

# Mehlam Bhuriwala

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## SPEAKERS

Mehlam Bhuriwala, Rimsha Syed

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Rimsha Syed 00:00

Hello, this is Rimsha Syed. I am the program coordinator with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. The date is September 27, 2021. I am on a Zoom call with Mehlam Bhuriwala for the Voices of Change oral history project. How are you today Mehlam?



Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:19

Hello, I am very good today. I'm very happy to finally get to speak with you and do this interview.



Rimsha Syed 00:30

Thank you for being part of this collection. Would you like to introduce yourself?



Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:35

Sure. Like you said, my name is Mehlam. My pronouns are he/him/his, and I am born and raised in Texas. I am the middle child of my parents who are Pakistani immigrants, who came to this country in the early 1990s. I was born and raised in a small town about an hour north of Houston, Texas. Very, let's just say, "old school conservative" rural Texas town. That's the environment that I was born and raised in. Then eventually, after graduating from high school, I made my way to Austin to study at the University of Texas and graduated last year in May in 2020. Aside from that, I was born and raised a Muslim. My parents are both Muslims, we identify with a small Shia sect within the broader Muslim community called Dawoodi Bohra. It's a very tight knit and small community, but one that is very well-connected, so that's my religious experience as well.



Rimsha Syed 02:09

Do you have a lot of family here in Texas? How long have your parents been living here?

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 02:16

Sure, I'd say I have a fair amount of family in Texas. Back in the 80s and the 90s, I think immigration and migration was just a very different thing than the way that it looks and the the narratives that surround it today. I think my parents, along with a lot of my cousins and other extended family, found their way migrating to the States. People coming to Texas in waves, a lot of them are involved with the medical profession in some way, a lot of just the typical quote-unquote "Desi jobs" that you'll hear of, as in doctor, lawyer, engineer. A lot of those type of professions that migrated over to the States in my family. To answer your second question, my parents were married in 1994 and came to the States very, very quickly after that for my dad to complete his residency, which he was doing in Detroit at the time. So my parents lived up in Michigan for a period of a few years when my dad completed his training, and eventually moving to Texas to start a family and work closer to Houston.



Rimsha Syed 03:49

Right. I know that you mentioned growing up in a small town, but I would like to hear a little bit more about growing up in a conservative area and what that was like for you as a young Pakistani-American Muslim person.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 04:06

Sure. I feel like I talk about this experience a lot with my friends who are people of color just because it's a unique experience for a person of color to have. It's definitely not uncommon at all. I think a lot of people grow up in environments that don't reflect their ethnicity at all. But anyway, seeing as it's all I was around and all that I really experienced for a good part of my childhood, I want to say while I was going through it, I never really felt—obviously there were all kinds of microaggressions, and they were things that I think I could point to my ethnicity being a factor, but I didn't really know what life in a different environment would look like. I had never really been in another environment, except for when I was kind of attending religious gatherings, in which case, I was still in a very ethnically monoculture environment, except replace White people with Pakistanis and Indians.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 05:14

But anyway, I think there were definitely challenges. I feel like I was made to feel like an outsider at a lot of points. I think just being someone who belongs to a different faith and growing up in a very evangelist Christian community, I think I was very aware of how many Christian values were present in the schooling system and just social dynamics from a very young age, because obviously, I didn't get any of the references. We'd be celebrating Christmas as a class and of course, I would get excited, but that was not a culture that was present at home at all. It was a disconnect there. I definitely grew up on the outside looking in, both by nature of my ethnicity and the area that I grew up in, and also I think the fact that I'm a massive dork in general. I definitely, like wasn't doing myself very many favors. Yeah, I don't know if you would prefer more specific stories, or a general overview of how it felt growing up in that environment. But yeah, that's the first things that come to mind.



Rimsha Syed 06:46

Thank you for sharing. You did mention there being a disconnect with the culture around you at school. I was curious about in what ways your parents kept the Pakistani culture or Muslim culture alive in your household.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 07:04

I don't want to speculate on behalf of my parents, but it didn't really ever feel like it was a conscious decision that they were making. I think that in their home environment, at least, they very much wanted to be themselves, and I think religion and culture and belonging to their native community is such a big part of their identity, that I think it really just translated over into the household. I mean, I was raised in a very multilingual environment. Being from Pakistan, my parents speak Urdu, which is in the native language of Pakistan, but for other reasons had to make a decision for our family not to teach the children Urdu, I think just because they were worried about us developing our other languages well enough to survive in this country. We grew up speaking Gujarati, which is the dialect native to the area of India that my dad's side of the family is from, and where the Dawoodi Bohras are based.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 08:11

I think the TV was always on my one of the Pakistani TV channels, so I grew up hearing all of the commercials, the same commercials that every Desi kid probably heard as a kid for Kebab King and all of these random restaurants in New Jersey and Michigan where the only other Brown people lived at the time. I think that that was just something that was very present at the home. The only other times that I felt like it really crossed over was bringing lunch to school from home. I think that was, when I was younger, a really big point of anxiety for me, because everyone has a story of their White classmates smelling their food and being like, "Ew!" I don't know, I just felt like my lunches always looked so different from everyone else's, and I already didn't have a whole lot of social capital to spend. It felt like another reason for people to look at me and gave me another reason to want to disappear at the time, and not stand out, and be able to blend in. I think the short answer to your question is that my parents are just really, really Pakistani, and I don't think they ever really made a decision to surrender any of that in their own lives and how our house would work when they made the decision to come to the States.



Rimsha Syed 09:52

That makes sense. It seems like there weren't many Muslims or people of color for you to relate with growing up. How did you deal with that, and did it ever pose a challenge in terms of your personality?

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 10:07

Yeah, definitely. I think it was a big challenge in that a lot of my time as a child, I lived in a very small town, in Montgomery, in which, like I said, very, very few other Muslims, let alone Desi families were in the area at the time. But on the other hand, I had a very, very large religious community in Houston, where a lot of Dawoodi Bohras tend to settle, for a large part, not only because it's affordable, just because I think the weather is very similar to Pakistan. A lot of people are just comfortable there. Every weekend, I'd be spending the weekend at my cousin's house and going to Islamic school every Saturday, and having negative experiences with that. I guess what I'm trying to say is that it was really a dual life in that I was an outsider in Montgomery and being the only Muslim, and then I was somewhat an outsider as well in Houston around other Muslims and other Dawoodi Bohras, just being where I was from, and not being able to attend social gatherings as often or be in the area on lesser events, just more frequently. I didn't really have a strong social bond in either place, due to me and my siblings having to split our time so much between each one. I mean, it was an hour drive to Houston, but that also meant that it was an hour drive from Houston for anyone that wanted to visit me or spend the night at my house as a child. Those kinds of instances were pretty rare for that reason as well.



Rimsha Syed 12:10



Rimsha Syed 12:10

For people who may not know what a Dawoodi Bohra Muslim is, would you mind giving a brief overview?



Mehlam Bhuriwala 12:18

Sure. Beyond the basic split of Muslim communities between Sunni and Shia, there's also several sub-communities within both groups, but especially Shia Muslims. It really comes down to a question of lineage and what certain groups believe is the chain of command and the chain of succession for the Imams that follow the death of the Prophet and his family. The Dawoodi Bohra community believes that in the wake of the Prophet and his family's passing, twenty-one Imams took the banner and passed down the line of succession and led the - let's call them the "true believing Muslim community." The difference between Dawoodi Bohra and, let's say, an Ismaili Shia, or Nizari, or Twelver Shia, is just a question of how many Imams succeeded the Prophet and who they were. The Dawoodi Bohra community is now led by a chain of succession called the Du'at Mutlaqeen, which is basically flag bearers that are holding the place of the imam, who is kind of the Messiah that's supposed to come back. Anyway, this is getting really complicated, but the point is, it's a pretty small sect of Shia Islam. I don't like to compare, but I would say that it is somewhat conservative relative to other Muslim communities. It's very tight-knit. I think they're pretty easy to tell apart from an average Muslim. I think the style of dress is very distinctive. Dawoodi Bohras use a dialect of Gujarati that's very specific to us. It's a very small, tight-knit Muslim community.



Rimsha Syed 14:51

Thank you for clarifying that. We've talked about religion in a broader sense, but how is your personal journey with Islam over time? What have been some of the challenges?



Mehlam Bhuriwala 15:07

I think like most any kid, as a first-generation American who has parents that may belong to a culture that is very far away and just very dissimilar to America, I think that there was always a disconnect between the kind of stuff that I was learning in school, and the kind of friends that I was making that weren't Muslim, and that faith, and the teachings that were being taught in what I would say is not a very healthy madrasa/Islamic school system that we had in Houston. I think that as a result, I definitely had a lot of questions from a young age, and things just didn't feel right for a long time. I think I struggled in the religion part to really find my place in it. For a long time, I played the part and I played the role, but I felt like I didn't really have the conviction behind it for a long time. I wasn't really ever sure when that was going to happen.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 16:23

Then when I was in my junior year of high school, my best friend at the time passed away. That was a huge shock, and it completely ruptured a world and a childhood that, up until then, looking back on it, I would have to say it was pretty sheltered in a lot of ways. It exposed me to the harshness and the cruelty of reality and the world, and the seemingly random ways in which things happen, and the way that all of it feels unjust. Concurrently at the time, as I was in high school, I was learning. I think this was another step towards my political journey. I was on the high school debate team, and so for that event, you really need to be studying and understanding research and sociological theories from a lot of different perspectives and a lot of different minds. It really broadened my perspective. It gave me a lot of lens for looking at the world in a different way. I think it pushed me a little bit towards the left wing in that

way. But anyway, back to religion, I mean, I think I was just going through so much at the time that I really left religion for a long time, and I couldn't find my place in it. I was still carrying a lot of feelings of anger and resentment, and just sadness and grief. It was a very prolonged mourning process.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 18:15

Eventually, when I was in college and school, when I was at the University of Texas. I wouldn't call it a crisis, but I got to a point where I really felt like I wanted to come to peace with that part of my life, and that set of principles. If I felt like I could get any value from it, from really trying to understand Islam in a way that I hadn't before, that I would try. I dedicated a lot of time while I was in school to trying to learn more about my faith and the roots behind it. I ended up declaring as a Middle Eastern studies major at school and learned Arabic along the way, really tried to get a better understanding of the Qur'an, and Islamic history, and the relationship between different Islamic communities, how different Islamic principles work, and how things have changed over time. Ultimately, I came away from that feeling a lot more rejuvenated in that aspect of my life and my faith. I felt like I really could have a place within this faith, and even if I didn't subscribe to the more hardline literal interpretations of the Qur'an or Hadith from very different areas, I still felt connected to some of the core aspects of Islam. In turn, those really helped me on my political journey as well, in my life journey. I really think, again, it gave me a sense of purpose and how I felt about creating a positive impact on the world. That's where I'm at right now. I would say I think I'm much more at peace with my relationship with Islam.



Rimsha Syed 20:19

Going back to when you were struggling with your mental health and religious identity through high school, what was or is still healing for you from that experience?

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 20:31

I'm sorry, what was what for me in that that experience?



Rimsha Syed 20:34

Healing.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 20:35

Healing. Like I said, I was really going through a huge life crisis at the time. From a very young age, I had had issues with mental health. I had issues with my parents growing up in that my brother had a very unique set of challenges for his development. I think my parents, when I came along, weren't exactly sure of how to deal with me. We had issues for a long time. I knew what it felt like to be unhappy because I felt like I was unhappy for a very long time in my life, and from a very young age. I could feel it bubbling as I got older and going into high school. When that happened, when Grant passed away, it felt like the balloon just popped. I really just sank, and I didn't know how to pick up the pieces of my identity and what I wanted out of my life, and what mattered to me anymore, and reconstruct my life. At the time, after that happened, I definitely had really strong issues with mental health. Like I said, I was going through shock and really massive amounts of grief.

**M****Mehlam Bhuriwala 21:58**

In going through that process, I think that for the people around me, my parents, my friends, none of us really knew what to do in that situation. Obviously, this is something that is not common, it doesn't happen to a lot of people, and when someone dies, usually people don't know how to react, but when someone dies much too young, it's almost multiplied. There's just too much strong feelings for anyone to be able to react a right way. I think all of us that were affected by it had our own journey with it. For me, I would say, I think my parents really tried, and I can see that now. But I think at the time, I really needed to push people away, and I think my relationship with them grew really strained. Eventually, I was diagnosed with major depression and started to be medicated. But that didn't last very long until my mental health spiraled even worse, the latter half of my junior year, that I was really dealing with the consequences.

**M****Mehlam Bhuriwala 23:12**

Eventually, I really hit rock bottom where I started to have thoughts of suicide at one point and started making a plan, so to speak. What to leave behind and how to do it. Really, really dark and twisted things, but that's the place that I was in at the time, and nothing else really mattered. Upon realizing what was going on, my family obviously freaked out, and I was institutionalized for a period of time. While I was there, I think I had a lot of really transformative experiences. I was in a mental health institution with young people from literally all kinds of places and all socioeconomic backgrounds. I saw what real suffering looked like. Not to diminish my own, but I saw what really tragic life circumstances looked like. Kids that, from a very young age, had been left behind and had nothing. I really think that awakened something in me where I had to move forward and appreciate some things in my life. I think that was a really big turning point for me in my journey with mental health, and eventually, that's part of what brought me back with spirituality and religion as well.

**Rimsha Syed 24:57**

Thank you for sharing that. I'm glad hear that you are in a better place now. I wanted to ask, when you reflect personally on your identity as a Muslim, as a Pakistani, as an American, and as a Texan, how do you see those identities for yourself now as an adult? Do you think that those identities play a hand in your involvement with organizing?

**M****Mehlam Bhuriwala 25:26**

As a Muslim and a Texan. In college, I grew into organizing very quickly. I literally just saw a random flyer, and I had already been converted into the the leftist school of thinking through my experiences in high school, but I really needed an outlet for that. I got into organizing, and very quickly, after I got into it, I realized that first of all, I was in another environment where not a lot of people looked like me. There aren't a lot of South Asians, period, involved in organizing. I mean, there are plenty, but it's not very common for people of our ethnicity to get involved with organizing. But it was different, obviously, than Montgomery. I was in an environment where I definitely felt supported, and I definitely felt like I had a community. The thing that stood out to me was that aside from my ethnicity, I had a very unique set of experiences. I had gone through things, and I'd seen things, that a lot of my peers hadn't. Obviously, in turn, they had tons of experiences that I've never had.

**M****Mehlam Bhuriwala 26:42**

I think that being a Muslim and being, not only just a Texan, and not a Houston Texan or a more suburban/city Texan,

I really grew up in rural Texas, so I really understood a lot of what goes into the more horrific and bigoted and ignorant logic that flows from a lot of parts of the state. I really felt like that was an aid to me. Not only understanding my role in the organizing movement, but also how I could relate to other people. I don't want to be one of those people that's like, "Don't demonize Trump voters," because obviously the former president had done tons and tons of terrible things while he was in office. But I think that being from heart of Trump land in really, really conservative Montgomery county - my high school, up through the 80s, had an annual slave day where White students would dress up like slaves and slave owners, so that's really the background that I'm coming from. Having to grow up in that environment, you had to humanize people that participated in that culture. That also gave me a very unique experience as I grew into organizing. I think it was definitely something of value, and it still is something of value, as I here and there participate in organizing. The more experiences that people have in an organizing space, the more that they can bring to the table, and the more rich these discussions are, and the more we progress and we learn as a community.



Rimsha Syed 28:46

I have two questions based on what you just said. My first is, how did you see your role as one of the few South Asian organizers in college? Did you feel a sense of responsibility to be a spokesperson for your community? How was that like?



Mehlam Bhuriwala 29:06

That's a great question. I think the best answer to this question would be if I just tell you a story. For the longest time in college, I was a labor organizer, and I organized with a group, it's a great group called United Students Against Sweatshops. It's a national organization, the largest student-led labor organizing group in the country. We did a lot of really, really amazing work. But my one of my favorite things, probably my favorite thing about the entire experience was that every year, we'd have a national conference at a university in regions that rotated. Not only did I get to meet tons and tons of organizers from all over the country, college students that were, very, very similar to me, but it was really my first experience ever encountering not only another South Asian and/or Muslim organizer, but a South Asian and/or Muslim labor organizer. It's a very unique flavor of organizing, it's hardcore. It was a really wonderful experience, but one thing we realized was even at a national conference with close to 1000 organizers, at the end of the day



Mehlam Bhuriwala 30:27

One of the things that we would do when we were in these conferences was at mealtimes we'd organize ourselves into caucuses. There would be a Black caucus for organizers that identified as Black to be in a space with other Black organizers and talk about things that matter to them. There was one for queer organizers, one for differently-abled organizers, etc, etc. Children of immigrants or first-gen Americans, stuff like that. I quickly gravitated towards the only other Muslims at the conference, and when we got together and took stock, we realized out of this huge, huge conference, there were three of us that identified as Muslim in the entire space. We had a great time. We really got to know each other, and I really cherish those relationships even now.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 31:24

But it became very apparent that we are definitely a minority within a minority within a minority. As a result, I think even there being so few of us, but just being in a space like organizing where if it's a healthy space, it's really an empowering place. People feel like no matter how small their group is, if they organize and they band together, they

can make their voices heard. It was just a very unique experience, and I think it was really nice to see other people in a similar position as me. It was three people from three different schools, meaning they were the only Muslim organizers at their school or in the group at their school right. There's a lot of power in community like I said. That's definitely been a major thing that has stuck out to me as being one of very few in the space.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 32:27

But then even more so as a South Asian, from that same conference, partly due to the encouragement and the support I felt by the other Muslim organizers, at the end when people were going around for full impressions, I ended up speaking up. I said something along the lines of, "As a South Asian organizer in this space, I very rarely get to encounter other people that look like me and even people that practice the same faith as me in this space." I just was sharing how grateful I was to be in this space, and then afterwards, a South Asian organizer that I didn't even notice before walked up to me and was like, "I really appreciated what you said." We kept in touch, and that's still another relationship that I appreciate today. Long story short, I think it definitely can be isolating, but the most wonderful thing about organizing in this day and age is that we have this wonderful tool called the internet that we can use to connect with tons of people that have tons in common with us. That's really been great getting to connect to other people that identify as Muslim, especially in the labor organizing space.



Rimsha Syed 33:55

I don't know if you've given this much thought, but why do you think there were so few Muslims or South Asian organizers when you were an undergrad, especially in a city like Austin that's quote-unquote "very liberal?"

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 34:13

I don't want to generalize, but statistically, South Asian families in the United States typically belong to, let's say a higher socioeconomic status. There's lots of variation within that, and I think I experienced that firsthand, not only with my own family's journey, but just all of the people that I've met in my life so far that are South Asian. Being from a labor background, I always just navigate to class first and foremost, but I think there are some class boundaries that encourage South Asian kids. The class, and [having] it wrapped into the culture of very high education and high achieving, it really encourages kids to go into professions that are considered, let's say, more "high profile" or white collar. I think that's also a cultural thing that exists in the States where I don't think our culture really values the contributions of organizers. In a large part, what organizers do and the impact that they make on society is very minimized and marginalized. I think that is a factor as well.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 35:47

But ultimately, I think that there's a very strong, let's call it, a cultural and class stimulus for kids of South Asian descent to go into fields and life paths that maybe aren't as connected to organizing or community service or social impact space. It's definitely changing. I've met lots of people who buck that rule, and definitely are into more socially progressive spaces. But for a large part, I think that there's just a very, very strong pull on people in our community to not go after what politically matters to them. Instead, go for financial stability, let's call it, and provide for their parents who had to struggle and work very, very hard to be in a position to put their kids through school. I think there's just so many factors, and so many things that exist in the culture and the community that devalue certain careers and certain achievements and value others. If I had to speculate, I would say that that would be a strong motivator. Like I said, things are changing. I'm sure that the number of South Asian organizers that exist today is way, way, way larger than has existed in this country in any other period. It's definitely not a monolith.





Rimsha Syed 37:38

Going back to the question I had from earlier, how do you think that your unique perspective being from rural Texas has benefited the organizing spaces you've been a part of?



Mehram Bhuriwala 37:56

That's a good question. On a practical level, I think it's really allowed me to get along with people that, politically, have a very, very different set of beliefs than I do. One thing in specific: while I was organizing with the United Students Against Sweatshops, I had the opportunity to participate on the governing board of a group called the Worker Rights Consortium, which is a really fantastic agency that is an independent watchdog for garment factories that produce collegiate clothing and monitors the conditions and the challenges that their workers face. It was a really great opportunity, but I had to serve on a board with university administrators and career apparel people. They had a very different set of values and priorities than me. I had to sit at the table with the same person that we would butt heads with the most at UT campus. I don't know if I'm legally allowed to say his name on this program. We called him to sit board, and then we had to be at the same table as him and work with him and negotiate and work on a path forward for the agency.



Mehram Bhuriwala 39:23

On a practical level, I think it really helped me. It helps me to this day to connect with people and to get down to a set of concrete things to discuss. There's that, but on another level, I think that the past four to five years has been a very emotional period for everyone. Obviously, most communities of color were very, very emotional after the election of the former president. Definitely myself and my community were not exempt from that. I definitely had a lot of strong emotions, and I had a lot of anger, a lot of resentment. I live in freakin' Texas, and we're so conservative, and how could all these people vote for a guy that wants to ban Muslims from entering the country, and all of these things, and all of the horrible things that ensued ever since. As a result of my upbringing though, I really think that it helped me - again, I don't want to say humanize - but I think it really helped me come to terms with the conditioning that goes into being the stereotypical angry, far-right conservative, especially in young people, because those are the people that I grew up with.



Mehram Bhuriwala 40:47

There were people that I knew since childhood that I knew very well, that were very strongly conservative. I had to understand why, because we grew up in the same environment, the only difference being our cultural background. How did I end up so far one way, and how did they end up so far another way? When I really had to think about that and reconcile with it, I came to terms with the fact that individual choice is definitely a factor. It's important. But when we're looking at what's happening in this country and what's happening in the world, we always look at systemic issues, we always look at broader structural decisions and trends and issues that exist that push people in certain directions. I realized, "Hey, one thing that was very present in my community from a very young age is poverty." That's something that, thankfully, I don't think my family was ever in a position where I would consider us in that income level, but a lot of people I grew up with did. As a result, I could see - I'm not trying to stereotype people who grew up in poverty - but there are a lot of challenges with that. There's family issues that are common, there are educational issues, and statistically, probably some deficits. I think that there were a lot of things about my local environment that I could see would promote someone who espoused a lot of things that Donald Trump did.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 42:25

For example, Montgomery county has one of the largest police departments in the country, and a police presence is very common. Montgomery is one of the biggest speed traps in Texas. Those cops will get you if you are like two miles over the speed limit. They just want any excuses. I have tons of stories of friends of mine that were White that were from a lower socioeconomic background, that had experienced police harassment and brutality. It was very common. Even so, the police being such a big presence, and there not being a lot of people of color or minorities, period, that would contradict these narratives, and Fox News telling conservative America that the world was ending for eight years while President Obama was president definitely didn't help. It was just a very angry community a lot of the times. People just felt very strongly that they were under attack for being White or for being conservative.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 43:35

I think the other thing I saw when I really tried to empathize with them, then I understood. I was like, "I think I understand what people mean when they say that liberals are smug." Because they are. There's a sense of liberal smugness that exists where I think people on the left wing, because they can wrap their language in humanistic terms, where they're like, "Institutional racism, etc, etc, etc." There's a matter-of-factness about the way that a lot of people on the left and liberals in particular, I should say, speak. That's really alienating to people that may need more discussion than a verbal beat-down. All of these factors, when I took those into account - obviously, I'm not going to justify the decision for anyone who chose to vote, because at the end of the day, like I said, it's a balance between an individual decision. But when I really took into account all the factors that could go into someone being politically radicalized enough to lean towards the far right, then it all started to make sense for me. It also helped me situate my place in America and what was going on in America at the time. I guess, see the forest from the trees, so to speak.



Rimsha Syed 45:06

That was very well put.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 45:08

Thank you.



Rimsha Syed 45:10

You talked about labor organizing. I also know that you're involved with Palestinian organizing here in Texas. I wanted to hear a little bit more about some of the challenges that you might have faced, whether that was at UT or within the broader community after you graduated.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 45:29

Insofar as Palestinian organizing, right?





Rimsha Syed 45:32

Yeah, either or.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 45:34

Sure. I should say that even before I really organized for Palestine, my first experience with Palestine, the country and the people, was - obviously, in my environment growing up, the only narrative that I had ever heard was, "Oh, there's this country called Israel that exists in the Middle East that is fighting for democracy and working to kill all of these bearded terrorists." That was the narrative that I had growing up. Obviously, I can't say I totally bought into that being a Muslim. I think my parents were never super vocal about Israel and Palestine, but at the same time, it's not like they encouraged me to be a Zionist.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 46:24

Anyway, I remember I was at debate camp, which, like I said, I was a pretty big dork. I was at debate camp in the summer, and I was eating breakfast, and I was watching the TV screen, and CNN was broadcasting live, this was 2014. It was broadcasting live Israel completely demolishing the Gaza Strip. I just looked at the screen, and I was like, "Okay, obviously something really bad is happening." But then I saw the disconnect between what was very apparently happening on the screen where entire buildings were being destroyed, and people were talking about how the UN - I think there's one instance in particular that happened in 2014, where the UN was operating a hospital in the Gaza Strip, and they told Israel's military like fifty times, "This is a hospital that we are operating, please do not bomb us." And guess what happened? The hospital was bombed, lots of people died. What I was seeing on the screen and what the anchors and what what I was hearing on the TV were two totally different things. The anchors on the screen were doing everything possible to minimize what was happening in front of me. That's when I was like, "Okay, I'm learning so much about all these institutional and structural issues. I'm learning about internalized racism, learning about gender justice." That was really my awakening towards Palestine.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 48:02

I learned a little bit more about it in the background and understood what was the issue, and obviously, I can't say that I knew a whole lot, but at the very least, I understood that Palestine was being occupied by Israel and being treated to horrible conditions as a result. I had that knowledge, but I really sat with it for a long time until I got to college. I was exposed to Palestine Solidarity Committee at UT my first year of college, but really I got involved in my second year. Palestine is a very important issue, and it's something that people have a lot of different backgrounds and a lot of different walks of life can understand and rally behind because it's so visceral. You see so much of the destruction and the violence that occurs on a day-to-day basis. If you're actually watching, then there's no other conclusion that you can come to other than, "This is an injustice." As a result of that, Palestine Solidarity Committee was and is the cool place for leftists to hang out. That was kind of the cool club. All of the cool leftists were always at the Palestine Solidarity Committee meetings.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 49:23

Like I said before, one of the biggest things for me about organizing as someone who, I'll be honest, is not naturally super inclined to being an effective organizer. The only reason I stayed in as long as they did was community and finding people that I could really, really relate with, and I found that in organizing for Palestine. The challenges were, obviously, just being on campus. UT is a very, very Zionist institution, gives a lot of money to Israel, and there are very

strong pro-Israel forces and contingents that participate in the school and school politics. Student government was not very sympathetic to the pro-Palestine cause. Those are experiences that I'd had in labor organizing, where I knew that the university administrators are never going to give you what you want. That's something you have to take. Experiencing it with Palestine, like I said, it's such an emotional issue for so many people that I think just organizing and being on campus, pro-Palestine, and being in public, the kinds of things that people would say to you as you were protesting, and just the hatred and the anger, it just felt so reminiscent of the most important struggles that you always hear about, or you would always read about. It felt like this is the most important thing, because if these people are that angry about it, then we have to be doing the right thing. This is one of the most important issues of our lifetime, and I still believe that.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 51:16

In general, just living in the state of Texas as well. Texas itself is a very pro-Israel, Zionist, evangelistic state, at least politically. The governor and the state government is very against Palestine. As a result, I'm sure that you know about the law, I think it was a law that was passed that. There's requirements for people that work for the state government to sign some weird oath against BDS, or Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction movement, and swear their loyalty to Israel or some weird stuff like that. Educators and people that have no connection to international politics have to sign this oath. That's something that affects a lot of people. It's a real challenge, and it's just one way that pro-Zionism is so entrenched in the political framework.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 52:16

It's something that on a personal level, it affects me as well. Like I said, I majored in Middle Eastern Studies and at UT there's a very strong government-Middle Eastern studies connection. There's a lot of factors that push people into working for the FBI and the CIA and the Department of State and USAID, etc. If you want to do that, then you can't be very vocal about supporting Palestine. You can't be very divisive, so to speak. That's something that, obviously, I've been aware of, and I had to think about as I navigated my career journey. But ultimately, I never want to look back and think to myself, "Wow, I compromised on my political ideology to work one job out of any number of jobs that I could have had." I think that there are definitely challenges to being a supporter of Palestine in the state of Texas, but at the same time, like I said, there's a big community behind you and lots and lots of people that are there and willing to support you and just amazing people that I've met through the journey as well.



Rimsha Syed 53:37

Speaking of community, do you have a vision for that in a broad sense? Not to say that any one person can single-handedly tackle institutional injustice or Zionism for that matter, but maybe you can speak to some of the short and long term goals you hope to see to further Palestinian liberation in particular.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 54:01

This comes with the caveat of myself just being a non-Palestinian. There's there's a limit to what you yourself can advocate for a people that their main demand is political representation, so to speak, or political power and the ability to determine their own fates. As an organizer and just an ally for Palestine and Palestinians, the most basic thing that I would see as a vision moving forward would be the right to self-determination for all Palestinians, both in Palestine and in the diaspora, and obviously a right to return to their native homeland and live among their people without any restriction on their movement. That's that's the dream, right? That's what people a lot of times mean, when people say, "Free Palestine." That's the broad strokes vision.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 55:05

But also, it's been so easy to say the tide is turning for so long, but really does feel like the tide is turning in that a lot of people from a lot of different political ideologies, even hardcore conservatives I think, are seeing the violence. Like I said, you can have CNN anchors try and deflate the balloon as much as they can, but what you're seeing on your screen and what's so easy to see now because the violence is so brutal and so obvious, and it's so one-sided, is that I think that you have a lot more people that are really coming to terms with, "Okay, this is what they mean when they say this is an apartheid regime. This is what it means. The violence is right in front of us. I'm hearing all this stuff about Hamas and launching rockets and stuff, but what I'm seeing right now is families and children and unarmed people being shot down and just brutalized and incarcerated for nothing." I think that in terms of public perception, there definitely is a shifting narrative.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 56:21

However, living in the country that we do, what the people think is a very different thing from what political forces do and how they operate. Ultimately, there definitely just needs to be more of a political mobilization towards the liberation of Palestine. I think that we will get to a place one day where we have the numbers to really make significant change in America's relationship with Israel and Palestine. It's happening in pockets all over the country. Students and universities have always been the bedrock of organizing. It's really a birthplace for a lot of organizers obviously. It's where so many people are politically educated, and so many young people are learning the truth about Israel and Palestine, and beyond that, so many young people, while they're in school, are organizing as we speak and are making real gains.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 57:26

You hear all the time about universities choosing to divest from Israeli-owned firms and choosing not to contribute to the apartheid and dispossession of Palestinians, and choosing not to contribute to illegal settlements in the West Bank, and all of these things. You hear about all these gains being made. Obviously, the king has not fallen, so to speak, but at the same time, it does give you a sense of hope for a vision where even playing the game as rigged as it is and as stacked as it is against people that have a vision for free Palestine and a safer and a less violent world, our only option is to win. We've already seen from Palestinians - I feel like I can say this with some level of confidence - is that all of the Palestinians I know, the mentality is that there is no other option but to liberate Palestine. If people fall, then more people will take their place, and ultimately, there can be no other option but a liberated Palestine. That's just something that gives me a lot of hope because I know that there's just so many generations of people before and after us that are going to continue this fight.



Rimsha Syed 58:53

I really like what you said about our only choice being liberation. I couldn't agree more. I want to ask, are there any organizers or historical figures that you look up to and draw inspiration from?

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 59:13

There's the Mount Rushmore, there's like the GOATs [Greatest of All Times]. Obviously, Angela Davis, I've read a lot and I really try to emulate her vision of understanding race in relationship to class and just the contributions of

organizers and what it means to participate in a movement. I think that Angela Davis is really, really amazing about that. I've also read the autobiography of Assata Shakur, is another big one. I think that that was not only one of the most beautiful books I've ever read, but I think really gives you so much vision and so much hope for what a free world would look like and what it means to dedicate yourself to a movement, and what it means to really, really put yourself on the line, and make sacrifices, and have those be meaningful. Even now, Assata Shakur, having been an exile in Cuba for decades, has such a voice in the United States, just because of how bold and how courageous she was.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:00:26

Aside from that, I don't want to be the typical Marxist bro, but I think we have a lot to learn from various socialist movements and revolutions across the world. The quote-unquote "global South" has tons and tons and tons to teach us about how to mobilize and what it really means to, like I said, put your life on the line and fight for liberation. In the United States, we have a much different view of what it means to organize than people in much different environments, and in a lot of cases, a lot more oppressive regimes than we are. People that literally put their lives on the line. I think that I've really tried to learn a lot about the revolution in Chile, and how that came to an end as well. I think Thomas Sankara is another historical figure that I really look up to, as someone that did his best to provide for his people and did not compromise one bit on his political ideals, because he knew that other actors were trying to undermine his vision.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:01:45

Those are the historical figures, but even now, I think there's so many amazing organizers that I've come into contact with that I look up to. The first person that I ever really learned organizing from is an organizer named Andy, who was the de facto leader of USAS at the time that I was a freshman and really taught me. Andy made so many sacrifices for the group. They hosted so many late night workshops at their small apartment, they made food for people all the time, they really just held it down in all the small ways. The thing that people like Andy, another person that I really look up to, Aileen Bazan, and a lot of the Palestinian organizers that I look up to, Mohammed Nabulsi is another really influential and prominent one - what I learned from these people is that there's a lot of ego in organizing, there's a lot of people that when they think about organizing, they want to be the guy that's holding the megaphone, that's leading the chants, and giving a speech at the protest. That's fine, that person has a role, they have a very important place in the system of organizing, but their contribution is no more - and I would in fact say a lot less - meaningful than the people that really do the work behind the scenes.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:03:11

Something that someone told me that really resonated with me that I still think about today is, someone is going to have to do the dirty dishes of the revolution. When we are organizing for something great and when we really have big goals, it's so easy to get lost in the vision, and it's so hard to follow through on the small stuff. It's so hard to be the one that's printing flyers and putting them up. It's really hard to be the one that's making group chats and confirming time and place and setting up meetings. It's really hard to be the one that's reaching out to people and making contacts. All of that stuff is so important, but nobody wants to do it. Unfortunately that labor ends up falling on the same people that the most onerous labor typically falls on, it's the women of color that exist in organizing spaces, and I think it's no surprise that the people that I look up to the most in organizing are women of color, because no space, especially organizing, is exempt from these societal forces like patriarchy, like racism, like the combination of the two, and other things as well. Seeing them navigate it not only really put me in my place in

understanding, "Okay, I can choose to operate as a person with a lot of privilege in this space and leave the dirty work to everyone else, or I can be the best ally and partner that I can be, and do my best to just be valuable to the organization and the group and everyone in the movement."

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:04:46

Those are definitely experiences that I'm very lucky to have had from women that did not have to share them with me, but they chose to, which is just another example of the labor that these people give to the movement. There's just so many amazing people that give so much of themselves to the movement and other people, and they are truly the best people out of us. That's probably why I said, if I'm being honest, I don't think that I'm someone that can sustain being an organizer for a long time because honestly, I don't think I'm a good enough person to really give that that much of myself to somebody else and a movement. It's really, really hard. Not everyone can do it.



Rimsha Syed 1:05:39

This may be going back to a little bit earlier in the interview, but I did want to ask, how does religion or spirituality guide the work that you do? How does it guide your sense of ethics or your sense of social justice?

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:05:58

That's a great question. I would say that for a long time, I don't really think that the two had very much to do with each other. I don't think that I was ever truly educated in the history of Islam, from a social justice perspective. My religious upbringing was very much focused on the rules and the various prayers and stuff. The history was only to reinforce a certain narrative about the religion and why all the other Muslim communities are wrong about this particular thing. It wasn't until I got to college that I really had a chance to synthesize it. It was there that I really started trying to understand the Prophet as a social reformist, and someone who was really trying to eradicate some problematic things about pre-Islamic Arabia.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:06:50

I learned about the different narratives around gender justice in Islam. I learned and I really had to adapt my understanding of jihad. Obviously, there's Islamic Jihad that you hear about in the news. But I knew that was just a false narrative, just being a Muslim, but even in my religious upbringing, Jihad was more something I was taught as, "Oh, it's just something that people did a long time ago to resist oppression." But there weren't really a lot of modern day, real world connections to it. Academia is not perfect, but when I had the academic perspective, that really helped me unlock my understanding of jihad, and understand it as "Jihad literally translates to "struggle." There's internal struggle, there is a self-struggle that we all face to do the right thing and to be generally good people and to make good decisions. Then there's oppression. There's systemic issues, and there's a mandate from Islam that says, "Hey, when you see injustice occurring, you are, in a sense, obligated to fight that." Then there's the military application, but what I learned was that - obviously, the military application is the one that is the most scrutinized and villainized, but that has a very specific application, and it's not really something that is present in a lot of other moments in Islamic history. Really, jihad has for a long time, and for the most part, been more of a philosophical/existential self-initiated struggle to just be a better person.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:08:46

That was a huge help to me, as I really tried to reconcile my understanding of Islam with organizing and social justice, and then I started reading a lot more from scattered sources about various movements in Islam. Especially being a Shia Muslim, I think that was another subtle thing about my political radicalization, was that I think I got implicit messaging just throughout my religious education. I know that Shias are a minority. As a result, as a religious minority within Islam, there's a certain level of - I wouldn't call it discrimination, but I think there is a little bit of otherization that occurs in broader Muslim spaces. For the most part, broader Muslim spaces tend to just assume that all Muslims are Sunni. There's not a lot of diversity that exists.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:09:42

Then when you look at the history of Shia Islam, it's pretty apparent that the history of Shia Islam is a history of persecution. I can't say that Shias have not inflicted violence, and I know it's a very, very complex, complicated issue, but a very prominent theme of Shia Islamic history is oppression, persecution, and resistance to persecution. Those are typically the kinds of stories that I would hear about as a young Muslim being in Saturday Islamic school. Those were latent messages that I didn't really ever connect to the broader social movement struggles until I had a chance when I was older to really reconcile all of these things. I felt really empowered by it. I realized, "Okay, not only do I have my beliefs, but for better or worse, I exist as part of a tradition of persecution and resistance to persecution and struggle against oppressors."

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:10:48

The central figure of Shia Islam, obviously there's the Prophet, but then the Prophet's grandson, Imam Husayn, his death is a monumental part for pretty much every Shia Muslim. It's pretty much the biggest event of the year, because his death was very cruel, and it was really oppressive, and it was perpetuated by a regime that most Muslim scholars universally regard as a really dark time, and a really oppressive and meanspirited era. Imam Husayn, the Prophet's grandson, was very brutally killed. So the story goes, he had the choice to either surrender and accept Yazid as the next caliph of Islam, or to continue to resist and to continue to insist that, "Hey, this person cannot claim the throne simply because they have military power. It doesn't work like that. There's a broader divine inspiration behind it." That's the narrative. I'm not saying it's one hundred percent correct. I'm just saying that that's it.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:12:07

That's part of I think what really helped me come to terms with religion was when I put that in perspective with just martyrdom in general and movements and what it means to hold true to your beliefs. Then I saw, "Okay, there's so many things that I grew up with, there's so many things in my childhood that have really reinforced this messaging, and have shown me that Islamically, it's okay." We should be encouraged to not only do the right thing in our own lives - we have a culture that's very "follow the rules, be quiet, don't cause a stir," but Islamically, there's very ample justification for not doing that. There's a lot of justification for raising your voice and being heard and mobilizing and being political. That really just gave me a sense of reassurance as I navigated my journey, and now I feel really at peace with it.



Rimsha Syed 1:13:08

Thanks for sharing that. I know that you're currently working for a nonprofit, and before we finish this interview, I do want to hear about the work that you've been doing for the past year, and how that's maybe broadened your perspective.



M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:13:24

Like I said, I graduated from school last May, May of 2020, neck deep into the pandemic. My original plans of living in the Islamic world, in Morocco, and continuing to work and work on my language skills, and eventually finding a career in that environment, it had to be put on hold for the time being seeing as there's a global pandemic that is making it very hard to travel and there's varying levels of responsibility. I ended up changing courses. Nonprofit work was always something that I was attracted to, it's something that I did throughout college at various stops and internships. I'm a practical thinker, so thinking practically, as soon as it became clear to me that I'm not going to be happy unless I spend my life doing something that's going to create a positive impact in my community and really create a change and do something good for the world, then my mind instantly gravitated to, "Okay, how am I going to do this as a lifestyle?" Nonprofit work was the first thing that came up. It was always something that I was interested in. I wanted to eventually work into a career in maybe an NGO environment or something like that.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:14:51

But like I said, the pandemic happened, I had to change gears, and I ended up working in the nonprofit industry here in Austin. Honestly, it's been a really, really great experience. There are very few tie-ins to my organizing background, but I do think that a lot of the things that I learned from organizing, especially work ethic, being diligent, and paying attention to small details, and understanding how they fit within the grander scheme of things, has definitely been something that has helped me. But yeah, I work in a nonprofit called Family Eldercare. We provide services to elderly folks and adults with disabilities. My job is more administrative, for sure. I'm definitely not on the more hands-on program services side of things, but at the same time, it's really nice to be able to play a role in distributing real positive impact to vulnerable members of our community. There is a real crisis on our hands with a very rapidly aging population for which not a lot of social support exists. Being able to try to fill the gap has been pretty rewarding from that perspective.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:16:16

As an organizer, the worst thing is not having the resources to do what you want to do, not having the money, not having the the people power. Working at an organization, you have both. You don't really do things unless you have the staff power and the resources to do those things. We were very active with the winter storm, and we're very active in the summer when the heat gets really bad in distributing supplies and aid to people, and financial relief, and bill paying programs, and all sorts of support. That was really nice to be able to put a pause on thinking about people from across the world, although their struggles are obviously important. But just showing out for my local community as well, and the city that I have lived in for the past five years now, and being able to give back in that way, as well. I think that's been really rewarding. I really appreciated the opportunity to do that.



Rimsha Syed 1:17:20


The last question I have for you today, well, it's more of a reflection, but seeing as this interview will be archived, do you have any message you'd like to give to people listening several years from now? You can speak to what you're passionate about, or how you hope society might change or really anything.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:17:43

If I had one message, I think I would just go back to something that I've mentioned a couple of times already, while


we've been talking, which is, more than anything, find your community. You may be completely isolated, you may be in an environment where nobody else feels the same way that you do, and nobody else carries the same beliefs that you do. But you are definitely not alone. There are so many ways for you to get connected to people, and not only contribute to the struggle, if that's something that you want to do, but even if you're just needing some connection, and you're needing someone, some peers, I guarantee, the social justice community is the most accepting, loving, caring, loyal, dedicated, and just amazing community that you can be around. There's so many people that you'll meet, so many different experiences and backgrounds that you'll be engaging with. It's so worth it to do whatever you can to find people that you can really see eye-to-eye with, and that can help you and help make you feel less alone.

 Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:19:01

As an organizer, especially as someone who may be organizing on the left wing, it's so easy to feel beaten down. There's so many failures that happen. Organizing is full of failures, full of nos. So many stops where you organize all these people, and you feel like nothing is happening. But when you have people to share that with, when you have people to share those feelings with, and when you have people to share the successes with, that is really what it's all about. That's what makes it worth it. More than anything, those are the things that are really valuable in a person's life. If there's anything that I would take away from this, it is to really do my best to find a community, build a community and find people that love and support and accept you and encourage you and embrace you for who you are, because not everyone has that. It's a really special thing to have.

 Rimsha Syed 1:19:57

Lovely, thank you so much for this interview. I'm going to go ahead and stop the recording now.

 Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:20:04

Thank you.