



## Hadi

*Hamrah, together on a journey*— The Hamrah Oral History Project is a series of interviews with immigrants, refugees, and asylees in Arizona, people who had to leave home due to oppression, war or violence, pursuing their future elsewhere. These are personal accounts of life between places and cultures, exploring how we arrived here and why we left home. Listen to stories of joy, dream and emotional pain that comes with the relocation and separation. Recorded at KXCI Community Radio's Historic Armory Park Studios in Tucson, Arizona.

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*Can you introduce yourself?*

My name is Hadi. I am 21 years old. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, but my parents are from Lahore, Pakistan. Lahore is a kind of a big city now. When my dad left in 1989, it was around Tucson size, like only a million people, but now it's close to 13 million people, so it's huge. It's very metropolitan. It's surrounded by all farmland. It's kind of like Tucson in the sense that it's very dry, but it's very green at the same time. And I love it because it's a very metropolitan city, but it has deep ties to its history dating close to 4,000 years ago.

*Can you tell me about your childhood growing up in a Pakistani family?*

In my childhood, was very Pakistani, but also very American at the same time. There were some traditions we did, which my parents tried to keep our Pakistani heritage and growing up in a Pakistani community really helped that. Compared to other students in my class, I would notice we wouldn't have some of the same things. Just for example, food. I wouldn't know what a meatloaf was. Some of my favorite childhood memories growing up were going to Pakistani festivals and parades in Brooklyn. There's this huge August 14th parade for Pakistani Independence Day, and it was just amazing seeing so many people who spoke the same language, ate the same foods all at the same time.

*Who did your family leave with?*

My dad left Pakistan in 1989. His older brother came to work in the US originally. I believe he only came to make money and eventually have plans to go back eventually. But my dad, he originally had the same goal, but sought a higher education. He went to Brooklyn College and

got his degree and he worked tirelessly to work while going to school. Since then, he was working between different jobs. He used to be a taxi driver and then also do IT stuff and he did a lot of small jobs in and out everywhere. And eventually my dad's older brother realized he could make a life in America, so he got married and brought his family over. And then when my dad eventually got his citizenship, he also got married to my mom and she came in a couple years later

*Who stayed behind in Pakistan?*

For the longest, my entire family was in Pakistan besides my dad's older brother and his family. Recently, I think in 2012 we brought over my dad's sister, but my entire mom's side is still in Pakistan. We applied for them to come to the US in 2009 and it was supposed to be a nine year process, but it's been over a decade and they still haven't come and the situation there is getting more and more dire. So it's kind of like worrying. At one point we brought my mom's mom, but she didn't really like it. She was just worrying about how everyone there was going to deal.

*Can you talk about your dad's journey to us?*

So my dad left his home country on a student visa. He left because there wasn't a lot of opportunity in Pakistan at the time. He was from a very poor family and in Pakistan the way things work is you need to have connections to advance your careers and whatnot. So if you come from an underprivileged household, there's not much room to grow. You need to be in elite circles to go further in your career. So when he came to the US, his brother was already here working as a taxi driver, so he also took that up while going to a school. At the same time he applied at the Brooklyn College. He got his degree, but he was still working as a taxi driver after that for many years. He left New York because it was too much for him at one point, but he lived in a bunch of other different states like in Virginia where he got his first library card, which was a not easy process without any other identification.

But then slowly but surely, he got his license eventually from that one library card because he had some id at that point. He moved back to New York. He would still work as a taxi driver until he met a friend who introduced him to IT. His original major was accounting because in Pakistan he wanted to go for schooling for accounting, but then when his friend introduced him to IT, he excelled in that. He got a really good job eventually in Accenture, which at the time was a huge firm. I remember even seeing their billboards at the airport. He worked there for a couple of years and it really helped him establish America as his home. And even going back to Pakistan, it doesn't really feel like his home anymore because Pakistan has grown exponentially and the area he left was very small compared to what it is now. Originally he left to escape poverty and now he's actually helping more of our family members to also do the same.

*How long have you lived in Tucson?*

I have lived in Tucson for almost two years now. I moved here in August, 2021. It's been really nice so far. It was a huge adjustment coming from New York and right before I came to Tucson, I spent two months in Pakistan actually. And then once I got back home, I drove for five days and got here. It's been really nice though. Otherwise, the weather's always nice and it's a bit of an adjustment, but I'm getting used to it.

*What has been the most difficult part of growing up in a Pakistani American family?*

I think the most difficult part of living in a Pakistani American family is trying to adjust two worlds. It feels like you're living in a duality of sorts. You're not just American, you're not just Pakistan, you're a bit of both. And every time you want to identify as one or the other, it doesn't really work out. My brothers, they'll try identifying more with their American side, but every now and then I'll see them wanting to experience their Pakistani culture more. Or I'll identify more with my Pakistani side, but then at the same time, I can't really stick to it cause I am living in America. And I'll notice going to Pakistan, a lot of the little things I do are very American and they can't really explain it there, but I think it's just trying to live on a balance of both.

*What do you like the most about Tucson?*

The thing I like most about Tucson is the sky. The sky's always blue here because in New York for half the year it's gray and just feels like depression. But I feel like in Tucson you can never have that because it's always blue and it just cheers you up all the time.

*What are some of the fun things you do in Tucson?*

Going to school events. I'm the president of my school's Pakistani student Association, so because of that I have to participate a lot on campus. I don't really know much about what goes on in Tucson outside of campus. I've tried to expand my horizons, but I think the north side and east side are pretty much dead, so I've been trying to focus more on South Tucson culture. Cause there's a lot out there, it's just a lot of UofA students aren't told to go there. They're told it's dangerous and whatnot, but there's a very vibrant culture there.

*How has your life changed since you moved to Tucson?*

So my life has changed a lot since I moved to Tucson because this is the first time I've lived so far away from epicenters of my cultural identity. Most Pakistani Americans are clustered within New York City. It's been a huge adjustment trying to find staples just for example, food, going to an Indian grocery store. They're very tiny here compared to back home. And then on top of that, they won't have specific Pakistani things I'd like. Or trying to explain my culture to someone, but they've never had experience with it before. So for example, explaining Ramadan and people were not even water, but I thought that was just a meme on the internet. It wasn't an actual thing people knew. Or I put on henna for the first time for Eid and people thought I was bleeding. And that was really silly trying to explain to them that's not dried blood. But it's

been a learning experience. I've tried to figure out ways to explain a lot of things and feel more comfortable in my skin, even with people who don't look like me around. For example, when I first moved here, I couldn't wear cultural clothes out and about. I felt like everyone was staring at me, but now it feels more comfortable to do so because I could just explain to them and I understand where they're coming from too.

*Do you ever dream of going back to Pakistan and living there?*

I've dreamed of going to Pakistan before to live there. I was watching this AJ Plus documentary where this guy, he was Iranian American and he was born in America, but he lived in Iran for a year or two and he was learning all these new things about his own culture because there's a certain thing you can't learn from just from participating in your culture from the outside. You kind of have to immerse yourself in it, and I want to be able to do that with my culture. Originally at my old school, I got permission to do a semester abroad at the University of Punjab, and I wanted to take Punjabi classes because my cultural background is Punjabi, but I've never studied it academically. I've started teaching myself Urdu after high school so I can read and write all fluently now. So last time I went, it was a really good experience just trying to be self-reliant on myself and I could just read all the signs. I didn't need anyone to baby me through it. And spending close to two months, it was a lot easier for me to see myself living there than I would've in the past. And I think that my dream would be just to do something to make life there better for people there. And I think it's kind of like a responsibility in a way because my parents left and they wanted a better life for me and I want to be able to give that back to people there. I don't think everyone should have to leave their home country and like never come back. They should be able to have those things in their own country.

*What do you miss the most about your home country and culture?*

Something I miss a lot. Just the people over there. The community is a lot different than it is in the US. You just show up at someone's house and they just have to let you in. It's kind of similar back in New York compared to Tucson, if I wanted to hang out with my friends, I would just show up at their door and be like, oh, we're hanging out. But over in Tucson, I feel like that's very rude and people wouldn't like that. But even my grandma, when she lived in the US, she felt it was very cold and desolate. People wouldn't just, for example, barge into your house, they would knock or text you first even if they were outside and she isn't very mobile, so she usually just sits in one place for very long. So that's something she would have a hard time with. With people just not coming in by themselves. And I think there's little things like that where it's very hospitable where people are just kind to you for no reason and people will just do things for you out of the goodness of their own hearts. They don't ask for anything in return, they just want to be doing something for you. And I think that's something I really like about that culture, just everyone being there for each other and you don't have to just rely on yourself.

*Can you talk about the role that language has played in your experience living in the US as a Pakistani American?*

Yeah, the role of language is important in the US. Growing up, I spoke both English and Urdu. My parents would speak Punjabi, but I thought it was just an accent you put on Urdu, which really confused me as a kid. Even my brothers have a hard time distinguishing between Urdu and Punjabi. Even though they're both our languages, they kind of get mixed up in their heads. And when I went to kindergarten, they actually put me in ESL English as a second language, even though I knew English already. And my parents, they didn't really understand what it was. They thought it was the gifted and talented program. And I remember going over language exercises in English. I'm like, I already know how to say grandma and grandpa. That's not really interesting to me. Could I write in my language? So I wrote Dadi and dada which means paternal grandpa and grandma.

And I remember my ESL teacher, she actually told my parents, oh, your son, he doesn't know English. He wrote daddy for grandpa. And it was like, my parents are like, no, we know what he's saying. Or I had another ESL teacher who's teaching me how to write numbers in Hindi, which if you guys dunno, Hindi and Urdu are the same spoken language, but they have two different written forms and she knew Hindi, but she wrote on her resume that she knew Urdu. I was not taught to read or write in either, but one day I came home writing all these numbers in Hindi and my mom was furious. She's like, where'd you learn how to do that? We're sending you to school in America to learn English and you're learning the enemy's language. And she got the ESL teacher and eventually they finally took me out once they realized, oh, he does know English.

*Have you found something you really like in us that your family didn't have before?*

Something that our family has in America that we didn't have in Pakistan was access to a lot of different goods and services. For example, in Pakistan, they don't have grocery stores. There's just markets with food. And my mom loves the fact. I remember as a kid especially, she would be raving about how we had access to groceries all year round, not depending on the seasons or just even access to cars because in Pakistan, that was seen as all luxury status, especially to my mom. Her dream was always to get a Jeep because the only cars she would see were military vehicles. And so she really wanted to get a Jeep because of that, because she's like, oh, that's the most expensive car you could get. And even her dad was the only person in her village who had a motorcycle, which was seen as a huge luxury status at the time. So coming to the US, thankfully we've always had at least one or two cars in my household because one gets too small, and especially with little kids, my parents would get a van and then my dad's work car. So it's been a good experience. I know a lot of people who don't even have access to that in Tucson, and it makes life really difficult, but especially the older you get when kids want to leave, I can't imagine trying to leave the house without a car. That seems really difficult, but that's something my parents would've never had access to in Pakistan and the cities aren't even made for cars. That's how little they would've had that.

*Have you found emotional support in Tucson?*

I made a lot of friends who I'll vent to every now and then for emotional support in Tucson. I think a lot of times we all come from different backgrounds and they don't really understand the same struggles. I made friends with someone who moved from Pakistan recently and they think that my struggles weren't the same as theirs because they came from a very privileged background in Pakistan and they didn't realize that doesn't equate to a privileged life in America because I think there's this misunderstanding that growing up in America, we would've had a lot of money. When we go to Pakistan, our money from here all equals to a lot, but in America, especially living in a city where the cost of living is really high, I didn't have an iPhone for the longest. I would just have a flip phone even though everyone else would have an iPhone. But I don't think they really understood it. And there was always this tension between us where they thought I was a spoiled American brat, but at the same time, when they moved to the US, they had no idea how to pay for rent or make their own money, and they came to the US with tens of thousands of dollars to start for school. But I've had to pay for my own schooling since I've started college, and that's really hard. Before I moved here, I was paying for everything besides rent living in my home. So I feel like there's sort of a difference between different immigrants who have perceptions of what life is like here. I don't think I've fully found emotional support for that. I think I just have to be my own for now because it's really hard to get someone to understand every issue.

Even on campus, there's CAPS counseling, and I remember talking to the therapist there and he was like, let me refer to some of my coworkers. I'm not really sure how to answer your questions. I'm like, okay. But I think I've had therapy in the past before, and at the same time there's little things that just get me so mad. I was telling this entire story and the therapist was like, oh, what's Chai? And I'm like, out of all the things that you could have asked questions for, this is the one thing, a very minute detail in this whole story, and you don't know what Chai is. You could probably Google that. But I think it's just one of those things that you just have to deal with. I wish there were more POC therapists and stuff to be emotional support for others, but I don't think our country's gotten there yet. And especially because a lot of POC therapists are in high demand because there's so few of them already.

*Have you faced any discrimination or prejudice in your new home?*

In the US I have experienced discrimination a bunch. I lived in a huge Indian community, so I would face a lot of discrimination from that. And I have so many stories of that where you'd think, oh, we're living in the US I'd experienced more racism from white people, but the bulk of the racism I've experienced in my life is from Indians because there's a strong sense of identity still in that. Ever since I moved to Tucson, though, I've experienced more racism from police and stuff. I don't think they really see me as a person sometimes. They'll just see, oh, there's a darker figure in a car, let's pull him over even though there's no problem. I've been pulled over countless times and I've always been let go. I've never been given a warning or a citation or anything. The only time I've ever actually been pulled over and given a ticket was on 9/11. So I think that was racially profiled, but that wasn't in Tucson either. But in Tucson, I remember on Halloween I was pulled over three times that night for literally nothing. And every time they let

me go, and even my friends, when they see a police officer, they're like, hide Hadi. We can't let him be seen. Or there's even things between other ethnic groups, for example, not being able to speak Spanish, right? I think in Tucson it's very important that we do learn Spanish, but I've also noticed a lot of people get mad at you if you don't speak Spanish with them. It's like, oh, no, I'm not Latino or anything. I can't speak it. But there's this sense of, oh, you're just trying to be whitewashed and you're not speaking your language. I remember going to Disney and the guy, he said, the price in Spanish, and my mom's like, sorry, I can't understand.

And he's like, he repeated in Spanish and my mom's like, oh, I don't speak Spanish. And he went on a whole rant that we're Trump supporters and people come from Mexico and they just forget their language and they just want to be white. Which, I understand where he's coming from, but at the same time, we're a different ethnicity, we have our own culture and language. We'll try our best sometimes. My mom's been using duolingo to learn more Spanish, especially being a teacher in Tucson, she thinks that it's important she understands her students. But besides that, I feel like there's a lot of miscommunication between people, but the police, I have no excuse for

*What hopes do you have for your future?*

The hopes I have for my future is to be able to do something that would make my parents proud, but also support my home country in some ways. Because there's always that identity crisis of am I more American? Am I more Pakistani? And I want to be able to, even if I do choose to live in the US for the rest of my life, I want to be able to give back to the people there. I do feel a sense of connection to it, even though it's on the other side of the world and the exact opposite time zone from here. There's still that connection there. I think growing up as a Pakistani American, it's changed my identity and affected my identity in a lot of ways. I've always had the sort of identity crisis of what am I? Am I more American? Am I more Pakistani? All these different issues in my head? How do I want to raise my future children, for example? And I experienced a lot of this throughout middle school and high school when I really had to think about it.

Even now, I have this sort of random days where I'm lost and I need to think about it. I'm like, what am I? I recently had this conversation with my friend Catherine about being an immigrant or being from an immigrant background, and she was basically calming me down trying to be like, no, you were just as American. You don't have to feel like othered because you also hold onto your cultural background. Which really helped me see it because there's all these different ways, especially with 2016 Donald Trump, how he wanted to put Muslims in internment camps. There was a book, there's this one book called Internment. I forgot who the author is, but I remember trying to read it and it was so deep on me trying to see, oh, this is my culture, a background as an Muslim American, and they just want to put us in internment camps. And I thought that couldn't possibly happen, but it happened to Japanese Americans. That was some point in America, so it just felt more real. And there's this video by Riz Ahmed from the UK, it's called The Long Goodbye, and it just shows a normal Pakistani British household celebrating a wedding. It reminded me of a lot of those get-togethers we'd have in America too. It's very



Pakistani, very chaotic, but then it gets gradually worse where basically neo-Nazis come in and start shooting up the place, taking all the men and women to internment camps. They take all the women, they shoot up all the men, and Riz Ahmed is reciting poetry about where he's from, and I am from here, I'm from there. If I needed to explain myself I'd need a map. It was just very impactful on me because I can't just be like, oh, I'm from one place. I need to actually show a map. And it's just one of those experiences I feel like a lot of people don't have when you ask them where they're from, they just say one place. But when other people ask me where I'm from, they ask a bunch of follow up questions to that. And even with, I've noticed people who immigrate to the US, they'll have the same questions I had back in middle school just so they're in their twenties or thirties.

I love knowing that I already had this realization a lot earlier, so it becomes easier to explain it to them. But I don't know a lot of Pakistani Americans who've been here who are older than me, for example, it feels like I'm the test run and after me, I could explain my story to others and they'll have an easier time, but for me, I have to figure out all of my own and whatever realization I come to, I could explain those sort of situations and people will get a sense of calming down and realizing what the reality is, and it makes it a lot easier for them. But thank you so much for having me on this show. It's been a pleasure getting interviewed by you.



