

## **Graduate Institute Oral History Project**

Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID)

Geneva, Switzerland

**Name of Interviewee:** Mahnoor Khan

**Interviewed by:** Snigdha Agarwal Srinivas

**Dates:** 8 and 20 November 2023

**Location:** Games Room, Grand Morillon Student Residence

**Background and Key Objectives:** The oral history project seeks to understand the intergenerational impact of the Partition of India and Pakistan.

On 15 August 1947, two independent nation-states emerged from one of the greatest migrations in human history. The separation of identities forced communities that had previously coexisted to create binary categories for themselves—as a Hindu or a Muslim. Around 18 million people were uprooted from their homes, forced to pack their livelihoods, and move across the subcontinent; thousands did not survive the journey and between two hundred thousand and two million people died.

Through a structured, subject-oriented interview methodology—while also incorporating traces of a family history approach relevant to the proposed theme—I hope to build on the existing literature on the Partition that focuses on those who were more directly involved. The overarching goal is to decipher whether there exists a generational transmission of violence or trauma and assess the role of emotive security in rehabilitation and reconciliation processes.

**Narrator: Mahnoor Khan** is a second year Master's student at the Geneva Graduate Institute. A Pakistan national, she is specialising in Conflict, Peace, and Security. An avid reader and writer, Mahnoor's articles have been published in the Graduate Press, the university newspaper. Mahnoor is interested in working on projects related to sustainable development, food security, and gender equality.

**Interviewer: Snigdha Agarwal Srinivas** is a second year Master's student at the Geneva Graduate Institute. An Indian national, she is specialising in Conflict, Peace, and Security. She is interested in working on projects related to peacebuilding, diplomacy, and reconciliation in conflict environments. In her free time, she enjoys playing the piano, swimming, writing poetry, and reading books.

**Format:** Two MP4 audio files: 1 hours 23 minutes and 53 minutes respectively

**Link to Audio Files:**

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ozio2UWqRLX9iNVai4dOYwd\\_xn\\_gtGQ1?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ozio2UWqRLX9iNVai4dOYwd_xn_gtGQ1?usp=drive_link)

**Transcript:** Initial transcription produced by Microsoft Teams and Trint; edited and reviewed by Snigdha Agarwal Srinivas. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Mahnoor Khan.

## INTERVIEW 1 of 2 (8 November, 2023)

**Snigdha:** Before we start, I just wanted to make sure that this arrangement works and that I have your consent to proceed. So basically, if there are any questions that you want to refrain from answering, please feel free to do so. There's no compulsion at all. At any point in this interview, or even in the entire project that I have, if you feel uncomfortable or you would like to withdraw, that's completely possible too. The recording and the transcript will be read by my professor and the TA. And if you choose to do so, we can also perhaps make it a part of the Institute's archives—perhaps a decision we can take a bit later. But yeah, if these arrangements work for you, then I would just like to ask if you confirm your participation and that we can take this forward.

**Mahnoor:** Yes, I'm happy to participate in this interview and I also consent to it becoming a part of the archives at the university, if that's something you want.

**Snigdha:** Okay, thank you so much! So this is the first interview session with Mahnoor Khan and we are in the game room at Grand Morillon. It's 8th November, 2023, and I think just to start, perhaps, I would like to know a little bit about your childhood and what it was like growing up in Pakistan.

**Mahnoor:** Okay, so I was born in a small city in southern Punjab called Bahawalpur and I lived there until I was, I think, just shy of about four years old. We moved to Karachi in 2002. I was not yet four. I turned four later that year.

I have no recollection of my biological father because my parents divorced when I was a year old, I think in the year 1999. That's also the same year that my sister Sarah was born. So she was an infant at the time of my parents' divorce. And unlike other children of divorce who keep in touch with both their parents, I did not get to keep in touch with my father. I have no recollection of him. From what little I know of him, he moved to the UK and I have not seen him or heard from him since.

I do have a few memories of Bahawalpur, but since I was very young when we moved to Karachi, most of my memories are from Karachi. I was brought up completely in Karachi. I lived in a place called Malir Cantt, short for Malir Cantonment, which is the largest army cantonment in Pakistan. It's one of those cantonments that still remains in South Asia since the time of the British. I believe many such cantonments are also present in India.

My mother is a doctor, but since she was also very young when I was a child, she used to work a lot at the hospital and she was also in the middle of taking a major exam in the United Kingdom. So that meant that I was left mostly in the care of my grandparents, my maternal grandparents, whom I called *Nano* and *Nanabu*. *Nano* was a retired school teacher and headmistress, and *Nanabu* was a retired Pakistan Air Force officer. Along with being an officer, he had also been a professor of English, English linguistics. And he was the headmaster of my school.

I used to go to an army public school which was within Malir Cantt. So it's normal for there to be an army public school within a military cantonment. That's where the children of army officers usually go because if you are an army officer, you very rarely stay in the same place for very long, and your father, if he's in the army or your mother, if she's in the army, they get posted to different cities all over the country.

So army public schools are a way of ensuring continuity in an army child's education, even as they have to move house quite frequently and live all over the country. So I grew up in a very military environment and went to an army public school. Umm. And yeah, I think those are the major details from my childhood.

**Snigdha:** I can completely relate to Army Public schools bit. Because you're right, India also has it, and it's kind of like a full society by itself. In the cantonment, it's fully self-reliant and self-sufficient. You don't even have to step out. What was your education like there? Because you mentioned that you studied in the Army public school. So was that different, perhaps from anything that you studied later? How would you describe it?

**Mahnoor:** You know what? I don't think it was that different at the time while I was studying in an army public school—and I studied in the same school up until my O levels, which is the equivalent of, let's say, from the 8th standard to the 10th standard. After that I did my A levels which are the equivalent of high school 11th and 12th grade and the O-A levels are basically another name for the Cambridge International Examinations which are UK Board essentially—UK board exams.

But even prior to me starting my 8th grade, that is going into my O levels, I remember we had—I would say I got a really good quality education. My favourite subjects at school were English and History. The books we used to study from were all books written by English authors—even like our Mathematics books and our Science textbooks, they were all written by foreign authors.

And I think they were all, yes, they were approved by the Pakistani, I think higher education system, or the Pakistani Educational Board and even like when I grew up and when I went to university to do my bachelors. And now that I'm here doing my masters, I do feel like I'm on the same footing as the rest of my peers from all around the world.

**Snigdha:** That's interesting. Is there a particular reason you wanted to do the UK Cambridge O levels that you mentioned. Was that standard for all students in the Army Public School or was that a particular decision that you took or your mother took?

**Mahnoor:** Okay, so I would say children of middle class and upper middle class families for some reason in Pakistan end up doing O levels as opposed to the local examination boards, which in Pakistan are called FSC, which I think stands for Federal Examinations or something of that sort.

When I was at university doing my bachelors at Habib University in Karachi, we had a mix of students who had come from the local examination board as well as from the Cambridge International Examination Board. But I think that's just something that happened over time in Pakistan.

I recall my mother telling me that public schools in Pakistan, which are run by the Government of Pakistan, used to be of a very high standard before the time of military dictator Zia-ul-Haq and then around the time that military dictator Zia-ul-Haq all came into power, these private schools started popping up.

One of them, one of the well known ones, is City School. There's another one called Beacon House. So these private schools started popping up gradually because they charged, I think, a higher fee, they became known as sort of the more prestigious schools to go to. And I think eventually, because we are also a postcolonial state, I think somewhere in our heads we still have this idea, which might be unfounded, but nevertheless, we do have it that the Cambridge International Examination Board is more prestigious or gives you a more rigorous education. So that's just the way it is.

**Snigdha:** I get that because even for us, the entire status that comes with private schools is a big thing in India as well, where even though government schools have really good quality education, it's kind of like a “power” thing towards the end.

I want to come back to your family. You mentioned you have a sister Sarah. What's the age difference between the both of you?

**Mahnoor:** So I am the eldest in a family of five sisters. That means I have four younger sisters. I was born in November 1998. Sara, my sister who's immediately younger to me, she was born in November 1999. So we're about one year apart. And then from my mother's second and current marriage, she has three daughters. And with them, I have an age difference of five years, seven years and almost ten years, respectively.

**Snigdha:** Okay, and how does that feel? Because one year is [a] slightly small age gap, but then if it's almost ten years with your youngest sister, how's that?

**Mahnoor:** So in a lot of Pakistani and I think also in other South Asian families, when there's a massive age difference between two siblings, the younger one tends to refer to the older sibling with a term such as *baji* or *aapa*, or I think *didi* in India, but that was not the case in my family [laughs]. My youngest sister, Hiba, calls me Mahnoor and that was always the case from day one and I don't think the age difference even registers in their head.

I know they obviously realised that I'm doing my Masters while they're still in school, while the youngest is still in school, but she treats me like a normal person and like a buddy of hers, and she can even tell me off or say something outrageous to me. So I think the age difference didn't really matter.

**Snigdha:** Yeah. For me, I'm the youngest sister. I have an elder sister so I can relate [laughs] to Hiba there.

Were you in Karachi all the time, like for your entire schooling?

**Mahnoor:** Yes.

**Snigdha:** In the same school?

**Mahnoor:** I have a picture of myself when I'm very small—I would say I'm about five or six—and I'm dressed in a different school uniform. I'm dressed in a City School uniform. I personally do not remember going to the City School, but my mother tells me that I did a stint at City School for about six months when I was very young and we had newly moved to Karachi. But other than that, yes, I was completely educated at Army Public School after my

O levels. I went to do my A levels—the two years between O levels and university—at another school, which was a girls school called Dawood Public School.

**Snigdha:** And how was the experience being in a girls school?

**Mahnoor:** So I did not really like being in a girl's school because all my life I had studied in a co-ed [co-educational] school and my friend groups used to consist of both girls and boys. And I would say growing up while I was in my schooling years, I was kind of a tomboy and like the class clown. You would normally expect boys are the ones who are the class clowns, like making everyone laugh and cracking jokes. But I also happened to be a good student. Not because I was brilliant at Math or Science, but because our schooling was in English—like I went to an English medium school—and so it was just easy for me to express myself, even in subjects such as Social Studies or Geography or History. And I think that's what made me a good student, because I like to read and I was comfortable expressing myself in English.

And I, I would say, I always got along with my teachers and they were fond of me, but I think when I shifted to the girls school, the norms sort of changed for me because girls are expected to act a certain way, be demure, and *be* a certain way. And I was not used to that. Like I was very comfortable just not policing myself or my body language and being the way I am.

And so I would sometimes feel that when I acted in a manner that a girl is not supposed to act, then other girls around me and the teachers would look at me strangely, like “all right, like, this is behaviour we're not accustomed to.” I'm not saying I was rude or brash or anything, but I was definitely not a very demure girly girl or a very feminine girl. Yeah, I don't know if that makes sense [smiles].

**Snigdha:** No, no, it does. I understand and so much has also changed now.

You mentioned that you had an affinity for social sciences and that your favourite subject was history. How did this develop?

**Mahnoor:** So I liked to read a lot and I think that reading habit was informed by the reading habits of my grandfather, *Nanabu*, and then my mother as well. I mentioned my grandfather was also a professor of English, and whichever house he ever lived in, whenever you would walk into his room, it would be full of bookshelves and it would be filled with books and encyclopaedias, the complete collection of Shakespeare, and a lot of Indian authors as well.

I remember growing up, one of my favourite books was by an Indian author called R. K. Narayan, who wrote *The English Teacher*. Some of the other books on his shelf were by the late Indian author Khushwant Singh. And there was another one by an Indian Princess called Mehrunnisa, who was the Princess of Rampur, and she wrote her memoir. He had books from all over the world.

I also loved Indian mythology and Greek mythology because he had books on that as well. And so I think that informed my love of history, because history is basically a collection of stories. I would say history is also very dramatic, so I loved reading about different empires in South Asia and other parts of the world, Ancient Greece, and so on. I think I was just a big reader. Yes, I was very fond of reading.

I remember each new school year, when my mother would go out and buy the new books, I would grab the English comprehension books because they were full of essays and stories and I would read them from start to finish. So I think my love of reading is what ultimately also allowed me to develop a love of history.

**Snigdha:** I like that you talked about a history as a collection of stories and it's interesting because the spelling also has the word “story” in it. You mentioned that you would go to your grandparents house that had these shelves of books. Were visits to your grandparents often during your childhood? Did they have a big influence in your upbringing?

**Mahnoor:** So I recall myself as living at my grandparents’ house, and even when my mother got married for the second time, my stepdad did not have a house of his own. He used to live in a different neighbourhood in a different part of Karachi with his parents. In Pakistan, it's common for a lot of children, even when they're fully grown up, to be living in the same house as their parents. So sometimes me and my sisters, we would go and stay over at their place, at my stepdad's parents place, and the rest of the time I would just be with Nano and Nanabu in their house. And then eventually, my parents, my mom and my stepdad, they moved into a house next to where my grandparents house was in Malir Cantt.

But even then I just continued to live with my grandparents because I think I was happier there. I was very fond of my grandparents and they also passed away very recently. They passed away not long before I came to Geneva. So for me, my grandparents house was not some *other* place that I used to visit. It was home for me.

**Snigdha:** Would you say that you spent more time with them than with your stepfather and your mother when they shifted—

**Mahnoor:** I would say so. Because when I was very little, my grandpa retired completely. I mean, he had already retired from the Air Force years before I was born, but then eventually - he also used to be the principal at the same army public school that I used to go to. I think he eventually stepped down and left that position when I was still very young. So for most of my life he was a retired person and so naturally because both my grandparents were retired and at home all the time, I got to spend more time with them. Both my stepfather and my mother used to work and still work. So I used to see less of them and more of my grandparents.

**Snigdha:** Okay, and you mentioned he was also an avid reader being the principal of this school as well. Were there any moments that you shared where you would perhaps pore over a book and then like discuss it or deconstruct it? Is there a book that you both like, perhaps, or a particular genre?

**Mahnoor:** Whenever I would ask him about something related to my studies, for example, if I had read about a war that happened sometime in the past, he would always encourage me to go and look at the encyclopaedia back then. Back then in Pakistan also, when I was about ten years old, I was not like this—. At that time, I don't recall ever consulting the Internet to brush up on my history or to basically check facts.

But my grandpa was from a different generation. He was born in the 1930s, so I don't think he really understood that the Internet was a tool that could be relied on for you to read about everything that ever happened in history. And so for him, the first point of reference was the

encyclopaedia, and he used to have the different volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica in his library, and he would always tell me to go and check that; he would always encourage us to read the newspaper and he read the newspaper from cover to cover every day.

As for a book, I don't think there was ever one single book that we ever connected over or talked about. There were a lot of them. So I would read a lot of the books that he had in his collection and then we would talk about them.

**Snigdha:** If books and these intellectual discussions on history, perhaps, were something that you shared with your grandfather, what were some things that you shared with your grandmother?

**Mahnoor:** So I would go to my grandmother for help with Urdu. My grandmother when she was young, she graduated from the University of the Punjab, which is still one of the biggest and oldest universities in Pakistan. My grandmother used to live in Lahore when she was a girl. Her family had basically moved from Amritsar to Lahore in Pakistani Punjab. So from Indian Punjab to Pakistani Punjab. She was from a Punjabi family and I used to go to her for help with Urdu. And my grandmother was also a great cook, and she was also very fond of cooking. So I associate good cooking with my grandmother.

She was also very fond of dressing up and even when she passed away, my mother could not stop talking about how hard it was for her to get rid of all her clothes [laughs] because yeah, her wardrobe was just crammed full of clothes. She was also very fond of perfume. She was very fond of jewellery. So yeah, those are a few things.

She was also a great homemaker, to the point that it was very annoying for every house maid that she ever employed because she would always find something wrong with the way that they did the cleaning or the dusting or the cooking. And then she would start meddling and start doing things herself. So yeah.

**Snigdha:** So at home you spoke Urdu and English. Was Punjabi also a language because of your grandmother?

**Mahnoor:** Sadly, I never got to speak Punjabi properly, even though that was the language in which my grandmother and grandfather communicated with each other. And if they had Punjabi house help, like if the driver was Punjabi, or if the maid was Punjabi, that was the language in which they communicated with their house help as well. But for some reason I never spoke in Punjabi with them and I would say I spoke Urdu and English at home. Yes, not Punjabi.

**Snigdha:** And so your grandfather was born and raised in Pakistan?

**Mahnoor:** Yes. So he was born and brought up in a city called Sialkot. So he was not one of the people who had to migrate from one country to another during the Partition. He was always in Pakistan.

**Snigdha:** Was there also a difference in the language, perhaps like Amritsari Punjabi and—

**Mahnoor:** I wouldn't actually say that my grandfather was Punjabi. I think he was Pathan and he actually had a whole family tree that he showed us and he had a book tracing the



lineage of his family. From what he told me, he was from an Afghan Pashtun tribe called the Kakezai Pathans. And so I think his ancestors were from Afghanistan, and he also looked very much like a Pathan—like the stereotypical attributes that you would associate with the Pathani. He had a long aquiline nose and he was quite tall—he was about six feet or taller. He spoke fluent Pashto, though he also spoke fluent Punjabi and I'm not entirely sure how it was that he spoke fluent Punjabi without actually being Punjabi. But then he also was able to speak Arabic. He was able to understand Persian.

I think it was also because he was in the Pakistan Air Force, not the Pakistan military, but both—. I think the Pakistan armed forces are dominated by Punjabi people and so perhaps that's where he picked it up. I'm not sure. He was a fluent speaker of Punjabi and if you ever heard him speak in Punjabi, you would not be able to tell that this is not a native speaker of Punjabi, but he and my grandma, even when they were having arguments. And when you're having an argument and you're expressing yourself very passionately, that's when you start speaking in the language that you are most comfortable in. And I've always found that whenever he would be angry or upset and he would be expressing himself very passionately, it would be in Punjabi. Like I never heard my grandfather speak in Pashto. I'm sure he would have spoken it with another native speaker of Pashto, but it never happened in front of me.

**Snigdha:** And could you tell me a little more about your grandparents' relationship? How did they meet? If you would know about that. Over the years, because you spent so much time with them how did it evolve?

**Mahnoor:** [pause] From what my grandmother has told me, it was an arranged marriage. She told me that my grandpa had had a few broken engagements before he married my grandmother [laughs]. I think when they were newlyweds, they moved to a city called Kohat, which is also where my mother was born in 1971, the same year that East Pakistan became Bangladesh.

As for that relationship they used to fight a lot, I mean verbal fights [laughs]. They used to argue a lot, but I would say that my grandmother was also a very supportive and dutiful wife. I mean, I can't imagine that it's easy having to move from one city to another when you're the wife of an Air Force officer. At one point in time, when my mother was about ten years old, this was in the early 1980s, they also lived in England for about a year or a little more than a year. And then later, after England, they also lived for a bit in Algeria which from what my mother tells me, [this] was an experience that my grandmother did not enjoy. Because Algeria at that time—I'm not sure if it's different now—was like a cold barren desert. And obviously in Algeria they were surrounded by people who spoke Arabic. My grandpa spoke it and my mother tells me that whenever he would speak in Arabic with an Algerian, the Algerian would be taken aback because they weren't used to foreigners speaking in Arabic.

Algeria had also been through the experience of French colonisation and the French colonisers tried their very best to wipe out Arabic from the country and they really tried very hard to impose French on the Algerians. From what my mother tells me, it was also not allowed apparently, to have a Quran in your home and the Quran, the Holy Book of Islam, is written entirely in Arabic.

So I'm not sure if it was a language thing for the French colonisers or if they were also intent on removing all signs of Islam. Unlike French, which sort of makes people look at you more respectfully if you know French, Arabic at that time in Algeria if you learnt it, I don't think

there were any real benefits that would be associated with it in terms of you getting a job or people respecting you more. But of course, the native speakers of Arabic—the Berbers there—they would certainly have respected you more.

Basically the point I'm trying to make is even though my grandfather was very comfortable in that environment—because my grandfather also liked being placed in uncomfortable situations—he was a military man and he was taught during his training to make the best out of even a bad situation. My grandmother was used to living comfortably, and so she did not like the experience of being in a cold, strange country where nobody spoke the language that she spoke.

**Snigdha:** Did your mother travel a lot with them through all of this, or was she, perhaps, in Pakistan when your grandparents were in Algeria?

**Mahnoor:** So my mother was still, I think, a teenager when her parents were in Algeria and she was there with them the entire time they were there. And during her girlhood, certainly, she would go wherever they would go because she was a child and would be with her parents all the time. Later in the 1990s—my grandpa had been in Pakistan, I think, since the mid 1980s—and so in the early 1990s, she used to live in a different city than her parents.

My grandparents were in Bahawalpur at the time when Nanabu was the principal of another famous boarding school called Sadiq Public School, which till date is a boys school. It's one of those boys boarding schools that was created during the time of the British in India. And so while my grandparents were in Bahawalpur and my mother was—I think in her early 20s—she was going to med school in Lahore, and the name of the university was King Edward Medical College.

**Snigdha:** And does your mother have any siblings?

**Mahnoor:** My mother has just one sibling, an older brother. Currently he lives in the US and is an American citizen along with the rest of his family. He has a wife and two children, a girl and a boy. From what I know of my uncle, he moved out from his parents house when he was quite young. I think he came to Karachi to do his Bachelors, which I think he did in Computer Science. He eventually went on to do a master's in Business Administration at another university in Karachi called IBA. When he was very young, he got married to a class fellow of his shortly after he graduated from his Master's. And then he and his wife, they moved to Dubai. So my uncle was very young when he walked out of his parents house. She has just one sibling.

**Snigdha:** Have you met your father's parents?

**Mahnoor:** Yes.

Oh as in my stepfather's?

**Snigdha:** Yes, your step—.

**Mahnoor:** Yes, I have.

**Snigdha:** And your biological father? Have you met his—?

**Mahnoor:** Him? No, I have no recollection of him and I have not met [them] to the best of what I know. I have not met anyone from his family.

**Snigdha:** Okay. How is your relationship with your paternal grandparents? Your stepfather's.

**Mahnoor:** I mean, it was nowhere near—. I was nowhere near as close with them as I was with my maternal grandparents. I mean, for me, I get along with people from all cultures, all walks of life, all ethnicities. But for me, their culture, like the culture within their household, was not very familiar to me. They were Biharis from Bihar. I think Bihar is a region in India. They were—what we in Pakistan call—Urdu speaking people and their culture—they were a lot more conservative than my maternal grandparents' family. The way they spoke, the way they lived, even the kind of food that was served at their house. It was very, very different from everything that went on at my grandparents house. And so I don't think I was able to ever really develop a genuine affectionate bond with them. Of course, I was always very respectful and they were always very hospitable whenever I would go there. But I was not informal with them in the same way that I was informal with my maternal grandparents.

**Snigdha:** And how is your relationship with your sisters?

**Mahnoor:** Oh, my relationship with my sisters is very normal. I think we're like—we're just like any other sisters in any other part of the world. We get along, we have fights, but we're also very, very close. And there has never been a difference between my sister who is my biological sister from both sets of parents and from my other sisters who are technically my half sisters because they have a different father. We treat each other the same.

**Snigdha:** What are they doing right now?

**Mahnoor:** So the one who was immediately younger to me went to the UK to do a one year Master's program and now she lives and works in the UK. The one who's younger to her has just moved to the UK—I think about a month or two ago to start her undergrad in accounting. And the fourth one is currently finishing her A-levels in Karachi, Pakistan, and the youngest one will be starting her A-levels next year in Karachi, Pakistan. This is the final year of her O-levels.

**Snigdha:** Are they doing it in the same school that you studied in?

**Mahnoor:** The youngest is currently in a different branch of [the] Army Public School, and we call it APS for short. But she will be moving to the same school that the fourth sister is currently finishing her A-levels at.

**Snigdha:** While growing up, what were, perhaps, some of the values that were kind of common in the household? Whether your mother instilled them or your grandparents. What

was something that, perhaps, either was said or unsaid while you were growing up and something that you still look [up] to right now?

**Mahnoor:** For my grandfather, being well-educated was always a very big deal. Being well read, being respectful. So my grandpa would not like it, for example, when children would run around the house without their shoes on. He used to think that was very bad. My grandpa was very loving, but he could also be very stern when he would see something going on that he did not approve of. He also, I remember, did not really approve of us being in the kitchen when we were young—he basically said it makes no sense for you to be in the kitchen. I think what he really meant is “This is no time for you to be standing around the kitchen and watching the maid cook or watching your grandma cook when you could be doing more worthwhile things like studying or reading or doing something else.” I don't know. For some reason, it sounds strange when I say it, but he didn't like us being in the kitchen.

He was insistent on being particular about little things. So when you walk into a person's house, greeting them properly, you know, eating properly. He didn't like it when you would sort of be eating at the table with a spoon and a fork, and your spoon would sort of clatter against the plate. He hated that. He hated bad table manners. He hated sort of speaking in an unrefined manner. Yeah. And then my grandpa was always—I think I just mentioned this—but my grandpa was always also big on getting good grades and doing well in school. You know, things like that.

**Snigdha:** And what about your grandmother?

**Mahnoor:** long pause] As [what about my grandmother?

**Snigdha:** **Anything that she—like as you mentioned** whether it's with table manners or running around the house or being in the kitchen—were there some sort of values that she wanted to instil in you and your sisters?

**Mahnoor:** When I was a bit older—when I was about eighteen or nineteen—I think she would have liked it if I had spent more time with her in the kitchen learning how to cook because she came from a Punjabi family and for her it was a very feminine and important feminine trait for a girl to be able to know how to cook and to cook well. Other than that, I think my grandmother was also a very put together woman. So every morning when she would wake up, she would do her hair properly, she would dress in nice clothes and she would put on her lipstick. For her, it was important that young girls and women should look put together. But other than that, there's not a lot of things that my grandma minded. I'm sure if we had been very brash and rude children, she would have sort of tried to put us in line. But I think we were okay [smiles].

**Snigdha:** I can relate because even my grandma—my *nani* [maternal grandmother]---she was also very put together. Like, you know, there would not be a day when she'd not wake up in the morning, wear her sari and her lipstick. She was also a homemaker. Even though she was not stepping outside, she had to look as if she was stepping outside [smiles].

That's something that—. I just got this flashback because I also lost my grandmother before coming to Geneva. But like a year before. But the thing is, because it had been one year, we have this ceremony sometimes after one year of passing. So that felt like a week before I flew to Geneva.

**Mahnoor:** Oh, okay.

**Snigdha:** Yeah. So it's really nice to hear about your relationship with your grandparents because I'm sort of remembering mine.

Were there any other elders or perhaps people in the community that also had an influence on your childhood or your upbringing?

**Mahnoor:** Any other older people? I remember since my grandparents would always have a friendly and informal relationship with the people they employed to be their driver or their maid. I remember each driver that they ever had because I would go to school with them and I would go to the shops with them. For example, I have not really ever taken public transport in Pakistan ever, because wherever I went, it used to be in my grandpa's car or my stepfather's car with the driver. So I was always friends with every man who was ever hired to be Nano and Nanabo's driver.

As for older people, I wouldn't say anyone else. I mean, obviously my parents had friends who were in the same age group as my parents, and my grandparents had some friends. I didn't really even know my grandfather's friends properly because he would disappear with them into his drawing room and then they would talk about things. But beyond greeting them, I never really had a relationship with them.

My grandma was friends with a few women who lived in her neighbourhood, so some of her neighbours. But again, beyond a relationship, I would characterise [them] as being that of an acquaintance—I did not really have much of a relationship with them. And again, perhaps because my mother did not have any other siblings except for one, and even then my uncle was not in the same country—was not on the same continent, let alone the same country.

I'm still on very good terms with my uncle and we often correspond through WhatsApp or on phone calls, but he wasn't present there in the same place. So I would say my formative experiences of having a relationship with adults does not go beyond my maternal grandparents, my stepfather and mother.

**Snigdha:** Was religion a very important aspect in this upbringing?

**Mahnoor:** Okay. So I'm sorry I didn't mention this before, but my grandpa, even though he, I mean, he was clean shaven, and in Pakistan, you can tell how devout or how religious a man is by a few things—some of them have to do with the person's outward appearance. So sometimes Muslim men who are very, very extremely devout Muslims or who are very religious, they go to the mosque five times a day and they have beards because in Islam, I think this is an Islamic injunction that pious Muslim men have to grow a beard that is at least

the length of their fist. And the Muslim beard is very distinguishable from other sorts of beards because a Muslim beard is a beard without a moustache. So it looks kind of odd because that's not how we're usually used to seeing men with facial hair. When a man has facial hair, it's typically a moustache with a beard. But a Muslim beard, in Sunni Islam and perhaps other sects also, is a beard without a moustache.

So my grandpa was clean shaven apart from a moustache, because I think the moustache also, in Pakistan, is a very military thing. And it's seen as like part of a man's sort of prestige or a man's appearance. But that was not a religious thing. So like in terms of a beard, and since my grandpa did not look like a *mullah*, that's a term that can also be called a derogatory term that can be used to refer to very religious men in Pakistan.

My step father did have a beard, but he did not have a Muslim beard. He had a moustache and a beard. But my stepfather's family was a lot more outwardly religious, I would say, than my grandparents. Since you asked me earlier about values that my grandfather encouraged us to sort of adopt, he would also, I mean, I always saw my grandpa saying all his prayers. So five prayers a day. But his form of Islam was not—he would never try to push it on other people. He would always just, you know, tell my sisters and myself, it's good to pray and you should pray five times a day. And you should read a few lines of the Quran at least every day. But it was not the sort of Islam where he would say that women cannot venture out of the house. Or women are supposed to dress properly or cover their heads. Never.

And for him—I know that this is also a discussion we've [Mahnoor and I] had previously, and I think this is something common that we've both experienced in our homes. For me, the topic of marriage never came up and I realised that it comes up for a lot of girls who are deemed to be of marriageable age in South Asian countries. But for me, it never came up. Not from my stepfather, not from my mother, not from my grandma, not from my grandpa.

So I think my grandpa believed in Islam in a very philosophical sense. He believed in it as a way of life that allowed you to live your life in a good way. It allowed you to look after your own personal hygiene. It allowed you to be a good neighbour. It taught you how to be a good human being. So for him it was more about that. Religion was more of a factor in, I would say, the life of my stepfather and the life of his immediate family.

**Snigdha:** Could you tell me a little bit about why you feel it was more dominant in your stepfather's life?

**Mahnoor:** I would say that they were more preachy in terms of how they treated Islam. My stepfather has also evolved a lot over the years, I think, because he was brought into a sort of family where his father was very religious. So in Islam, if you're a very, very devout follower of Islam, women are not supposed to bare their skin, save for their hands, their feet and their face. But I remember that my stepfather's mother, she was from Bihar, and she used to wear a sari in the way that is typical of a Bihari woman and the way she used to wear her blouse and drape her blouse—a portion of her tummy would always be visible. But I don't ever recall my stepfather making a fuss over—or any of his siblings making a fuss over it—because that was

a very cultural thing. And so it's interesting to me how, for instance, if I would have worn a crop top that bared part of my belly—not that I ever wore one when I was young—but I think that would have been an issue for him. But his mother used to wear a sari with part of her tummy showing and it never came up. Maybe because they respected their mother and maybe because they never thought twice about it.

But, I think, purely Snigdha, I think he was brought up in a more religious home, that's what made him be more religious in his personal life as well. And even when we were in the car or something, he would just listen to stories about the prophet's life and whenever an opportunity would come up for him to distinguish between what is morally acceptable in Islam and what is not, he would always point out and say like, “Oh, if a woman is dressed a certain way, that's not acceptable. Or if a person has a bank account in a bank that charges interest, that's not acceptable because interest in Islam is also a taboo.” So things like that. For my grandpa, it wasn't little things like that, that were really important. It was more about, you know, how you are in life and how you treat other people.

**Snigdha:** What about your mother?

**Mahnoor:** Hmm. [pause] For my mother also, religion plays a big part in her life, and I'm not sure if she became this way after her second marriage or if she was always that way before she got married. I remember my mother used to—. Of all the pictures that I've seen of my mother before she got married for the second time, she used to have very short hair because that was also the fashion at the time. And you see lots of Pakistani ladies—pictures from the 80s and 90s with their very short hair. I think she started growing it out after the second marriage. She also started, like, covering her head after her second marriage. And I know for sure that she never did that before she got married for the second time.

But I think even now, when she lives apart from my step father—they're still married but they live in different places right now because my mother is living and working in the UK and my stepdad is still in Karachi with my two youngest sisters—I mean, she still covers her head. Religion for her still plays a big role in her life.

I wish I had a mother with whom I could discuss dating and boys, but I know I can't because for her, like that, that would be very strange. And she would ask me, “Oh, this is not right” and things like that. But yeah, I think it definitely plays a big role in my mother's life. I would say she has a real fear of God. So there are things that she really believes, like if you do something, then it will incur the displeasure of God. Those could be things like, you know, being rude to your neighbour or, you know, giving someone a portion of food that has gone bad and you wouldn't eat yourself. It's lots of little things.

And I think if a Muslim person were sitting here, they would understand because Islam is just—. There's such a wealth of things within Islam. And I think for a lot of non-Muslims, because of the way that the media portrays Islam, when they think of Islam, they think of women in hijabs, and bearded men, and terrorism and things like that, and sort of a curtailment of women's rights. But in Islam, even smiling at someone and being courteous to

them, being polite to them, being good natured to them is something that gets you brownie points with God or looking after your neighbour similarly. To give you an example, in Islam, I think one of the things that the Prophet said was “He is not a true believer who goes to bed having eaten his fill, not knowing that his neighbour is going to bed hungry.” So you're supposed to have, like, a very strong sense of community and look after one another.

I think certain Muslims, if you talk to them, if you ask them to describe Islam in a sentence, they will say it's a complete way of life. And so I think my mother very much has the same sort of approach towards Islam and she thinks it's a complete way of life. And I do think it governs her life. So, yes. Since I would say it governs her life, I would certainly say it plays a big role in her life, too.

**Snigdha:** Are there any religious practices that you have adopted or that you have been doing since you were born?

**Mahnoor:** I wouldn't say I'm a very practising Muslim. Technically, Muslims are supposed to say their prayers five times a day. I don't do it five times a day. I would do it, I think, at most a few times a week. There are things in Islam that I personally don't agree with. I don't understand why—if you follow Islam to the fullest for instance—then I don't understand why a woman has to cover her hair. And in Islamic countries and in neighbourhoods where you have very very religious people, it's common to have practices like segregated weddings, where the women celebrate in one part of the marriage hall, and the men are celebrating in a different one. And practices like that are very strange and alien to me [laughs] because like my family, per se, is not that religious.

I would not be very comfortable in a very devout Islamic environment. But, the things I like about Islam, have to do with the way that Islam teaches you to treat other people, the way it teaches you to be a part of the community, the way it teaches you to be a friend, a daughter, a sister, a neighbour. And it also teaches you to have good hygiene. So in Islam, we're taught that, you know, cleanliness is half of your faith, which means that [laughs] if you live in a very sloppy manner and if your room looks like a pigsty and you don't bathe often, then that's something that's frowned upon. So for me, it's not about the ritualistic side of Islam, like saying your prayers or, you know, dressing a certain way. It's more about how it teaches you to be with others.

**Snigdha:** Did religion play any role in education in Pakistan?

**Mahnoor:** Like all schoolchildren in Pakistan, regardless of what religion you are, when you're in school, you study a subject called *Islamiyat*. *Islamiyat* is basically reading about the early years of Islam, how the Prophet Muhammad became the Prophet of Islam, how he received the first revelation from God, how he used to go and meditate in a cave called Hira somewhere in the city of Mecca in Arabia. And then it's about the early wars of Islam, about what happened after the death of the Prophet. We have chapters on how to be good to animals, how to look after the environment, the rights of parents, and similarly the rights of



children and things like that. So that subject is called Islamiyat or Islamic studies. And that's what we study up until grade eighth or grade tenth.

Also for Muslim children in Pakistan, usually what happens is when they're of an age where they are able to read, they are appointed a teacher who teaches them the Quran. If it's a woman, she is referred to as Qariya or Qariya Sahiba. If it's a man, they're referred to as Qari Sahab. I had a male teacher at first who used to teach me and my sister the Quran. The Quran is in Arabic, and in Pakistan Arabic is not a language that is spoken; we speak Urdu. And then there are other regional languages in Pakistan, such as Balochi, Pashto, Punjabi, and Sindhi. But interestingly enough, most Muslim children in Pakistan, even though we can't understand Arabic, when we see it written, we are able to read it because we are taught to read it since we are taught to read the Quran. So those are two things like studying Islamiyat in school and then learning how to read the Quran at home or in a Madrasa if people go there to learn.

**Snigdha:** In the Army Public School, were there mostly children who practised Islam or were there people from other faiths as well? Like your friends, for example, if you could tell me a little bit—

**Mahnoor:** So I only recall a handful of people, Snigdha, who were Hindu or Christian, Snigdha, when I was in school. I still have a very good friend of mine who I met when I was doing my Bachelor's at Habib University. His name is Shallum Oscar David, and currently he is working in the US. He went there to do his Masters. One of my favourite teachers at school was actually Christian. Her name was Iris Christopher. She was also the wife of an army officer and I was very, very fond of her [smiles]. She was also a big reader and she used to read this magazine that my mother had a subscription to called Reader's Digest. Sometimes I would bring my books to school and I would bring the Reader's Digest, and she would always appreciate me for reading and having a reading habit.

But, I'm not sure why, it was mostly Muslims. I would say I was surrounded by 85 to 90% Muslims at school.

**Snigdha:** And in your Bachelors?

**Mahnoor:** Yeah, the same. Interestingly, there were more Hindu people that I came across as compared with my schooling years. Because Hindus in Pakistan mostly reside in the province of Sindh. And Karachi is also a city in Sindh—Karachi is the biggest city of Pakistan, located on the coast of Sindh. So there are a lot of Hindus in Sindh. So there were some Hindu girls, some Hindu boys. The person who was supposed to be in charge of the music room at university, where I learned the sitar, his name was Chandu Lal and he was also a Hindu.

I've also been to one or two temples—*mandirs*—in Karachi. We also have a very big cathedral in Karachi, which is called St. Patrick's Cathedral. So I would say, yeah, I would say in Karachi we definitely have a sizable Christian population, a sizable Hindu population,

and the Parsis, who are Zoroastrians, and also exist in India. The last I read, there are about 2000 of them in Pakistan and all of them live in Karachi.

**Snigdha:** All of them?

**Mahnoor:** Mostly, all of them yeah.

**Snigdha:** Okay. Would you say, for example, when you meet someone new that religion plays an important role at all?

**Mahnoor:** Not at all for me. But I know for some Muslims back home, I can't say that I personally know them or that I was ever friends with them.

So Islam is also an amalgamation of many sects that came about years after the death of the Prophet for various reasons—as a result of wars, as a result of political differences, as a result of literary differences on how different scholars interpreted Islamic scripture. So there are lots and lots of sects within Islam. I know the names, but I'm not even sure what the differences are. And I can take the names for you like there is Barelvi Islam, there's the Deobandi Islam, the Sunni Islam, which is the predominant one, there's Shia Islam, there's Ahmadi Islam which a lot of Muslims don't consider Islam because they don't consider Ahmedis to be Muslims at all and they're excommunicated from Islam in Pakistan. That's also an interesting story.

The point I'm trying to make is [that] some Muslims then also distinguish between different sects of Islam, and they will prefer to stay within their own community. But for me, religion plays, I would say, absolutely no role in terms of my friendships or relationships with other people, whether it's at work or whether it's with friends. I have never asked any of my friends what religion they are or what sect they are—if I have ever asked, it's purely out of sheer curiosity. So I would like to know more about their festivals and the kind of food they make at home and the significance of the rituals that they follow in their day to day life.

For me, I just have to get along with you. For example, if I run into someone at a bookstore and we end up discussing the same book, then that sort of exchange for me is more important than what kind of religious background they come from.

**Snigdha:** The fact that your paternal grandparents were from Bihar and your grandmother, she came from Amritsar, and because perhaps their way of life was similar in the sense that there was no discrimination amongst who they're speaking to based on religion, for example—do you think that influenced it because you were in that environment from such a young age and your relationship with them?

Is this something that you have developed by yourself through your readings or through your experiences, or do you think they have had a guiding force?

**Mahnoor:** As far as I know, there was no religious bigotry ever in my own household, which I am very, very grateful for because I'm not going to lie—from reading the news purely, I

know that there is a lot of religious bigotry in Pakistan. And I would say that I am the sort of person who would have a problem with religious bigotry anywhere, no matter what person it's coming from. This is something that has been reinforced to me since I moved to Geneva. I realised that people who are not Muslims can also be religious bigots. So I think for me, discriminating against anyone on the basis of religion is such a taboo, an inexcusable thing to do.

I also know from experience, when I was a little child at school that in some households religious bigotry is more pronounced or it's not even questioned. And so I would say yes, I, perhaps, took it for granted that you're not supposed to discriminate between people on the basis of their religious or sectarian or ethnic identity, because that was never something that I saw within my own household. But I'm sure for people who grew up in households where the parents have bigoted views, then they would grow up to think that those sort of beliefs are quite normal.

**Snigdha:** I want to move into your grandmother's experiences during the Partition and revolve around that a bit. But I know it's already been an hour. So would you like to take it up in another session on another day?

**Mahnoor:** Whichever you prefer.

**Snigdha:** Because it is also dinner time. So whatever you're comfortable with.

**Mahnoor:** Well, if you'd like to leave for dinner, that's fine with me. I'm happy to continue or to continue another day?

**Snigdha:** Would you like a cup of water or something? Because I know it's been quite long!

**Mahnoor:** Not at all. I'm perfectly enjoying myself [laughs]. Is this taking too long?

**Snigdha:** No, no, not at all! There's so much I'm learning. Like I knew about, for example, Shia and Sunni. But then you mentioned so many sects.

**Mahnoor:** There are so many—there are so many.

**Snigdha:** I think for me also, a part of the reason I'm doing this oral history project also is just to understand how life is across the borders. Because we were all one country at one point. We were neighbours. I mean, we're coexisting. So it's very interesting for me to just understand the similarities in your childhood or your relationships with your grandparents as well.

Okay. So coming now to the Partition a bit, I think I would like to start off by asking what you studied about it first. Like when were you first introduced to this idea that, okay, the partition happened. How old were you or—

**Mahnoor:** You know what? I think a lot of children in Pakistan and India realise very early on that we are two neighbouring countries that formerly used to be one country. I mean, even

if we don't grow up studying about the history of British colonialism in school a great deal, we do learn about it because we ultimately have to learn about what happened in 1947. And so independence is a very big deal for people in both countries. Children are taught that Pakistan's Independence Day is celebrated every year on 14th August and India's is on the 15th. And because our independence days are on consecutive days, children do realise. We grow up with the knowledge that these are two neighbouring countries that became separate countries in the year 1947.

I remember when I was a child and I used to live in a military cantonment. Like I said, we used to have cable TV and we used to have a lot of private TV channels and many of them were Indian. Many of them used to show some Bollywood movies from the 70s and 80s with Amitabh Bachchan. And *Sholay* is still a massively popular movie in Pakistan. And I think it's because Hindi and Urdu are such similar languages that a person who speaks Hindi, a person who speaks Urdu, they are perfectly able to have a conversation with each other and understand each other completely. That's why Indian content is also big in Pakistan. Not the news channels, but certainly Bollywood and also some Indian music. I remember—it's no longer the case because relations between India became worse and worse over time—but when they were not so bad, I think in the 2000s, I remember Star Plus, which is a major Indian channel, it used to come on Pakistani TV and my grandma used to watch a lot of Indian dramas and I still remember their names.

There was another children's channel called Pogo. And then there was the Indian Disney Channel. I remember we used to have all of those. We used to even have some Indian cooking shows. That's how I grew up, knowing who Sanjeev Kapoor was, for example. So I can't pinpoint an exact time when I realised that the Partition happened. But I think when you talk to young children in Pakistan and if you talk to the children, for instance, at my school when I was growing up, everyone would know that this is something that happened.

**Snigdha:** Yeah, I think I can imagine a bit because as you mentioned, there are two independence days so there'll be Independence Day celebrations in school. You will see that there are flags all around the country or even in the city that you're living [in]. So even if you're not directly told that this is an event, you pick up on these cues. Because even if I think about my earliest memory of just confronting this idea, I can't pinpoint the exact time. I think it's something that you kind of live through.

You mentioned your interest in history. Was the Partition ever an interest in this? Did you study about it in depth or were you curious about it?

**Mahnoor:** It just so happened that because my grandfather's book collection had books written by Indian authors that I somehow was very fond of South Asian literature and of the way that Indian authors would write. I think a lot of my writing style was also influenced by the way these Indian authors wrote. Two of them I named, Khushwant Singh and R.K. Narayan. And I think I always had a particular affinity for Indian literature. So even when I would go to bookstores, I would inevitably end up moving to the section where they had books by Indian authors.

Sorry could you repeat your question, I forgot it.

**Snigdha:** In terms of how you kind of just, you know, embrace this idea that the Partition happened through cues because you necessarily don't learn about it. So if you could tell me about the first time you read about it because I remember when I was a child it was a chapter in one of my history textbooks—as a child, so in junior school, for example. Something along those lines—when did you come across it as a topic to be studied?

**Mahnoor:** So I think right from the get go, I would say from the time that I was in first grade to the time that I was in the eighth grade, we would always have at least a paragraph or two about how India and Pakistan became separate countries. In 1947 after gaining independence from British rule, after the British had to leave India after the end of the World War, because essentially they had no more money with which to run their massive colonial empire in South Asia. I think at least one paragraph or two in every history book of mine in Pakistan. We also have another subject called Pakistan Studies, which is like the geography of Pakistan, and then the history of Pakistan told from the Pakistani nationalist perspective.

When I grew older and when I was in my O-levels, there was more written material in the books on Pakistan and India, because we used to read about the Morley-Minto reforms and separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims in India. And we used to read about how those were one of the practices instituted by the British that sort of made communalism in South Asia more pronounced. The fact that you had separate electorates. And we used to read about the beginning of the Congress Party and about Jawaharlal Nehru and his father, and then about Mahatma Gandhi and all these figures who were associated with Indian and South Asian independence. So there was more of it, I would say, when I was in middle school.

**Snigdha:** And was this topic discussed in family discussions like during dinner?

**Mahnoor:** I would not say the Partition is something that's discussed at dinner. Perhaps if India happens to be in the news in Pakistan, then the topic of India *might* come up at dinner table conversations. I remember my stepfather would always discuss Pakistani politics with his brother-in-law or his brothers. India and the Partition are not discussed, I think current affairs are what is discussed. India is not really a topic of conversation at dinner tables.

[long pause]

But also in Pakistan, one of the basis for the formation of Pakistan is something that we call the Two Nation Theory, which I personally do not agree with. But as a Pakistani, I grew up reading about it in school. And the Two Nation Theory basically states that the vast majority of Hindus and the majority of Muslims are two separate communities with separate faiths, separate rituals, separate ways of life. And so it makes sense for them to have two separate homelands. Because we grew up sort of reading about the Two Nation Theory and learning about how the Partition was inevitable because of this so-called Two Nation Theory, it's somehow supposed to justify the creation of Pakistan. We all grew up reading about the two

nation theory, and by extension, we grew up learning about India and how the Partition was inevitable. That's what we're taught that ultimately it had to happen at one point or another.

**Snigdha:** Were there any books that you and your grandfather read that even if it didn't revolve around the Partition, were just about Hindus and Muslims or about the South Asian continent, either pre-Partition post-Partition?

**Mahnoor:** My grandpa used to have a memoir or two written by retired Pakistani armed forces officers, whether they were Air Force officers or whether they were military officers. There was a book he used to have that was written by an Indian Muslim princess whose name was Mehrunissa, who was from the state of Rampur, and her father was the Nawab there. And she eventually married a very high ranking Pakistani Air Force Officer. And so her book was her memoir about her life with her husband when he was posted as Pakistan's ambassador to Spain and I think to the United States at one point in time. So that was one book, like, on the cross-border marriage between an Indian princess and a Pakistani Air Force Officer. Other than that, there were not a lot of books on or perhaps I'm forgetting.

I never recall seeing this book in my grandfather's collection, but I did read Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, when I was a university student doing my Bachelor's.

**Snigdha:** Did you have any discussion with them regarding the Partition, even if it was not related to books?

**Mahnoor:** I think whatever discussions I did have with him, he would always say that there was a lot of unnecessary bloodshed. And we know that a million people or I don't know how many—I think a million people died during the Partition. At least I grew up hearing that entire trains of people would arrive from India to Pakistan full of dead people with bloodied corpses. So there was that recognition that there was a lot of unnecessary communal hatred that resulted in so much bloodshed across faiths. Yeah.

**Snigdha:** Yeah, that's true. You mentioned that your maternal grandmother came from Amritsar. Could you tell me a bit about that experience?

**Speaker 2:** I think if my grandmother had been older and able to have more memories about what went on during the Partition, I would have had more stories. But she was just a baby when her family came over from that side of the border to this one.

She was either born in the year 1942 or 1945; I think it was 1945. So she would have been two years old. But she told me that her father did not make it across at the same time as the rest of his family with his wife and his children. He was able to come to Pakistan about six months to a year later. During that time, from what my grandma told me, his family had no way of knowing whether he was alive or dead. And then she told me that when he eventually did come to Lahore, he brought with him—like the only belongings that he carried with him—were some of his wife's *saris*. And so my grandma would always tell that story in a way as like, “Oh, that was the kind of love that he had for her, that the only things he took with him were his wife's *saris*.” But I don't think, like, thankfully, it's not like any of my

grandma's siblings or her parents were murdered during the Partition. So I don't have any of those kinds of stories, like, of something terrible happening during the partition.

**Snigdha:** Are those *saris* still there?

**Speaker 2:** You know what? I'm not sure. I don't think so [laughs]. No.

Oh, by the way, I was less than ten years old when she passed away. But I have very, very clear memories of my grandmother's mother, who I called Big Nano because she was my great grandmother [smile]. But I never really spoke to her about the Partition. And now I'm thinking what a missed opportunity, because she was a fully grown woman, married and with children when it happened. But I don't know why I never asked her. Maybe because I was too young to realise the significance of the Partition.

[pause]

That's one person certainly who was alive until the time that I was ten years old, who I'm sure could have given me even stories about life in Amritsar.

**Snigdha:** Do you know how they travelled across the borders?

**Mahnoor:** I think by train.

**Snigdha:** Was it a safe travel? Were there any details that you recall?

**Mahnoor:** You know what? It's such a shame, but I never really asked my grandmother these questions [laughs]. I don't know why. And now I'm kicking myself because I can't even ask anymore. But no, I mean, I don't know. Maybe if something terrible had happened, she would have said so herself. But I don't think, thankfully, that the journey was as terrible for them as it sadly was for other people.

**Snigdha:** When did you first have that discussion with your grandmother? Like, when did it come up? How did it come up?

**Mahnoor:** Again, I can't pinpoint a particular time. I think I had multiple conversations with her over the course of my life.

[long pause]

Oh, also because my grandpa was in the Air Force and he did serve in the wars with India. So in 1965, I don't think so in 1971, but he would tell us stories of the 1965 war, and I think he got two military awards also. A Tamgha-e-Shujaat award [Medal of Bravery]—I think Shujaat means bravery in Persian or Urdu. And so he had stories about the wars with India and he would sometimes tell us those stories. He had other interesting stories about his time as an Air Force officer and what life was like for an Air Force officer in the military bases. Yeah.

**Snigdha:** Do you remember any of the stories he mentioned?

**Mahnoor:** [long pause] Yeah, a lot of them. I can't really say, I don't know why [laughs]. I can't think of one right now.

But he did also talk about meeting the husband of this Indian princess, the Air Force officer that she married and lots of different things. I can't really think of one story in detail from start to finish that I can mention right now.

**Snigdha:** No worries! We can always come back to this, perhaps in the second session as well in case there are any details that you remember or anything else. Even once the interview is done, if there's anything else that you'd like to share, that's always there.

I think I'm just curious to know when these discussions happened, was it something that you were curious about to ask? Like who initiated discussions? Did they come to you and talk to you or did you ask them questions?

**Mahnoor:** I think I was the one asking them. If you're asking about the Partition, then I was the one asking the questions. I don't think they really ever volunteered information about the Partition. Also the year I was born, it had been 51 years since Partition. So perhaps if I was born, let's say in the 1950s and 60s, it would have been more of a topic of discussion. But by then it wasn't. By then we were discussing other things [laughs].

But I do remember vividly, and I do not recall how this started, but I do remember vividly when I was a child growing up in Pakistan. I always thought that Pakistan was the country with the religious extremism problem, and we had sort of adopted an overly religious Islamic identity. And I always thought that we should be following India's example of being a secular country. For some reason that thought was always in my mind. I don't know why.

And I mentioned earlier how religious bigotry is a problem in Pakistan. I remember when I was in school, there was a girl, I don't remember her name. She was not even in the same class, but she had sort of like a red birthmark somewhere in the middle of her forehead. And so sometimes [laughs] the other children, and they could not have been more than 8 or 10 years old, but they would ask her, "Are you Hindu? *Tum Hindu ho?*" I was practically a baby at the time, but I always thought what an unnecessary and stupid question to ask and what a bigoted question to ask.

Traditionally in Pakistan, when we have the school assembly, sometimes a short *dua* is made like a prayer from the Quran, a very short one. And girls and women are supposed to just cover their heads. And even if you don't cover it fully, you're supposed to, you know, just drape your *dupatta* [scarf] over your head. Sometimes, if someone would not do that or would forget to do that, others around them would ask them, "*Tum Hindu ho?* [Are you Hindu?]" [laughs] and that never made sense to me. And like, why Hindu *ho*, why not Buddhist *ho* or Christian *ho*? [Why wouldn't they ask if they were Buddhist or Christian?] [laughs]



So, I don't know. Maybe because my grandfather was a very well read man, and he used to have books from all over the world and he used to watch all sorts of movies and all sorts of TV shows. And I was exposed to the idea that people other than Muslims exist in the world. It didn't make sense to me why someone would single out people who are from different faiths. And so I remember, religious bigotry would always infuriate me ever since I was a little child. And I was never a nationalist Pakistani child. For some reason.

**Snigdha:** [pause] Do you recall the earliest moment when you realised, okay, this religious division was something you were not comfortable with?

**Mahnoor:** I just always [laughs] remember thinking it was stupid and pointless.

**Snigdha:** Was there an experience that kind of made you come to this conclusion because you mentioned what it was like as a child. I'm curious to know, perhaps, how old were you, was this in middle school or younger or older? And what prompted this thought?

**Mahnoor:** [long pause] I think because I grew up in Pakistan, from a very early age, I realised that our Islamic identity was also a big part of our national Pakistani identity and we all always had to insist that what makes us different from Indians, even though we are so much like them. What makes us different? Oh, Islam is what makes us different.

I did not agree with a lot of practices that were carried out in the name of Islam. So, for example, religious conservatism or, you know, just the fact that I observed—. I would see these ads on television on Indian channels, for example, a scooty [scooter] for women is being advertised and the woman is riding something that looks like a motorbike on the streets of India. And I had never seen that in Pakistan. And so I would question—. It just seemed like a much freer society to me from what I would see on TV. Also, I would see these Indian shows and the girls would be dressed in shorts and tank tops and they would be like on the streets of India. And I was like, gosh, they are speaking the language that I am speaking but what a different country. I always thought it would be a more fun place to live [laughs]. So when I was little, because the people there just seemed so much freer and open and I was, like, disgusted by us. I was like, why can't we be like them? [laughs] And they seemed richer and wealthier also for some reason. That's why maybe I thought in my head that our religious conservatism was holding us back from being like them.

**Snigdha:** Was it around this time, perhaps, that you started having discussions with your grandparents?

**Mahnoor:** I don't think I ever really discussed [it]. I never made comparisons with India, with my grandparents, but like, for instance, my grandma was not the sort of person with whom you could have very intellectual discussions on politics. I mean, she was a very well read woman, and she had done a masters in Arabic, I think, from the University of Punjab. And she had read a lot of Urdu poetry and Urdu literature. But her mind was not made for political discussions.

Conversely, with my grandpa, even though he was an Air Force officer, by no stretch of imagination was he a jingoistic person. He was always very cognisant of the problems within Pakistan and with the way Pakistan is run, with the exaggerated influence of the military. And so I could talk about Pakistan's problems with him. But, no, I don't think I ever really compared Pakistan and India and my discussions with him.

**Snigdha:** Okay. And do you think the Partition either as an event or this fact that there are two countries that were once one has influenced your way of thinking or even your upbringing in any way or your experiences?

**Mahnoor:** How the fact that these two countries were once the same country, whether that has influenced my upbringing?

**Snigdha:** Yeah, upbringing or even like has it shaped your life? [pause] I think I would put it differently because, yeah, upbringing is a bit specific.

**Mahnoor:** Again, I think I've always associated religious pluralism with India, democracy with India, secularism with India. One thing I clearly remember my grandpa saying is, "Don't you think that the whole nation theory is bogus? Because even today, there are more Muslims in India than there are in Pakistan." So that's something he used to say. I believe after Indonesia, India had the largest number of Muslims.

[pause] How else? I, um. I was always very fascinated by the literature and the films that came out of the subcontinent on the topic of the British in India or British Raj [rule] in India or, you know, the literature that was produced in India during the time of the British in India. I was always a big fan of the Merchant Ivory films, which were adapted from some Indian novels. And I think one of the writers was Ruth Praver Jhabvala and one of them is a film called Heat and Dust, which is like entirely in English. But I think one of the lead actors is Shashi Kapoor. And then again, Bollywood is today very big in Pakistan. Shah Rukh Khan was a massive star in Pakistan, so was Amitabh Bachchan.

Oh! Interestingly enough, my grandpa once told me that as an Air Force officer or as a dignitary, he was invited to a dinner party at the house of the governor of the Punjab. At the time, the governor of the Punjab was a man called Shahid Hamid, and he was invited to a function or a ceremony there. And there were some guests from India, Dev Anand, Amitabh Bachchan and Kapil Dev, the cricketer. And my grandpa told me he shook hands with Dev Anand, but he refrained from shaking hands with Amitabh Bacchan and Kapil Dev because he said they were religious bigots. And I said, "Really?" And he said, "Yes. But I shook hands with Dev Anand." I remember trying to look for evidence that Amitabh Bacchan and Kapil Dev were religious bigots or fundamentalists. But I didn't find anything to corroborate that statement.

One of the stories my grandpa told me was of a man who was his colleague or something at the university, and he said that they got along very well. And then he stopped seeing him and then he saw him months later. And then he called out his name. When he called out his

name—like this was at some train station or something—the man looked back and he came running to my grandpa and he said, “Yahan pe mera naam zor zor se na lo. Yahan mujhe koi nahi jaanta.” [Do not take my name so loudly here. No one knows me here.] And then he quickly went away. My grandpa said, like years later, “I thought he might have been a spy from India because he looked so shaken when I called out his name.” So, I mean, it's not an implausible story. But yeah, from my grandpa, there were never any, like, hostile anecdotes about India or Indians. Never. No.

[long pause]

How else has the partition shaped my thinking? I wish I had grown up learning how to read and write in Hindi. Sadly, I don't think Hindi is taught in schools in Pakistan. Because I know how to speak it. It could have been good if I had known how to write it and read it.

**Snigdha:** [In] my school, I think for about a year and a half they offered Urdu and I learnt Urdu.

**Mahnoor:** Yeah, I'm not surprised.

**Snigdha:** But perhaps things would be different now. I'm not sure if they still offer that as a subject.

**Mahnoor:** Hmm.

**Snigdha:** You also mentioned that your paternal grandparents were from Bihar.

**Mahnoor:** Hmm.

**Snigdha:** Could you tell me a little more about—did they also migrate?

**Mahnoor:** You know what? I have never had a single conversation with them about how they came to Pakistan. Never. No. [pause] I, I, I'm not even sure if they came to Pakistan before the Partition ever happened. All I know is that they are Bihari, which is like people from a region called Bihar who speak Urdu.

**Snigdha:** When was the first time you met your paternal grandparents? How old were—

**Mahnoor:** I think around the time my mother got married.

**Snigdha:** Okay, and how old were you then?

**Mahnoor:** I think she got married in 2003, so I must have been four or five.

**Snigdha:** And your stepfather was still living with them?

**Mahnoor:** Yes.

**Snigdha:** You were in Karachi then. Were they also based in Karachi?

**Mahnoor:** In a different place in Karachi, but in Karachi.

**Snigdha:** Was it very far from your house?

**Mahnoor:** Yes, I considered it to be on the other side of Karachi. I'm not sure it would be entirely accurate to say the other side, but I think they lived about, like, 20 to 30 km away in a *completely* different neighbourhood that looked very different from Malir Cantt. Yeah.

[long pause]

**Snigdha:** I think I would like to hear more about your grandfather's story as well, but I do understand that that's something that perhaps would take a bit of time to recollect. So we can take this forward in another session.

**Mahnoor:** Yes, that sounds good.

**Snigdha:** Thank you so much for doing this. I am going to stop recording now.

## INTERVIEW 2 of 2 (20 November, 2023)

**Snigdha:** This is a second session with Mahnoor Khan and we are in the games room at the Grand Morillon Student Residence. The date is 20th November and it's 7:23pm.

Thank you so much for sitting with me once again Mahnoor. I learned a lot in the last session that we had and I thought we could pick up right from where we left off. We had been discussing your grandfather's time in the Air Force and I was wondering whether you remember any of the stories he would mention about that and even if not that's completely okay! I just thought it would be a nice starter to get started with.

**Mahnoor:** Yeah, I think my grandpa used to tell me a lot of stories about his time both when he used to teach and his time in the Air Force. He was never an Air Force *pilot*. He never flew planes or anything like that so we have no stories of that kind. But for some reason, I'm not sure why, I think I've forgotten most of those stories now.

I forgot to tell you this last time, but my grandpa wrote his memoirs, but they were never published. But the manuscript is still there back in my house in Karachi. And I used to visit it from time to time, just open it up to a random page and start reading and those memoirs are basically like a collection of stories from his life and from his childhood. Interestingly enough, I forgot this the last time you were interviewing me, but he does have stories also from his school days, which were in the pre-Partition era. And he does mention having Sikh classmates and Hindu classmates. Although, the place where he was brought up was in present-day Pakistan, so he and his immediate family did not have the experience of migrating and crossing borders during Partition. But nevertheless, he does talk about growing up in a sort of environment where he had Sikh friends and classmates and Hindu friends and classmates. I don't remember the stories in detail, but they were typical stories of boys being naughty at school. Other than that, apart from one or two stories here or there, I can't really remember stories from his Air Force days.

**Snigdha:** No worries at all! Do you know why he wrote these memoirs? Like, it's actually connecting really well with my next question where I wanted to know whether your grandparents or whether you have done anything to preserve the past. I think this fits really well. Did he write it with a purpose? Or was it just like journaling?

**Mahnoor:** So I used to love listening to his stories and when I was little, I used to look up to him. Whenever he would tell me stories about his life, I would always come away thinking that he had had a very interesting and colourful life. And I would ask him several times, "Oh, Nanabu, why don't you write a book about your life?" And then he would just sort of laugh and he would say nothing. But eventually it turns out he did do that. He did write a book.

This is a manuscript, like a collection of memoirs that are unpublished and I think the manuscript we have at home is just the one manuscript that exists. In the foreword that he's written, he goes on to mention all of his family members, his wife, his children, his

grandchildren. But then he wrote that the credit for writing this goes to my granddaughter, Mahnoor Khan, if the reader likes the book then Mahnoor is to be credited, and if not then I [Mahnoor's grandfather] "am to be blamed for my poor show" [laughs]. So maybe like, that was one reason I kept telling him or I kept asking him to document his life, to write it down.

**Snigdha:** Was there a reason [that] you wanted him to document it?

**Mahnoor:** Yes, because I think I did have that awareness that the generation that experienced the Partition or the generation that lived through the early years and decades of Pakistan was not going to be around forever. And I did think that those were important stories for future generations and people of my age group to hear.

**Snigdha:** And when did he start documenting his life?

**Mahnoor:** I think after he turned 80.

**Snigdha:** Oh! Okay.

**Mahnoor:** So given that he was born in 1935, I would say that [he started writing in] 2015.

**Snigdha:** 80! That's quite—I mean, it's really nice, because you have so much, so much history to tell. And it's a very nice endeavour from your part as well. Have you gone back to the manuscript recently?

**Mahnoor:** I think—yeah. I think I did open up the book and read some of it when I was back in Pakistan this summer. But I didn't bring it here with me, which maybe I should have.

**Snigdha:** Are there any other ways that he kept in touch with the past?

**Mahnoor:** Hmm. What kind of past do you mean?

**Snigdha:** Just his life, you know.

[pause]

**Mahnoor:** So I remember, whenever he moved houses, he would always have a lot of belongings that would go with him to the new place that he was going to. And a lot of those belongings would be the books that he had collected throughout his life. He was an avid reader and so he had a lot of, I think, books that were very old editions. And then he also had a collection of souvenirs from his travels from different parts of the world.

Another way in which his writing still survives, is that he would also write for various newspapers. He would write, for example, for Dawn, which is Pakistan's biggest, leading, oldest and also English newspaper. And then he would write for another paper, which I'm not

sure if it still exists, but it was called the Frontier Post. So when we were deciding what to do with his belongings after he passed, I did keep most of his articles. I mean, he had kept those himself as well. So whenever an article or a story written by him would appear in the paper, he would cut it out of the paper, as a way of preserving it.

**Snigdha:** My mom has a similar—;ike, she doesn't write for newspapers, but if it has an article that she particularly likes, she has a file with all these newspaper clippings. And I know you write as well. Do you think maybe your grandfather's passion kind of influenced you to pick up writing? And also [to] write for newspapers? Because I know you write for the Graduate Press.

**Mahnoor:** Yes, I have been writing for the Graduate Press a little bit. And since my grandpa was—I guess you could call him a man of letters. And he did think that education was very important. To him writing was a noble and intellectual pursuit and so he always encouraged that in his children and his grandchildren as well. So yes, I think it would definitely be correct to say that the fact that I write or try to write has to do with his bringing up of me. Yeah.

**Snigdha:** Okay. And what about your grandmother? Like, how has she kept in touch with her past?

**Mahnoor:** So my grandma also used to tell me stories about her life as a child with her family. She used to describe the way that houses back then would be structured; she used to talk about the food and she would also always sort of lament about how the food today does not compare at all to the kind of food that they ate back then when they were children.

I don't think she's told me a lot of stories about her life before the Partition, because I think, frankly, she was too young to recall that. She must have been two years old when her family moved to Pakistan. But yeah, I think for most, photographs were also a big way of staying connected to the past. My mother and my uncle, they sort of disposed of most of the photo albums that my grandma and my grandpa had and they basically digitised those. They got rid of the actual hard physical copies.

I mean, it wouldn't be wrong to say that they [Mahnoor's grandparents] had hundreds of them. Maybe not hundreds, but at least one hundred [laughs]. And so yeah, I think they were very fond of pictures. And they also grew up and were alive in a time when there were no phones, and even digital cameras came later. So for them, taking pictures of your children and of your life was also important. Yeah.

**Snigdha:** I was just curious about whether besides stories, and also writing, if there was any other medium through which they kind of communicated their life to you? Or was it just these two in particular?

**Mahnoor:** I think it was just these two because I always also lived in very close proximity with them. We never lived in separate cities or anything like that. So there were no letters or

anything. Perhaps if I had lived in a different city or a different country, they might have corresponded via letters or posts.

**Snigdha:** Even your Bachelor's was in the same city?

**Mahnoor:** Yes. So my university was just a twenty-minute drive away from home.

**Snigdha:** Okay, so you were a day scholar? Or did you have a hostel that you stayed in?

**Mahnoor:** No. So I used to stay at home. And then yes, my car would take me to campus on the days that I had class.

**Snigdha:** Did your campus have facilities for people to stay there?

**Mahnoor:** No, because people used to come from all over Pakistan to attend Habib University—from different parts of Pakistan. I mean, not everybody who was a student at Habib was also a resident of Karachi. So for people who came from out of town or for people who did not have a home in Karachi, there were hostels, but they weren't on campus.

**Snigdha:** Okay, kind of like what we have with the Graduate Institute.

**Mahnoor:** Yes.

**Snigdha:** That's interesting. I think I just want to come back to your grandparents. And then for the latter half of this, I wanted to focus on you and your thoughts.

Do you think that your grandparents carried the weight of the past? In the sense that, I know your grandmother had the experience of migrating, and then even with your grandfather and his time in the Air Force—was that like a recurring memory that kept coming up?

**Mahnoor:** Okay, that's an interesting question.

I think my grandpa, in particular, was a very pragmatic person and he was never one to overtly show emotion, like overtly be very happy or, you know, very upset about something. I mean, he could get very riled up and he would raise his voice when he would get riled up. But he wasn't one to dwell on the past with nostalgia or sentimentality. That was not Nanabu at all. I do know, he was very fond of the Air Force and I do think he enjoyed it, but I think he enjoyed his time as an academic more. And I think if you were to ask him what the golden period of his life was, then it was probably the ten-year stint he did as the principal of this boys boarding school, which is located in Bahawalpur, Pakistan, called Sadiq Public School. It is another one of those boarding schools that has been around since the time of the British Raj, and it's very much modelled after an elite British boys boarding school, sort of like Eton or something like that.



He was the principal there for about a good ten years. And I think he really enjoyed that job. He enjoyed living in Bahawalpur, because while he was principal throughout these ten years, he was given a massive house. He had lots of servants—I was also born in the Bahawalpur—and even though I was very young, when we left I do have some memories of Bahawalpur.

I remember that our garden used to have peacocks and I think some rabbits. I remember my birthday parties in the garden and the gardens were huge. And even from my first two birthday parties, I think they are—. We used to have video cassettes that we used to play in the VCR. I remember watching footage of me being very little and me walking around, holding Nanabu's hand and there were these helium balloons tied on like trees and branches all over the lawn. I was very fascinated because the balloons were sticking right up in the air, because obviously, they were filled with helium. And Nanabu would unwrap one, and he would give it to me, and I would let it go. And then he would unwrap another and give it to me and I would let it go.

Even my uncle, I think when he came back from the US to Pakistan, when he had heard that my grandpa was, you know, probably on his deathbed and he came back and after Nanabu having passed away, we were just sitting in my grandpa's living room. And even he [Mahnoor's uncle] mentioned this period of his life as like a golden time of his life. Because of the position that he had, he would be able to entertain guests at his house ranging from bureaucrats to politicians to I think, once, even the US ambassador to Pakistan at the time came to see him at his house. And I think he enjoyed that—he enjoyed entertaining, he enjoyed meeting people. So more than the Air Force, I would say that that was what he would call the golden period of his life.

**Snigdha:** What about your grandmother?

**Mahnoor:** [pause] I think my grandma also enjoyed being an Air Force wife. My grandma—more so than my grandpa—would always sort of yearn for her life in Bahawalpur as well. Because my grandma also very much liked being a hostess and being the lady of the house [laughs], and having people to order around, like “Cook this” or “Do that.” And so yeah, I think for my grandma as well, Bahawalpur was definitely the highlight of her life.

**Snigdha:** You mentioned that your grandfather was very practical in his approach especially in terms of emotions. How would you describe your grandmother?

**Mahnoor:** Oh, my grandma would be very emotional [laughs]. No, my grandma was very, very emotional compared to my grandpa. And, I mean, if something upset her, you would know it every time. She was one of, I think around, eight siblings. When she was in her old age, some of her siblings were obviously also like naturally passing away. And so every time one of her brothers would pass away, she would howl and she would cry. Maybe it was the Punjabi in her, I'm not sure, but she was for sure a very emotional woman.

**Snigdha:** Do you think any of their experiences have passed down through the generations? Like, is there something that you hold dear to your heart, or anything that you carry with you that you have yourself not experienced, but they have?

**Mahnoor:** I think I have an acute sense of how the Pakistan that they lived in is very different from the Pakistan today. And the time that they lived in is very different from the time today. I mean, even if you look at something like how people talk or write today compared to how they would talk or write back then—if you look at Pakistani TV shows from back then—they just seem like a very different society. For example, if I were to go out in the world today, and maybe do a job, or something, it would be very different from the kind of job that my grandpa did. I think the world has just changed so fast. It's not the kind of world I'm living in today and is not the kind of world that I had imagined I would be living in ten years ago. I don't know if that makes sense. But I think I'm also somehow nostalgic for the time that they lived in. And I think, fleetingly, I saw that time when I was a child. Maybe it also had to do with their influence because they sort of managed their home in their own way. And maybe that kind of rubbed off on me.

**Snigdha:** Is there anything in particular you are nostalgic about?

**Mahnoor:** Just you know, even if you were to walk into their home, it had a bit of an antiquated vibe about it. And that's not surprising. I mean, obviously they were people of an older age group and I think their tastes also reflected that. That's why I used to have trouble connecting to people of my own age, because for the longest time, I mean, they were the people that I interacted the most with. And so, I picked up their mannerisms, their way of talking, sort of their beliefs and their worldview. Then when I would go out and talk to people my own age, they would seem very different to me.

I don't know if that answers your question.

**Snigdha:** No, it does! I think it fits really nicely with what I was curious about. What differences do you see from that time and our time right now? In terms of the evolution of thought, whether it's with regard to the Partition or experience as well? How do you think it has evolved, as time has passed?

**Mahnoor:** Because I was looking at life and the world through their eyes, I thought of the world as a much simpler place. I mean, even when I was growing up, my grandpa would always say, you know, try to be the best that you can be because [the] competition out there is intense, and the world is cutthroat. But today, I see so many different people around me that I start having serious doubts about my own abilities. I say to myself, "Oh, my goodness, everyone here is so intelligent and so well read and so gifted and talented, and they have all sorts of skills, which I don't." I think young people today have a lot more pressure on them, and their own families—and just generally society—expects a lot more from them than you would have expected from a young person of our age, maybe fifty years ago. And I just, I

don't know, somehow I grew up thinking that the world was a much simpler place than it really is. I don't know how to put it better than that.

**Snigdha:** I get that, I get that. Who knows, probably ten years down the line, the next couple of generations may think that our time is simpler and there's was more complex. I think that's definitely interesting.

I was just wondering, with everything that you've told me about your grandparents experiences, and even your parents experiences, how has that impacted you?

**Mahnoor:** [pause] How their experiences have impacted me? Their experiences of life?

**Snigdha:** Of life, or—. Let's say with the stories that you heard about their time, whether pre-Partition, post-Partition. I just want to understand, given that this is something that they have experienced and you have not, I want to see how you carry it with yourself, if at all.

**Mahnoor:** [pause] I think I was very much raised to believe that—. I don't know exactly what part of their life experiences it is you want me to talk about. But if it's the experience of Partition, then I would say for sure, I was raised to believe that all people are equal. And nobody has to superior to another person on the basis of their caste, creed, faith, etc. Other than that, what I was talking about in my previous answer, as I grew older, and I went to college and university, I also sort of started believing that okay, as much as one might look up to their parents or grandparents, their experiences and their beliefs may not necessarily apply to your life, because the world that you live in is very, very different from the world that they lived in. And so while you might respect their experiences and their outlook on life, the world that you have has moved on. You must live your life according to your principles and your experiences. Yeah, and if there's a follow up question, you want to ask, you can.

**Snigdha:** I think maybe what I'm trying to understand is, given that our generation is the third generation from the Partition, I want to see if at all you have any emotional connection to this historical event? And it doesn't have to be. How do you see it at a personal level, given this entire history of your grandparents, either their thoughts, their experiences, your parents, what you've studied, the public discourse. You can take the time to think there's no hurry at all.

**Mahnoor:** I think a lot can be written and said about this. But briefly, I would say that I personally recognise the Partition as a great human tragedy, because obviously, a million people lost their lives. And I'm not sure how many million had to flee their homes overnight, leave everything behind and migrate to another country that they had never previously been to; to lay down their roots there. So I think that aspect of it is very sad and very tragic, even the communal violence that unfolded. Though thankfully my grandparents did not witness intense communal violence, I do know from hearing the testimonies of other people who lived through this event—brutal episodes of colonial communal violence that they witnessed.

But then I think, because the media and TV shows and all of these things are so prevalent on both sides of the border, we do get to gain an insight into the lives of people across the border. To me, they look the same, they sound the same, they almost speak the same language. So it is very much a case of the same people being divided across religious lines, and nothing more than that. And I wish the world were a better and more evolved place and people did not differentiate amongst one another on the basis of which God you pray to or what religion you follow.

Other than that, I wouldn't say that I personally have an emotional connection with the event of the Partition. I was born long after. I was born, I think 51 years after the Partition. So whatever little I've heard about it, I've heard about it from my grandparents. But other than that, I, like many, many other Pakistanis and South Asians and people around the world, I consume a lot of Indian content, whether it's films, whether it's shows, books, music. Because of the cultural similarity and the proximity with India, I enjoy, for example, books written by Indian authors, and I can relate to them more than I would relate to something written by, let's say, a Japanese author or Latin American author. So there's that.

**Snigdha:** What is the public discourse on the Partition right now in Pakistan? Is it there at all?

**Mahnoor:** Okay, so this is a very interesting question. I'm glad you asked this. So I think recently, after Modi, and I think after Modi's second term, there is now the sentiment amongst even people who are unsure about whether the Partition was, you know, the right thing to do, or the sensible thing to do, or the wrong thing to do. There is a sort of, I don't know, there's been a growing sentiment of "Oh, my goodness, maybe Jinnah was onto something if this is how Muslims are being treated in India right now." And don't get me wrong, I mean, if you talk to religious minorities in Pakistan, it wouldn't be unfair to say that they are treated as second class citizens, for example, only a Muslim can be the President and the Prime Minister of Pakistan. The last time Pakistan had a Christian Chief Justice of the Supreme Court was in the 1960s. So there's that.

I mean, in terms of legislature, yes, the Pakistani constitution clearly states that in order to be the president or prime minister of Pakistan, you have to be Muslim. And I don't think the Indian constitution says anything like that. I do know that India has had Muslim presidents. But there's, I don't know, there's some, if I may say so, there is the kind of—. For example, because I have Instagram and I also have access to the internet, I do get to see what is happening in other countries. And I do get to see the kind of rhetoric and discourse that is taking place in the neighbouring country—in India. I think the sort of vitriol that has entered politics right now and the kind of language that is being used to talk about Muslims, I think that is missing in Pakistan.

Even yesterday, I was listening to a Pakistani human rights activist, he's Hindu, and his name is Kapil Dev, like the Indian cricketer. He was doing an interview online and he pointed out something very interesting. He said, you know, whenever an atrocity happens with Hindus or

Christians in Pakistan, and I tweet about it on Twitter, 90% of the replies I get on my tweet are positive from Pakistanis, and they are supporting me and they are denouncing whatever atrocity has happened. And then he says, if you go to the Twitter of a Muslim activist, let's say in India, and they denounce something that they perceive to be an anti-Muslim action in India, most of the tweets they will be getting are vitriolic, hateful tweets. I think that's interesting.

Pakistan and India both have problems. When it comes to the way they act, they think they are in the religious majority, but it ends up manifesting in very different ways. And when I was growing up, I would always try to tell people around me who would start a conversation on this topic that "Oh, we should learn from India. India is a secular country, and we are the country that has a religious extremism problem." Now, I think things are also sort of devolving in India. Because you asked the question, I think there is a recognition of the fact that right now as Muslims, we are probably better off in Pakistan [laughs], than we would be today in Modi's India.

**Snigdha:** Yeah, no, I completely get that. I think I also was perhaps thinking that—you mentioned that you didn't have an emotional connection to this. Because it is, after all, something that happened years and decades ago.

Could it also be because your grandparents dealt with any—I'm using strong words here and it may not be the case—trauma that they underwent? Because perhaps they resolved it amongst themselves and hence that hasn't been passed down through the generations.

Perhaps what I'm trying to understand and I guess my question is that let's say in the event that perhaps they had not reconciled any issues, do you think you would have felt stronger about this?

**Mahnoor:** [pause] You know what? I don't think that they had any extreme trauma or any trauma at all. I mean, if we're going to use that word, then no, I do not think they had any trauma related to the Partition. If my grandma's family had grievances over the fact that they left a perfectly good family home back in Amritsar to come to a new country, then she never sort of explained it to me, ever.

Maybe she was too young to understand if that happened to her family. But again, my grandparents were not communal and they were not that sort of—. So I don't think, even if something, God forbid, horrible had happened to their family during the Partition, I do not think I would have grown up with a resentment towards the other community that allegedly committed crimes against my grandparents.

**Snigdha:** Do you think it's because you're abstracted from that situation?

**Mahnoor:** That could be.

**Snigdha:** Or is there any other reason you think that you wouldn't be affected?

**Mahnoor:** Wouldn't be affected by what?

**Snigdha:** By their experience.

**Mahnoor:** [long pause] I think there is a recognition in Pakistan that violence broke out on all sides. And it wasn't just one particular religious community committing atrocities against another. It was everyone. Every community did unspeakable things. That is because the British had also carried out their policy of divide and rule. And they were, I think, the first to sort of put this thing in people's minds that, "Oh, you know, you are different from one another on the basis of your religious identity." So it was just this craze and madness that people got swept up in. I think people were also obviously very frustrated and life was not great under the British colonial rule. Maybe the violence that erupted was just one way in which people's frustrations and hopelessness manifested themselves.

I don't think any religion in the world preaches hate. I think all religions in the world preach community and getting along in harmony. But it's what people interpret their religion to be. The way you interpret your religion says more about you than it says about the religion. Even today, and I came to realise this not very long ago, but even today, when something atrocious happens in Pakistan, let's say an act of vandalism against a Christian neighbourhood or a church, then, even though it's on those Pakistanis who committed the act of vandalism, there's a far greater number of Pakistanis who will rise up against the act of vandalism or speak out against it or denounce it. So they are also Muslim and they are also Pakistani. So how come one group is so opposed to this and one group says, "Oh, no, this is justified in the name of our religion?" And I don't think religion or an entire community should be blamed if something atrocious happens. So. Yeah.

**Snigdha:** I really like the point about how the way you interpret religion tells a lot about you than the religion. I think that's extremely true.

[pause]

This may seem slightly random in this order of questions, but, suppose you plan to have a family in the future, would the Partition be a topic of discussion? Would you want to tell them about it? How would you do this?

I know it's early to think about it as well, but [I'm] just curious!

**Mahnoor:** I think I would encourage them to read. Reading books for them would be a better way of learning about the Partition or watching films, for instance, than me telling them about it, because I have not personally lived through it. They would read about it just like any other historical event except this one would obviously be more significant because it happened in the country of their origin or the heritage that they're from.

Any young child that I have a role in shaping their childhood or bringing them up, I would also want to educate them about how, you know, different people from all walks of life exist

in the world, from all sorts of religious backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, and everyone is equal—everyone is different but equal. And you must treat them as such and respect them.

Just to follow up on my previous point about how the way you interpret your faith says more about you than it does about the religion itself. Growing up, based on the stories I would read about Hindu mythology or even the books I would read by Hindu authors, the way that I came to see Hinduism was very much about living in harmony with nature and not, you know, causing harm or hurt to anyone. Basically, if I were to boil it down to one sentence, it would be living in harmony with nature. That always really struck a chord with me.

But then obviously, like, there are Muslims who interpret their faith in a very, very radical, and extreme way. There are people like that in all sorts of countries. Now I think it tells us about your life experiences and your personal prejudices, the way that you interpret your faith.

**Snigdha:** Do you think as the successive generations that come, should this be immortalised in any way? Given that, for example, let's say with our generation, if we are already feeling abstracted from it—given that it's three generations above us—do you think we should preserve this memory of the Partition or is it something that should organically fade?

**Mahnoor:** I do think the story should be preserved. In fact, there's a very good project—I was on their YouTube channel a few days ago. I think it's the 1947 Partition Archive, and I think the lady who started it, she interviews survivors of or the people who lived through the Partition and she takes their oral histories. I do think projects are really important for sure.

**Snigdha:** Why do you feel so?

**Mahnoor:** Because, it was an event that shaped the trajectory of the subcontinent. I mean, why does Pakistan exist and why does India exist today in the form that it exists? In order to understand a lot of the politics in India and Pakistan today, you can not understand it without understanding and reading about the Partition.

[pause]

For example, why was Gandhi assassinated or, you know, or how can you trace the roots and the origin of the RSS and the Hindu ideology? I mean, it all goes back to British colonial rule or it all goes back to the Partition.

You can't have a proper and holistic understanding of present day politics without understanding the Partition. When you do not have a proper and holistic understanding of it, you start doing misinformed things like saying, "Oh, this community is intrinsically backward or, you know, they're the ones causing problems." If you don't go back and read about how—

For example, when I was doing my undergrad degree, we also learned about how religions were very syncretic in India before the British—even when the British arrived. I mean, it takes a long time for things to change.

Syncretism is a term that means essentially that everything is blended together and there's no hard line separating this from that. Because we all live in the same place, there were traditions within the Hindu community that the Muslim community also used to practise and things and rituals and traditions within the Muslim community that the Hindu community practised. A friend of mine from India was also telling me how, for example, visiting dargahs is also a ritual for many Hindu families. Even in the way that wedding festivities are conducted till date in Pakistan borrows a lot from the way that Hindu wedding celebrations are done. So, you know, there is no hard line dividing this religion from that or these practices from those ones. When you don't have a proper understanding of your past, you can't really understand your present.

**Snigdha:** [pause] Given that the past had a lot of painful moments that happened, and one is also definitely understanding the context so that you can understand the history and perhaps the timeline it has followed to the present date—how do you think we should navigate this pain that's there? You know, there's a lot of tough moments that happen, as we know, even with the Partition, it was a very brutal bloodshed. Is that something also that we should carry in future generations? What are your views on this?

**Mahnoor:** I think for sure people of future generations should know that it was a traumatic and bloody event. Obviously, they will not be able to understand the extent to which it was traumatising and bloody because they themselves did not live through it. But at least they should read about it.

**Snigdha:** How do you think that would be helpful?

**Mahnoor:** [long pause] Just to give one very small example, when they see, for instance, a politician, you know, speaking in a derogatory manner about other religious or cultural communities they should understand that, you know, we've seen this happen before and it did not result in something good. They should have that awareness. I mean, they should learn that one of the basic sort of principles in life is to be respectful and to live in harmony with your fellow man. They should understand that it wasn't a demon sent from hell who participated in so much violence and bloodshed and carnage. It was ordinary people. They should understand that even ordinary people have the ability to do extraordinary harm. It just depends on the way you look at the world and what sort of beliefs you have. And so I think it should be a lesson for them not to repeat history or not to sort of buy into communal hatred or politics that is done with a communal bent.

**Snigdha:** I think I was just coming from the place where we all have this feeling of wanting to protect anyone—like a dear friend, a sibling or in the future, our children if we decide to have them—from anything that's unpleasant. Even I'm trying to understand, like, how do you navigate that space between informing them about their history and their roots, but also not



scaring them or not introducing them to, perhaps, violent ideas. That was what I was trying to understand in case you have anything further to add.

**Mahnoor:** I mean, they don't necessarily have to start learning about it when they are two years old [smiles], but slowly and gradually. It's a lifelong process. They don't have to learn everything at once. But once they're old enough to understand, they should learn about the fact that ugly and horrible things happen in the world. And the Partition is not the only thing. I mean, the Holocaust is another one of them that happened at roughly the same time during the Second World War. They do have to eventually learn about it, right, like the way we did. And I think, if you were to ask us today, "Do you think you would be better off not knowing that this happened?" I don't think I would say, "No, I'd rather not know." I'd rather know. Yeah—yeah.

**Snigdha:** I agree with you because I'd rather know as well.

**Mahnoor:** Yeah.

**Snigdha:** Yeah, because there was this philosopher who mentioned [it]—I think it was Rousseau, but I could be wrong. He said that we come as a blank slate. But I'm not sure how much I agree with that because even when we are born in this world, we are coming from multiple histories, you know. Just with this interview also with you—your grandmother's experience, your grandfather's experience, your mother's experience, your father's experience—it's almost impossible to have a blank slate because you already have this baggage.

But yeah, this has been extremely insightful for me. Just understanding where you come from and where your family comes from. I was just wondering if you had any message, perhaps for someone listening to this or for future generations on something that you'd like to tell them.

**Mahnoor:** I don't think I have anything profound to say [laughs] to them right now because I think I'm still also very young and figuring stuff out. But I guess I would just say—don't presume things about people that you have had limited interactions with or never interacted with or never seen. You have more in common with people living across the border than you think. And at the end of the day, people are just people. Yeah. I think it's always sad when sort of hate triumphs over love and understanding. So yeah, those are the final thoughts. My coherent final thoughts [laughs].

**Snigdha:** Is there anything else you'd like to share about your family's experience—your experience—something that you think I should have touched upon in this interview and I may have not?

**Mahnoor:** I just think—I just think there's not a whole lot of difference between the way that families are on this side of the border and [on] that side of the border. Because of the distance, because of the heavily militarised border and given how relations are between India and Pakistan—there are no direct flights from this country to that one and vice versa. There's a lot of fascination that people have about each other from either side of the border. Curiosity,

I guess, would be a better word because you are curious about things that you can't see or haven't seen. But you know, once you get to know each other, you learn soon enough that you are so similar and you have so much in common. And I think I was also listening to Karan Thapar interviewing someone and he said the same thing. Like, to paraphrase, what he said, "How can you not have so many similarities with people who have been your countrymen for thousands and thousands of years—for millennia? And so. Yeah.

**Snigdha:** Are there any questions you may have for me?

**Mahnoor:** Yeah, I mean, I could also ask a lot of those questions that you asked me [laughs], but that would be a very long interview session. What are your—do you have any connection whatsoever with the events of the Partition?

**Snigdha:** I think I feel the same in terms of feeling abstracted a bit. Also, now, in conducting this interview, I realised that there's so much I could have talked to my grandparents about. I don't really know a lot about their experiences. I think with what I recall, they have always been on the Indian side and it has never come up in discussions—I think primarily because it's been quite a long time as well. So that's why I don't feel a personal connect to it. But then I do feel personally connected to the state of the country at the moment. And as you said, you have to go back to history to understand what's happening now. So in that sense, I do hold it close to me, but not at a personal level, just to understand the current time I am living in, to which I am personally connected. If that makes sense.

**Mahnoor:** Yeah that makes sense. And if you were talking to, let's say, a young Indian child who has just started studying something related to 1947 and the Partition in school, and they have lots of questions about it and they come up to you to ask you—what is something that you would say to them, to an eight year old or a ten year old?

**Snigdha:** I think it would be to have an open mind, to not form any concrete thoughts at the moment. Because I feel like there are so many opinions, thoughts, feelings and facts across the world that sometimes it takes a lot of effort to deconstruct that and come up with your own positionality. I know these are very intense themes for an eight year old [laughs], but I think my main message to them would just be, "Keep reading, keep talking to people and keep an open mind." What I genuinely, truly appreciate about children at a young age is that they're so curious. And I feel like as we progress through all the grades and start reaching, like whatever, 15 or 16 years old, and then we go to Bachelors, it takes more effort to keep that open mind. I think we're increasingly narrowing it down to—like one plus one is always two. Which is a fact! [laughs] Yes, it is. It is two. But then there are so many different ways you can go about it. So I think it's not that it's impossible. It just takes more time to nurture that open mind. So I feel like from a young age, if you just teach children to be curious and loving.

**Mahnoor:** And have you read any books set, for example, perhaps against the backdrop of the Partition or books on the Partition?

**Speaker 1:** I had a lot of texts during my Bachelor's when I was studying—I did Political Science. And I will be reading it for my thesis as well. [short pause] But yeah, [I] mostly have read short stories like, you know, Ismat Chughtai or, even Khushwant Singh—

**Mahnoor:** You read Ismat Chughtai in Hindi or English?

**Snigdha:** I read it in English.

**Mahnoor:** Because the original is in Urdu.

**Snigdha:** Yes, true [smiles]. And I've read some poems as well. But in terms of books, I have a huge list I need to get through.

**Mahnoor:** But you have read poems and Ismat Chughtai and Khuswant Singh.

**Snigdha:** Yeah.

**Mahnoor:** And if you were to write like 500 words, reflect on the Partition and what you think of it as the granddaughter of people who saw it, what would you say? What are some of the things you would say?

**Snigdha:** That's an interesting question.

**Mahnoor:** You can think about it [laughs].

**Snigdha:** Yeah [laughs]. I think I would write about understanding your roots. Respecting your roots, also. Because, I mentioned the point about being a blank slate. I think we all do come with the full slate that we need to then shape into the picture that we see ourselves. You learn from history and it helps you understand the parts you can take forward. So in a very short thing, I think these are some of the themes I touch upon.

**Mahnoor:** Including your grandparents and other people of an older age group, whether their parents or your grandparents age group. Did anyone from those generations ever talk to you about the Partition or tell you about it? Or have things to say about Pakistan? [pause] Good or bad? No filter!

**Snigdha:** I think about the Partition, no. I've not really had conversations with my grandparents about this. With respect to Pakistan, as you mentioned, there's always this curiosity. And I've never heard, at least in my family, anything negative. Like my grandparents were actually based in Kashmir. And then Srinagar for some time. In all the time that I've known them, I've never heard any animosity with anyone from another religion or another community.

**Mahnoor:** Yeah.

**Snigdha:** But this is very interesting! Like I think this would also go on for long because we have so much curiosity amongst both of us [laughs]. But thank you so much for doing this.

And once the transcripts are ready, I will send them across to you so that in case there's anything you want to change or anything you want to remove as well, please feel free. Because, I mean, these are your words and I want to put that across. So thank you so much!