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Archives & Special Collections



# South Asian Oral Histories in Peel collection

## FINDING AID

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## FONDS-LEVEL DESCRIPTION

### **Administrative history**

The South Asian Oral Histories in Peel Project (saohpeel.ca) investigates the histories of South Asian residents of the Region of Peel in Ontario, Canada to tell the stories of people and migration, food and businesses, arts and entertainment that make Mississauga and Brampton vibrant and multicultural spaces. It began with a series of conversations at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM) on how to foster ties between the university, its students, and the South Asian community that thrives in the Peel Region. These conversations became even more pressing as the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021 made many think about community with a new urgency as social distancing reminded people of the importance of social ties. With the support of the Department of Historical Studies, Centre for South Asian Civilizations, and the University of Toronto Mississauga Priorities Fund, the project was created in 2020 as a way to collect, document, study, and preserve oral histories of South Asians in Peel.

The South Asian Oral Histories in Peel project is designed as a student-researched project wherein undergraduate and graduate students are linked to the wider Peel Region community through directly participating in and learning about the methods and importance of oral history. In addition to the undergraduate student oral history interviewers, participants in the initial phase of the project in 2020-2021 were work study students Sameer Devalla and Sana Rizvi; teaching assistant Aisha Salman; digital humanities research coordinator Kanishka Sikri; and professor Luther Obrock.

**Date of creation:** 2021

**Physical description:** 11.18 GB of digital video recordings (14 MP4 files)

**Immediate source of acquisition:** Interview recordings were created and submitted by student interviewers at the University of Toronto Mississauga as partial fulfillment of requirements for an undergraduate course. Collection is comprised only of those recordings for which voluntary written consent for archival deposit was obtained from both the interviewers and narrators. Recordings were donated on their behalf by Kanishka Sikri (project research coordinator) and Luther Obrock (project research supervisor and course instructor) at the conclusion of the course in 2021.

**Scope and content:** Collection consists of 14 oral history interviews with members of the South Asian diaspora residing within the Peel Region (Mississauga and Brampton) in Ontario, Canada. Interviews were conducted by students enrolled in the senior undergraduate course *RLG360 Special Topics in South Asian Religions: South Asian Oral Histories in Peel* offered at the University of Toronto Mississauga in the 2021 winter term during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

**Accruals:** Further accruals expected.

**Arrangement:** Interviews are arranged in alphabetical order by name of narrator.

**Restrictions on access:** None.

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**Languages:** English.

## SERIES-LEVEL DESCRIPTIONS

### **SERIES 1: Oral history interview with Tasneem Ahmed conducted by Arsalan Rizvi**

**Date of creation:** 30 Mar. 2021

**Physical description:** 0.832 GB of digital video recordings (1 MP4 file that runs 01:33:33 in duration)

**Scope and content:** Tasneem Ahmed is an educated Muslim woman living in Mississauga Canada. She is a mother, wife, and decorated professional. In her oral history with interviewer Arsalan Rizvi (UTM undergraduate student at the time), narrator Tasneem Ahmed speaks about life in Canada, growing up in Pakistan, her relationship with her parents, and their impacts on her life and perceptions. She speaks about religion, religion in Canada, her professional life in Saudi Arabia. She also speaks about her experiences throughout her life, experiences with racism, classism, and how religion has played a role in her life.

**Restrictions on access:** None.

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**SERIES 2: Oral history interview with Saima Hussain conducted by Rijja Moeen**

**Date of creation:** 5 Apr. 2021

**Physical description:** 0.558 GB of digital video recordings (1 MP4 file that runs 01:15:28 in duration)

**Scope and content:** Saima Hussain is a well-known journalist and award-winning book writer who currently works as a supervisor at the Mississauga Library. As an immigrant to Canada from Pakistan and spending many years of her life in Saudi Arabia, Saima focuses on being involved in the community, such as becoming a member of the Council of Agency Serving South Asians, the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, and running programs for newcomers. Saima completed her MA in South Asian Studies from the University of Toronto and also worked there as an admissions counsellor. She then moved to Pakistan where she became an editor at *Dawn* newspaper. Upon returning to Canada, she produced a history book for young readers called *The Arab World Thought of It: Inventions, Innovations and Amazing Facts*, which received an award from the Carolina Center for the Study of the Middle East and Muslim Civilizations. She also wrote another book called *The Muslimah Who Fell to Earth: Personal Stories by Canadian Muslim Women* to allow representation of Muslim women in the world.

In her oral history with interviewer Rijja Moeen (UTM undergraduate student at the time), narrator Saima Hussain speaks about her experiences of being a journalist and writer, how she has made a difference in the South Asian community through her work, the importance of religion in her life, and her experience of being an immigrant to Canada.

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**SERIES 3: Oral history interview with Sharmin Kassam conducted by Aleah Ameer**

**Date of creation:** 18 Mar. 2021

**Physical description:** 0.758 GB of digital video recordings (1 MP4 file that runs 01:28:50 in duration)

**Scope and content:** Sharmin Kassam is a henna artist from Mississauga. She got her degree in civil engineering technology, and right after she got her degree, she decided to take a course with Ash Kumar's company to refine her henna art. After that, she applied to become a product stockist with the company, which is how she started her own henna business. She now works in construction and also works as a henna artist for various events such as religious functions, weddings and parties.

In her oral history with interviewer Aleah Ameer (UTM undergraduate student at the time), narrator Sharmin Kassam speaks about her connection to the South Asian community through her work as a henna artist. She explains where her passion for pursuing this art comes from and why she continues to work in both construction and henna. Sharmin Kassam also shares her thoughts on the westernization of South Asian culture, specifically henna. She speaks about the importance of education regarding things with cultural and religious ties and how westernization is not the issue. Rather, it is the disrespect and the erasure of the history and origins that follows it.

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**SERIES 4: Oral history interview with Amanat Kaur conducted by Khushpreet Virk**

**Date of creation:** 2 Apr. 2021

**Physical description:** 4.489 GB of digital video recordings (1 MP4 file that runs 00:54:32 in duration)

**Scope and content:** Amanat Kaur is an international student that came from India. She is originally from India and was raised in India. Amanat currently resides in and works at an immigration office in Brampton. Amanat immigrated to Canada in 2014 and she is currently in her early 20s. The interview covers several themes such as religion, education, work, mental health, immigration, and general lifestyle in the Peel Region.

In her oral history with interviewer Khushpreet Virk (UTM undergraduate student at the time), narrator Amanat Kaur goes in depth about the immigration experience and her experiences with racism, religion, and community involvement. Furthermore, the interview goes in depth and talks about the mental health of international students and the struggles international students face when they immigrate to Canada.

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**SERIES 5: Oral history interview with Ali Kazmi conducted by Zahraa Syeda**

**Date of creation:** 24 Mar. 2021

**Physical description:** 0.495 GB of digital video recordings (1 MP4 file that runs 01:32:08 in duration)

**Scope and content:** Ali Kazmi is a Pakistani-Canadian actor and director, as well as a Toronto Film School alumnus who migrated from Pakistan to Canada in 2007 to pursue his career in film and television. Kazmi's parents, Rahat Kazmi and Sahira Kazmi, were two of the pioneers of Pakistani television content in the 1980s.

In his oral history with interviewer Zahraa Syeda (UTM undergraduate student at the time), narrator Ali Kazmi speaks about his transition from Pakistan to Canada, his experiences and struggles in pursuing his cinematic career, his Oscar-nominated film, stereotypes regarding gender roles within his culture as well as the taboo attached to mental health and sex education within the South Asian diaspora. Additionally, he sheds light on his ideas and views of religion and spirituality, and where they stem from.

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**SERIES 6: Oral history interview with Jeejna Mandavia conducted by Mukti Patel**

**Date of creation:** 18 Mar. 2021

**Physical description:** 0.548 GB of digital video recordings (1 MP4 file that runs 01:08:49 in duration)

**Scope and content:** Jeejna Mandavia is a teacher who now lives and works in the Peel Region. In her oral history with interviewer Mukti Patel (UTM undergraduate student at the time), narrator Jeejna Patel speaks about the role of faith in her and her family's life, her dependence on her guru, her father's passing, her experiences with racism as a child, and her experiences as a mother.

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**SERIES 7: Oral history interview with Andy Ramgobin conducted by Prashil Gandhi**

**Date of creation:** 20 Mar. 2021

**Physical description:** 0.202 GB of digital video recordings (1 MP4 file that runs 00:37:20 in duration)

**Scope and content:** Andy Ramgobin is a member of the Shiv Ganesh Mandir in Brampton where he plays the harmonium during various prayers and live events. In his oral history with interviewer Prashil Gandhi (UTM undergraduate student at the time), narrator Andy Ramgobin speaks about what role religion plays in his life and how music was what brought him closer to religion. Andy also draws upon the differences around the aspect of what religion means to him, his parents, and family back home in Guyana.

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**SERIES 8: Oral history interview with Harvinderpal Sandhu conducted by Prabhleen Purewal**

**Date of creation:** 1 Apr. 2021

**Physical description:** 0.45 GB of digital video recordings (1 MP4 file that runs 01:09:11 in duration)

**Scope and content:** Harvinderpal Sandhu is currently a resident of Brampton, and he immigrated to Ontario (Brampton), Canada from Punjab, India with his family at the age of 15. Upon arrival, Harvinderpal was living with his family and was enrolled in high school in the Canadian school system. He later went for post-secondary education in Ontario, and later worked a diverse range of jobs which altogether allowed for him to learn valuable lessons.

In his oral history with interviewer Prabhleen Purewal (UTM undergraduate student at the time), narrator Harvinderpal Sandhu talks about his experiences immigrating to Canada, in the school system as an ESL student, being South Asian in adulthood (college and workforce), and his struggles/lessons along the way.

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**SERIES 9: Oral history interview with Harleen Sawhney conducted by Chashanjot Sidhu**

**Date of creation:** 6 Apr. 2021

**Physical description:** 0.244 GB of digital video recordings (1 MP4 file that runs 00:52:44 in duration)

**Scope and content:** Harleen Sawhney is a Punjabi Sikh social media professional. Born in India, she migrated to the Middle East, England, and at last, Canada. She currently resides in Mississauga.

In her oral history with interviewer Chashanjot Sidhu (UTM undergraduate student at the time), narrator Harleen Sawhney speaks about her immigration process, as well as some of the challenges she faced as a newcomer to Canada. She touches upon her childhood experiences, specifically growing up in a different environment compared to someone that would have been born and brought up in Punjab. As well as talking about her immigration challenges, she talks about certain things that were expected from her in terms of her future career. Although she did pursue an education in a career she was interested in, she could not use her qualifications to build her career in Canada due to certain hardships, which she talks about in her oral history interview.

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**SERIES 10: Oral history interview with Abdul Rahim Shaikh conducted by Muzammil Waris**

**Date of creation:** 18 Mar. 2021

**Physical description:** 0.076 GB of digital video recordings (1 MP4 file that runs 01:09:50 in duration)

**Scope and content:** Abdul Rahim Shaikh considers himself to be an activist. He helps make Youtube videos for a Youtube channel by the name of WeAllBlessed. Shaikh is deely connected to Islam as he memorized the Quran at a tender age of 13.

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**SERIES 11: Oral history interview with Sarabjit Singh conducted by Flyura Zakirova**

**Date of creation:** 23 Mar. 2021

**Physical description:** 0.553 GB of digital video recordings (1 MP4 file that runs 01:08:04 in duration)

**Scope and content:** Sarabjit Singh is a well-known chef with extensive culinary expertise who has his own restaurant in Brampton. He was born in India then pursued an education in Australia and settled down in Canada with his family while continuing his cooking journey. Now his work in Canada aims to bring Indian cuisine to Canada in an elevated form which will advance the existing experiences of food for South Asians in Peel.

In his oral history with interviewer Flyura Zakirova (UTM undergraduate student at the time), narrator Sarabjit Singh speaks upon his experience across themes of immigration, community, the importance of Heritage, food and generational changes.

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**SERIES 12: Oral history interview with Sandhya Srivatsan conducted by Sarada Sai Susmitha Turaga**

**Date of creation:** 27 Mar. 2021

**Physical description:** 0.38 GB of digital video recordings (1 MP4 file that runs 01:16:22 in duration)

**Scope and content:** Sandhya Srivatsan is the founder of the music academy Gaanavarshini located in Brampton, Ontario. She is a trained Karnatic singer coming from India, who has learnt under the discipline of wonderful gurus. As a trained musician, Sandhya speaks about her early connections and relationship with music. Sandhya comes from a musical family, where each member of her family shared a collective passion for this art form.

In her oral history with interviewer Sarada Sai Susmitha Taraga (UTM undergraduate student at the time), narrator Sandhya Srivatsan talks about the importance of Karnatic Sangeetham and what the art form has to offer the youth of today. Sandhya talks about the importance of family, religion, occupation, and education, and how Karnatic music allowed her to develop a balance when approaching life. Using her passion for music and teaching, Sandhya has developed her own music academy, hoping to teach the tradition of Karnatic Sangeetham and have it rooted in the hearts of the South Asian community in Peel.

**Restrictions on access:** None.

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**SERIES 13: Oral history interview with Sophia Syed conducted by Areeb Daimee**

**Date of creation:** 31 Mar. 2021

**Physical description:** 0.968 GB of digital video recordings (1 MP4 file that runs 00:54:50 in duration)

**Scope and content:** Sophia Syed is a teacher who works in the Peel Region at Rick Hansen Secondary School. Mainly focusing her teaching on politics, religion, and world issues, Sophia seeks to connect students to understanding the different political structures, cultures, beliefs, and concerns that play a significant role in peoples' everyday lives.

In her oral history with interviewer Areeb Daimee (UTM undergraduate student at the time), narrator Sophia Syed spoke about the significance of South Asian teachers for South Asian students in Peel, the ways in which such representation can help combat discrimination for both students and teachers, and her experiences supporting South Asian cultural and religious celebration in the school.

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**SERIES 14: Oral history interview with Shirley Wu conducted by Mehreen Butt**

**Date of creation:** 5 Apr. 2021

**Physical description:** 0.364 GB of digital video recordings (1 MP4 file that runs 01:12:15 in duration)

**Scope and content:** Shirley Wu is a Pakistani-Canadian beauty salon owner and a staple in the beauty community not only in Peel, but all over the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and parts of North America. She was born and brought up in Lahore, Pakistan and immigrated to Ontario in 1991.

In her oral history with interviewer Mehreen Butt (UTM undergraduate student at the time), narrator Shirley Wu speaks about her experience growing up in Pakistan, her family's influence on her career and life experiences, her Hakka ancestry, her influence on the beauty community and South Asian community in the GTA, as well as how important it is to maintain South Asian traditions while growing up within the Peel and GTA South Asian diaspora.

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