Context and Summary

This transcript provides a detailed account of Fahad's life story, highlighting his family background, educational journey, personal growth, and experiences navigating various challenges. Fahad was born in a marginalized Muslim and Dalit neighborhood in Aligarh, India, where his father worked tirelessly to improve the community's living conditions and access to basic services. Despite their modest means, Fahad's parents ensured he and his brother received a quality education, which opened up opportunities for their future success. His religious and philosophical views evolved significantly during his time at Aligarh Muslim University, where he engaged in activist work and faced backlash for his more liberal and secular perspectives. Fahad describes how his move to Delhi presented new challenges, including difficulty finding housing and employment, as well as a health crisis where he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Regardless of these obstacles, Fahad talks of his fulfillment in teaching music to children and his triumph at securing a scholarship to study at the University of Oxford.

Aasiya Kazi:

Do you want to just start by telling me a little bit about where you're from?

Fahad Zuberi:

So, I'm from North Indian State. I'm from India, from a state in North India called Uttar Pradesh, and a western Uttar Pradesh town called Aligarh, which is famous for the Aligarh Muslim University, which started there around 1878. I was born in a small rather run down, which a lot of people would call a ghetto of Muslims and Dalits. So, my childhood was there. So, that is where I was born. It is a neighbourhood called Jeevangarh.

Aasiya Kazi:

[Hindi 00:02:39].

Fahad Zuberi:

So, if you ask anyone who's from Aligarh about Jeevangarh, it's sort of a place where people feel ashamed to have it on their address, something like that. So, I was born there. My father was actually from Etah, which is another district in Western UP. And he moved to Aligarh in 1989 to work as an office boy, or peon as it is locally known in-

Aasiya Kazi:

South Asia.

Fahad Zuberi:

... Indian English, South Asian English. Moved there for that without a pay because he just wanted to be in the office so that he can get a job. He did not have much to show for education. A huge part of it was because he was orphaned at a very young age. He lost his mother when he says he was in class five, so I'm assuming 10 years old, and lost his father by the time he was in high school.

After that, he worked at his uncle's medical spirit factory, and studied on the side and got a BA in Hindi, third division BA. And no, there are no takers for a third division BA in Hindi in the job market, especially at that time when the only job that you could get were mostly government jobs.

Aasiya Kazi:

And this was around?

Fahad Zuberi:

This is, I would say, '80s, early '80s, when my father was in Etah. And then his elder sister was married to somebody who had a job in Aligarh, in AMU as a telephone line man, who was my uncle, who used to repair telephone lines. And he said that, "If you come here, maybe there can be a job here for you." So, on his support, my father moved to Aligarh. He moved there and he started working in the medical college as... So, if anyone has been to any South Asian government medical colleges, there are people who will shout your name when it is your turn to see the doctor. There's no ticket system or a number system like that. There is no queue. The queue is maintained by one person, who's usually a peon, who will shout your name. So, he used to do that. He started doing that. Then 1989, he moved there.

My mother was born and brought up in Aligarh. My nana, my maternal grandfather, used to work with Nawab of Rampur. He studied till high school and then he was a clerk with Nawab of Rampur. Then [Hindi 00:05:25] was abolished when I think the feudal structures of land were broken after independence. So, my nana then moved from there to Aligarh again as a head clerk, or a section officer. And they were used to live in the campus.

In those days, if you were a large joint family, then you could get houses which were above your pay grade. So, even if you were let's say a clerk, but let's say you are a clerk and your, I don't know, brother is a clerk, or your sister is, three of you can get together and get a house which is meant for a professor, but then it can be given to you. So, it was a large house like that across the road from Professor Irfan Habib's house. Shireen Moosvi and Professor Irfan Habib, that was the neighbourhood. But my nana got it there because there were three, four members of the family who were working, and they were all clerks. That is where my mother was born and brought up. And she studied quite a lot. She was my nana's only daughter, so my nana was big on her education. And for some reason he was, and whatever values came to him, he was very interested in the fact that, "I do not want my daughter to be married until she wants to be married."

Aasiya Kazi:

And this was back in the '80s?

Fahad Zuberi:

'80s, late-'70s, '80s. So, my mother studied a BA in political science, then did an MA in political science, then got interested in education, so studied a BEd. Then it was the time when computers were coming to India very early on, so she expressed a wish to my nana that, "I want to learn something in computers."

Aasiya Kazi:

Like Commodore Computer-

Fahad Zuberi:

Yeah. Well-

Aasiya Kazi:

... I remember back in the day,

Fahad Zuberi:

Probably the little black screen ones. So, then she learned something on that. Then she wanted to work and earn her own money. So, then she started teaching at a local school. My father's, you can say, rather delayed employment and my mother's pursuance of her education meant that they both got married when they were both 35 years of age, which was quite late in life.

Aasiya Kazi:

Unusual for South Asia.

Fahad Zuberi:

Yeah.

My nana was a head clerk, but he was very enthusiastic about Persian, about Farsi. So, he used to study Farsi by himself. He was educated just till high school, so he was always very ambitious for education. So, my parents got married and they got married in 1990. In 1991, they had a stillborn baby. And then 1992, I was born. Because my father's income was not that much, so my mother actually came from living across the road from some eminent professors and academics in a very posh AMU campus to our house, which was a very small house with a mud roof, no bathroom, an open-air toilet with just the walls. And my father would, and even I remember, we would bathe at the community hand pump outside. And my mother would shut the bedroom and bathe inside, because we didn't have a bathroom, no running water. So, collect water on the hand pump and bring. It was a situation like that where I was born.

So, that is where I was born. That's the background, but I'm waiting for the next question or I can go on if you want.

Aasiya Kazi:

Okay. No. Do you want to tell me a little bit about how your parents met and got... I mean, why they decided to get married?

Fahad Zuberi:

It was arranged. My maternal uncle, my [Hindi 00:09:37], his wife was from Etah and knew my father's family. So, my father finally had a job, which he tells me at the time he was a daily wage employee, was six rupees and 50 paisa a day in that time. And my mother was earning, she was a teacher. She had a small salary. She used to teach middle school at a local school called Zakir

Hussain Public School. She used to teach there. So, then the marriage was arranged and they got married. It was an arranged marriage. And they continued working both of them after that.

Aasiya Kazi:

And do you have siblings?

Fahad Zuberi:

I have a younger brother.

Aasiya Kazi:

Where is he? Back home?

Fahad Zuberi:

He is... In 2023 actually living in that context, the life of our family completely changed because in 2023 I got a scholarship to come to Oxford and my brother qualified the UPSC Civil Services examination with a rank of 86, all India rank of 86, and is now an Indian diplomat. He has chosen the foreign service. So, 2023 was the watershed moment where I came to Oxford and he went to the training.

Aasiya Kazi:

And went on to become a diplomat?

Fahad Zuberi:

Diplomat, yeah. His training is just getting over.

Aasiya Kazi:

Your parents must be so proud of you both.

Fahad Zuberi:

Yes. Yeah. They are. They are. For the first time they were interviewed by the press because it's a big thing in India, that exam. So-

Aasiya Kazi:

Yeah. It's a civil services exam, right?

Fahad Zuberi:

Yeah.

Aasiya Kazi:

What's it called? ICS, right?

Fahad Zuberi:

So, the umbrella term is Union Public Civil Services. And within that, there are verticals such as the Indian Administrative Services, IAS, Police Services, IPS, Foreign Services, which is diplomacy.

Aasiya Kazi:

In Pakistan, we have the same thing, but it's called CSS, Civil Superior Services. And then you have all these departments.

Fahad Zuberi:

So, they take great pride in saying that now we've become famous by our kids. Hindi [Hindi 00:11:55].

Aasiya Kazi:

[Hindi 00:11:57].

Fahad Zuberi:

So, as a matter of fact, tomorrow my mother is called to some event to talk about her parenting, because the area where we grew up was quite violent and hostile. A lot of my childhood friends got killed in police encounters. Some got overdosed or... So, it was an environment like that. And the biggest challenge for my mother was, and because of the background that she came from, she was very focused that, "I'm going to make sure my kids get the best education in the world, because that's the only way that they'll get out of here."

Aasiya Kazi:

So, that was, you think, mostly coming from your mother or your dad also?

Fahad Zuberi:

My mother completely, because I remember arguments between my mother and my father. They sent us to the best school in town. It was very expensive. They had to cut down on a lot of things. For example, my father never bought a motorised vehicle in his life. He used to use a bicycle, which is not easy in India. I mean, it's nice and fancy to use bicycles in the West because of the weather and everything, but it's not a choice in India. Nobody uses a bicycle by choice. The moment people have money, they buy a scooter, but my father could not. Could not repair the house much. So, my father used to be worried about it, "We should just put them in the government school." But my mother used to always resist.

So, my father also did great hard work in dropping us to the school, taking me to all things that I was interested in. When I was young, just like how small kids are, I used to have fantasies about, "Okay, I want to be a mathematician", and 10 days later I want to be a physicist, or scientist, or whatever. And then what he used to do, he used to put me on his bicycle and take me to the professors of that subject that he knew in the university. But the university had a strange hierarchy between the teaching and the non-teaching staff. So, I remember standing outside the houses of some of the professors, who were not that generous, who wouldn't come to meet a little boy who just wanted to know about mathematics. I was very curious since I was a little kid. And there were

others who would ask me to come to the department and show me the department. One such professor, whose daughter was also in my class and has been my childhood friend, was Tariq Islam.

Tariq Islam's father, Khursheedul Islam, used to teach at Oxford. He is quite well known in literary criticism in Urdu. And he has a lot of good work on Ghalib. He was quite open-hearted and open-minded. And it was my vicinity to him and the push for education from my mother's side that I built a dream that I want to go abroad and study to the best universities in the world. So, I don't know how I got here, but... Yeah.

Aasiya Kazi:

No. No. Think of this as just a conversation like we were having before when you got here, just a conversation about your life. So, no hard and fast rules, no questions. Just tell me anything you feel like that.

Fahad Zuberi:

So, one thing about my childhood was that it was full of these contradictions. The school that I went to, it was a convent, Catholic convent, Our Lady of Fatima, a secondary school, the best school in town at the time. I think it still is. So, it used to have the district magistrates' kids would be studying there. The kids of the most well-known professors at the university were studying there, or the biggest business persons, their kids were studying there. And we were also studying there.

So, it was very strange because I mean there were very visible markers of things like having let's say the same school bag for five years, which has stitches and repairs from the cobbler versus your friends getting new things every year, or something. And then going to their house for parties or seeing their houses versus the house that we used to live in. But there was also contradiction in friendships. The friends that we had in school versus the friends that we had locally in our neighbourhood, which, most of those people are now... They sell tea. Somebody is a tailor somewhere, somebody is... Nobody could gain at that time formal employment of any kind, my childhood friends. Some of them have faced very dire...

There used to be one guy who used to call me and say, "Can you find me a job somewhere? I'm very..." And he was in things that can be called criminal. He got caught in some gang issues, or with drugs, or something and he wanted to get out of it. And he used to say, "These people are going to kill me. Can you find me a job somewhere?" And I used to try to get him some jobs in India, but then he was then encountered by the police.

So, this was the local childhood friends that we had with whom we used to go out and play cricket in very dirty grounds in the evening. And in the morning, we were going to the school, which paid attention to the polish on the shoes. You know the convent school things that... Although the school made a lot out of us, gave us a lot of... It taught me English, for example, which was very strange in my locality. People did not speak English. But I remember it also as this strange feeling of not belonging here or sometimes not belonging there. Calling those people here, calling my friends from school to home, feeling shame around it.

At the same time now when I go back and when my brother goes back, there's also strange survivors' guilt. We feel strange [Hindi 00:18:38], it's difficult to look those people in the eye. And of course, it was the fact that we went to a good school was a privilege that my parents struggled to

produce for us. And me and my brother, I would say our role in that was that we reciprocated that opportunity that our parents gave. But they did not get that privilege. Maybe their parents did not have enough to even cut corners and to be able to afford that. But we were friends when we were kids, so that is strange to feel now.

Aasiya Kazi:

So, how has your relationships and your friendships with people from your neighbourhood now evolved as you've grown up and also the relationships you had in your school?

Fahad Zuberi:

I have only one friend from school now, who's Sophia, who's the daughter of Tariq Islam.

Aasiya Kazi:

Right.

Fahad Zuberi:

We became friends when we were in kindergarten, so my oldest friends. From my neighbourhood, I lost most contact after I left Aligarh. In 2015, I left Aligarh for Delhi, and then Ahmedabad and then Oxford. Most of those contacts I lost. But when I go back now, sometimes I will see somebody coming. There was a strange thing that happened one evening. I was coming back from somewhere and I was walking. And these are very dark alleys, so I was walking and there was a cycle rickshaw parked. And the rickshaw puller... For context, a cycle rickshaw puller is probably one of the most marginalised, economically deprived person on the Indian street, possibly just above a completely homeless person.

So, his rickshaw was parked there and this man was sitting with his face towards... And this area has open drains. So, this man was sitting with his back towards the road, and sitting and probably counting money, or eating out, or something. I don't know what it was. And then he turned to me, and I was dressed well and I was walking. So, there was a very clear distinction between him and me. And he looked at me and he said, "Assalamu alaikum", which is usually somebody in his position trying to respect you, also thinking maybe you will feel generous and give him something, or just as a marker of somebody who's from a upper class. And I realised he was my childhood friend and I did not address the fact. I pretended that I didn't see him and I just walked.

Aasiya Kazi:

Why do you think you did that?

Fahad Zuberi:

Survivor's guilt. It felt so bad.

Aasiya Kazi:

Do you think he recognised you?

Fahad Zuberi:

No.

Aasiya Kazi:

No?

Fahad Zuberi:

No. He didn't. He did not have a name. That was another thing in our neighbourhood, people didn't have names.

Aasiya Kazi:

So, can I ask the makeup of this neighbourhood? Was it religious makeup of this neighbourhood?

Fahad Zuberi:

Mostly caste, I think. Caste was the makeup. So, it was Muslims usually. So, now I study urban segregation. That's my area of study. And now I understand that Muslims and Dalits are-

Aasiya Kazi:

Do you need a minute?

Fahad Zuberi:

No, it's fine.

Now I understand that Muslims and Dalits are the most segregated communities in Indian city. So, it was a ghetto of that kind, where it was Dalits, who, very visible markers of Dalits in North India. To be very precise... And I do not want to use the particular caste, because that caste name is now criminalised. You cannot use it. But one can go later and look it up, which is a caste of Dalits that exclusively cleans dry toilets. That's the caste. So, they used to live and one of the visible markers is that they domesticate pigs. And pigs in Islam are considered to be impure, to be unclean, but our next door neighbour used to rear pigs.

Aasiya Kazi:

And your next door neighbour was not a Muslim?

Fahad Zuberi:

Not a Muslim, but a Dalit. And we had bought our house also from, which is a Shudra caste, it's not a Dalit caste, which is of herders. That caste is called Lodha. So, we had bought our house from them. So, that was the makeup. It was more on caste lines. I mean, caste and economic class hugely overlaps in South Asia. So, it was mostly people who did not have formal employment. My father was one of the probably two or three people who could read and write in the area. So, my father used to do a lot of work in making sure the government hand pumps are working, or the road is built, or the drain is cleaned, or the trash is picked up, because these areas are also very neglected by municipalities.

So, for example, in an upper caste affluent neighbourhood, they'll pick up the trash every day, they'll clean the drain regularly. But in Dalit or Muslim neighbourhoods and ghettos, they would not come that often. I mean, there have been enough research about it. So, my father was very involved in that very ground level work, because he could read and write. So, people would come to our house to have my father write letters to the local mayor or to the sanitation inspector that, "The drain outside my house is clogged, so I have to walk through sewage water to get in." Or, people were not able to get... And this was an area where it's a common phenomenon in South Asia that people steal electricity.

Aasiya Kazi:

[Hindi 00:25:29].

Fahad Zuberi:

I mean, so [Hindi 00:25:29].

Aasiya Kazi:

[Hindi 00:25:29].

Fahad Zuberi:

[Hindi 00:25:29]. So, it's-

Aasiya Kazi:

In Pakistan they call it the [Hindi 00:25:29].

Fahad Zuberi:

[Hindi 00:25:29]. So, that used to happen very often and a lot of people were criminalised because of that. My father identified that one of the biggest problems was people were not able to get formal connections, because there were middlemen. And the bribes that one had to pay to those people would mean that your authorised power connection would cost around five times more than you have to pay. And people are not able to pay that. So, my father had worked a lot to cut those people out and a lot of the things that he had done through endless writing. He has two or three cupboards of just letters that he has written all his life. It's a big archive in our house, because he could read and write in Hindi mostly.

He got the local magistrate to issue an order that there will be a camp right in our neighbourhood, where people can go and get a legal power connection so that they don't have to pay any bribes. That was a big thing. And because of that, a lot of people applied, a lot of people who were otherwise criminalised because they were... I mean, the police would come to their house and seize their things. So, my father used to do a lot of this on ground, a lot of social work. And my mother used to run a informal school for the kids of our neighbours, who were actually domestic workers. So, they used to come, because she used to teach also.

And after my brother was born, my mother suffered some neural issues in her leg and it became increasingly difficult for her to manage between the home and the job. So, one year, I think, after my brother was born, my mother quit her job. Then she used to be at home, work raising us, work

with the house thing. And also, then in the evening used to run a small, just a gathering of kids, teaching them basic reading, writing and mathematics.

So, that was the makeup. And my father locally came to be known as Netaji for this.

Aasiya Kazi:

Which is, in South Asian context, it means-

Fahad Zuberi:

Like a leader.

Aasiya Kazi:

... leader. Right.

Fahad Zuberi:

He retired in 2015. After he retired, actually a lot of political parties came, asking him to contest local municipal elections, which he didn't want to do.

Aasiya Kazi:

He did not?

Fahad Zuberi:

No. So, they came with his party cards ready, printed and ready. He didn't want to do. His idea was, which I am very... Because I think I live in more privileged spaces now. His idea used to be, "I do not care if it is a right-wing government, left-wing government, centre government. I want that hand pump fixed. I want that street light done. I want this person to be able to walk to their house without having to walk through sewage." So, he would work with everyone, the new mayor, regardless of whether it was at the Islamophobic right-wing, or whoever. As soon as the new mayor would get appointed, he would write to him... Or, he would write to the new mayor, welcoming them on the chair, and would go, and meet them and establish good relationship with them, so that something in this ghetto could improve.

And I have seen that improvement happen over the last 30 years. Where there were no roads, there are roads. People have dignified running water and bathrooms. They have easy access to a lot of government schemes. So, I saw that happening. He also made sure a new anganwadi, which is the municipal school system in India, it's called anganwadi... Angan basically means courtyard. He also made sure a school was opened in our neighbourhood. So, because of him being the only initially, and then one of the two, three literate people, he was doing all of that. But he was surrounded by this neighbourhood, which was full of a lot of violence. I've seen two people being killed, shot at.

Aasiya Kazi:

In your neighbourhood?

Fahad Zuberi:

With my own eyes.

Aasiya Kazi:

And how old were you?

Fahad Zuberi:

I was very young. Maybe six, seven, eight. Yeah. The gang wars and all, it used to happen. It is very common in such neighbourhoods.

Aasiya Kazi:

Was there a religious element to this violence in the neighbourhood?

Fahad Zuberi:

No. No. Gangs were made up of all sorts of people. They were Hindus, and Muslims. And those friendships or memberships, this was not so organised, but it was usually like there are two gangs who were all sorts of people. There was no religious angle to this, although our area was infamous for... Aligarh has seen a lot of communal violence and our area used to be infamous for being the place where violence will erupt, but it never did. Not in our area, it never did.

Aasiya Kazi:

But there was always that threat?

Fahad Zuberi:

That threat that it'll happen here. There used to be a few places, [Hindi 00:30:53] the common word was Jeevangarh [Hindi 00:30:54], they were going to come from there, but nobody ever did. I think we were as scared as... Although my mother remembers, July 1992, I was born. December 1992, the Babri Masjid was invaded and demolished, 6th of December. And few days after that, some, I think 100, 200 metres away from my house, they put a tyre around somebody and they burned him to death. Very close. So, my mother felt that we are not safe here. And my nana's house was inside the campus, which was the safest place possible you could be in a town where there are riots, but the entire area was curfewed. And I was a six-month-old baby. So, my mother tells this story that she took me in her arms, took everything. My father tied some clothes and something on his bicycle and they walked. It was some four or five kilometres. They walked through that curfewed town.

She explained that it used to be that my mother would wait, my father would go check if the street is clear, because there were also orders of shoot at site at that time. In 1992, India saw widespread violence against Muslims after the invasion of Babri Masjid. So, he would go, he would check if the street is clear. And then he would call my mother and my mother would go till that point. And then he would go to the next turn, next corner, check if the street is clear. That is how they went through the town. And they reached my nana's place, where they stayed till the riots left. But my father used to come to check the house, because there was also the risk that somebody might arson the house, which is common in communal violence. So, I think such areas gain a certain perception, I would say. But you were asking the makeup of the neighbourhood, so that was the makeup.

Aasiya Kazi:

So, growing up with your dad and mom as such central figures in the community, what was that like for you to witness and experience that coming and going, and having your parents seen as these particular figures in the community?

Fahad Zuberi:

One was, sometimes I think why did I... Although, for example, I studied architecture, and I did not take the path of just entering the industry and sitting and just designing high rises. I was more always interested in questions of politics and, largely, people. I think the furthest that I could trace it is that that influence was from my father, because my father was interested in these questions although at a much more, a lot of people would say, pragmatic level. Like I told you, he was not a political being. He was political in some way that he was always working, that resources come to people who are the most neglected in these areas. So, that was a huge influence.

We used to see my father, for example, refusing to give a bribe and then talking about it with great pride, or my father enabling a poor person's, let's say, ration card to be issued without a bribe and would take great pride in it. So, people had a sense of reverence towards him. But there were also sections that were unhappy with him, sections who were not earning the bribes that they were earning. So, sometimes there were threats as well.

So, when I think how it was, one, it impacted me and I think I started thinking of these things early on. So, it created some sort of principled, this thing. My mother's direct influence was also similar in the way that she always taught us to dream bigger. One of the things that happens when you are in this context is that you cannot dream big enough. Although you can dream beyond your current circumstances, yes, but how far beyond can you? Can you think of Oxford when you're sitting there, or can you think of being an Indian diplomat when you're sitting there? No, you cannot. But my mother was that force that she always... If we got a job, like the first time that I got a job, she was very clear, "Go for something better." When I got that, she'll, "Go for something better."

When I came to Oxford, the thing was, "Just apply for a PhD. Make sure you go for a PhD right away." So, she was always somebody who kept our eyes above the horizon, so to say. In the larger community how it was, there was a sense of respect towards my parents in that area. There was also a sense that they belong to a different class, because they are literate.

Aasiya Kazi:

[Hindi 00:36:33] South Asia [Hindi 00:36:34] when you're seen as [Hindi 00:36:35].

Fahad Zuberi:

[Hindi 00:36:35]. So, because of that everyone used to treat me and my brother as slightly different people also because we used to go to an English medium school, a very good school. Whereas other people, other kids, some even did not have names, which means that they did not have a birth certificate. So, do you want me to explain what it means to not have a name?

Aasiya Kazi:

If that's something you would like.

Fahad Zuberi:

Yeah. I've not seen this phenomenon anywhere else, but later on I saw that at that time the government had run an awareness campaign also asking people to name their kids, because it is your name through which you get everything. That's your fundamental legal identity. But then somebody was born and they would be called Chotu, Chotu, Chotu, and then that person will grow a bit older and they would be called [Hindi 00:37:38], or something like that. And then that person will, for example, become tailor somewhere. Then he would just be called Master Sahab, and then just die like that without a name. Or somebody would have a nickname. And nicknames were also strange, like somebody had a big nose, Tota, or Murga. And that used to be their identity, but they did not have a birth certificate. They did not have a legal name. And this sort of crowd used to look at me and my brother as quite different, quite different people.

Aasiya Kazi:

How did it feel... You talk about survivor's guilt, but how did it feel in those moments, the everyday of it, going to school, coming back, interacting with peers, kids from your neighbourhood? And what was it like interacting with your relationship with kids at school?

Fahad Zuberi:

So, our mother always preferred that we kept our friendships to the school, because she was worried of bad influence from the local kids. So, common term that goes in South Asia is [Hindi 00:39:04]. So, for example, you are not allowed to go with them to any playgrounds that were far off. Far off would mean something that takes a kid a five-minute bicycle ride, we were not allowed to go. We were supposed to be playing in the plot of land nearby, just in the neighbourhood. Not allowed to go around with those kids too much.

So, our mother preferred that we stayed close to the school friendships. So, that was one thing that is part of its everydayness, who all were playing with you when you were there. "Okay. This one was there. [Hindi 00:39:49]. He is a good boy, goes to the madrasah, goes to the school. He was a good boy. That one, why was that one there? Doesn't go to the school, doesn't..." Probably the poor thing just comes from a place where he cannot go to the school, but he's a [Hindi 00:40:10] for that reason. So, this used to be an everyday thing there.

In school relationship, I think that most of the friends that I made, with exception of one of one friend, Sophia, who's still my friend, everyone else was somewhere similar because later on when I went to their houses, I realised that they are also coming from marginalised neighbourhoods.

Aasiya Kazi:

[Hindi 00:40:40].

Fahad Zuberi:

So, I had a very close friend, Osama, in school, who came from the old town and a very dense neighbourhood in the old town, Ooper Court it is called. I realised he was also from... And now I remember that he also belonged to a marginalised caste within Muslims in India.

There was one friend who came from a rather posh background and whenever we used to go to his place... So, for example, at his house I saw computer for the first time. He had a bat, like a real bat.

We did not have a real bat. We used to take a log of wood, and take it to a carpenter's place. And the carpenter would whatever, [inaudible 00:41:23] and all the kids used to pitch in a rupee or two each and get that bat. I saw a real bat at his place for the first time. So, the relationships were like that.

There was also a lot of bullying in school, and bullying takes all sorts of forms. It's also physical aggression. It's also sometimes just talking somebody down or making fun of somebody's shoes because they're not new, whatever, things like that.

So, in school actually I faced a lot of. But in school, there was a sense of inferiority in at least in me. That broke in class five. Up til class five, I was a silent kid, who would not talk at all. I was also very small in my stature, because now that I look back and I think about it, because the place where we came from, I was sick quite a lot. I had worms in my stomach quite a lot, which results in, over time, in malnourishment and stunted growth. So, I was also very small, which also used to result in a lot of bullying, which also results in let's say late puberty. And then you feel very weird. But all of that broke in class five.

I was very interested in music and I remember if a song would be coming on the radio or something, I would play on the table. And in class five, I lied my way into playing a musical instrument. You want to know? It's a very nice story. So, I was in class five and somebody... I used to always look from a distance, people playing the congas, or percussion instruments in general. And I always fascinated by it, but we didn't have the money to send me to any teachers to learn and didn't have the money to buy the instrument also. So, I used to imagine three drums or four drums on my table and play it like that, or in the air.

So, I had some inherent sense of music. And in class five somebody said that there is an interschool group singing competition and they need somebody to play the percussion. And there is this teacher, I think her name was Meena, Meena Singh. Meena. She's putting together a team. So, I walked up to her and I said, "Yeah, I can play percussion." And she said, "Have you played before?" I said, "Yes." I lied. "Have you learned from somebody?" I said, "Yes, I've learned." "Who has taught you?" And I took the name of the best music teacher in town, Chandan Chatterjee. I said, "Chandan sir. Chandan sir [Hindi 00:44:26]." And she said, "[Hindi 00:44:29]. Come to this room tomorrow in the recess." So, "Okay." I went, and there was the instrument, and I played and it played. And they took me. This was the first time I test a musical instrument and they took me in. And then I was on stage. Then I was in performing arts, and that just changed the game.

Aasiya Kazi:

You just played?

Fahad Zuberi:

I just played and it played. And ever since then I've been playing percussion. I played and it played and just went on the stage after that. And being on the stage just turned the game. I just felt [Hindi 00:45:04]... Yeah. Then it was like addiction, just being on the stage. Then started playing for the school band. By the time I came in my college, saved up money, got my first drum kit. Then I had sort of a semi-professional career in music.

Aasiya Kazi:

Did she ever find out that you were actually not trained, that this was-

Fahad Zuberi:

No. No. Nobody did. I told my friends, but I was never trained. But then I ended up recording on albums, doing background score for some independent films till now. But I lied my way into going to the stage in class five and that broke my inferiority complex.

Aasiya Kazi:

What made you do it, you think?

Fahad Zuberi:

I knew that I can play.

Aasiya Kazi:

You just knew?

Fahad Zuberi:

Yeah, I knew. I knew that I can play because when I would hear the song, I could just replicate it in real time. And my father can also do it. Yeah. Now, I have a small drum that is in Aligarh and now my father is retired. He also has early stage dementia. One of his favourite things-

Aasiya Kazi:

I'm sorry about that.

Fahad Zuberi:

Yeah. Over the last five years we discovered it, so that has been difficult. One of his favourite things to do is to play songs on the TV and play along.

Aasiya Kazi:

What kind of music does he listen to?

Fahad Zuberi:

My father loves qawwali.

Aasiya Kazi:

Qawwali? Yeah.

Fahad Zuberi:

So, he loves qawwali. My father used to just go around town finding out where a qawwali evening is happening and used to be there till four in the morning.

Aasiya Kazi:

Do you like qawwali?

Fahad Zuberi:

I love qawwali.

Aasiya Kazi:

Yeah. Same. Do you like ghazals?

Fahad Zuberi:

I like ghazal. Ghazal is more... So, my mother's side is rather well off and upper caste, so they are more cultured, quote, unquote. So, they are more into ghazals. My father's side, they are lower castes and they are more free.

Aasiya Kazi:

Qawwali.

Fahad Zuberi:

We're more folk, you could say.

Aasiya Kazi:

I-

Fahad Zuberi:

So, I like ghazals also. I like-

Aasiya Kazi:

A bit of both.

Fahad Zuberi:

I like metal, I like death metal. I like progressive. I like world fusion. I listen to a lot of different things. Rap, everything.

Aasiya Kazi:

If you are okay with talking about this, what role did religion play growing up in your house informally, in the everyday, you know what we call in South Asia, [Hindi 00:47:31], and in terms of formal education? Like you talked about kids in your neighbourhood going to the madrasah, were you sent to the madrasah, or did you get Quranic education at home? A lot of us had a woman teacher, like an auntie who would teach. So, what was that like?

Fahad Zuberi:

So, my parents were not very religious. They were moderately religious. So, they would pray the namaz that they could. I would say they are not deeply philosophical beings, who would wonder about the nature of life for its purpose. They are much, for lack of a better word, simpler in their way of life. So, their main struggle was putting food on the table, education, et cetera. So, religion was not very heavy. My mother, for example, never asked us... There was no compulsion that, "Why did you miss the Maghrib namaz?", for example. She would say, "[Hindi 00:48:35]." My mother was strictly against corporal punishment. And out of the fear of corporal punishment, she didn't send us to madrasah, because we would hear stories of maulvis giving you corporal punishment in madrasah.

Aasiya Kazi:

[inaudible 00:48:52]. It's very common in South Asia.

Fahad Zuberi:

Yeah, very common. So, my mother actually had... There was a local maulana. Paan wale maulana, he was called because he also had a paan shop. He used to come home and he was known to be the kindest, the funniest, the most gentle maulana, who would never give you corporal punishment. And my mother really looked around and found somebody. I never received corporal punishment at home, neither did my brother, which actually at least in my generation, the millennials, is fairly common. Maybe now it is disappearing for good, but at that time it was fairly common.

Aasiya Kazi:

Common in South Asia.

Fahad Zuberi:

Very common.

Aasiya Kazi:

Yeah.

Fahad Zuberi:

We never got, and my mother was strictly against it. So, we did not go to madrasah. Individually, just for myself, I have had a rather complicated relationship with faith. We were never pushed into it. When I started doing music is also the time when Zakir Naik became very famous. So, a more puritanical Salafist interpretation of Islam entered people's living rooms in South Asia. And I've seen that happen.

An aunt of mine became quite disturbed by the fact that I was doing music because in that interpretation, music is not allowed. So, she stopped eating at our house because I would also earn very meagre, sometimes, money from music. She said that because this money is coming, I won't eat. That prompted me. I thought, I'm going to read the Quran. I had read the Quran in Arabic several times without knowing what it means, which is also common in South Asia. That prompted me on my own motivation to read the Quran in English. So, then I read the Abdullah Yusuf

translation, then I Pickthall translation, which is a more critical translation of Quran just by the virtue of his own positionality. And I realised that at least for the puritanical Salafist understanding, she's right. And I was in a state of crisis that-

Aasiya Kazi:

How old were you?

Fahad Zuberi:

I must be in my mid teens. 15, 16. Around that time, I had also started watching Zakir Nayak's videos quite a lot because I was curious. I liked logical thinking. And one thing that is very attractive about Salafism and Wahhabism is that they're very logical as opposed to let's say Sufis tend to be more mystical and romantic. My mother's side, they were all the Sufis. My father's side, they were also very involved in qawwalis and... But here is a man who's making very logical argument why you should not go to the graves, why going to the mazar is wrong, for example, which was so against everything that I was brought up in. So, I was also quite convinced by him at that time. But at the same time, I was doing music, which was really very great experience with no malice to it, and I could not find any immorality in doing music. And at that time I began a very critical... By the time I came to college, I started being critical of scriptures, or at least its puritanical Salafist understanding.

Aasiya Kazi:

What brought about that shift?

Fahad Zuberi:

It started with reading the translation and there were some things in the translation which I thought were not consistent with the Hadiths, for example, sometimes would say no... Actually about music there is a Hadith that the Prophet actually allowed music to happen at a particular celebration, because there were kids who were enjoying it. And he disallowed music in other places, because it carried a certain sense of malice or exploitation of women, for example, which used to go along with that sort of music. So, therefore music is contextual. It is allowed in one place and not allowed in another, but the Salafis would disagree. So, there were these contradictions that I was faced with.

I think I had an intelligent mind for a teenager to be engaged in all of this. Usually teenagers are not. I was quite engaged with this. Then I started reading criticism of let's say Hadiths, and found out that Imam Bukhari compiled it after nearly a couple of centuries of Prophet's death. And how can this happen? It's, a lot of people would say, a very heretic thing to think. I thought, "How is one person compiling oral tradition after two and a half centuries, and we are taking that as truth?" So, I remember, by the time I came to college, I made a very close friend, Umar Tariq, who was very religious.

Aasiya Kazi:

And which college were you in?

Fahad Zuberi:

This was in Department of Architecture in Aligarh Muslim University, 2010. And I discussed with him. We used to go to Lucknow to just have a day of eating good food. So, we were going to Lucknow and we landed in Lucknow early in the morning. There used to be a train, overnight train, from Aligarh, and landed it. We were waiting for the shops to open. I remember this so clearly this moment, we were sitting and I said to him, "I do not believe in the Hadiths any longer." And he said, "What are you saying?" "Well, I do not believe in the Hadiths." He said, "Why?" I said, "I don't think anyone can compile oral tradition with such accuracy and I don't agree with it." He said, "These thoughts that you're having, these are very bad thoughts. I'm telling you, in no time you're going to be an atheist." I said, "Come on. It's never going to happen."

And then soon after that, I came across Sir Sayed Ahmad Khan's interpretation of religion, which belongs to the Mutazilite tradition, which is Ibn Rushd and these people who you can say were rationalists in Islam, who did not believe in heaven and hell for its material actual existence, but looked at Quran as allegorical or heaven as the good life that you can have by being good or hell as the place you find yourself in life by being bad, for example. More allegorical reading of the Quran rather than they did not believe in miracles, for example. And I thought, "This makes sense. This makes sense."

As I was growing older, I was also in Aligarh Muslim university. There were sections within the students that were sort of extremists. A lot of those sentiments were actually used also by a lot of people who wanted to do violence of all sorts in the campus. At that time I came to the university, I started... So, the university has a very prominent performing arts centre that has given quite great performers in Bollywood, including Naseeruddin Shah, Javed Akhtar. They all were there at that drama centre theatre, and I was a part of that. I was in music and I started a world music society there. There used to be a western music society. There used to be an Indian classical music society, but I thought... I was very influenced by world music, which is also called fusion, so I started that there. I am the founder of that, which was difficult. It was difficult to do in central universities, to start as society.

I had done that for which I had received a lot of backlash from local students, who thought music is not allowed in Islam. So, that was also my context that brought a lot of criticism towards religion, the religion that I was born into. By that time, I had found Western philosophers and I was reading Spinoza, and quite happy, "Oh, yeah, this is the kind of God. God doesn't have any moral role to play in our everyday lives. God just sort of initiated the universe and something happened." Spinoza's God as we call. Then I started reading, my God, I regret it now, Richard Dawkins, came in touch with the New Atheist movement. Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, all these guys, Daniel Dennett, who just passed away last week. A good philosopher, Daniel Dennett. He was not the sort of hate mongering person like Sam Harris and Dawkins eventually turned out to be. And then there's no God. Okay, there's no God.

Aasiya Kazi:

And this is you in university?

Fahad Zuberi:

This is me just graduating by 2015.

Aasiya Kazi:

Undergrad.

Fahad Zuberi:

Undergrad. Openly, openly declared person, very outspoken always, "There's no word." And because of this, I faced a lot of problems, quite hated in the campus, but I also used to run away politics of more left political narrative in the campus, something that would give place to various gender identities or sexual orientations, which was not accepted largely. A case had also happened where a gay professor was suspended from Aligarh and he died by suicide out of that depression. The day that his body was found, just that day the orders from the high court had come, which had said that his suspension was unlawful and he should be reinstated, but it was too late. And I was a student at the time at the university and we mobilised things in his support, but we were a very small group. There's a film about it. It's called Aligarh, Hansal Mehta's film on this case. Manoj Bajpai has played Professor Ramchandra Siras, who was a professor of Marathi literature in Aligarh, who suffered this. And-

Aasiya Kazi:

And you were there at that time, obviously.

Fahad Zuberi:

I was there.

Aasiya Kazi:

And you were involved in activism around the case?

Fahad Zuberi:

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. but I was quite young, so there were older people who were more involved in this. One of whom was at Oxford actually, Adil Hossain. I don't know if you know Adil. Adil Hossain, he was at Merton. Nandini Guptu's research scholar.

Aasiya Kazi:

The name sounds very familiar, but I-

Fahad Zuberi:

Yeah, yeah. He is quite well known.

Aasiya Kazi:

I don't know him, but the name for some reason sounds very familiar.

Fahad Zuberi:

He did his PhD in international development.

Aasiya Kazi:

Is he still here?

Fahad Zuberi:

No. Now he's in Bangalore, teaching there. He was actually in the leadership of that movement. I was much younger. I had just entered college I think, but I was in that fervour. So, I got a lot of criticism, a lot of backlash, sometimes threats also.

Aasiya Kazi:

Do you want to tell me a little bit about your activism?

Fahad Zuberi:

Yes. I was in Aligarh and primarily started the... Social media had come by then. We are talking '13, '14, 2013-'14. Social media was quite active. Facebook was the place, and I used to write quite a lot there, reacting to local things such as undergrad girls were not allowed in the main library of the university, for example. So, it was the most celebrated library. So, it was as if women are not allowed in Rad Cam in Oxford. It was-

Aasiya Kazi:

So, they were not allowed in a particular-

Fahad Zuberi:

Main library.

Aasiya Kazi:

And was there a reason given for that?

Fahad Zuberi:

The vice-chancellor then, who's the older brother of Naseeruddin Shah, General Zameer Uddin Shah-

Aasiya Kazi:

The actor Naseeruddin Shah

Fahad Zuberi:

Yeah. His older brother was the vice-chancellor.

Aasiya Kazi:

Right.

Fahad Zuberi:

He said that, "If we let women enter the main library, it'll be flooded with boys." And I used to speak against such things. So, it started on Facebook with local issues like this, raising those issues, and speaking against them and criticising them in all sorts. And then locally joining protests, trying to take out some protests. And then I realised that there was a bunch of people who were like-minded. And unofficially, I started a group there, which was called Vicharak. Vicharak in Hindi means thinker.

So, I started a group and it was called Vicharak. And being influenced from the rationalist thought, and Bertrand Russell and all of that, at that time I named it Vicharak, an association of free thinkers. That became the centre. So, we used to run reading circles. We used to take out marches about awareness. For example, for the first time in AMU campus, we took out the one billion rising march, the worldwide feminist march, after which the women from Vicharak, who had organised that, shots were fired at their hostel doors, at their rooms. AMU campus is violent. A lot of Indian university campuses are violent. Shots were fired at their door after that. And I used to also receive a lot of threats.

So, Vicharak became the centre of things. We used to hold just discussions, just go to a, I don't know, lawn somewhere, sit and discuss any ongoing issues, any development, any news. A lot of people who were not out to the world, for example, but did not conform to the heteronormative gender binaries or sexual orientations, they also came and secretly were out to us. So, we knew, for example, that somebody was gay, who was part of Vicharak, and that was the space that that person found. So, they opened up to us, but we would keep that protected, for example. So, things like that. Mostly things like this.

Towards 2015... 2014, Narendra Modi got elected as the prime minister of India and India got deeply, completely taken over by the right-wing Hindu fascist ideology. I was starting to become very famous in India in general. So, there were people from Delhi, for example-

Aasiya Kazi:

Do you want to tell us a little bit about why you were famous?

Fahad Zuberi:

I was a very different voice coming out of Aligarh Muslim University, a kind of voice that they had not seen earlier. Aligarh-

Aasiya Kazi:

How was it different?

Fahad Zuberi:

It was different because it had a liberal agenda. Aligarh has had its own leftist past, but that was past. That was the time of Professor Irfan Habib and Shireen Moosvi, these people. Mushirul Hasan. Then it was mostly dominated, especially after the 1980s, mostly dominated by Salafism. 1980s Students' Islamic Movement of India, which is the student movement of the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind was founded in Aligarh, and later on it was at least alleged that they were involved in some violent

activities, some bomb blasts, et cetera. It is contested. But the ideological shift came in the 1980s after the founding of SIMI.

Since then most of the voices coming out of the Aligarh Muslim University were mostly could be clubbed under what you can call Islamic puritanism. I was very different. So, I made a lot of friends in JNU, in Jawaharlal Nehru University on the left at that time. I made a lot of friends in other, other parts of the country in Bombay, completely social media. And I used to travel. I used to save money and travel to just go and meet those people at that time. At that time, I just felt this is what I live for. I live to meet people, and to learn and to talk to them. And there were not a lot of people in Aligarh, so meeting these people was quite refreshing. I used to go there, go travel. Five of us would go, three, four of us would go.

By the-

Aasiya Kazi:

Where was your brother at this time?

Fahad Zuberi:

My brother was in Allahabad. He was in school, and then he moved to Allahabad to study at an institute there to study mechanical engineering. I was studying architecture.

So, I started getting known because of that and Vicharak also had a mild presence, you can say. By 2014-'15, what I was doing started getting used by the right-wing, which often happens. If there is, let's say, a critical feminist voice from the Muslim community, they often get picked up by the right-wing, because it serves their agenda of criticising Muslims and showing to the world, "Look, how bad Muslims are." Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a very good example. So, she's, I think, from Somalia, somebody who's been raising voice against female genital mutilation, got appropriated by the right-wing. Maajid Nawaz is another good example from UK. He also totally... I say that he totally lost it. He used to run a very good Quilliam foundation. But anyway, by '14-'15, I realised I started getting used by these people and I got very alarmed. This was also the time when I moved to Delhi. 2015, I graduated. I went to Delhi to find a job.

Aasiya Kazi:

And did you find a job?

Fahad Zuberi:

It was difficult. When I was in Aligarh, I used to think, "Oh, I'm not... I don't identify as a Muslim any longer and I don't believe in God." And then I went to Delhi, I realised, no, I am Muslim, because nobody gave me a house to live. They would refuse a house to me. At one point, I actually said to somebody, when they said to me, "I have a problem with your religion, so I cannot rent this house to you." And I said, "But I'm an atheist at that time." But it didn't matter. I realised my socio-political identity, my cultural identity is that of a Muslim. The penny dropped when I moved to Delhi and I realised what is going on in the country and I was reacting to a very small bubble in Aligarh.

It was difficult finding a job. I found a job at a place called Gian P Mathur & Associates as a junior architect. 10 days into my job I fell sick, very sick. I collapsed in the office. And then Sophia, my childhood friend, was working at another architecture office nearby. She came, she took me to the

hospital. And it turned out... And I had mild fever and difficulty breathing since around 15 days. Didn't pay much attention to it. It turned out that I had TB and my left lung was around 75% not functional, but had some fluid built up. Pleural effusion, it's called.

So, the doctor said that, "For the next two months, you're going to be on very heavy medication and we have to drain all of this. So, it's better that you go back home at least for a while."

Aasiya Kazi:

Home.

Fahad Zuberi:

I went back to my office. I was not diagnosed till then. They were suspecting, but they did not know because effusion can mean a lot of things, including carcinogenic. It can also be malignant. So, I went back to my office. I told them, "Look, there is something wrong and I have to be home for two months. Is it possible?" And this is my first job. So your first job is really, you feel this is everything. Your first job is like, "This is everything. There's nothing beyond this."

Aasiya Kazi:

Do you have to go right now?

Fahad Zuberi:

In 10 minutes.

Aasiya Kazi:

Okay.

Fahad Zuberi:

I'll just probably finish this story. They said, "Okay, we will push your joining date by another two months. You go take your rest, take your treatment, come back. It's okay." At that time, I was living in this place called Abul Fazal Enclave, because eventually in Delhi also I found a house in a Muslim ghetto. Nobody gave me a house anywhere else. So, I had to travel long distances to go to this office, which was in a better place, which was in South Delhi, east of Kailash, that area was called. Came back to my house, packed everything, called up home.

I was so scared, "What am I going to..." I felt like I just started working... And my father retired in 2015, so I was the only earning member of the family. And I used to also send money home. I used to get 15,000 rupees. Out of which, I used to pay 5,000 or something for a small room, very small room in which two of us used to live, me and another boy, my cousin actually. And I used to send money home as well. And then I thought, "Now I don't have a job."

Anyway, I moved back. I was in hospital for a couple of days. They drained the thing. They put me on very heavy TB medication. By that time I was diagnosed with TB. Started what was to be a 12-month-long treatment, very bad on digestion, very bad on mental health. Really bad. I was on steroids to prevent further build up for three months. Then suffered from withdrawals. Anyway, after those two months, I wrote back to my office saying that my doctor has said that I should take

another two weeks. And I had gotten a medical certificate from my doctor, sent them a medical certificate. They didn't respond to my email. I called them, nobody answered. I called some seniors of mine, who used to work in that office. I said, "Can you go and talk to the HR? What is happening?" Nobody moved. I said, "Just go and ask them for me." Nobody moved.

I couldn't go to Delhi. It's around three hours bus ride from Aligarh. And then the HR calls me and says, "No, I don't think we can keep you." I said, "Why?" "We are not happy with your performance." I later found out that one of the senior architects, whose father owned the firm, she went around making this stigmatic fear that he has TB and if he comes back here, he's going to infect everyone. We are not going to... Which was untrue because my TB was not contagious. I'm-

Aasiya Kazi:

Also, TB stops being contagious after a while.

Fahad Zuberi:

After two weeks of treatment. But my TB was not contagious to begin with, because I had extra pulmonary TB. They could never find out where it was, what was the site of infection? My lung was only the site of inflammation. Infection was somewhere else. It's like how your body becomes warm when you have fever, but the infection might be in your throat. That was the case. They could never find out where it was. Might have been in my stomach, might've been in the bone, might've been been in the brain. They never found out. It was not contagious to begin with. And I tried to explain that it was not, and it's not. But they said, "[Hindi 01:13:14]. That's not the problem. We don't like your performance." I said, "I've just been there for 10 days." And I was a good employee like that. Lost that job. Went into a very bad phase mentally, very bad and came out of it only because I was there at home trying to recover from this.

I was already known in Aligarh for being good at music, so a local school reached out to me saying that, "We have our annual function coming up and our present music teacher just cannot handle so much of work. Will you come and teach music?" I had no formal education. I said, "Okay. Though I have no formal education in music, but I can come and help you set up something." And I started teaching music at an inclusive school, the only inclusive school by that time, which had kids from all sorts of neurological make-ups, kids who needed special attention as well. And we have to put a show up for their annual function. So, here I worked with them for six months and that was amazing. That actually helped me recover.

By the time I finished my treatment, I was just coming to an end of teaching at that school. So, I taught music to kids for six months, which gave me a bit of money, but it was just good to go somewhere and to work with kids. And kids are so amazing, such good learners, so talented. I mean, I remember the things that we used to struggle with in the studio with adults, who were supposedly artists, kids used to pick up in half an hour and it used to be so surprising. Yeah.

Aasiya Kazi:

Fahad, I know that you have to go. So, do you want to carry this...

Fahad Zuberi:

Yes.

Aasiya Kazi:

I'd love to hear more about what brought you to Oxford life and Oxford. Also, lots of other things. So, do you want to do another one?

Fahad Zuberi:

Let's do another one. Yeah. I am-

Aasiya Kazi:

Okay. I'm going to stop recording right now and then we can set up a time for the other one.

Fahad Zuberi:

Yeah.