

Hamza Jilani

I just want to thank you again for agreeing to do this with me. I already know a little about the places you've lived and the kinds of energy transitions you've lived through, so I'm really looking forward to hearing you reflect on them.

Nisar A. Memon

And before you start, Hamza, let me congratulate your university for selecting a very, very important and appropriate subject, which affects not only me and Pakistan but also the whole globe. And also, the questions you sent me really brought up a lot of memories for me. So thank you for doing this, I am looking forward to this conversation. Okay, so go ahead with any questions you have. If I am drifting away, please bring me back, because I have too many memories.

Hamza Jilani

Okay, so I first just want to ask you a little bit about your life when you were in school, before University, in the 50s. And I want to ask first, about transportation, so how did you get around back then?

Nisar A. Memon

I'm now 80, and I was born at the time Pakistan was created, in 1947. I was born and lived mostly in Karachi, which was the capital of Pakistan to start with. And now I live in Islamabad, which is the capital of Pakistan today. So I have spent most of my time in these two capitals, apart from the fact that I was, as you know, I was in Paris, which is the capital of France, and Kuwait City. However, I have kept very close links with the rural areas, and our hometown is Thatta District, which is a very famous historic district. So having said this, now, let me start on your first question that you had about transportation. I remember we used to have a car—I still remember the name of the car, the manufacturer was Opel. It was a Opel car that the family owned and we had a driver. We were taken a few kilometers away to our school on the main road, which connects the entire city to the coastal area to the seaport. Karachi is a seaport as well as a commercial city, a banking hub, and an industrial hub, and it has a high population, of the 230 million is 23 million in Karachi, which means about 10% of the population lives in Karachi. So that's the city we are talking about.

But we used to have a car as I told you, and that car used to run on petrol, so, starting in the 50s, we were using petrol, not high octane at that time. And later on, the car I had in the 60s—when I went to university, I was lucky to be given a car of my own—it was a Fiat 1100D. And it was something that now, for that money, you can't buy a cycle, much less a motorcycle. And where we got the gas was the petrol pumps, which were there all the time. And apart from this, the family created a principle that once a week, we will not be given the car but will go by public transport to the school. And something that is very amazing that many people may or may not know is that there used to be trams in Karachi, the same trams that you see in Switzerland and San Francisco, those trams used to be there, but they were not electrical tracks at that time, I'm talking about the 50s, and those trams used to run on petroleum products, which were smelling like diesel to me, I remember the smell. And it used to be more mechanical, it used to be driven by both sides: the guy used to take his gear out from one place when he went in a different

direction to go install it in another. And there used to be open seating. The trams were unfortunately taken out totally and completely, they did not leave them because it was a private company running them. They took them out because it was the main road and it was a busy road. It was known as Bandar Road, which means Port Road, but now it is known by the name of our founder – MA Jinnah road. So I think because of the traffic they completely removed it and now there are lots of buses and cars there. There were buses at that time also, and the buses were being run on a diesel type of a thing, I think, because it was not clean air.

Now, transportation, I've talked about, and what kind of life I lived--I remember people used to use kerosene lamps in the villages at that time. But in Karachi, there was electricity coming through wires, copper wires. And we used to live in a building where there was electricity for the light. So we didn't go through the pain of the kerosene oil. There was no gas for heating at that time, so we used to use wood to burn, which has the climate effects, but it is what used to be used, and even today, it's being used in Islamabad, where I live, the people who cannot afford gas, they use that. So wood was used for heat, but we used to use, at home for cooking, coal, which is mined in Pakistan.

I don't think that in the 50s we had the gas, nor in the 60s: later on, that came in. And I think the natural gas in Pakistan was discovered in 1952, which was Pakistan Petroleum Limited, but I don't remember that we had that in our family house, even up to 1960. Then, it used to be that we had stoves, and the stoves used to have kerosene. So that was the chain: from coal to stove in the 50s and 60s, and later on, came the gas.

So I hope that I have touched on this, what kind of food you also mentioned was something you wanted to know? In Karachi, it was very interesting that there was no chicken at that time, but there was always meat. Beef was kind of considered to be something only people who can't afford mutton would eat. So, we always had mutton, and not beef, which, now beef is more expensive than anything, even in Pakistan. And then there were vegetables, and those were not grown at home because we were in a building so there was nothing grown except for a few pots of roses and flowers. But the staple food was wheat—chapatis and naan—and it was made at home on the kerosene stoves and the food was mainly curry and vegetables and fried things. And fish was eaten a lot; because Karachi is on the sea coast, a lot of fish is eaten: fish, vegetables, and also legumes were eaten.

Hamza Jilani

And how did this food get to you? Who did the shopping, and what was that like?

Nisar A. Memon

It was a joint family. And one of my uncles had the responsibility to buy all the stuff needed at home whether it was clothes or food, it was him, the youngest of my uncles, that used to do that. And the ladies used to cook: that was the distribution of the labor. And they were purchased from the shops and they were beautiful markets. Even today, those markets like Empress Market which were built by the British in colonial times, stand out. But there were local markets also, like fish markets. I remember going there all the time. Sometimes, I'd drag along with him. And the local markets were very close by, you didn't need to go in a car, it was walking distance

and then there were other shops also from where you could buy things. There was no such thing as hamburgers or McDonald's, fast food was not there. It was all homemade, I would even call it organic food, because the fertilizers had not come in at that time.

Hamza Jilani

What about the meat, where did that come from?

Nisar A. Memon

Meat and vegetables came from the rural areas, from only 20 kilometers away from downtown. There was a green patch that was known as Malir. Today, it's a mostly residential place, but at that time, it was a green patch created for the city of Karachi from where the vegetables came and where people used to have sheeps and goats, which were kept on the farms and purchased there. People used to have these little farms there, but then as you go deeper into the country, the rural areas were growing the wheat and rice we used to have and also the meat and legumes.

Hamza Jilani

And our family was involved in grain production, right? Did you ever visit the farms? What were they like?

Nisar A. Memon

Yes, yes. We used to be young boys and we used to go there and I remember I used to ride a horse there. I was very scared of the horses on the farm; they would jump sometimes, but the gentle horses, the smaller ones, were given to us to ride. So, we used to go there to enjoy ourselves, while the parents used to look after the business of agriculture. There was no electricity, because there were no copper wires. And the ladies were not going there, it was mostly men who were going there, and we were cooking using wood, not coal—wood used to be the energy for this. And therefore, you can imagine how much wood could be wasted by burning it like this. Later on in the 50s, the gas came in, and now the country has piped gas. It is very interesting that from Karachi up to Islamabad, but not so much in the mountains, we have piped gas.

Now, in Kuwait, where we lived—I'm jumping now to Kuwait—which is an oil-producing country, they never gave us gas at home through the pipe, it was cylinders. I can imagine if you have cylinders, then you have better control over usage. It's just like water, if you buy it in bottles, you will be more careful because you have to transport it, like today with the mineral water that we use.

At that time, there was no mineral water. I remember we used to have a filter plant at one end of the city that was known as Gharo. There used to be a filter plant, and we visited it in school. They took us to see how the dirt is separated from the water and how the water comes in. And this water also was coming to Karachi by pipe so we never had to use water bottles or anything. It used to come in pipes to the house and we used to drink that! It was clean! Later on, it was said that it is better to boil it. But there was this difference in how you got water: in the villages, you would just have flowing water from the river or a stream. In the city, it was filtered water. And then, later on, this filter, when the quality was suspected to be bad—or probably the

marketing of the mineral water bottling company—then we were told that it is not so clean, so I remember we used to boil it down. That is what I was given at home, but in the villages, when we used to go to the farm, there was no boiled water, there was water from the stream, and we drank it—it was so, so, sweet and drinkable. By the way, one other thing that reminds me of is that the area we live in was known as meetha dar, and meetha means sweet, so this means a place where there is sweet water. We were close to the riverbanks and to the sea coast and the road ahead of us was Embankment road, and that area was known as kharadar, and khara means salty. So, you can imagine—in a matter of two kilometers, the water would change.

But our building used to have, in the beginning, a hand-driven pump which used to pump the water from the tank below the building to the top of the building for us to get it from the pipe. I remember there used to be a guy who used to come and do this, and he was Sikh. At that time, even after the creation of the country in 1947, in the 50s, the people in Karachi used to be not only Muslims but Sikhs, Hindus, and Parsis. One of my teachers, Sir Benjamin, he was my maths teacher, he was Jewish. So, there were temples and there were synagogues in Karachi and they're still there. This country was made in the name of Islam for the Muslims to live, but the creator of the country, the founder of the country, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, announced that we will be a country where all religions will be tolerated and they will be allowed to practice. I remember, he said that now that Pakistan is made, everyone is free to go to the mosques, temples, synagogues, and whichever religious places they want to go, they are free to practice their religion and our Constitution allows that. I think this is a little diversion, sorry, please bring me back to your questions.

Hamza Jilani

Yeah, absolutely, I'd love to know a little more about the ports—you said Karachi is a port city and your school was close to the ports. Did you ever hang out there? What was life at the ports like?

Nisar A. Memon

When I was a young man, we used to take walks from the city towards the port area and we would see it. There were buses and trains going there and there was a lot of traffic. We talked about transportation, and the transportation at the ports--the ships had no containers at that time, packages were carried there directly, some people drove the packages to and from the port by hand and by little carts. But if the distance was longer to the port, then animals would carry the cart, so there were horse-driven carts, donkey-driven carts and there were camel-driven carts. Even today, if you go, people are carrying things by hand and by the trolleys that you have at the airport, donkeys are still there, but it is difficult to manage those animals and they are becoming more expensive.

The port was created by the British colonial system because they wanted all the raw materials. For example, we produced cotton in the rural areas: in Sindh, there is weather that is good for the cotton. So, cotton was produced and they used to take the cotton to the mills in the United Kingdom. Now, of course, the biggest industry that we have is the textile industry. And we use our own factories to do ginning, spinning, and then cloth making, and then, of course, fabrics and even readymade garments. So that is something the British had made. They also had the

railway system. That was one mode of transport for the ports, the engines used to be steam, like as you see in old US movies, that Wild West kind of thing. They came from the Khyber Path, which is in the northern areas of Pakistan, going through the plains of Punjab right through the whole of Sindh to Karachi city. They used to go to the port to carry all the goods for the Britishers. So they created that for their own economic system development. And that system was left and the port was left.

And one more thing is that the beaches were there, and they were not white beaches, but brown beaches. And the turtles used to come, it's one of the few beaches in the world, even today, where the turtles come and lay the eggs. And that's a remarkable thing to watch. So we used to go there and watch them quietly. Because if turtles are laying eggs, you can't distract them, they'll run away, they'll go back to the water, but if they've started to lay the eggs and you stay back, they will not be deterred, they will continue to lay eggs, digging and then laying. And hundreds of eggs they would lay and then they buried them with the sand and then they went back to the sea. So that's the kind of port which we are talking about.

Hamza Jilani

Are there still turtles there?

Nisar A. Memon

Yes, yes, there are. And that place is protected so that people don't disturb them, but this is a very important tourist attraction.

Hamza Jilani

As a final question, I want to ask about your impressions of the places you visited and lived for work when you started working.

Nisar A. Memon

So when we went to London in the 70s I think it was eye-opening because there were underground trains—metros, as they call it in the US and in France also. So that was different, and the vehicles were better, they were bigger than the ones they would export. But the metro was the main thing, and then of course it was a much more developed country. And I will say that's because of the resources that the colonial power extracted out of the colonies. And these days, there is a debate going on about reparations for all of this.

And Kuwait, too, was very developed. When I worked at IBM in Kuwait, I think there was a feeling even at that time, because of the newly acquired wealth, whether of Aramco or Adnoc in Abu Dhabi, of arrogance and superiority. One of the objectives I was given was to oversee Kuwaitization of the business. At that time, I remember in our operation, I used to manage 26 nationalities, European, American, Egyptians, and Lebanese. However, my objective was to hire people who were Kuwaiti nationals, and give them training. So we would, in fact, go out of our way to train them and give them opportunity, sometimes, they did not completely have the kind of merit we needed, so we'd lower the merit a little bit to employ them and engage them because they were the custodians and masters, or the owners of the country.

And I think, at that time, Kuwait was also one of the most developed countries that I knew in the Middle East, apart from Egypt and Lebanon, but Kuwait in the Gulf region was the most advanced because they used to have a parliament, and they used to have women working there, in their ministries. They used to be my customers: there was one ministry, the social ministry, which was totally employed by ladies. So it was a very developed society at that time. And of course, after this, Saddam walked in, but luckily, we moved by then because I was assigned to be brought back to Pakistan.

Hamza Jilani

Thank you so much for interviewing with me, Nana, it was really very insightful to hear you reflect on these experiences!

Nana

Thank you, Hamza, it was my pleasure.