

Episode Two: “The City in the Suburbs: a South Asian Muslim Mecca”

CUE: SAJDAA BY NASHITA HASAN

MAS: Interviewing Salma Khan was one of my favorite memories during this work. I walked into her home, nervous about the potential language barrier between us and the generational differences. She greeted me at the door with a small smile and led me to her dining table. I sat awkwardly on the wooden chair and placed my hands on her plastic-covered table. I admired the crocheted doilies adorning the table along with Salma’s personal Qur’an accessorized with prayer beads while I waited for her to sit. When she sat down, a shiver went down my back. This was the very woman who saw myself and most of the community in diapers. She was the reason why my father even immigrated to the United States. I owed her my entire existence. Most of the Elgin Muslim community is in Salma Khan’s debt.

I shook those thoughts away and began the interview, lasting only 34 minutes. 34 minutes of sheer power and strength from her. Throughout the entire interview, her eyes never left mine as she exposed the truth of 9/11’s toll on the Muslim population globally and in Elgin. Pride and love filled her voice when she spoke about her late husband’s success in establishing a South Asian Muslim-American community. She invoked a certain kind of magic with her tone and careful pausing between sentences- making me realize the early history of the South Asian Muslim immigration and population of Elgin needed documentation. Preservation of her story was crucial especially since she is one of the last surviving elders of the founding South Asian Muslim-American community in Elgin. Here I present to you episode two of *A Community of Our Own*. “The City in the Suburbs: a South Asian Muslim Mecca”, takes us through the history of the South Asian Muslim population in Elgin, Illinois prior to the events of 9/11.

CUE DING

MAS: In this episode, we'll discuss the history of South Asian immigration to the United States, specifically in the case of Elgin, and how Elgin produced a settlement allowing for the South Asian Muslim community to thrive. Nationally, there is a link between South Asian Muslims and immigrants in the United States evident in the following statistics: the largest percentage of Muslim immigrants is 15 percent from Pakistan followed by India, Iran, Afghanistan and Bangladesh and among the U.S. immigrant Muslims, about 35 percent come from South Asian than any other region of the world listed in the same 2017 Pew Research Center survey. Elgin's own demographics point to 25.4 percent of its population being immigrants. Elgin served as a rather peaceful landing pad for a variety of reasons from job opportunities, affordable housing, proximity to a metropolitan city, Chicago with an already established South Asian Muslim population.¹The large wave of South Asian immigration gained momentum in the late 1960s because of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act as well its attached Family Reunification clause.

Cue: thought bubble sound effect

MAS: However before the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, there was a treacherous journey to the United States and the 'American Dream' for South Asians beginning as early as the 18th century. Earliest examples of South Asian immigration to the United States are Sikhs and Muslim Bengalis and Punjabis peddlers coming to New Orleans or fleeing parts of Canada due to harassment in the late 1700s. Numbers of South Asian immigrants remained low amounting to about 1000 in 1900.² Yet 1910, saw a jump of 3,000 *documented* immigrants,³

¹Siddique, Mumtaz. At the Hyphen Podcast. 23:14.

²Perera, Marisa J., Edward C. Chang, Ram Anjali, and Bhatia Sunil. "South Asian Immigration to United States: A Brief History Within the Context of Race, Politics, and Identity." Essay. In *Biopsychosocial Approaches to Understanding Health in South Asian Americans*, 15–32. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018.

³Rangaswamy P. Namaste "America: Indian Immigrants in an American Metropolis". University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press; 2000.

Then 1917 marked a drastic change in South Asian immigration due to the Immigration Act of 1917 or Literacy Act, less commonly called the Asiatic Barred Zone Act, which made immigrants take literacy tests to immigrate. The Asiatic Barred Zone Act was a reaction to the fear of the growing Asian presence in the U.S. stemming from racism. Due to this act, no South Asians immigrated to the United States. The act also caused the deportation of an estimated 1,700 deportations of Indians and 1,400 Indians chose to return to their homeland.⁴

After a few years in 1923, another blow hit South Asians in the United States and those who wanted to come by the Supreme Court Case: U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind. This landmark case revoked naturalization, the process of becoming a citizen, from South Asian immigrants.⁵ The following year, 1924 Congress passed another immigration act which instilled race-based quotas on immigration inspired by the Eugenics movement and completely blocked South Asian immigrants from the United States. Finally after almost 20 years, the 1946's Luce-Celler Act lifted immigration restrictions on South Asian countries by a slim margin and reopened the naturalization rights.⁶

The Luce-Celler Act paved the way for the famed Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. This act served as a watershed moment in South Asian-American history because it expanded the rigid bounds of immigration.⁷ The act of 1965 aimed to still limit the number of immigrants to 290,000 visas annually and 20,000 per country, however, the government failed to judge the flooding of immigration through its attached Family Reunification Clause.⁸ The Family

⁴Arora N. Political Reviews and Essays. Coming to America: The Making of the South Asian Diaspora in the United States. Caravan Magazine. October 2017.

⁵ "United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind." *The American Journal of International Law* 17, no. 3: 572–78. 1923.

⁶Hatton, Timothy J. "United States Immigration Policy: The 1965 Act and Its Consequences." *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 117, no. 2. 2015: 350.

⁷Reimers, David M. "An Unintended Reform: The 1965 Immigration Act and Third World Immigration to the United States." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 3, no. 1:9–28. 1983

⁸ Lee, Erika. "Immigrants and Immigration Law: A State of the Field Assessment." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 18, no. 4. 1999:92.

Reunification Clause remains one the largest proponents of South Asian immigration into the United States today. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, though, only applied to highly skilled workers thus only available to wealthy or upper-middle class South Asians.⁹ The majority of the South Asian families in Elgin today came to the United States through the clause including my own family and the very first Muslim South Asian family in Elgin: The Khans.

INSERT SALMA KHAN AUDIO: “My name is Salma Khan... And we were the only ones here from Pakistan and Muslim. In the paper, we were the first family from Pakistan Muslim” 2:45¹⁰

MAS: Salma Khan, from earlier, is a vibrant elder figure in the South Asian Muslim community and happens to be a part of the first ever Muslim South Asian family in Elgin. Her late husband, Ahmad Raza Khan, came to the United States in 1964 to work as an engineer in the transportation field of Chicago. After establishing himself in the city, he quickly sponsored Salma and their four young children from Karachi, Pakistan, in 1967 through the family reunification clause. The family remained in Chicago for only eight months before taking the plunge to move into the suburbs of Elgin in 1968. Salma and her daughter, Sufia, explained the move to Elgin satisfied the desire of having a home, somewhere they would have roots, and for the children to grow up in a safer environment than the city.

With historical context in mind, Salma and her husband were adamant to provide a home for their four children after the two dealt with the trauma of the 1947 Pakistani and Indian Partition.¹¹ The final Viceroy of India, Lord Mountbatten, fractured the Indian subcontinent and created the Muslim state of the current day, Pakistan. Partition led to numerous deaths, loss of

⁹ Lee, Erika. “Immigrants and Immigration Law: A State of the Field Assessment.” 132.

¹⁰Khan, Salma. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*.2:45

¹¹Another interviewee Dr. Mumtaz Siddique detailed his own father losing their ancestral land because of partition and starting fresh multiple times until finally reaching West Pakistan.; Siddique, Mumtaz. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*.7:40

property, and the Kashmir conflict.¹² Salma pressed that it was important to her and her husband that their children grow up in a home that they could own and not fear about landlords. During the first month in Chicago, their landlord kicked them out because of the noise complaints regarding their children. Scrambling to find a home, Salma and Ahmad found solace in another South Asian couple's apartment in Chicago—someone Ahmad met when he first immigrated to the United States. That was the first ember for the need of a community in Salma and Ahmad's eyes, the eventual flames would come later as their children grew older. Traumas from Partition and fear of their children enduring the same prompted the Khans to move to Elgin.

Sufia Azmat, Salma's eldest daughter, recalled what Elgin was like when they first moved:

“People in Elgin at the time- the 60s (70s) were very curious and interested in who we were.

there was no- i never felt racism, i never felt like I didn't belong”¹³ She added later in the

interview, “it was in the paper that we moved there. there was a welcome wagon! .. There was a

literal wagon the ladies of the auxiliary came with all these local goods”¹⁴ Salma corroborates

with Sufia's memory of the wagon and the newspaper in her own oral history.¹⁵

Elgin did offer affordable housing with better landlords than the city and more job opportunities for non-English speakers during the 1960s and 1970s, but what made Elgin different from other suburbs of Chicago was its cultural appreciation of its diverse residents—something Elgin continues to pride itself on.¹⁶ In these oral histories, interviewees spoke about the different events hosted by the Elgin Community College and city sponsored

¹² Gilmartin, David. “Partition, Pakistan, and South Asian History: In Search of a Narrative.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 4:1068.1998; The Kashmir conflict is a land conflict over the lands of Kashmir and Jammu between India and Pakistan after the 1947 partition.

¹³ Azmat, Sufia. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*.5:45.

¹⁴ Azmat, Sufia. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*.16:30.

¹⁵ Khan, Salma. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*. 2:31-6:46.

¹⁶ n.a., “Elgin Historical Museum Welcome Pamphlet” *Elgin Historical Society*, 2019.

groups to reject typical assimilation practices forced onto immigrant families like adopting Western clothing or americanizing their ethnic names by changing its spelling. Salma Khan details her own involvement with the city of Elgin in terms of cultural appreciation:

Insert audio 6:40: “ I got more involved because people didn’t know anything about Pakistan, the religion, the country. So I wanted to tell the people about Islam and Pakistan. We used to have a folk fair and I had a stall there with samosas, dresses. . . .after they knew me, the different churches and schools would invite me to talk about Pakistan and Islam”¹⁷

MAS: Moreover, Elgin provided a security to South Asian Muslims that neighboring cities and suburbs failed to do prior to 9/11. Elgin, being a well-established city in the Midwest since 1836, offered numerous free education programs for residents to learn English and trade school skills.¹⁸

Sufia Azmat only remembers one instance of harassment during her time in Illinois when she wore a traditional Pakistani outfit with a scarf on her head on lakeshore drive. As they were walking around doing the typical tourist activities, a man across the street yelled from his car “why don’t you put on some American clothes”.¹⁹ She brushed it off thinking, ‘well that’s just the city’.

Sidebar: Of course, it must be acknowledged that the perspectives of our oral history interviewees see Elgin in a nostalgic light. Elgin was a very lovely place for these Muslims, however, there were moments of tension between South Asians Muslims and the established Elgin community. However, many of our interviewees faced more obvious and visceral discrimination and racial microaggressions in metropolitan areas and saw Elgin as their safe space. This perception of Elgin which could mean the downplaying of any racial discrimination or prejudice. Back to our regular programming.

¹⁷Khan, Salma. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*. 6:45.

¹⁸Alft, Elmer Charles. *Elgin: An American History*. Canada: Crossroads Communications, 1984. 246.

¹⁹Azmat, Sufia. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*.14:35.

CUE: DING

As time went on, Salma and her husband knew that their children- being the only Pakistani and Muslim students in Elgin- needed a community to provide a safe haven. Towards the early 1980s, Salma's husband eagerly pointed to the newspaper about a car accident in the neighboring town of Dundee, offering an unexpected opportunity of community outreach. One of the drivers of the accident was Muslim- at least that's what Salma and Ahmad thought, so they quickly searched through the yellow pages phone book for the family's number.²⁰ Interviewee Sufia Azmat agreed that the yellow pages were a huge source of finding Muslim and South Asian friends in Elgin during the 1970s and 80s.²¹

Phonebooks aside, community celebrations like those of Christian holidays also demarcated an opening for the South Asian Muslims to expand their community. Sufia Azmat recalls what sparked action for community building for her parents was a comical encounter with a Christian holiday staple:

Insert Audio Sufia Azmat : "I remember this one day we had all come home from school and we, my siblings and I, were close with the white crossing guard. Later in the evening, there was a knock at the door and the crossing guard, she brought us a christmas tree! We were obviously so excited but you could tell our parents were taken aback. I think that really was the impetus for them to decide we need to really make a community. They thought we need to raise our children the Muslim way and we need to get people together, we need an Islamic center"²²

Salma remembered the impetus for a South Asian Muslim gathering area differently.

Insert Audio Salma Khan: "One day, a man called the house and asked if there was a mosque nearby. I told him 'no-- there is no mosque'. But my husband said, 'okay if you want you can

²⁰Khan, Salma. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*. 6:34.

²¹Azmat, Sufia. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*. 14:26.

²²Azmat, Sufia. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*.23:40

come here and pray at our house'. That was when we thought there needs to be something. So we started hosting prayer in our basement where we started inviting the other muslim families...but my husband kept inviting more and more people - that it was no longer my house! Then we thought there needs to be a mosque. So my husband found an old church..My husband was the first president of the Islamic Community Center²³

MAS: The kindness and generosity of the Khans holding prayers at their home never left the minds of the South Asian Muslims in the community at the time. The Khans and other South Asian Muslims in the community including Dr. Mumtaz Siddique, interviewee Samah Raheem's parents', and Asifa Siddique's families pitched in to purchase the church and apply for a loan with the aid of ISNA- the Islamic Society of North America.²⁴ Sufia Azmat believed some members of the South Asian community put their own homes up as collateral.²⁵

After numerous collective efforts in 1984, the Islamic Community Center of Elgin opened and started a new chapter for these South Asian Muslims. The Islamic Community Center (ICC) is foundational to the Muslim experience in Elgin. The ICC offered daily prayers, Qur'an classes for all ages, Sunday school for Muslim Youth, Islamic lectures, and parties for Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.²⁶ In fact, Samah Raheem's own parents met each other at the ICC, which prompted their eventual relationship. Not only did the ICC provide a safe shelter for Muslims in Elgin and the surrounding suburbs but it maintained an open door policy to anyone curious about the religion of Islam or the South Asian culture.²⁷ The late 80s saw a boom in the South Asian Muslim community's growth comparable to Chicago's South Asian community expanding by

²³Khan, Salma. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*. 10:10

²⁴Khan, Salma. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*. 9:15.

²⁵Azmat, Sufia. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*. 18:13.

²⁶Siddique, Asifa. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*. 23:41.

²⁷Islamic Community Center Website Homepage

26,000 people by 1990.²⁸ The ICC started to feel a bit cramped as they tried teaching children, hosting prayers, and planning community events all in the same vicinity simultaneously.

To deal with the issue of space, the South Asian Muslim community decided to create a *Madarsa*, an Islamic boarding school, that could also be a spillover mosque. The Islamic Institute of Education (IIE for short) developed itself as an additional mosque between Elgin and Gilberts, a neighboring suburb, in 1987 and decided to hold the responsibility of the Madarsa. IIE already had plots purchased in Gilberts and chose to build the dormitories of the Madarsa there.

While Elgin's residents embraced the South Asian Muslim community, the neighboring towns were more hesitant. The construction plans for the Madarsa led to contentious debate between the township of Gilberts and the South Asian Muslim community mainly located in Elgin. The predominantly white residents of Gilberts immediately started petitioning in their community against the building of the potential Madarsa. In April 1994, covered by Elgin's hometown newspaper *The Courier News*, Gilberts Trustees discussed their issues with the potential creation of an Islamic boarding school. The Muslims in the surrounding suburbs attempted to pacify the Gilbert residents and trustees by explaining the details of Islam and their goals for the boarding school. Eventually the Gilberts township rejected the property plans of a Madarsa through a forced annexation of the land.²⁹

Luckily for these suburban South Asian Muslims, the city of Elgin stepped in and offered an old paint warehouse to be used as its dormitories in 1995 as written by *The Courier News*.

²⁸ Paral, Rob, Timothy Ready, Sung Chun, and Wei Sun. "Latino Demographic Growth in Metropolitan Chicago." *Research Reports- Institute of Latino Studies at Notre Dame University* 2004, no. 2 (2004): 9.

²⁹Courier News, "Elgin Islamic institute expands to 2nd building on east side". Elgin Gail Borden Newspaper Archives, October 1995.

The city of Elgin even publicized the open house of IIE in 1996.³⁰ The community celebrated this milestone for the South Asian Muslims and Elgin history. The Elgin South Asian Muslims successfully created an Islamic boarding school *and* they created Elgin's first ever religious boarding school. Protestant and Jewish clergymen and public officials appeared at the dedication of IIE and to the school's open house.³¹ Elgin became a South Asian Mecca through its tolerance and commitment to engage with its denizens respectfully with their culture and religion in mind. With the creation of IIE's dormitories, Elgin now had three separate Muslim spheres where Muslims worked on increasing their own visibility within their community.

Uniquely, Elgin area Muslims' visibility shone through the vast media coverage of its local newspapers. *The Courier News* has been Elgin's very own paper since 1884 and now is a part of the Chicago Tribune family.³² Aside from *The Courier News*, there are archives from the Elgin Community College and another newspaper titled *The Daily Herald*. In my search for articles and information of Muslims and South Asians in Elgin, I found rows of cabinets filled with microfilm filled with *The Courier News* and *The Daily Herald*. I found over a dozen articles on our particular area of interest dated prior to 9/11 which is quite odd. In the Elgin Community College Archives, I found a photograph from the post-fast meal called Iftar during the holy month of Ramadan and with information on where to attend these meals from 1998.³³ Most historical literature claims there is little to none local newspaper presence of South Asian

³⁰Courier News, "Islamic institute finds a home in Elgin after rebuff by Gilberts".Elgin Gail Borden Newspaper Archives, September 1996.

³¹ Ibid.

³²"Elgin Courier News." Chicago Tribune. Chicago Tribune, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/elgin-courier-news/>.

³³n.a., *Ishtar Dinner*, Elgin Community College History (Illinois Digital Archives), 2023-05-05, <http://www.idaillinois.org/digital/collection/nelgincco01/id/6>.

Muslims prior to 9/11 in predominantly white suburbs yet here in Elgin, it seems we have a gold mine!³⁴

These articles by *The Courier News* are pieces written about the Muslim community and their practices in a positive light- free of ridicule and any xenophobic or islamophobic rhetoric. One article follows the celebration of Eid al-Adha with the eye-catching title “Festival of the Sacrifice” where it explains the significance of the holiday and how one may observe the holiday with their Muslim community members from 2000.³⁵ In 1991, *The Courier News* titled “ No Violence and Little Harassment for Elgin Area Moslems”. This article, though only two paragraphs, details the relatively peaceful and secure environment Muslims believe Elgin produces. The article works off interviews with local muslim.³⁶ All of these articles shed a small light on the positive media exposure the South Asian Muslims experienced in Elgin prior to 9/11 juxtaposed to Muslims and their relationship with the media afterwards.

Cue: like a duolingo sound

MAS: And that concludes this episode of A Community of Our Own: South Asian Muslims after 9/11. I sincerely thank you all for listening to this podcast and be sure to check out the final episode next. With the utmost gratitude, I thank my amazing interviewees, my incredible thesis advisor, Professor Ramirez at the University of Illinois, my thesis cohort group, and the remarkable Professor Mathisen at the University of Illinois as well. Please feel free to visit the exhibit website where you can find interviewee biographies, primary sources, community resources, the oral histories, and much much more!

CUE: SAJDAA BY NASHITA HASAN

END OF EPISODE TWO

³⁴Gillum, Rachel. *Muslims in a Post-9/11 America*:84

³⁵Courier News, “Festival of the Sacrifice”. Elgin Gail Borden Newspaper Archives, November 21, 2000.

³⁶Courier News, “No Violence for Elgin-area Moslems”. Elgin Gail Borden Newspaper Archives, March 1991.

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