Context and Summary

This transcript provides a detailed account of Makhnoon's personal and academic journey, focusing on his experiences as a Kashmiri Muslim navigating various spaces, including college in Delhi, journalism work, and now as a graduate student at Oxford University. Key points:
Makhnoon's childhood was shaped by the political conflict in Kashmir, leading him to become more politically engaged as a youth. This involved participating in street protests and developing a stronger sense of his Kashmiri Muslim identity.
Moving to Delhi for college exposed Makhnoon to new perspectives and challenged some of his preconceptions, as he formed friendships with Hindu classmates and realised their common struggles.
Makhnoon's experience as a journalist investigating anti-Muslim riots in Delhi had a profound impact, exposing him to online hate speech and the role of far-right groups in inciting violence. This led him to pursue a master's at Oxford focused on social science of the internet.
At Oxford, Makhnoon has found a sense of community and support among other students from the global south, but feels disconnected from his European/Western peers who seem oblivious to global issues like the oppression of Palestinians. This has shaped his sense of self and identity as a Muslim from a marginalised community.
Overall, Makhnoon's narrative highlights the personal and academic challenges of navigating spaces as a Kashmiri Muslim, and how these experiences have strengthened his political consciousness and commitment to using his education to address injustices faced by marginalised communities.

Aasiya Kazi:

So just tell me a little bit about where you're from, your childhood and we can get started from there.

Makhnoon:

Okay. So I am from Indian administered Kashmir. My childhood mostly was, so I was not born in Kashmir. I was born in the Jammu division, which is primarily a Hindu dominated region. There, my family was in a self-imposed exile because my father was involved with a few pro-freedom groups, peaceful, but they were outlawed by the government back then and some government sponsored gunman were after my family. So I am the third sibling, the youngest one. The other two were born by then, so we had to run away from our family. So I was born in exile in Jammu. And yeah, that's where I was born, then we did come back, most of my childhood was in Kashmir and I think schooling was fine until I guess class third or fourth. That's when 2008 happened. The conflict in Kashmir, that was when I think me personally and my generation in general got introduced to the political, the conflict of Kashmir because by then we'd only heard about militancy in '90s, which had relatively died down by then.

Aasiya Kazi:

Can I ask how old you are?

Makhnoon:

I'm 26 right now. Yeah. So I think it was, it had died down. The militancy had died down by 2008 and we didn't see a lot of street protests until then. And that's when in 2008 when the Indian government made certain decisions to accord, they gave land to the [inaudible 00:03:13] everything. Anyway, so there was a lot of protests and that's when I got introduced to these pictures of like, okay, that's India, that's Pakistan, this is Kashmir. And I got introduced to street protests and what stone-pending is, what sloganeering is. And yeah, I mean until then I would say I was a more of a nationalist person. I thought whatever was there in the books is true, the democracy is true. Everything is like I was with the state narrative. But when I saw things around me, that's when I got, it challenged me personally to look into these things.

And I started following the news. I started talking about what had happened in Kashmir in 1990s, why did the militancy start? Why are we having shutdowns? I started having these conversations with my family, with my friends, with my uncles. And then 2010, a lot of street killings, people started getting killed in the streets because of the demonstrations that were happening, before that there was a fake encounter, which started it, all of it. In 2010, then 2016, Burhan Wani was killed, the militant leader in Kashmir. So all of these events have shaped me as a person. I mean, this is, I would say primarily a political conflict, Kashmir, but religion significantly influences it because people don't see the Indian army only as an aggressor or an oppressor in terms of how they have occupied our territory, Kashmir.

They also see it as a Hindu majority in country grabbing our rights and our land. So that's how I got accustomed to all this. And I would say at a very young age, I was in grade 10. Until then I had... It's sun. Can I?

Aasiya Kazi:

Oh yeah, of course.

Makhnoon:

Yeah, I started the interview. So until then I had sort of started building this bias against Hindus inside me because I had no Hindu friends. It's a Muslim majority, I mean, dominated by Muslims. There were no Hindu friends in my school until grade 10. In grade 10 I moved to New Delhi. Sorry, can we?

Aasiya Kazi:

Do you want to just move there?

Makhnoon:

Yeah. Sorry.

Aasiya Kazi:

No, no, please. I complete, I'm South Asian, I get it. There.

Makhnoon:

So yeah, I mean by grade 10 I was getting involved in a lot of street protests. So my family, my father particularly, who was a teacher, he was running a few schools, he was the principal, so he was very much into education, he pushed us. So he understood that if I stay in Kashmir, I'll be arrested or something bad will happen, which happened with most of my friends. I'd say even the people who were toppers in my class, I was a pretty average student. Nobody would imagine I would be studying in Oxford right now. But most of them, like one of my best friends isn't, like he's in jail for street protests and everyone gets involved in the conflict in some way or the other.

There were too many shutdowns. So my father pushed me to go outside Kashmir, although I was not very willing to do so, but I think he had that foresight that he needs to get out of here. By then my other brother, elder brother had also moved to Delhi. So then I moved to Delhi. I went to Jamia Millia Islamia, again, it was a Muslim dominated institution. It was a minority institution, so not a lot of Hindu friends in my hostel. But then when it came to college, my first year I went to Delhi University. I started living with Hindus. We were six people, four of them were Hindus. And I realised that, okay, I mean they have the same ambition, same dreams. They want to earn for their family. They want to get some skills, some knowledge, and just know all of us were from lower middle class, we barely had any money.

We found solidarity in that struggle for money, for resources, for connections. And nobody gave us internships. We had classmates who had, during summers they'd go to intern with Google, with Meta, and we're not getting in, we're not able to even publish a small article in a blog. I mean, those struggles, we realised that our struggles are the same and we detached ourselves from the mainstream narrative, whether it was on the left or the right. We formed our own narratives, we formed our own solidarity, and we found a very unique way of struggling and created our own politics, basically, I would say. Then, yeah, I mean after that, for three years the college, during college we had a lot of protests for facilities and all, it was a new, like we were the founding batch of Delhi School of Journalism. New department, we did not have a lot of resources, struggled there as well. Then I worked for a couple of years. It was a journalism degree.

So immediately after completing my journalism degree, we started, me and my friend, we were doing something of a freelance situation where we, like, there were anti-Muslim riots in New Delhi, 2020, February 2020. So we investigated that. So we were just two fresh journalism graduates with zero experience, although I had some publications, but they were just op-eds or analysis and I have no ground experience. So we started investigating, most of our investigation was around social media. We found Facebook handles, we found WhatsApp groups, infiltrated WhatsApp groups. We did that, I cannot believe it. So then we also check a lot of Twitter handles. We created a corpus of data where it was online, anti-Muslim hate speech, and we tracked them like in February, the riots happened, the anti-Muslim riots. We started from December 2019.

When they started mobilising people, they started this hate speech that there were protests around the CNRC and the Citizenship Amendment Act, those protests and how the right-wing groups started creating this narrative that Muslims are terrorists, they're doing this and that, they're all infiltrators. And then February 2020 happened and we could actually track it. If police had done that, what we were doing now, if they had done it in real time, they could have apprehended people because they were saying, tomorrow we are going to do this, and they did it. Tomorrow

we're going to mobilise at this place, at Saharanpur, at these things, these places. And we just joined the dots and that did happen. So we exactly knew who was doing it. Far-right groups, they call them the fringe, we call them the, I would personally call them the mainstream because they had direct connections with the BJP leadership in New Delhi.

We found photos of them together with Kapil Mishra, with even Amit Shah, the current Home Minister, the same people who were rioting in Northeast Delhi. So we had all this corpus, we pitched this story to The Wire, which is one of the leading news porters in New Delhi. So they accepted it and we worked with the founding editor, Siddharth Varadarajan. And yeah, we published both the pieces. I mean, it got a lot of traction, but there were no arrests as such because they had the government support. And then, I mean, that was something that was very shocking for me because we had all the evidence, it's something that should easily get people arrested. Nothing happened. And then there was this one writer who I talked to in disguise on Instagram. He talked, he just exposed everything, how they had planned it, how the student being of BJP was planning it. I'm sorry if I'm going into too much detail.

Aasiya Kazi:

No, this is, absolutely go into as much detail as you want.

Makhnoon:

Okay. Okay. So yeah, then I talked to this person, I saw his videos, how he was talking about, so he was a 17-year-old boy who had the aspiration of joining the Indian Army. And he was boasting, he was trying to be courteous because I was posing as a woman, as a right-wing Hindu nationalist woman who is very impressed by his pictures with guns, everything illegal, like no licence guns, it was all over his Instagram. And he had write it. He had a lot of live videos from the riot where he was throwing stones and all.

He told me how he had killed people. And it's all in the chat, it's all on the investigative, like it's a two-part series on this. So he had videos about how he wants to go back to Kashmir and fight for the nation. And you know how he wants to, pardon my language, rape Kashmiri women and teach the jihadis a lesson. Because you know, when we were transcribing those videos, when we were doing this stuff, I'm a Kashmiri Muslim, the other person, Alisha, and he's also Muslim from Uttar Pradesh, Northern India. So we were hearing cuss abuse and hate speech against us, against our community, and we were reporting it. So that had a very deep impact on me. Before that I was working on internet shutdowns. So it was a very weird situation where I would, there, I would say that internet shutdowns are not good because Kashmiris has suffered because of it.

One of the longest internet shutdowns in a democracy, 550 days in Kashmir. And here I was seeing how this internet was being abused by these people. So this is what got me interested in this course, Oxford Internet Institute, Masters in Social Science of the Internet, because I wanted to understand where does this bound, how to balance it, whether you should curtail the internet or there should be hate, or what sort of regulation should be there. That got me to Oxford. So yeah, that's my story until now. If there are any more questions, I'll be happy to.

Aasiya Kazi:

So just a few things. You talked about moving to Delhi and for the first time interacting with people or living with people from other religions, and then also witnessing this hostile environment towards your community. How did that shape or impact your sense of self, your identity?

Makhnoon:

I think all those attacks, everything that made my sense of identity stronger because the more they try to attack you, the more assertive you become. Especially because all of my Hindu friends who were actually my friends who were living with me, they would support me. And when you get support from the other side, supposedly the other side, because they were Hindus and there were other Hindus in our class or in our college who even tried to get me expelled for my political views, they would complain against me, abuse me on the street or anywhere. But these people supported me. So I realised that my identity is not a crime. I mean, because right now it's a cliche to say, and I mean it's something that, okay, of course it's not, but when you're young, when you're 18, 19 years old, freshly in college, you really don't know. I mean, it's difficult to defend yourself.

But then when you get support from your own fellow Hindu friends and you read a lot about identity, about propaganda, because it was a mass communication journalism degree, you realise how these constructs are made. We read a lot about, we used to read a lot about Holocaust drop parallels with the Nazi Germany and how this is similarly happening in India as well. Cartoons on Muslims, how Muslims being compared to termites, Muslims being compared to monsters. Danus In the Hindu mythology, they would compare us to Ravana and all those things. But I'd say when these attacks happened, we, in the process of defence, we explore our own identity in a much better way.

Because when people used to come to me that, "Oh, you Kashmiri, you are terrorists, you killed Indian army." So I knew that I cannot just say, "Oh, you are lying," and we cannot give anecdotal examples. I've been beaten up by the Indian army a lot of times for no fault of mine, but I can give that anecdotal evidence. But I didn't want that. I wanted an argument that is based in empirical evidence. So I read about it and I started publishing about it. I have a lot of publications on Kashmir now. I would call myself an expert now. But yeah, so I think that helped me, so in the process of that defence, my identity became more stronger. And yeah, it gave me a chance to reflect on who I am.

Aasiya Kazi:

You know what often happens is like if you publish stories that the state doesn't want, or journalists have security fears, they've been attacked, killed, et cetera. Is that something you've experienced after publishing the story? Like that fear or any kind of threat?

Makhnoon:

Right. When we published these stories on the Northeast Delhi, they actually, these people who were like the characters we have followed, the groups that we had followed. They actually did a lot of webinars, mentioning our names, mentioning our social media handles, calling people to commit violence against us. So we were a little scared, of course, but our editor, he was a very nice guy. He

said, they just say things they won't do actually. Of course we were very shit scared, very scared. But yeah, I mean, it's always at the back of your mind. I mean, there's this one guy, we were following, the guy who was wanted to go into the army, he went completely, he went off the grid, deactivated all his accounts and all.

I mean, I don't know if it makes sense every time I used to go out of the house and go for a stroll or for a cigarette or something, I just look like around, I mean, this is now like, it's not much prevalent now, I don't get these thoughts, but I would just think about it because he was very young, very hormonal. When a young person is there, because I just thought he was like a ticking time bomb. The way he acted in front of me, the way he used to speak, the way he used to post pictures with swords and those Desi, country made guns. I always thought he would come and kill me. It was that fear inside my mind. Not all those big leaders who would call for violence and everything against Muslims.

But this one guy, because he seemed like a guy who would do something like Christchurch massacre. He had those traits, I would say. But yeah, apart from that, I mean, we got a lot of hate on Twitter and a lot of abuse. But I think we transcribed so many videos, so much content we processed through our wing, we had nightmares at one point. But after that we really grown immune to that. I mean, after this job I was in another job for one year. We were working on an AI tool to measure the harm potential of online hate speech. So this was sort of a, I was building on the same work that I had done for The Wire. So there we were labelling this content, categorising it for the AI tool. So the other two annotators who were like, who had never done this work, they could barely do it at a stretch for two weeks or three weeks.

I completed my quotas in one month, but it took them three months because they couldn't, I had grown immune to it or maybe, I mean, it's fine, but they couldn't do it because it was the first time for them. That was the severity of that abuse, I guess, that affected these people. But yeah, I mean we had some support from the office. We were given some counselling and all, so it was fine in the end. But yeah, it's something that I don't say we really recover from it, but we get used to it with the abuse. So actually I'm not a journalist anymore, I just-

Aasiya Kazi:

And you're sure you're comfortable talking about it?

Makhnoon:

Yeah, of course. So I'm not doing journalism anymore. I do publish on tech policy, on surveillance on Kashmir, but I don't know hardcore journalism. The other person who's has been my friend since then and we've been working together, he's still a journalist. He has a lot of following on Twitter. So we took, like I went into academy, he continued with journalism. He has a lot of followers. He still publishes a lot. So when I look at his Twitter handle, every single post, even the post which is creating Hindus, Diwali, or [inaudible 00:21:34] I look at the comments and everyone is abusing him. [foreign language 00:21:38] I mean abuse that I cannot even discuss.

But I mean, kudos to him. I mean, he's been really resilient. But I mean, I think one of the reasons that I went into academia, but of course it was something I wanted to do, and the research focus here is something I've been building on. The work is really nice, and I'm lucky to have this opportunity to study here and do this research. But one of the significant reasons why I chose to

leave journalism was because this abuse, and also because I knew that if I continued doing this work, I wanted to primarily work on Kashmir, Report from Kashmir, because that's where I spent most of my formative years. But I have journalist friends there. Their families are called by the local Army people. They are summoned by the police stations.

It's very bad. I mean, I'm not even talking about the underpaid work culture that prevails in the journalism service. It's just that the state is very hostile towards Kashmiri Muslim journalists. And it's actually quite bad. I have a Muslim women journalist friend. I'm using all these terms so to express the severity of this, the shared audacity of the state and what they do there. So she reports for international organisations. It's not like she has a hidden interest in it. She's a reporter. She's doing her job objectively. And she was actually the army people called her family, they called her extended family as well. And it's a woman in a conservative society, and the Army people are calling her ChaCha's, hermama's and her father and her mother telling her that you have to send her here with the other [inaudible 00:23:54] We have to do some investigation.

I mean, in a conservative society, if the army people are calling a woman into the army camp, summoning her and telling these things to her family, to her extended family as well, that is the kind of psychological torture that I cannot even imagine because I'm a man, I have that privilege. These things, these are the anecdotes and these are the experiences that push me out of the field, I would say. And yeah, I mean a lot of people have left journalism because of the same reason. Either they left journalism or they started doing embedded journalism for the state, which I didn't want to do. And even that is not safe. You'll be killed by the other side if you want to start parroting the government's lines. So I just left the scene as it is. I still did some, like, I wrote a regular column for Himal Eastern, and if you know Himal Eastern.

Aasiya Kazi:

Yeah, I do.

Makhnoon:

I wrote for them for a year. So on Kashmir especially, I wrote about the post 370 developments. So I mean it was safe, but a few other journalists who reported for the same portal, they were arrested. Irfan Maharaj, he was arrested. He's still in jail for the same reportage he did for Himal Eastern. But I was doing analysis for the same portal. Even one time I got a call from my bank, the Jammu and Kashmir Bank. They told me that you have to send your invoices, you're getting some money from Himal Southasian. You're writing on the unrest. And it's like, why do I need to send the invoice? There's no requirement for it. Why do I need to send?

You'll have to send it because the local police station wants it. So I knew that I was under surveillance, but I was working in New Delhi, so I think I had the privilege to be, so I know that the Jammu and Kashmir police won't send a team to arrest me in New Delhi, especially when I'm working in a think tank. And I had that protection with me, so I continued writing. But I would understand why a Kashmiri journalist who's living in Kashmir will stop reporting or doing their work because of such. If a person from Kashmir gets a call that you're being monitored, you'll have to send your invoice. They'll stop working. I still had some privilege. I had some protection of working in New Delhi. And so yeah, that pushes people out of these professions.

Aasiya Kazi:

What in terms of you coming to Oxford, what made you want to come to Oxford or apply to Oxford?

Makhnoon:

I mean, one of the primary reasons was protection. I wouldn't say it outside, but it wasn't even that the course is good or it's a very prestigious university. It has that, I have people will see that, okay, this guy's in Oxford and his credibility will increase. I just wanted to be out of India for a year or so, and I wanted to continue living here. I wanted to leave the country, but of course I'm on a scholarship and it's a UK government scholar, I have to return. But things are not quite looking good there. So one of the primary reasons I would say, for coming to Oxford and working so much for the scholarship, the offer at Oxford is the protection that it grants you, some sort of a... I mean, even then it's stupid because they could have cancelled my visa, they can still cancel my passport. And they've already cancelled passports for multiple people.

I mean, yeah, that's true. For Kashmiri journalists, there was a long list, 250 people, majority of them Kashmiris. One of them is a fellow at Harvard, two people I know, they had gotten prestigious fellowships here at Reuters Institute of Journalism here in Oxford. And their passports were cancelled. They would called to the passport office for verification, even when they had more validity in their passports. So I was very scared, even before coming to Oxford, before moving to Oxford, when my funding was confirmed, I deactivated my Twitter, I deactivated everything. I put on hold publication of three of my articles because I was scared that my visa might be rejected.

Or even when you have visa, sometimes they just stop you at the airport. They put a weird seal on your visa saying rejected without bias, which is ironic. But, so yeah, I went off the gate, of course, I know that state allowed me to leave if they wanted to they could have. But yeah, I mean, it's just small acts of I'd say freedom that we try to get out of the country. We say that, okay, maybe this will give me some sort of protection. But yeah, in the end, I have my own life to live. I have my own ambitions. I want to earn money, support my family and all those things. So yeah, I mean, that's quite about it.

Aasiya Kazi:

How's your experience at Oxford been in terms of, I mean of being a minority, being Muslim and Kashmiri? Sorry, which college are you at?

Makhnoon:

Saint Anthony's.

Aasiya Kazi:

Yeah, we talked about it.

Makhnoon:

Saint Anthony's. So yeah, I mean, my funding got confirmed quite late, so I couldn't take up the offer at Saint Anthony's, as in the accommodation, I couldn't participate in the ballot and all. So I don't have a lot of things to say about my college because I couldn't include myself in that

community. I had to live here in Iffley, which was cheap. So it's fine. But generally, I mean, I found communities here because during Ramadan, we used to go to Bangladeshi Mosque in Kauli, then we used to go to the Manzil Bay Mosque. So we found a lot of communities, there's a few Kashmiris here, we would do Iftar together.

Also, but only in unofficial spaces I would say. Most of the Muslimness of Oxford, or I would say the Muslim community in Oxford is in unofficial spaces such as these, like there's a local mosque where you go, you have to seek them out. But I would say within the official or the formal spaces of Oxford, I don't see a lot of Muslim representation. Or maybe I haven't sought out or I am not seeking out such spaces. That could be my, let's say. But yeah, I mean even in my course, I'd say there are two or three Muslims at best. And most of the events, I think most of the events that happen have alcohol in them. Although I would maybe have a sip or two. It's not that I'm that...

Aasiya Kazi:

Sorry.

Makhnoon:

Yeah, I'm not that religious. But still, I would say these events are more, it's a cultural thing. I mean, it's a university based in the UK, so that's fine. But I wouldn't say there are any specific spaces for Muslims within the university that welcome you or anything.

Aasiya Kazi:

So you talk about living outside of the college in your first year does make a difference in terms of integration and all, but have you joined any clubs or societies?

Makhnoon:

I haven't.

Aasiya Kazi:

No.

Makhnoon:

I haven't. That's not because there aren't any clubs or societies to join. That's, I think a very personal thing because I have been focusing a lot on my work because I do some freelance work for some consultancies. I have my publications and then the coursework as well. So very short course, 10 months, you don't get a lot of time to indicate or go around. I know some of my friends do involve themselves in these pub nights or go to different events and all, but I'm very selective with where I go. I mean, yesterday there was this event at Indian High Commission, I went there, I came back and I joined the encampment. Even after this interview, I'll go to the encampment. So I try to curate where I go. Maybe I'm lazy, I don't know. But I don't involve myself in a lot of events. No, I don't. But that can be a personal thing.

Aasiya Kazi:

Yeah, I also feel like it's, all of us have different levels of socialising.

Makhnoon:

Yeah, I socialise less. Exactly.

Aasiya Kazi:

So that absolutely makes sense. But in terms of, what do you think the university should do for let's say Muslim students in order to make it a more welcoming space or accommodate their needs, et cetera?

Makhnoon:

I mean, in terms of religion, I wouldn't say any university should have any specific policies for different religions. I'd say if there are any communities who are historically marginalised, if that is a proven fact, then there should be special spaces or affirmative action or any other programmes for them. Say Muslims in general, I mean, if there are Muslims from let's say Saudi Arabia or affluent countries, I would say they, I mean, culturally they should have spaces. Everyone should have a cultural space that they should have avenues to maybe propagate their culture or their religion, that's completely fine. But in terms of special support or in terms of special programmes, I'd say it should be reserved for people who are marginalised.

Let's say Palestinian Muslims, you should have special scholarships for them. You should have a centre for Palestinian Studies. If there isn't one right now, there should be a centre for Vega studies, Vega Muslims. So these Muslim communities who are persecuted by their home countries, even for Indian Muslims, I would say there should be special support programmes for them. Because Muslims who are in a minority in many of these countries face unimaginable oppression. They should have some sort of a support, cannot invite a Muslim from let's say China or from Gaza, Palestine, West Bank, and then expect them to perform at 100% here, just because everything is safe here.

But we carry our conflicts with us. So you should have special support for them. I am not including Kashmiri Muslims. I think when I look at what's happening in Palestine or when I listen to Vega Muslims talking about the level of oppression they face there, I think that my struggles are nothing in front of them. So I'll adjust. But for other Muslim groups, Muslim minorities, I think there should be some sort of special support for them. I mean, I'll give you an example from my own department. So because I focus on authoritarian tech surveillance, state surveillance, and all these subversive technologies, there was recently a report that Israel was using Lavender, which is an AI, to decide on targets. So within 30 seconds, an operator is given an option to whether they want to target this house or that house.

Everything is done by AI, so-called artificial intelligence. And within 20 seconds they decide on whether this family should be obliterated or that family has to be destroyed. I mean, they're delegating such decisions to AI. So all the 35,000 Palestinian Muslims who have died, have died because AI decided that they don't deserve to live. I mean, my department, I know professors who have built their careers on AI and AI bias, AI discrimination, they do research on these things. They go to EU, they go to American Senate, give their opinions there. When it comes to Israel, they don't say anything. When it comes to their surveillance industry, when it comes to Pegasus and how it's subverting democracy across the world, they're mum.

I mean, you have no right to call yourself AI experts. I'm not asking you to condemn it. I'm asking you to at least talk because you're experts. Oxford Internet Institute is one of the very few institutes for which is focusing on emerging technologies on AI across the world. And you have credibility. What good is your research if it's not for social good? If you're just furthering your careers, just say it. I mean, that is what Oxford needs to do. I mean, your research, the topics, your priorities are misplaced. I mean, you're focusing on, okay, that was a very big scam, the post office scam, which is also like the post office systems that were used to...

They did not function well and then a few people lost their jobs because they were... I mean that was big. But are you not looking around like what's happening in Gaza? And they're bigger, like people are dying, 35,000 people are died because of it because they have used AI for this, randomly targeting people. I mean, Pegasus were used to kill, which is a surveillance technology, it was used to assassinate Jamal Khashquji, who was a Washington Post journalist. I mean, you have to do research on this, you have to talk about it, but they're not doing it. That's not good.

Aasiya Kazi:

Makhnoon, how has... Sorry, I'm just taking that in. So you've talked a little bit both about your academic journey here, and this is obviously, it's almost been a year for you here, right? And your personal journey. How do you think that Oxford has shaped those journeys, both academic, personal, and your activism here?

Makhnoon:

Can you rephrase that?

Aasiya Kazi:

Basically, how do you think your academic journey has gone at Oxford and your personal journey?

Makhnoon:

Right. Academically, I think it's been good, a little underwhelming in the sense that my course is totally Eurocentric, it's too white, if I may use that term. I think we have a majority of internet users are in the global south, at least a lot of them are in India. It's one of the biggest, has one of the biggest internet users in India in the world. And then you have China as well. But we barely have any lectures that focus on, let's say digital public infrastructure in India or the biometric systems in India, social media use in India, online hate speech in India, maybe in it one among eight lectures there's one slide on India, but it forms like the majority of internet, at least 30, 40% of the user base.

They don't talk about that. So again, their research priorities are misplaced. But in terms of research methodology, the knowledge, general knowledge about internet or in terms of general skill building, Oxford has been good in terms of access. I mean, people might take it for granted here, but SOLO, the library repository, I find it fascinating because until now I've been researching in India and everything is behind a paywall and I cannot pay for everything. I used to use Sci-Hub, LibGen and just somehow get a copy, call someone from Joel Amralo University, or can you give me access to this? And you have no resources there. Even when I was a part of the Delhi University

or Jamia Millia Islamia, we don't have an SSO there. There's no access. We don't have any access to any information. And nobody knows about Sci-Hub. And even Sci-Hub doesn't have all the papers.

Here, when I need any book, any paper, any conference paper, any journal, I just put it on SOLO or even if it's on Sage or any other online repository, I can use my SSO and I get the access. So that's very fascinating for me. I haven't had this access until now. So that is good. That has been good. Personally, I feel that's a failure on my part. I wasn't able to really relate to or make good friends with Americans or Europeans or people from other countries. I tended to make friends with Kashmiris, then a few Indian Muslims, of course. But I couldn't really, I have good acquaintances, but I couldn't really connect to those people.

I think it's a cultural thing because I mean, let's say my cohort, people in my cohort, they meet every night or every other night for a pub night or the things they have to discuss. I'm not belittling that, like their conversations they have, but I feel like they come from a position of privilege. And me and my friends, we usually talk about politics or we talk about what should happen or it's not like we don't joke around or we don't know have lighter topics, but that is all they have, they're too happy for me. I cannot sit with them. They're extremely happy, which is good for them [foreign language 00:42:50] but I cannot sit with them. They come from extreme privilege. They don't care about anything. When this news about Lavender AI came out, I sent a text on the group asking them to at least reach out to the director and ask them to at least talk about it. Or we can have an independent petition and we can send it to media organisation, they talk about it.

You're talking about AI every day. You're sharing papers and you're having discussion groups about it. You're doing your summits on it. Your entire research thesis is on AI, but you don't care about when this AI is been used to kill thousands of people, you don't care about it. You don't care about their surveillance industry, you don't care about it at all. You don't care about how Oxford is investing in these structures. They're completely oblivious to it. I don't know how can you be so oblivious to it? And I don't have any Palestinian friends. It's not like I'm from Palestine or I have any direct interests in it. It's just that I see things and I want to act on them.

But I don't know how, why they're not. I mean, it, again, it's political. Personal is political, but I simply cannot make friends with people who don't care. They don't care, so I cannot relate to those people. So that's why personally, I couldn't make friends with such people usually. I'm sure some of them do care, but they never mentioned it. So I couldn't relate to them. So personally, I couldn't really make a lot of friends outside of these ethnic groups.

Aasiya Kazi:

How do you think being in this particular place during this time, how do you think that has shaped your sense of self?

Makhnoon:

My sense of self?

Aasiya Kazi:

Or even like what being Muslim means to you?

Makhnoon:

Right. I've thought about it. I mean, I came to Oxford and Palestine happened in October, I think in September. I was, I started the course. I thought about it. I mean, I came here and I was really in, for the first month I was really impressed with everything in Oxford because I come from New Delhi. We have no traffic rules there, there's no everywhere you see garbage, even if I was like living in a very posh society there, but even then it was really bad. And I video called my mother, I was walking down the road, I pressed that button and the traffic stopped. And these things are like that, I got enamoured, actually got enamoured. Like, what's happening? How did they organise everything in such a good way?

But then when Palestine happened, October 7th and all these things happened, and I remember having this conversation with my friend where we were discussing, I told him, it's quite ironic when every time we were going, like the induction was happening here in Oxford, and every time we went to a new building, they would tell us that fire extinguishers are there. The fire exits are here, and if a fire happens, we have to assemble them. General safety, they're very particular on safety. There are footpaths, everything is, safety is a very prioritised concept here. I mean, I'd say it was very surprising for me. And then what's ironic is when your money is being utilised to kill Palestinians, again, I'm going to Palestine, back to Palestine, but they're being killed. And you're sending them armaments, you're sending them munitions, and your government is doing it. It's so ironic, here you have fire extinguishers everywhere. You have fire exits and nobody should die because of human error.

They're so high on safety here, but then they don't care about people dying there through their funds. I mean, the foreign secretary, David Cameron, is saying that only 1% of armaments that Israel receives is from the UK. So we are not going to stop it like the US has. 1%, what is on 1% of 35,000? Are you willing to kill that many people because it's just 1%? You're investing in their startups. UK pension fund was used for NSO, their startup, which is being used to surveil on dissidents across the world. So how do they resolve this conflict within their society? And when I come here and I see all these things, and I see them not caring about these things, I feel insignificant as a person. I feel they don't care. When I'm within their borders, I'm protected under their law. But if I'm outside their borders, they're willing to kill me because their foreign interest, their national interest lies in killing me.

So it's not that the society is ethical or they're morally upright, it's just that they care about their safety within their borders. They want everything to function well. They want everything to be peaceful. And because they've somehow found me to be capable enough to accept me into their university, accept me, give me a visa, give me a scholarship, because I have certain skills and knowledge. They wanted me to come here and contribute to there, and I mean, I'll also get something out of it. But once I'm outside of the system, I'm an insect, a bug, they can kill me. Like they're killing Palestinians. I don't think the UK government or the Oxford administration thinks of Palestinians as anything more than bugs. That's what we are. If they really cared, if they really had humanised Palestinians or any other groups outside of the UK, they wouldn't send money to kill them. It's as simple as that. So I think I'm just protected because I'm here, outside of this system I'm nobody. That is what my experiences have told me that I'm protected because I'm here.

Aasiya Kazi:

Because you're part of particular spaces in particular institutes?

Makhnoon:

Yes. And then once I'm out, I'm not protected at all. It doesn't matter. I'm a human. I'm protected here not because I'm a human or I have a family or I have emotions, I have conscience. I'm protected because I had certain skills and knowledge that they found worthy enough to let me get included in their system. And now I'm protected until I'm here, after that, I'm nobody.

Aasiya Kazi:

I'm mindful of the time because I know you have to go, but anything that we haven't covered that you want to talk about? Given what the project is about, and it's not about, I was talking about this with somebody else, that it's not really about Muslimness and Islam and all. It's also about, it's not only about that, it's also about stories of people who come and go. So anything you think is worth sharing?

Makhnoon:

I mean, I don't... I was saying. It's fine. I mean, I think I've shared pretty much everything that I had to. But yeah, if there's anything in particular that you feel I should think about to talk about, any keywords or anything.

Aasiya Kazi:

Just everything you've shared is so important, but just anything about what your time in Oxford means to you at this point.

Makhnoon:

I mean, I'd say what value does Oxford give me if I think about it right now, is not my professors, it's not my other cohort members or my classmates. It's people from other global south countries who are here. Not just Muslims, anyone outside of the UK, outside of the wealthy nations. Because I feel like I can relate to their struggles. And I feel like if they have achieved something that is replicable to some extent for me as well. So that is the value that Oxford provides me.

I go to these encampments, I go to this encampment primarily because I am able to talk to a few other people who have had similar experiences because I don't personally know any Palestinian, but I feel for them. So I want to talk to them. I want to see what they feel, what are their ambitions and this is the value that I think Oxford provides me because there are a lot of people from these countries. And I mean, if I can learn something from them because they're facing more oppression than my community back in India is facing, a lot more. But if they've been able to be resilient and survive, I think I can learn a few things from them as well. Yeah.

Aasiya Kazi:

Thank you so much, Makhnoon, it's been an absolute pleasure. And again, I know Saturday-