

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: [Anonymous]

Interviewers: DILLON CHAI (Sophomore); CHRIS JOHNSON (Junior)

Date/Time of Interview: June 30, 2014, at 10:00 AM

Transcribed by: DILLON CHAI; CHRIS JOHNSON (Edited by: Taylor Ginter 5/7/17)

Audio Track Time: 45:30

Background: This interviewee requested that his name and identifying information not be included.

Setting: The interview took place in the Zoroastrian Association Community Center. A large focus of the interview was given to the interviewee's post-secondary education, and his experiences thus far in Houston. Occasionally, on the audio, a phone can be heard ringing in the background.

Interviewers:

Dillon is a rising sophomore at Rice University. He was born in Houston and lived there until moving to Shanghai at age five, where he completed the rest of his education at Shanghai American School. His parents were first generation immigrants to the United States and residents of Houston, which is what sparked his interest in the Houston American Asian Archive.

Chris Johnson is a junior at Rice University, majoring in Linguistics. A Houstonian since childhood, having the opportunity to work with the HAAA project and learn about the city's lesser-known stories has been a particular source of interest for him.

Interview Transcript:

Key

DC	Dillon Chai
CJ	Chris Johnson
I	Interviewee
—	Abrupt stop, false start
...	Speech trails off, pause

Italics Emphasis

(?) Preceding word may not be accurate

Brackets Actions (laughs, sighs, etc) or interview notes

CJ: This is Chris Johnson—

DC: And this is Dillon Chai—

CJ: And we're here today, on June 29th, [2014] here to interview [anonymous] for the Houston Asian American Archive here in the Zoroastrian Association Community center. So, [anonymous] can you start by telling us a little about yourself, maybe your childhood, where you grew up at?

I: Okay, I grew up in Karachi, Pakistan. Uh, in a Zoroastrian family. And, I went to school, uh, Zoroastrians are also known as Parsis, so I went to a Parsi school for my first ten years of education. And then the final two years, I went to a government college, or, a government high school. And after that, I came to the United States to do my undergraduate work.

CJ: Um, so, in your household, how many family members lived with you when you were a child?

I: Let's see, my grandparents, my aunt who was unmarried then, so that's three, plus my parents. And later on, my brother was born. So, that's three, and three, six, and me, seven.

CJ: Um, what did your parents do?

I: My father worked in a bank, and my mother was a schoolteacher.

CJ: Okay. Um, can you describe—so, you said you went to Parsi school for the first ten years, can you describe that a little bit for us?

[Interviewee's phone rings]

I: Oh, I'm sorry about that.

CJ: Oh, it's fine.

I: What did you say?

CJ: You said you went to Parsi school for the first ten years.

I: Uh-huh.

CJ: Can you describe that a little bit for us? What was that like?

I: That was, I consider myself very fortunate that I was able to do that. Because, our school was considered one of the best in the sc—in the city. It had a good reputation, and so, therefore, I was able to get a good education. Uh, and I was able to get a good education right alongside some of my co-religionists, or, people with whom I identified along with. The regular people of Pakistan. And...I was also able to get a little bit of religious education. More specifically, historical education. And, went to our time in Persia. And...it just felt like I was with my peeps, you know. So, that was nice.

DC: So, were your friends mainly Zoroastrians?

I: My friends were Zoroastrians and Muslims. ‘Cause back then, Pakistan was a wonderful country. And, so, I had both friends, both type of friends. And a lot of my friends grew up in neighborhoods that were exclusively Parsi. Whereas, I grew up in a—I was—we lived in a flat, or an apartment. It was quite large, though. But we had all kinds of people in the building. My neighbor, one neighbor was Christian, there were other Parsi families in the building, and then all different types of Muslims in the building. So it was Jesse Jackson’s ‘Rainbow Coalition’ back then. So...and everybody was very friendly and got along well.

DC: So, where are your parents from?

I: Well, originally India.

DC: Okay. So, what language do you speak at home?

I: Gujarati. Do you need me to spell it?

DC: No, I...

I: Okay.

DC: Um...

I: You’ve had enough of these to know the spelling! [everyone laughs]

DC: What language did you speak at school?

I: The school was what we call ‘English medium’. Which means that the teachers used English as the language of instruction, but then, outside of class, I spoke Gujarati if the friend, or classmate was a Parsi; or Urdu, if the friend or classmate was Muslim.

CJ: Um, so during that time in your childhood, um, what types of things did you like to do for fun?

I: Well, we played quite a few games in the streets, you know. Like, we played cricket. We played soccer. Uh, then other games, you know, that we just made up. Yeah. In school, I liked to play volleyball. And, I was able to go to a club that was established just for us, us Parsis. And I could go, and I learned swimming over there and I used to go Friday—Friday afternoon and Sunday morning was reserved for boys, so I could go and swim there, and in that heat and no air conditioning, swimming was a blessing. [DC and CJ: Mm.] Yeah. So, that's what I did.

DC: So, could you describe your neighborhood in Pakistan growing up?

I: Uh, well, I described the building that I lived in and the buildings next to us were similar, with all kinds of people. Back then, we had quite a few Christians living there, also. And, there was another neighborhood, where some of my friends lived and there were quite a few people of Chinese origin that lived there. Over the years, they ended up there because of trade, or migration, or whatever. And, so there were Chinese people there. And, I lived on a street that was rather busy during weekdays, but very quiet on Sundays. But it was a main thoroughfare. So, that was my neighborhood.

DC: Did you attend religious service as a child?

I: Yes. Yes, I was forced to [laughs]. Yeah, I was required to go the temple, then we have the ten holy days that come in August, and I had to wake up sometimes at four in the morning to get ready, you know, bathe, and be clean, and go for prayers, that took a long time. So, yes. Intense religious...upbringing.

CJ: Um, so, you mentioned that after attending Parsi school, you went to a government college, is that correct?

I: Well, they call it 'college,' but you would say 'high school' here, freshman and senior year, yeah. But it was government, yes.

CJ: And, so, did you have a particular focus of study at that point in time?

I: Yeah. You have—in my school, after the eighth grade, when you enter ninth grade, you have to choose one of three sides. It's either commerce, medicine, or engineering. So, I took engineering. So, freshman, sophomore and junior and senior years, we had to take physics, algebra, chemistry, all that. In order to prepare ourselves to go to engineering schools after graduation.

CJ: And so what prompted you to go into Engineering?

I: Well, uh, I felt like I was way more intelligent to not—to go into commerce. But, I did not choose medicine, because back in Pakistan, if I wanted to go to medical school, they had quotas over there. And there was one quo—one seat for minorities. Which, minority

would not mean based on skin color, it would mean based on religion. So, I would have to compete with all non-Muslims for that one seat. Including my co-religionists, and Christians, and Hindus, and all that. And, while I thought that I was intelligent, I didn't think I was *the* number one in my group. So I didn't want to risk that, so that's why I chose engineering.

CJ: And, so, just out of curiosity, so if someone were to apply, say, to the pre-medical track, and didn't get into it, would they have to repeat a year, or what would happen after that?

I: No, no, no, you only get one shot, which is right after you graduate from high school. You miss that, you're done. So, if you didn't get it, then you could always do BSC, which is Bachelor of Science, and then, you know, try and get into other medicine-related fields. Like, pharmacy, or something like that. You would not make it as a doctor, but you would make it as, in some other related field.

CJ: I see. Um, so following that, where did you go to university at?

I: University of Houston.

CJ: Um, so what prompted you to come to U of H?

I: Well, I wanted to, uh—I wanted to come to America to go to school. And I ended up in San Francisco. And the college—and I wanted to study architecture. But the college I ended up in San Francisco was not the kind of college that I thought I wanted to attend. It was one of those types that you see advertised on daytime television. You know, Massey Business College type thing. There was a car showroom on the ground level, and a college on the second, and that was not my idea of going to a university. So, I was looking around, and somebody mentioned Houston. Some classmates of mine from, uh, the high school, were in Houston. And I realized that Houston offered architecture also. So, I said, okay. I'll go to Houston, and that's what I did.

DC: So, what made you want to come to the states in the first place?

I: Uh...you know, for some reason, I was always attracted towards America and Americans from childhood. In my free time, I would go to the American consulate. Back then, the relations between Pakistan and America were very good. And, they had an American cultural center, where you could go and they had a library there. And you could read magazines, and you could read books, and it was an awesome place to go. And I loved to go there. Then, the Americans would have all kinds of events there. You know, art shows, or art competitions, and things like that. So I always had an affinity for America and Americans. And, then, I was also kinda tired of my environment, and wanted to get out and seek new ventures and all that, so.

I felt like my life was pre-programmed over there. In my community, you go to school as far as your intellect can take you. Whether that's ten grades, high school, college, or PhD. You go as far as your intellect can take you, and that applies to both

men and women. And then you find a job, then you get married, then you have children, and then your children do everything that you did. So, I wanted to do something different. So that's why. I came here to make my life better.

CJ: Um, can you tell us a little about—a little bit about when you lived in San Francisco- did you live in an apartment, or was it a student dorm?

I: No, I lived in an apartment, it was a one-room apartment, and I had three other roommates. Money was tight.

CJ: Can you describe the neighborhood that you lived in for us, a little bit?

I: It's right San Francisco, at the corner of Van Ness Avenue and Post Street. It's right there. On the street level, there was a massage parlor. And on the level above that was my apartment. And, you know, this was right San Francisco. It was not the suburbs or anything like that. And the school that I went to, Heald Engineering College, was right on Van Ness. I just had to cross the street, block, block and a half, and I was at school. That's where I lived.

CJ: Um, did you work any jobs at that point in time?

I: Yes, I worked as a dishwasher in a restaurant. My parents were not rich, so I had to work.

CJ: Um, so when you came to Houston, following that, what was your first impression of Houston?

I: I fell in love. The reason is that jobs were difficult to find in San Francisco. And when I say jobs, I'm not talking about high-paying jobs, I'm talking about odd jobs, minimum wage jobs. You—being a waiter in San Francisco is considered high-falutin', you gotta be part of a union. Otherwise, you can't get a job. And among my friends and roommates, I was the first to get a job, find a job. And even me, it took 30 days, for me to find one. But the jobs were difficult.

Then I come to Houston, and Houston is the—is in the middle of an oil boom. This is after the OPEC oil crisis. And there are jobs everywhere. I mean, there are help wanted signs—three in one block. It was like being in heaven. And the schools were god-awful expensive in California. They were very cheap in Texas. To the point that, out-of-state tuition was higher than tuition for foreign students, if you can believe that. You of course had in-State tuition, which was the lowest. Then after that was tuition for foreign students. And then after that, tuition for out-of-State students. So if a guy goes to school in Lamar University in Beaumont, and he's from out of the country, he pays less money than some guy from Lake Charles, right across the border, in Louisiana. I thought that was terrific. For me, anyway [laughs]. So in every way Houston was great. And the apartments were cheaper, everything was cheaper. So, I felt like, when I came to

America, I felt like I left a Third World Country and came to America, but then, it was even more so, having moved to Houston, after San Francisco. So, it was great.

CJ: And, what year was that in, that you came to Houston?

I: '75, 1975.

DC: So, could you describe for us, your experience at U of H?

I: Very, very nice experience. They had an international students association. Those people over there were super friendly, super helpful, very nice. I couldn't believe that they would be so nice and helpful. It was a pleasant experience. There was one family that lived close to the campus, and I think during the holidays, they had—they would have a party at their home for foreign students. I thought, 'Wow, they don't owe us anything, and yet they were doing it.' So, it was a very pleasant experience. The—it took me a little while to get adjusted to the campus environment, to the classes, to the way of studying, 'cause, uh, I was used to my tests being, you—they ask a question, I give an answer, you know, essay form. Well, I came here, and all the tests were true-false, or multiple choice. That requires a different way of studying. And so, it took a little time to do that. There were times, where I would be walking on campus, and I'd look around me, and I'd look at all the students, and I'd say, 'Where am I? Am I really here?' 'Cause it was kinda different, so...But I didn't have any bad experiences, or any negative experiences.

CJ: Um, and so, at U of H, did you live on campus, in a student dorm there, or?

I: No, I lived with roommates in an apartment right off 45 and Wayside.

CJ: How did you initially meet your roommates?

I: One of them, he and I flew to America together. He and I were in Houston—uh in San Francisco together, and we came here together. And, the third roommate, I grew up with him back home. He lived in my neighborhood, so I knew him from back then.

DC: So, what drove your friends to come to America, for similar reasons as you?

I: Similar reasons, yes.

CJ: So, can you describe that neighborhood that you lived in for us, a little bit?

I: It's a bad neighborhood now, but back when I was living there, it was an okay neighborhood. There were all kinds of people there. Anglos, African-Americans, Hispanics. Don't recall any East Asians, but, basically it was a mixed neighborhood, but it was, I would say middle class to lower-middle class. But...I didn't feel like I was in a crime-ridden neighborhood or anything like that, I felt safe, so... But, you know, I basically slept there. I was either in school, doing homework, or going to work, so, not much time to do anything else.

CJ: Um and so you just mentioned that you would go to work, where did you work at?

I: Uh, well I worked as a waiter in a restaurant on the north end of downtown Houston. And then—I think I was there for six months, or a year maybe. And then I found a job at a restaurant at the Hyatt Regency, and that was an awesome job for a student, 'cause I made good money there, enough to pay my share of everything plus the fees, books and all that. Oh I forgot to mention another advantage of moving from San Francisco to Houston. In San Francisco they had—or in California, in all of California, they had quarter system. Then I came to Houston and they had semesters. Now, you struggle to save every penny to pay your fees. And before you can blink, the quarter is over and you got fees due and books due again. Semester gave me a little breathing room, so forgot to mention that, which was a big deal back then, so.

DC: Did you go back and visit your family at any point during your college days?

I: Yes, I did. And my family once came to United States also, in '79. And we went on a tour of America.

CJ: Um, so following your time at U of H, where did you go from there?

I: Uh, once I graduated I looked for a job, but I couldn't find one. I did off and odd jobs even after graduation. Right across the street where I lived was the headquarters of Oshmann's Sporting Goods. Back then it was a big chain, like Academy, and I worked in accounts payable over there. But then after a year I found a job with a company called G.A.B. Business Services, which later became G.A.B. Robbins, and I got a job as an insurance adjuster trainee. So I joined them, I became an insurance adjuster, and I've been one ever since.

DC: Sorry what was—what did you study at U of H?

I: Business, I got a degree in Business.

DC: So, what made you switch from architecture to business?

I: Oh yeah. Architecture required a lot of time on campus. I had to stay in the lab and come up with designs, and back then make models of my designs, and that required not just classroom time but a lot of time on campus. And I had to go to work, otherwise I can't pay college fees and I starve. I couldn't do that as an architecture major, so eventually I realized that it was futile, so I changed to business. Now I took—attended classes, took notes, did a little homework, aced my exams, and got my degree. Didn't require time on campus after classes, that's why.

CJ: Um, so while on the topic of your time on campus, did you—were you involved in any extracurriculars at that point in time?

I: No, didn't have time. Did not have time.

CJ: So, can you tell us a little about your experience as an insurance adjuster?

I: Well, what I do is—when people have a claim of course, they file a claim under their insurance company's policy. And then I go out and inspect, investigate, and determine what their damages are, come to an agreement, and pay them. That's what I do. And initially I was a multi-line adjuster, which meant that I could do a property claim if somebody's house, or office, or business was damaged, and I did autos also, if somebody was in an auto incident, and I did general liability also, if somebody slipped and fell or ate tainted food or whatever. But for the last sixteen years I've been doing catastrophe work. So, what that means is that if there's a hurricane on the East Coast someplace, then all of a sudden they need a lot of people there. And so I go and work that area, and when the job is finished I come back home to Houston.

CJ: So, do you spend a lot of your time traveling then, or?

I: Yes, away from home a lot. Yes. I'm on the road living out of a suitcase, in a hotel, and in different places. The advantage is that I have been to more places in America than most Americans. And when I say America, I don't mean New York, Chicago, and L.A., I've done that too, but I go to small towns, you know, remote areas that nobody would go unless they had a specific reason or family. I've been to small towns. So I think, I feel fortunate to have done that, yeah.

DC: And what are your—some of your experiences traveling to so many different parts of America?

I: Well, when I first get there, I'm too busy to do anything other than work. And when I say work, I'm working normally minimum twelve to sixteen hours a day. But then when things slow down, I try and look at the touristy things, the museums and all that. And...I also get to meet people from different parts of the country, you know, people from Louisiana are different than—well not a lot of different—but there is some difference from let's say Louisiana to people from Wisconsin. And I was in Lacrosse, Wisconsin, one time, which is in western part of the state, and it was as if I was in Scandinavia. Because people were all of Scandinavian descent: Swedish, Norwegian, Danish. Even their—the streets and the stores were designed like you were in Scandinavia. I got to see these old, old dairy barns that had the kind of timber in them that you would not find anywhere today. So it was a unique experience. I've been in areas where everybody, lots of Amish people are there, you don't see that in Houston. I was—once I remember before the advent of cellphones, I was lost, I think in Kansas, or some place. I had to go—

backtrack so I could find a payphone so I could call the people and find my way there. Because you know, no GPS or cellphones. So I found a grocery store and I went to the grocery store and there was an Amish father there with two little toddlers. They had come there in their horse and buggy. And those toddlers couldn't take their eyes off me, 'cause they had not seen anybody like me before, I mean everybody is Anglo-Saxon out there. No Hispanics, no African Americans, nothing, so. I think they were fascinated by me [laughs]. So it was a—I have those unique experiences.

CJ: So, when did you move to the neighborhood that you live in now?

I: 1999. Uh the company I worked for had transferred me to Corpus Christi, given me a promotion and transferred me to Corpus Christi. And I was there for ten years. After that I decided to leave the company, so I moved back to Houston, where my heart was. And then I lived someplace for six months and then found this apartment where I live, and I've been there since '99.

CJ: Um, and can you tell us about your time in Corpus Christi?

I: Corpus Christi is a very beautiful town, right by the sea. And I, I love the ocean, I love to live next to the water. And here, if I want to go fishing it takes a little planning and effort because I have to drive all the way to Galveston. And over there, it's right there, 10 minutes away. So there were times when it's time for lunch, I'm going to eat a sandwich, and I decide hey, why not just pack it, take it to the pier, do a little fishing and eat my sandwich. If I catch something, fine, if I don't, hey, I had a good lunch. And...I had to get a adjusted, because in Houston if I set an appointment with somebody at 11 o'clock, I have to leave the office at 10. In Corpus Christi if I have an appointment at 11 o'clock, I can leave at 11 o'clock, be there at 11:15, and that's considered being on time [laughter]. So initially, I'd show up at an appointment half hour early or—and people would look at their clock or watch and say 'Oh, you're early.' But...back then, Corpus Christi was 60% Hispanic, so while there are—there were Hispanics in Houston also, the percentage was not that high, so it was a unique experience to be surrounded by Mexican food and Hispanics and Hispanic culture and all that. So that was a new and pleasant experience.

CJ: Um, so you've lived in Houston for quite a while, how have you seen it change over the years?

I: Well I've constantly watched it grow. And back in the '70s, when I was going to school, and I lived in the Southeast, Wayside and 45. Whenever I came on the Southwest side, near Greenway Plaza, and further southwest, I always find some building that was not there the last time I was there, or being constructed that was not being constructed the last time I was there. And Houston is still growing, and uh...I

don't think I can say that Houston has turned for the worse or anything. I think Houston is still great, so. I love Houston, yeah.

CJ: Can you tell us how you first became involved with the Zoroastrian community in Houston?

I: Well, being a Zoroastrian you automatically look for familiarity. And so...back when we were in Houston, there were just 20, 25 families. We all knew one another, and on our new year or special events, when we had parties it was usually at somebody's apartment's community center, you know, and it was potluck. Well, after that I moved to Corpus and then when I moved back, I realized the community had exploded, and we had the center, so. And the people had progressed economically also. They were no longer living in apartments; they all had homes and lived in the suburbs and all that, so. But you know, you kind of lean towards familiarity based on language, based on shared experiences and all that, so that's how.

DC: Are you involved with like the Pakistani community in Houston?

I: No I am not, and...yeah I'm not.

CJ: Um, so you mentioned languages just a moment ago. On your consent form you mentioned you spoke several different languages. Do you find yourself still using them recently, or not so much, or?

I: Well, when the occasion comes...I speak Gujarati with my homeboys; I speak Gujarati. I have Muslim friends with whom I speak Urdu. I have Indian friends with whom I speak Hindi, so when the occasion arises.

CJ: Um, so sounds like you have a pretty diverse social circle that you interact with, how do you um, generally find yourself meeting most of them?

I: Through friends. Uh, you know, you know somebody and then they know somebody that you happen to meet. That's how, yeah.

DC: So what do you do in your free time in Houston?

I: Uh, now that I'm getting old, very little, but I have some friends with whom I play poker on Friday nights. I like to go fishing when I can, when it's not too hot, otherwise I get burned. Then I have a small group where we meet and discuss the market, stock market. How to invest, what to invest, options, calls and perks and all that. Those are basically the things I do. I read books in my free time, and also watch television.

DC: Has your job ever taken you out of the country?

I: Uh, no. I mean, my company does send people, they've sent people to England, Australia, Canada, but I have not gone. I was asked to go to Japan after the tsunami, but I declined that.

DC: And why did you decline?

I: I'm not a big fan of cancer. [laughter] That's why. I didn't want to take the risk, because governments tell you everything is safe, but who knows? That's why.

CJ: You mentioned you had a sibling, a brother is that correct?

I: Yes.

CJ: Do you stay in touch often?

I: No, no he has expired, he's passed away, yeah.

CJ: Oh, oh I see, I'm sorry.

I: He was ten years younger than me and he has expired.

CJ: Mm. So, have there been any big events in U.S. history that you feel have really impacted your life?

I: Well anytime there is an event that involves terrorism, and f—god damn involves Pakistan, then there is anxiety. It's like, are you familiar with a guy named Chris Rock? He's a stand-up comic and he's African-American, and I like his comedy and his humor. And one time he was saying that anytime he's watching the news and they talk about some murder or holdup or something he's saying, 'God, let it not be a brother. Please let it not be a brother.' Well when I hear about terrorism I say, 'Oh god please, let not Pakistan be involved.' Because—so 9/11, yes, the Iran hostage crisis, yes. Those are the things that affect me. So.

CJ: Have you ever felt that you faced any...hostility from anyone because of those events, or?

I: Uhh...you know, no, very minor, nothing to write home about. You know, several years ago, a black guy in Jasper, Texas, was chained and dragged behind a pickup truck to his death. That is serious stuff. I haven't faced anything like that.

CJ: So, do you regularly participate in Zoroastrian religious service?

I: Not intensely, but when I get a chance, yes. In August we have our holy days, the ten days, and if I'm not working and I'm in town, I do. But if I'm working and I'm out of town, I cannot, so I don't.

CJ: And do you find that being a part of this faith community influences your daily life in anyway?

I: Yes, the three essential tenets of my faith are good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, so I follow that. So yes it does affect me.

DC: So like, what's an example of your religion—how your religion would impact like, your daily life?

I: Well...I'm driving on the road and some SOB cuts me off or does something. And I want to yell and scream at him, and then I'm reminded 'Hey, I need to have good thoughts.' So I chill at that point.

CJ: That can be difficult in Houston driving. [everybody laughs]

I: You know it. Yeah.

CJ: So what would you consider one of your biggest accomplishments so far?

I: Well you know, I'm not Hakeem Olajuwon so I can't say I've done this or that, but I guess I've survived. I've made it. I've never taken welfare. I've paid for my own ever—ever since I became eighteen. So I guess that's my accomplishment. And I graduated.

CJ: Great, do you have any other questions?

DC: No, I think.

CJ: All right, is there anything else you'd like to add to the archive?

I: No, I'm kind of glad that you guys are doing it, to document our history, so thank you for that.

CJ: All right, well thank you so much for your time.

I: You're welcome.