

Saagar Shaikh

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SPEAKERS

Saagar Shaikh, Rimsha Syed



Rimsha Syed 00:03

Hi, this is Rimsha Syed with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. The date is August 10, 2022, and I'm on a Zoom call today with Saagar Shaikh for the Muslim Voices in Texas oral history project. How are you today?



Saagar Shaikh 00:18

I'm good. I'm great. How are you?



Rimsha Syed 00:20

I'm good, good. So for starters, can you introduce yourself and also tell us where you're joining the interview from?




Saagar Shaikh 00:28

Yeah, my name is Saagar Shaikh, and I am joining the interview from my apartment in Los Angeles.



Rimsha Syed 00:35

Awesome. Well, I am very excited to hear all about your story, and I know that there's tons of things that we can dive into today, but I would actually like to jump as far back in time as possible and hear about your childhood, things that stand out, anything you can remember from those early years.



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Saagar Shaikh 00:57

Wow, let's see. That's a pretty far back. Let's see. I was born in an area called Alief, Texas. It's a little area in Houston. It's not the safest or best area. Yeah, I went to elementary school there, Chancellor Elementary, and then I went to Alief Middle School, which is a hood rat school. Can we say that? I don't know. But when I was fourteen, we moved to San Antonio because my dad, who worked at a gas station when we lived in Houston and then later on bought one, he bought another gas station in San Antonio, and we were so upset that we had to leave Houston to go to San Antonio. We went from an extremely diverse area. It wasn't the best part of town, but it was really diverse, so I had a lot of friends from everywhere. There was like three White kids in the whole school. It was great.

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Saagar Shaikh 02:04

And we moved to San Antonio. We moved to north side San Antonio, which is pretty White. I went to Rudder Middle School and then freshman year just for a few months. And then freshman year I went to Clark High School and then for sophomore through senior, I went to Marshall High School. And yeah, I jumped around a lot, but we got to senior year really quickly. And then I went to Northwest Vista College because I had no interest in going to school, but my parents made me go to school. And then maybe two years later, I started seeing some of my friends from Houston and people that I had known in Houston start going to UTSA and I was like, "Oh I want to go to school with friends. They're all going to school together. I want to go there." So then I got my act together just enough to where I can transfer to UTSA. And then I went there for another three years, took me six years to graduate.

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Saagar Shaikh 03:13

And while I was in school, while I was at UTSA, I was a business major, and I just wasn't having fun. It wasn't for me. But my parents insisted that I continue, and I finish, and I get a business degree, and I get a job. And I was like, "Dude, this can't be my life. I have to do something different. What do I love?" And I was confused for a long time trying to figure out that question. And then one day I had a thought. I was thinking about taking theater arts classes in elementary school and then once in middle school and once in high school. And I was like, "That was fun. What if I became an actor?" And then I started Googling, like, "How do you become an actor? What do you need?" You need head shots. You need a resume. You need a demo reel. You need an agent.

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Saagar Shaikh 04:15

So I start looking to how to get that stuff, and I found this - this was the same time when I was in college that I'm looking for an internship. So I go to the guidance counselor, and she just gives me a list of ten places to apply to. So I literally applied to three places. I got an interview at one place, went in, and this place had the word "management" in it, so I was like, "Yeah, checks out for school, business management." So I went into that office, and I was looking around, and I see a bunch of head shots everywhere, and I'm like, "This is crazy. What is this place?" And it turns out this was a talent management company for actors. And so I told them

in my interview that, like, "This is crazy. I've literally just been thinking in the last couple of weeks, I want to become an actor, and this place falls into my life." So they end up hiring me as an intern and signing me on as a talent.

S Saagar Shaikh 05:17

And so I started going auditions from there. And I'd book a commercial every few months or something. I was getting really excited about this could be a real thing. And so I decided that when I graduated, I'm moving to LA, and I told my parents I was like, "Amma, papa, two years I'm graduating, I'm moving to LA." They're like, "Han dekhte hain. We'll see. We'll see what happens." And then I'd give them notices every six months. I'd be like, "Year and a half. One year left. Six months left." And then I graduated, but I had just moved out of my parents house, so I had nine months left on my lease. So this is my parents thinking like, "Okay, yeah, this is a phase. He's just saying he's going to leave, and he's never going to leave, whatever." Exactly what they would have wanted at the time. And then my lease ended nine months later. Packed up everything in my car. Fit four trash bags with all of my stuff into the trunk of my 2007 Toyota Camry and just drove to LA.

S Saagar Shaikh 06:23

And I roomed with four guys. That was me plus four. And we had a three bedroom, three bathroom apartment. It felt like the typical immigrant story that we hear where our dads moved here, and they had a bunch of roommates in a one bedroom apartment until they made it out. That's kind of what it felt like. I know it doesn't compare, but when I was so new to the city, it's a completely different culture, environment, everything from Texas. It had remnants of this is what my dad must have felt like when he came here. When I moved here, I did a bunch of odd jobs. I don't know if you guys know what TaskRabbit is, but, where you get hired to build a shelf or stand in line for someone at the Apple store for five hours so they can get their iPhone first. I did a bunch of little jobs like that for the first year just to make rent.

S Saagar Shaikh 07:30

And then I got a job at Nordstrom, and I worked there for two years and that was fine, but it was just also paying my rent and for food, and I wasn't going on any auditions. So I've been in LA for three years at this point and hadn't gone on a single audition. And then I, out of laziness at first, grew out my beard, and then I started getting auditions. I found an agent really quickly after I took head shots with the beard. And I was like, "Whoa, this is weird, but it's working for me." So I had the beard for a long time, and I kept on getting more commercial work with it. Yeah, and then I left Nordstrom because I was like, "I could be doing this at home. Why am I still working jobs that I could have worked living in Texas?" So I quit that. And I made a rule for myself in 2015 that I wasn't going to make any money doing work outside of the industry.

S Saagar Shaikh 08:37

And so I left Nordstrom. Couple of months later, I got a job as a production assistant, specifically a post-production assistant, which is basically the office assistant for the editorial department. So yeah, for the next four years, I'm just getting people's lunches, making people's

coffee, going to get groceries for the office, doing menial work and jobs like that. And then I became a post-production coordinator, dug myself into that grave a little deeper, and then a supervisor, and I was like, "Yo, I hate this." And so I got fired from my post-production supervisor job, and my boss gave me a two months notice, and he's like, "Hey man, I just want to let you know that we're looking for your replacement. I don't know if it's going to take a week, two weeks, a month, two months, but I just want to give you a heads up that you got to prepare yourself."

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Saagar Shaikh 09:50

And so I was like, "Damn, what do I do?" But honestly, it was the best thing that happened to me. It took two months for them to find my replacement. But after that - and I had just gotten married right before I lost that job. But then my wife Wajiha, she happened to get a job right as I was exiting my last job. So that gave me a little comfort, like, "Okay, she wasn't working. I was working. Now I'm not working and she's working. So financially things are still moving." But that gave me a little bit of a cushion to spend more time working on my craft. Because since I started, since the inception of the idea that I wanted to start acting, I've always had school and work or a full time job, and I've never been able to really dive into it. So now my wife was working for a couple of months while I was unemployed, and so I really took that time to focus on this.

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Saagar Shaikh 11:01

And I did this thing, what's called the Disney Showcase right now. I did that in 2019, and that was four months after I lost my job. And so there's 15,000 applications, 2,500 auditions, and then they pick sixteen people. And the two years before that, I got to the last round, and then I didn't make it. And then this third year, when I didn't have to work, or I didn't have to do or think about anything else, I got one of those sixteen spots, and that got me a new manager, a new agent, and it really changed the game for me at that time. And then COVID happened. So pilot season was canceled. Auditions are all canceled. And I'm like, "Shit man, I just spent eight years trying so hard to get this job and this career, and now a global pandemic has ended it. Should I keep doing this? What do I do?"

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Saagar Shaikh 12:13

But seven months later, I guess five months after COVID happened, auditions started picking back up. And I got this one audition for this show, and I was like, "This is my shot. This is my chance. I understand this character. I know this character. I've been a version of this character. I gotta get this job." And so I worked on it really hard. And yeah, I screen tested for it, and then a week later, I got the job. And then I moved to Atlanta for six months, did this job, and now here we are.



Rimsha Syed 12:53

Wow. What a journey.

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Saagar Shaikh 12:55

I know, when you said go back, I was like, "You know what? I'm just gonna word vomit."



Rimsha Syed 13:02

Well, I like that you framed it as a typical immigrant story, because I definitely got some hints of that. Just with all the hard work and all the odd end jobs and everything that you had to do to get where you are now. But if it's all right with you, I do want to jump back a little bit and ask you about Alief, specifically because I have actually heard a lot about that part of Houston. And I'm just curious as to what brought your parents to Alief in particular.

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Saagar Shaikh 13:34

So my dad moved to the US, and I want to say in 1981, and he had a sister that had just in the previous year or two moved to Houston from Pakistan. And she moved to an area near Alief. And so my dad, before he was married, was living with her and her husband and their daughter. And then my dad went back to Pakistan and got married to my mom in 1983. And then they moved to Houston and lived with my aunt again until my older brother was born. And then they moved into an apartment in an area called Sharpstown, which is not a super safe area at all. I was born in Sharpstown. We lived there for four years.

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Saagar Shaikh 14:35

And then my dad's sister, the same one, bought a house in a neighborhood called Alief Village. And so my dad was like, "Yo, I'm ready to buy a house, too. Let's be neighbors." So he bought a house on the same street. And so we were neighbors with my aunt. And then within the next five years or so, two of my dad's brothers and one of my dad's sisters also moved from Pakistan, one from Pakistan, one from Saudi, and one from Iran. They all moved to the same street. So we all grew up together and we rode our bikes together, roller blades, we rode the bus together to school, we saw each other in the hallways in school. It was a really cool time.



Rimsha Syed 15:25

Yeah. And then did they end up all moving to San Antonio as well?

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Saagar Shaikh 15:29

No, we're the only ones that left that neighborhood at the time. We were the first ones to leave, I believe, and we moved to San Antonio. Now two of the families still live in Alief Village, but the other ones have moved out and they live in Sugar Land now, which is fifteen minutes away.



Rimsha Syed 15:54

Right, yeah. So I know that you mentioned not being particularly excited to move to San Antonio, and you were fourteen at the time. And I wanted to hear about how that transition went for you in terms of having to make new friends, for example, or having to start at a new school, and just how you handled that transition as a teenager.

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Saagar Shaikh 16:17

Well, it was kind of rough. I'm this new kid that came in the middle of the school year. Nobody knew me. I didn't know anybody. These are formative years. And I remember the first week I got into the bus, my school bus, and there was this kid, I don't remember his name, but he was like, "What are you?" And I said, "I'm a Pakistani, I'm Muslim." And he said, "Oh, so you're a Mohammed?" And for the next few years, from that moment two months before eighth grade ended all the way to the end of senior year of high school, I just embraced it. And that's what everybody called me. And now that I'm in my thirties, I'm like, "Dude, I should have nipped that in the bud immediately." But I'm so new. I'm a kid. I'm scared.

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Saagar Shaikh 17:24

And then a year later, 9/11 happened, and that made it even worse. I remember there was this Afghan kid, this refugee that started - he moved to San Antonio as a refugee and went to school at Clark. And I remember watching some White boys - he was standing on the stairs or by the stairs, and his backpack was hanging off of the ledge. And it's outside in the courtyard. And I remember these White kids were planning on pulling his backpack down and messing with him because he's a refugee, because he's an Afghan refugee.

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Saagar Shaikh 18:10

And of those White kids, there was one that had that had just recently become my friend. We would BMX together. And I had to tell him, I was like, "Dude, do not do that shit. You can't do that shit." And that guy was - that refugee became really good friends with my brother later on that year. But yeah, it was just really scary. Like, "I'm hearing people talk about this guy. What are people saying about me?" Yeah, and at this point, I'm what, fourteen and a half, fifteen, dealing with a new school, a new city. The school is predominantly White, and 9/11 just happened. It was a rough time. Scary shit, man.



Rimsha Syed 19:03

Yeah, yeah. So would you say that these cases of Islamophobia were worse after 9/11? Or is this something that you also ran into when you were in Alief?

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Saagar Shaikh 19:16

Well, it was different. It was just different, right? In Alief, there's a lot of racist jokes. But there are so many people of so many different races there, and that are all friends, that these racist jokes are - they're racist after all, but they are easier to laugh at because you're laughing with

each other. You're making fun of each other. And obviously they're coming from somewhere, but I guess they came out of humor, right? But in San Antonio, it came from a different place. It came from a place of like, "You don't belong here." That make sense?



Rimsha Syed 20:08

Yeah, yeah totally. I guess speaking of being Muslim, seeing as you and I grew up in the same community for some time, I wanted to hear about what community meant to you. Were you close to the people in the Pakistani Muslim community in San Antonio? Did you grow up going to the mosque, and just what that one aspect of your identity was like while you were still in Texas?



Saagar Shaikh 20:37

Yeah, so when I was in Houston, community meant a lot. We had a lot of family in the neighborhood like I said before, and we had a ton of family friends. We'd go, we'd attempt to have sleepovers all the time, and our parents would most of the time say no. Every once in a while they'd say yeah. But yeah, I went to Sunday school every Sunday. I had a whole group of friends over there. It was a big thing to me. We went to Qur'an classes. I made friends in all those Qur'an classes. I still talk to some of those people.



Saagar Shaikh 21:11

And then when I moved to San Antonio, I feel like all of that just stopped. I remember when I was a kid in Houston, and we used to go to dawats which are family gatherings or family friend gatherings. There would always be those older cool kids that never went to the dawats. They were too cool to go. And I remember this feeling when I moved to San Antonio. I lost all that sense of community, and there was a moment where I was like, "Am I that kid that I used to think was too cool to go to dawats. Is that what the other kids now think of me?" When really I just don't have a connection to the people in this community. It's new to me.



Saagar Shaikh 22:00

I feel like when I moved to San Antonio, there was not a large Muslim or Desi population there, and the ones that were there were younger families. So there's a huge age gap between us. And I knew you back then. When I was when I was fourteen or fifteen, you must have been six or something. And I knew you, and I knew your brother, but also you guys were so much younger than me that I felt like I can't even go to the same dawats that my parents want to go to. I know they're trying to make friends, but I'm not going to find any friends there, so I'm just going to stay home. Whoops, did you go away? [pause] There you are.



Rimsha Syed 23:03

Yeah. So sorry about that. I have no idea why my laptop just started bugging out, but hopefully it didn't mess with the recording for the first half.



Saagar Shaikh 23:14

No, it said recording the whole time.



Rimsha Syed 23:16

Okay. Awesome, awesome. So yeah, I think before you could off, you were talking about how you felt like you lost that community aspect once you moved to San Antonio and you were a little bit worried about feeling like an outsider.



Saagar Shaikh 23:32

Yeah. It didn't feel the same. It's a completely different community, but it felt like not one that I'm a part of. I even went to Sunday school in San Antonio, but it wasn't the same. Sunday school that I went to in Houston had like 150 kids and the one in San Antonio had like eight. And I met a couple of guys over there, and I still talk to them every once in a while. We didn't grow up together, but we became friends during college, so five years after we met. Yeah.



Rimsha Syed 24:18

Yeah. It seems like the Muslim community was much smaller when you were growing up and going to Sunday school compared to now.



Saagar Shaikh 24:26

It's huge now.



Rimsha Syed 24:27

Yeah. I mean, I go back for dawats here and there and just see so many new faces, and I have no idea who all these new families are.



Saagar Shaikh 24:36

Yeah, where the hell did they come from?



Rimsha Syed 24:38

Literally.

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Saagar Shaikh 24:42

When I moved there, there was one masjid. It was the Medical masjid. And then in Houston, there's a masjid on every corner.



Rimsha Syed 24:53

Yeah. Now we have a few in San Antonio, and I think the South Asians don't go to the Medical masjid anymore.

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Saagar Shaikh 25:00

Yeah, that's weird too.



Rimsha Syed 25:02

Yeah, there's a lot that's changed for sure. And then I guess still talking about community, how would you say that's been in LA?

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Saagar Shaikh 25:14

So the first few years that I lived in LA, I didn't really have a community. I would go to a masjid over here for Jum'ah and during Ramadan, but I didn't have any family here, and I didn't have any South Asian or Muslim friends here for the first three years, three and a half years maybe. And then I met someone, and they introduced me to someone, and they introduced me to someone. And now I have my own little family here. There's like fifteen of us in a group chat. We see each other all the time. Yeah, it's pretty great now. I have more fun doing Eid in LA than I do going back home now. I do feel bad because my parents are there. I got my brothers and nieces and sister-in-laws, and they're great. But Eid just is different in LA now because we're all a family of transplants. And so we all make something, we all contribute, and we're all a bunch of lonely people.



Rimsha Syed 26:25

Yeah, that makes sense. Did you meet your wife in LA?

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Saagar Shaikh 26:29

I met my wife through a mutual friend who was her neighbor in Boston. So my wife lived in Boston. Her friend and neighbor moved to LA for a summer because she was interning at Snapchat. And I met that friend while she was here. We met four or five times over that summer. And when she went back to Boston, she messaged me and she was like, "Hey Saagar, I have this friend who I think you might be interested in. Let me know if you're into it and I'll set

things up." And then she sent Wajiha, who is my wife, the same message, and both of us were like, "Yeah, set it up." And then she made a group chat, us three, and then she left. And we just started talking and cut to a year and a half later, we're married.



Rimsha Syed 27:21

Yeah, awesome. So seeing as this is a Muslim Voices in Texas collection, I have to ask how you feel about Texas generally and if you ever see yourself moving back or even how often do you get a chance to come back to San Antonio?



Saagar Shaikh 27:42

Okay, I got to Texas in my heart, right? We have so much Texas pride. My friend when I was nineteen got me this gift, and it's a Texas shaped mirror, and I've had that since I was nineteen. I still have it right now, and I have hung that in every apartment that I've lived in. But now I just moved to this new apartment, and this mirror is sitting on the floor still, and I just don't want to hang it back up. I'm really mad at Texas. [sighs] I want to have the same amount of pride for Texas as I used to, but Texas sucks in a lot of ways now. I got home there. I got family there. And I don't think I'll ever move back, unless I was in a lot of trouble, and I couldn't afford to live in LA anymore. Then for sure. I'd go back until I could leave again. My relationship with Texas is complicated. I love it because my family is there, and I go back maybe two or three times a year to go visit. But I have a hard time staying there longer than four days. I get really bored. It's so slow. We got good food, but yeah, food and family is about all Texas has going for it for me lately.



Rimsha Syed 29:21

Yeah, I feel that. I feel like San Antonio just starts feeling small once you've been gone for long enough. It'll always be home, but there's just not much there, if you know what I mean.



Saagar Shaikh 29:34

Yeah, I know exactly what you mean. Yeah, I used to go to this hookah shop when I lived there all during college. And every every time I visited Sultan, Sultan Cafe, I'm sure you've been or heard of it, but that was my home away from home away from home in San Antonio. And now that place doesn't even exist anymore. So when I go back, even have a place to hang out other than home. So it just feels like every couple of years I detach a little bit more.



Rimsha Syed 30:15

Yeah, that makes sense. So you already kind of talked about this in the beginning when you were talking about your college years. But what inspired you to want to go into acting? Was it maybe specific people that you had seen on TV? Just walk me through your thought process.

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Saagar Shaikh 30:37

I didn't know a single person in the industry when I decided I wanted to do it. But I did watch a lot of TV. I watched a lot of comedies. And I loved *The Office*, I loved *Parks and Rec*, I loved *30 Rock*. But the one show that made me feel like, "I want to do this," is *Community*. And I loved that show so much. I thought it was so funny and light-hearted and just so smart that I wanted to take the exact same training that Donald Glover and Danny Pudi took. So I found out that Donald Glover studied at UCB, Upright Citizens Brigade. That's where he studied improv and sketch. And so I signed up for classes two weeks before I moved to LA to start taking classes at UCB. And I did that for seven years. I took classes there. I performed there regularly. And then I took classes at Second City. I took classes at iO West, just a bunch of different improv and sketch comedy schools.

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Saagar Shaikh 32:03

And then I was like, "I can't just do comedy. I got to be versatile. I got to do other things." So then I started taking real acting classes. Went to a few different schools out here just to really work on the craft. It's hard to practice something when you don't have anything to work on. So it gave me something to look forward to, gave me some assignment to work on and yeah, yeah. So going back to your question, it was *Community* that really pulled me in. And I did some research, and I saw how much they improvised on that show. And I thought the art of improvising was so fascinating. I had to know everything about it.



Rimsha Syed 33:00

Yeah, I love that show. I get it.

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Saagar Shaikh 33:02

Yeah, it's so good.



Rimsha Syed 33:04

So this is also something that you mentioned earlier that I was still pretty curious about. But you said that after you started growing out your beard, you started booking more roles, if I'm remembering correctly.

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Saagar Shaikh 33:17

Yeah, yeah.



Rimsha Syed 33:19

Yeah, so why do you think that is?

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Saagar Shaikh 33:22

I think because there was a time in the past six or seven years that beards were super in. And I'm blessed enough to where all my testosterone is focused on my face. And so I grow such a crazy beard. And I didn't do it on purpose at first. It was just like, "I don't have to shave for work. I'm lazy. Razors are expensive. So I'm just going to grow it out." And then my agent at that time was like this small boutique agency, they dropped me as a client because I didn't look like my head shots, basically. And I missed one audition they were mad about. They sent me on eleven auditions over fourteen months. Bullshit.

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Saagar Shaikh 34:14

Anyways, yeah, they dropped me, and then I was like, "Well, I guess I gotta get new head shots, and people keep complimenting my beard. So let me take head shots with the beard." I took head shots with the beard. I submitted to five agencies, and three of them called me in. When I moved to LA, I submitted to over a hundred agencies and got zero calls. When I grew out my beard, when beards were hot, I submitted to ten and three of them called me. I signed with one, and I started booking commercials. I think it was when the hipster beard was a big thing. It was a good representation of a hipster beard, I suppose. But I wasn't questioning it, man. I was just like, "Look, whatever is working, it's getting me work, stick to it."



Rimsha Syed 35:03

Yeah.

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Saagar Shaikh 35:03

Yeah, and I did just that. I told myself I wouldn't shave unless a job paid me \$10,000 to do stuff, and that never happened.



Rimsha Syed 35:16

And then you did shave pretty recently from what I remember on your Instagram.

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Saagar Shaikh 35:21

Yeah, yeah. I was like, "You know what? I got the job, the biggest job I could have possibly gotten with a beard, and now it's time to move on."



Rimsha Syed 35:30

Right. So what does it mean for you personally to be a South Asian Muslim actor?

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Saagar Shaikh 35:39

I think it's huge. There's really not a lot of us out there, and I really hope that it inspires more kids and people to think like, "Hey, I can do this." The playing field is still so small, but we still don't get a lot of work, because it's not just the acting world that doesn't have a lot of Brown Muslim actors. But it's also the writing world, the directing world, the executive world. We need people like us to be in seats in all of those departments because that's how more stuff is going to get made. And that's the only thing I get asked for, is for more stories to be told. There's so many of us and so many different kinds of us and philosophies within the cultures, and I think they could all be explored. I'm just one person. I want to see more stories. I want to do more work. And I want to see other people like me out there.



Rimsha Syed 37:03

Totally. Yeah, I think one thing that I've heard a lot from people in our community is, "Wow, I wish we had something like *Ms. Marvel* when we were growing up." But at the same time, it's so, I guess, heartwarming to see these types of representations finally making the big screen between *Ms. Marvel*, shows like *Ramy*, *Never Have I Ever* finally getting that type of representation that we just haven't had for forever.

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Saagar Shaikh 37:33

It's partially our parents' fault, man. They don't let us do shit.



Rimsha Syed 37:40

Yeah, there's that too.

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Saagar Shaikh 37:41

I won't give them all the blame because it's mostly White people for being gatekeepers and not letting us in, but also, our parents were so terrified of their kids doing something new, something different, something like untapped waters. And yeah, I'm thankful for my parents for not holding me too tightly.



Rimsha Syed 38:10

Yeah. And do you ever worry about having to live up to some sort of expectation that the South Asian and/or Muslim community might hold you to?

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Saagar Shaikh 38:22

Constantly. It's actually really scary. Muslim internet is not super forgiving, and people forget

that we're only telling one story of one family of one person in one situation. Everybody wants to see themselves in a character, and when they don't see themselves in that character, they get a little upset. I don't really know. I just feel like because there are only such limited spots of storytelling when it comes to us, it's hard to please everybody, and you want to do your best, but you're also wanting to stay true to the actual story that was written, and you want to stay true to the character. I'm pretty sure Ramy feels like this too, right? People get upset about a lot of his episodes or the choices that he made, but that's a real type of person.

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Saagar Shaikh 39:52

And a lot of stuff that people say on the internet can affect one's work. So I try really hard to not look at too much. It also comes with the sense of imposter syndrome where I feel like now that I've done this job, people are expecting to see me more and to do more things. And I worry that like, "Okay yeah, I could probably get another job pretty soon." But then I'm worried like, "Am I able to do that job? Am I going to live up to people's expectations or my own expectations?" There's a lot on the line.



Rimsha Syed 40:39

Yeah. You can't be everyone's cup of tea.

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Saagar Shaikh 40:42

Yeah, you shouldn't be, actually, I think.



Rimsha Syed 40:45

Yeah, I agree with that. It would almost be inaccurate to have a very one dimensional representation of what a Muslim or a South Asian person is like or what their life is like.

S

Saagar Shaikh 40:57

Yeah, I mean, we're such a monolith.



Rimsha Syed 41:00

[Laughs]. So obviously we have to talk about *Ms. Marvel*. Absolutely love the show, love the way the culture was depicted. It was funny. It was light-hearted and powerful all at once. And I want to ask, do you remember the specific moment that you found out you were casted? What was happening? What were your initial emotions? Who did you tell first?

S

Saagar Shaikh 41:29

Yeah. So it was September 2, 2020. I tested for it probably, I think, ten days earlier or eight days earlier. And so it was all that was on my mind, and we were in lock down. So we're stuck in the apartment, couldn't even go for walks because, the air quality was bad outside cause we had a bunch of forest fires or wildfires earlier that week. So we're just going crazy inside the apartment. And I got a call from my agent, and he conferenced in my manager, and that never happens. It's either one or the other that calls me. They're never both on the line. So I was like, "Okay, this is either really good news or really bad news. Let's hear it."

S

Saagar Shaikh 42:21

And so they inched their way towards telling me. And they were like, "You got the job." And I broke down. I had it on speaker phone. My wife was in the dining area sitting at the table, and she just gasped really loudly out of excitement. We had some tears. I called my mom first, and that's actually when I started crying is when I called my mom and I told her. And then she started crying, then I started crying. Because it had been eight years. Eight years of people telling me, "I think you should - you tried. You gave it a good shot, but maybe it's not going to work out," or things like that. And so it was really, really special. This is the job that changed my life and so many other people's. And this job made the eight years of playing the game and working so hard so worth it to have this one be my first show. My first series regular. Honestly, it couldn't have gone a better way. I'm so thankful, so glad that this is the one that did it for me.



Rimsha Syed 43:53

Yeah. Was it difficult hearing people say that maybe it was time to give it up? I mean, I'm sure there were plenty of people in your life who were supportive always. But there's always some people who are thinking, I guess, I don't know what to call it, maybe more practical when they're advising you to just take a different avenue.

S

Saagar Shaikh 44:16

Yeah, it did hurt a lot. There were definitely times where I would get job offers from San Antonio or my brother's friend has this business, and he's looking for this position, and he wants to hire me. He'll pay me \$70,000 a year or \$65,000 a year. And my dad would be like, "You know Saagar, you should take this job. You can come here, live a normal life." And I always thought I would much rather struggle to pay rent doing what I love doing than go back to Texas and make \$65,000 a year, be able to own a house, whatever. The appeal of that wasn't fun to me. Because what was it all for? What's it worth? That's all going to happen. I've never been a follow the money kind of person, and I'm doing this.

S

Saagar Shaikh 45:20

So I used to tell my mom - I used to test my mom, and I'd get so mad when she failed. But I used to call her. Every nine or ten months, I would tell her, "I don't know if this is working. I think I'm going to come home. And she would say like, "Ajao, wapas ghar ajao." And I'd be

like, "No, that's not what you're supposed to say. You're supposed to tell me, 'Hey, don't give up. Keep going. You're going to be fine.'" And I don't think she ever passed that test. But yeah, I mean I'm glad I listened to my gut. I'm glad I had that perseverance and the drive to keep going, because if I quit, I would have gone home, and I would have been unhappy for the rest of my life. I would have just wondered what could have been if I stayed, if I continued trying. And now I know.



Rimsha Syed 46:12

Yeah, yeah. And I think thousands of thousands of people are so glad that you didn't give up.



Saagar Shaikh 46:20

Yeah, I hope so.



Rimsha Syed 46:23

So how was the experience? You had to obviously relocate for some time. How long did it take to shoot? What was most memorable for you?



Saagar Shaikh 46:34

Yeah. So on October 2, they told me, "Hey, so you got to move to Atlanta on October 12 for six months." And I was like, "Yeah, let's go. Let's do it." I packed a bag. My wife and I, we left LA, we went to Atlanta, got an apartment over there. Obviously they give you a per diem so that you don't have to go out of pocket over there. We got an apartment in Atlanta. We sublet our apartment in LA, and we were at one spot for three months, and then we all decided, the whole cast, let's all move to the same building. So a couple of us moved out of our spots and moved into the building that others lived in. And then there was seven apartments in this high rise building on different floors with the whole cast. We basically bubbled together. We saw each other all the time.



Saagar Shaikh 47:40

And they're all a lot younger than me. I'm in my thirties, and they're nineteen to twenty-four, something like that. I felt like they were all my little brothers and sisters, but I would also try to give them their space, cause I sometimes felt really uncle-y around them, especially when I dabbled once and they were like, "No, don't do that." I was like, "What? Guys, people my age do this too." But yeah, one of the most memorable parts was just spending time with the guys, the rest of the cast. They're so great, they're so fun. And it made work that much more fun because it feels like just a bunch of friends working together and playing with the lines on set. Yeah, the whole cast and crew was just incredible to work with. Everybody was so, so cool. It was so family oriented. The directors and the producers, all amazing people. We all still talk all the time. It's so great.



Rimsha Syed 48:55

Wow, love to hear it. Can you walk me through a day or a week in the life of filming and rehearsal and just what a typical time looks like for you?



Saagar Shaikh 49:08

Yeah. So you can work anywhere from one to six days a week probably. And the days can be anywhere from six hours to fourteen hours long. You might get picked up at 5:30 a.m. You go to set. They drop you off at your trailer, and then you're in your trailer for thirty minutes, maybe eating breakfast or something like that. And then you got to go into the hair and makeup chair, and that'll take about thirty minutes to an hour, and they're just doing basic makeup and fixing your hair to what the scene is supposed to reflect your hair to look like. And then after that, you go back to your trailer. You get into wardrobe, and then you might sit in your trailer for thirty minutes. You might sit in your trailer for five hours. Just depends on how the day's going.



Saagar Shaikh 50:12

And then you go to set, and they have the stage set for the scene that you're supposed to be shooting. So we might do a rehearsal or two just to get the flow, and then we shoot it. And anytime you shoot a scene, you gotta do a wide shot and then you gotta do a two shot, which is two people in the frame talking to each other. And then you do singles for each person. So basically you're doing the same scene four or five times. And that will be half of your day basically, just shooting one scene. One back and forth dialog, one monologue, one whatever. One or two page scene. And then yeah, and you finish up, you go change back into your street clothes. You de-rig your makeup, and then you go home, and it's like 8 p.m. And you go to sleep and do the same thing the next day.



Rimsha Syed 51:24

Wow, that's a really long work day.



Saagar Shaikh 51:27

Yeah, yeah. But you're surrounded by good people and snacks, and you take a book, read it in your trailer, and you get to play. You get to invent stuff in the scene, if they let you. If the directors let you, you get to change your words a little bit. As long as it has the same or similar effects to the scene, you get to add a lot of yourself and add value to this, to the script.



Rimsha Syed 52:01

Yeah. Were there any challenges you faced throughout this process?

S

Saagar Shaikh 52:11

So sometimes I think I'm too close to the show, to myself, to my character in the show. And I obviously want what's best for myself. And I can't always see what I'm shooting and how involved my character is or feels. And so, a lot of the time, I'm really stressed out that I don't think my character is doing enough or has enough or is valuable enough. And so I was working with that on my mind for a lot, a lot of the shoot. And it wasn't until I watched it and I was like, "Oh, wow. I actually have a lot. I'm actually doing like a lot. My character means something to this show." And so for more than six months - we shot this almost two years ago. We started shooting it almost two years ago. And so for the last year and a half or so, I've been just carrying the weight of, "My character just isn't doing what I would like for my character to do," or "He's not involved in the show as much as I would love for him to be." And I watched it, and I was super surprised at how much energy I wasted stressing out about that and I didn't need to.

**Rimsha Syed 53:47**

Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. And so what was it like finally seeing it all come together? Did you watch with the cast or with your family?

S

Saagar Shaikh 53:57

So episode one and two, they sent me cuts, and I got to watch them. I watched them with my wife first, but these were unfinished cuts. And then the first time I saw the finished cuts were at the premiere. The premiere was on June 2, earlier this year, and I flew in my parents, my younger brother and my sister-in-law. And they came from San Antonio to LA. And then me, my wife, and all of them, know, they picked us up in a Escalade, and they took us to the premiere. And I got to watch it with my parents. My parents met the whole cast and the whole crew, basically all the directors and producers at least. And it was just so nice to see the payoff. My parents worried about me probably more than they worried about either of my brothers. And it was just so nice to see that relief on their face that, "All right, we think he's going to be fine." That was really special.

**Rimsha Syed 55:13**

Yeah. Sounds like a moment that everyone is going to remember forever and talk about for years.

S

Saagar Shaikh 55:19

Yeah, I mean, I feel like this was history.

**Rimsha Syed 55:23**

Yeah, agreed. Did you have a favorite scene?

S

Saagar Shaikh 55:30

I think my favorite two scenes that we shot. I love the Haram-Dot-Kamran scene. That was probably my favorite of the whole show, because that was my first scene working with Travina who plays Tyesha and Rish who plays Kamran. That was my first scene with both of them of the whole shoot. And I actually made up that line on the spot, Haram-Dot-Kamran. So I didn't tell anybody I was going to do that. I tried to do a different joke each take and of all the jokes, I didn't tell anybody I was doing any jokes. As far as I knew I was going to stick to the script or say the one that I just previously said. And it was always a little goal of mine to make a joke that nobody was expecting and to try to make everybody in video village, which are the directors and the producers, try to make them laugh. And so that's the one that they laughed the hardest at, and I was really happy that that made it in the final cut because I didn't know whether it was or not. That and the dance sequence was really, really fun.



Rimsha Syed 57:01

Yeah. The dance sequence was probably my favorite, too. And I saw that you actually brought your wife to your marriage [laughs].

S

Saagar Shaikh 57:10

Yeah, yeah, yeah. She did background work. We shot that in two days, and so she came to set both of those days. It was really fun.



Rimsha Syed 57:20

Yeah. So it seems like you might have encountered some new territory after the show aired with tons of new people following you, tons of new people interested in what you're all about. How have you navigated those things?

S

Saagar Shaikh 57:38

Yeah, that's been really weird. It's really new to me still. So I've been working towards this for a long time, but you never know what to expect. And so a lot of times a lot of people will reach out to me for an interview or just for a meeting or whatever. And I will send those all straight to my publicist usually, or my manager, so they can suss out, is this worth it? Is this going to help me or hurt me? Or is this person, is this platform a good platform for me? Does it align with me? And I guess I hate to say it like this, but the brand. I don't know. And so yeah. I'll forward it to them, and I'll have them suss it out. And if they say it's a go, then I'll do it.

S

Saagar Shaikh 58:41

Some of them are different. Some of them are like this one and another one I did, they are hosted by other Brown Muslim people. I'm usually more inclined to doing those without asking their permission. Or sometimes if they don't get back, the person will reach out to me again

and I'll be like, "You know what? I know this person, it's okay." Like in your case, I was like, "Yeah, this is fine." And then the new followers, that was overwhelming at first. It's just like, dude, so many people have eyes on me now. It feels so weird. It kind of makes me want to post a lot less, or I feel like I only want to post now if I have something to promote. I don't know. I'm still trying to figure it out.



Rimsha Syed 59:37

Yeah. Definitely all new territory. Probably gonna take some time to figure out how to navigate these things, but -



Saagar Shaikh 59:44

I just want to be so busy that I don't have time to think about these things, you know?



Rimsha Syed 59:48

Yeah, makes sense. So I guess aside from *Ms. Marvel*, do you have any plans on what's happening next or any dream roles or types of movies or shows that you'd want to do in the future?



Saagar Shaikh 1:00:06

Yeah, I want to do some gritty comedy. Something with - I don't know. I want to do something like our *Breaking Bad* meets *Barry*. I want to do something like *Atlanta*. I want to do something that's real but funny and just weird. Doesn't exist yet. Hopefully I can be part of one that does. I would love to be a part of writing something like that. But this isn't something that is easy to do alone. And I've longed for for a very long time for a creative partner. And that's just so hard to find, especially with schedules and drive and aligned creativity.



Rimsha Syed 1:01:12

Yeah well, you're already making history, so anything is possible at this point.



Saagar Shaikh 1:01:19

Yeah, hopefully. Inshallah, you know.



Rimsha Syed 1:01:22

Inshallah. Okay, so I'm looking at the clock. I don't want to take too much more of your time, but I did want to ask if you had any words of wisdom or advice that you wanted to pass along, seeing as this oral history interview will be archived. The hope is people would be listening to it

years and years down the line. Is there anything you would like to say as a last note?

S

Saagar Shaikh 1:01:51

Yeah. If there's something that you really want to do, do the thing. Otherwise, you're going to get old, and you're going to feel like it's too late, and you're always going to regret that like, "Dude, if I started this ten years ago, I would have been ten years deep by now." Start today. Start today. Because life is short and happiness can be a hard thing to come by. And so do the thing that makes you happy. Yeah. That's it.



Rimsha Syed 1:02:32

Awesome. All right. Well, thank you so much again for taking the time to be part of this collection and to sit down with me today.

S

Saagar Shaikh 1:02:41

Yeah, of course. Thank you.



Rimsha Syed 1:02:43

All right. I'm going to go ahead and stop the recording.

S

Saagar Shaikh 1:02:45

All right.