



REPORT

DRIVING CANADA

**A Front Seat View of Immigration
through Uber**

*A project by Qissa in collaboration with the Canadian Museum of Immigration at
Pier 21*

Report prepared by Qissa

CONTENTS

About Qissa	1
Inspiration Behind the Project	2
Collaboration with the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21	4
About the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21	5
Overview	6
Key Insights	7
Participant Profiles	20
Outreach	36
Outreach Challenges	37
Methodology	38
Future Plans	39
Call to Collaborate	40
Special Thanks	41
Behind the Scenes	42
Photo Credits	45



About Qissa



A non-profit organization founded by anthropologists, oral-historians and writers, Anam Zakaria and Haroon Khalid, Qissa is a storytelling platform that documents, archives, and exhibits oral histories of immigrants to Canada. Telling stories of immigrants in their own words, Qissa challenges the western gaze that has traditionally framed narratives of immigrants and immigration in Canada. Starting as an artist collective in 2020, Qissa incorporated as a non-profit organization in 2024.



Contact us at info@qissa.org to get in touch.

Visit www.qissa.org to learn more about Qissa.

Inspiration behind the project



"What did you do in Afghanistan before you came to Canada?" we asked our Uber driver. He was a soft-spoken man in his late 50s or early 60s. It had been an easy flowing conversation till that point, but then it became awkward. He became conspicuously quiet.

We had asked this question of all our Uber drivers previously and none of them had ever been offended. In fact, if anything, it was a validating question, an acknowledgement that we know that Uber doesn't define them and that they probably had another career before they came to Canada and were struggling to land a job in their field. That had been our experience in almost every conversation we had with Uber drivers, most of whom happened to be recent immigrants. People were happy to tell us what they did.

When he eventually spoke up, his voice was laden with uncomfortable emotions, "I was an ENT specialist," he said. "I was working at the military hospital and came to Canada after the Taliban took over."

It was our turn to be quiet now, allowing the weight of his response to settle upon us, gathering our thoughts, trying to figure out what to say next. Both of us (Anam and Haroon) were thinking the same thing. We were on our way back from our daughter's pediatrician. Another frustrating trip. Another ear infection, and another dose of antibiotics. With the number of ear-infections she had had in the past few months and the subsequent antibiotic courses, she qualified for an ear-tube surgery, but it had been months and we couldn't even get an ENT specialist appointment to make this official assessment.

So, there we were in that car, frustrated parents, who couldn't get an ENT specialist appointment for their infant due to an understaffed health system, and a frustrated ENT specialist from Afghanistan, who couldn't practice because of the systemic barriers for foreign trained doctors ([particularly from the global south](#)), instead being forced to drive Uber to survive.

It is this and countless other such conversations we had with our Uber drivers in the past couple of years that became the inspiration behind this project. Through our personal encounters, and other news reports and secondary research, we know that there is an overrepresentation of racialized newcomer immigrants in the gig-economy. For example, [Toronto Star](#) reported that in 2023 landed immigrants accounted for almost 60 percent of the workforce providing personal transport or delivery services through an app. Another report titled [Harnessing Immigrant Talent: Reducing Overqualification and Strengthening the Immigration System](#) by a Canadian think tank, C.D. Howe Institute, highlights how immigrants from the global south have their educational and professional credentials questioned more often compared to immigrants from the global north, which often translates into overqualification of immigrants from the global south in their respective jobs.

Going beyond statistics and hard facts - though informed by them - we wanted to document the life histories of recent immigrants to Canada to understand their pathways and experiences of immigration, and their interactions with the job market, all amid growing anti-immigration sentiment and rising unaffordability in Canada. And so, in 2024, we collaborated with the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 to jointly record these oral histories, with Uber becoming an entry point to exploring the layered lived experiences of newcomers to Canada.

Landed immigrants accounted for almost 60 percent of the workforce to provide personal transport or delivery services through an app, in 2023 (Statistics Canada)

37% of new Canadians say that living in Canada has been worse than expected (Leger, 2023)

Immigrants from the global south have their educational and professional credentials questioned more often compared to immigrants from the global north (C.D. Howe Institute, 2024)

38% of employed newcomers were not able to find a job in their field (Leger, 2024)

60 percent of employed newcomers said they had difficulty finding a job due to challenges with credentials and needing local experience (Leger, 2024)





Collaboration with the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21

As Canada's national immigration museum, we were interested in exploring the possibility of a collaboration with the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 (CMIP), which holds the largest collection of immigration-related oral histories in Canada. Qissa reached out to Emily Burton, Oral Historian at CMIP, in early 2024 and pitched the project *Driving Canada: A Front Seat View of Immigration through Uber*, as a collaborative undertaking between the two organizations. The project sought to video-record oral-histories of immigrants in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA), who currently drive, or have driven Uber in the past. By capturing these stories, the project aimed to document, archive, and highlight the diverse experiences of immigrants, using Uber as a unique entry point into their journeys in Canada.

Qissa and CMIP developed a formal collaboration agreement outlining responsibilities in the project. Qissa was responsible for the outreach of the project (in consultation with CMIP), as well as conducting pre-interviews and interviews. The questionnaire was created jointly by Qissa and CMIP, and the Museum was responsible for video-recording of the interviews, conducted in October 2024, sending interview participants interview copies, and making the interviews available for both internal Museum use and third party use, subject to interview restrictions.

These interviews are part of CMIP's permanent collection, with Qissa able to access them through a licensing agreement. This report is prepared by Qissa and is not part of the collaboration, which was limited to the collection of oral history interviews.

About the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 (CMIP)

CMIP is one of six national museums in Canada. It is located in Halifax, Nova Scotia, at Pier 21, a National Historic Site of Canada, where nearly one million immigrants entered Canada between 1928 and 1971. It opened as a Pier 21 Interpretation Centre in 1999, and then became a national museum in 2011, re-opening to the public in 2015 with two core exhibitions, *The Canadian Immigration Story* and *The Pier 21 Story*. CMIP has an oral history collection of about 1,300 audio and video oral history interviews.

Visit www.pier21.ca to learn more about the Museum.



Overview

13 hours of video recordings

8 oral history interviews

5 interviews are with participants who are currently driving or have driven Uber in the past

2 interviews with co-creators of the project providing context for the project; both co-creators are recent immigrants to Canada

1 participant is the spouse of someone who drove Uber; also a recent immigrant

6 interviews with men

2 with women

2018 – 2024: All participants immigrated to Canada between these years

1984 – 1997: All participants were born between these years

4 Express Entry Permanent Residents (PR), now citizens

2 came on a student visa, now PR

1 Refugee, now citizen

1 Temporary Immigrant (Open Work Permit)

5 Indian Origin

2 Pakistani Origin

1 Syrian Origin

2 Master's in Information Technology

2 Master's in Anthropology

1 Master's in Pharmacy

1 Bachelor's in Pharmacy

1 Bachelor's in Arabic

1 Bachelor's in Computer Applications

66 years of cumulative professional experience of all the interviewees prior to moving to Canada

Key Insights

Diasporic Communities

Certain geographical regions have huge diasporic populations across the world, which further fuels emigration trends. Many of our interviewees, particularly from Punjab, India, referred to this and spoke about the charm of Canada, due to its historical connection with the Sikh diasporic communities.

“

My cousins are living in England. My cousins are living in Australia. My cousins are [also] living in Canada. Even New Zealand. [But] I opted [for] Canada.

You see every other person from every other house going abroad.

[I] chose Canada because there were already a lot of [Sikhs] in Canada, who [are] well-established. [People here] are well-versed with the Sikh culture.

So, you've heard stories from other immigrants that once they go [to Canada] they built everything. They have a home. They have cars. You see that on [Instagram] reels.

”





“Starting from Scratch”

All interviewees were mid-career professionals when they moved to Canada. However, despite their education and professional experiences, the majority of them reiterated that they were prepared to ‘start from scratch,’ and ‘do anything and everything.’

“

No matter what happens, no matter what the circumstances are, I'll be ready for all kinds of jobs whatsoever.

I had my mind set up for this kind of work, that even if I have to do, like the worst kind of stuff, I'll do it.

I have a master's [degree]. Why should I do an odd job? I didn't come with **THAT** mindset. I want to earn a living [however I can].

You have to start from zero.

”

Impact of COVID

COVID loomed large across all interviews, impacting immigration plans, delaying documents, hindering job search, separating families and sometimes even providing new opportunities.

“

My daughter was born in the year 2020. She's a COVID kid. It was very hard for me, because I was away from my family at a time when they needed me the most.

We were not getting out from homes to give resumes. Even the people who were on jobs were getting laid off during COVID. So, the beginning days were really hard.

I applied for PR in 2019. [Within] four months, everything was processed. I had to book my biometric appointment. But then COVID hit. I had to wait for 22 months, but [by then] I had changed my mind [about immigration]. [Things] had started to settle down in India. I built a home. I spent all my savings on it, because I had it in my mind that [the PR] is not going to come and there's no need to move to Canada.

I took this decision [to immigrate] during the pandemic, when I was sitting at home. I thought of taking some chances in life, of trying something new. I decided to come to Canada.

”





Devaluing of international experience and the emphasis on Canadian professional experience

Uber is a choice borne out of necessity for the interviewees. They all applied for jobs in their fields but experienced obstacles. With professional degrees and extensive work experience, many did not realize it would be so hard to find employment commensurate with their experience. Everyone expressed frustration with the overemphasis on 'Canadian experience' in the job market.

“

I understood what was happening. I understood my international experience is not being counted.

I did not choose this profession [Uber driving]. I was forced to get in this profession because that is the only thing available to pay my bills.

[I was told] you need Canadian experience. I don't know what they mean [by that]. Experience is experience.

”

“

I'm a new immigrant. How will I have Canadian experience? You give me the job [and] I will build up the experience. So, this is kind of a conundrum. You cannot break out of it.

As per the immigration [requirements] you get [everything] assessed. I got my degrees assessed, and it was equivalent to the Canadian education here, but still, they don't consider it.

I thought, what big of a deal would it be to get a customer service job? [Canada] is a big country. There are lots of big companies here. Every company needs a customer service job. So, it would not be a big deal for me to get a customer service job here.

I thought that I'll [get] a part-time job and then I'll go for a [full-time] role. Since I have great experience back home, I will be offered a job very easily.

Going out. Giving my resumes. Trying for full-time or part-time jobs. I heard nothing ... [I started thinking] maybe I should do something differently.

I applied for a sales representative [job] at a retail company, and they said to me that you are overqualified and you'll leave us after you get a job.

I started applying for entry-level jobs. [I hear] that I am overqualified for those, but I don't have 'Canadian experience' for higher level jobs.

Beggars cannot be choosers ... Once you know bank accounts are draining out, you try to look for other jobs. You cannot just be searching for the jobs you like. You have to be open to anything.

”



rac-ism /'reɪsɪzəm/
abilities are determ
racialist; believer in
rack¹ /ræk/ n 1 w
holding food (esp h
... from

'Anti-brown' and racist experiences

Some of our interviewees spoke about covert and overt racist experiences.

“

They were like, sorry, we don't have any job for you. And that's when I realized so many companies here ... they don't want us (South Asians) in their stores ... It was heartbreaking.

We faced such thing when we actually tried to find a home ... This is nothing that somebody has said to us. This is something that we actually concluded. That maybe ... they would not want our race to be there in their home.

I got a ride and it got cancelled. I again got a ride from the same person. It got cancelled. I don't know what could be the reason ... it could be a reason that [they] don't want to drive with [me].

”



“

It was 2 at night and there was a person who was drunk, and [I] was driving [him] home. He kept on complaining [about] how the economy sucked and that immigration is the reason for it, and how people from other races and religions have come and taken over a lot of things. At that point, you can't do anything. You have to keep listening because you need the money. I could have stopped the car and asked him to get out of my car but I couldn't do that. It could affect my rating. I've heard Uber drivers getting banned for a month ... [So] I chose to focus on my job and get this person home safely.

We went to a bar [in Oakville]. I just dropped them (white professional ice hockey players) off there. There were no white people in line [in] front of the pub. They were just openly speaking about it ... This is not a pub that we should go to. We should choose something else ... I felt bad about it.

I saw reels on Instagram, a lady who was complaining about [how] the housing prices went up because immigrants and students come, and they get together, like eight or nine or 10 of them, and purchase a house. [She said] I cannot afford [a house] because we are not used to living with so many people. But the thing that pinched me from her interview was that she has been here for the last 20 years, and she was not able to buy a home. She is still renting it. So how come I, who has been just here for two years, make a difference?

My cousin [who] lived here [in Toronto] for many years is an HR professional, and she said, 'You need to take Pakistan off your resume.' And I realized that every organization I had worked for had Pakistan in its name ... I started using acronyms ... I only started getting interview calls after that.

”





The emotional toll of losing community

Many of the interviewees came from big family systems and interconnected communities. They spoke about the emotional loss they experienced and the importance of keeping up a brave front to protect their families back home.

“

When I came here, I realized that nobody even cares that I'm here.

I was out of money by the end of December. It was [very] stressful, because you cannot even tell [your family] what's going on. Everybody back home will start to panic. So, I had to keep my mouth shut and keep doing everything I could.

[Growing up] we were never alone ... I've been a family person. I cannot stay alone. That's the only weakness. I cannot stay alone.

I was alone at ... home [in Canada] at that time, and I got the news that I had a daughter [in India]. I woke up [my housemate]. He tried ... he congratulated me. But the feeling that I wanted, I didn't get that feeling. [It] was a little hard for me to keep myself in control at such a happy moment.

If you are working on your festive day, it makes a little pain in your heart. You have memories of when you were in India, with your family and friends. You enjoy on the festive days.

”





Settlement agencies vs informal support structures

Several participants talked about reaching out to settlement agencies for support, but eventually relying upon informal community support structures because they didn't find the services at settlement agencies useful.

“ I went to a few [settlement] agencies to give my resumes. [They said] whenever anything comes up, we will contact you. But unfortunately, that happened only a couple of times. The [agencies] didn't work much for me.

We went to the newcomer centre ... [I was told] I could do a course [at the centre] and then it would help me to find work. I took this course, but I didn't [pursue] it, because it was taking [a] long time.

I let them (a settlement agency) know that this is my experience. These are the things that I have done and if you can help me in getting a job, then that would be wonderful ... they told me that they will help me build my resume, help apply everywhere but whenever I had my appointments, it was not that fruitful.

A friend had a distant friend, who took the responsibility to pick me up [from the airport]. He took me to their home. They were 12-13 people living there. I was there for 13 days. They didn't even take any money from me. They told me that you are from home. You need support. You can pay us off when you get your first job.

I had this one cousin here, who guided me. [She told me] you need to set up a bank account, get your SIN, health card ... In the initial months, I took [financial] support from my cousin. She did that for me.

My friend set up everything for me. He contacted another friend and found me a home.

I stay in this house with my sister-in-law's family. We stay together so that the expenses are taken care of, and if someone is working from home, that person can also take care of things that are required to be taken care [of] when the kids are going to be home. We've also had a requirement of someone going to drop the kids to school, pick them up from school. So, it becomes easier as a family.

”

A moment in history - economic recession

Despite the challenges, many interviewees interpreted their situation through the lens of 'economic recession.' They commented on how there are several more Uber drivers on the road now while there are fewer riders and that has decreased the margins for the drivers.

“

It started off good, eventually recession hit and everybody started [driving Uber]. So that's when there was no money. You have to wait for like 20-30 minutes or even more. You were making good money; average money; then you are making nothing.

I was doing more than 12-14 hours [seven days a week]. But there were times that there was no passenger and you were just waiting ... I was on the road all the time. I had to pick the right spot, but wherever I was going, there were no [passengers].

Income per hour is way less than the minimum wage ... [I am] earning about \$9 to \$10 per hour [working] those many hours (17 to 18 hours/day). There are apparently so many drivers that you've got to wait. There are a lot of wait times.

It wasn't a good paying gig, but I had to do it because I had no options ... It is not the same anymore. I feel that there are too many cars on the roads, too many drivers, and the pay is only getting worse.

”



The Uber Experience

While many interviewees spoke about the sense of isolation and challenges that come with the gig economy, others also spoke about how driving Uber helped them interact with different cultures and people they wouldn't normally interact with and provided them with a better understanding of Canada. For some it paved the way to fine-tune certain skills, while others brought in previous professional experience to their work.

“

[There are a few] Facebook groups, but there is no physical contact with the other gig workers.

Uber is quite a different experience. Everyone should have it, because you get the time to know people from all walks of life. You engage with so many people. You understand the country's working culture. You understand people from diverse cultures. You learn about how this country has been to them.

I learn a lot of things from the people sitting with me while driving Uber ... [I have] had wonderful conversations ... about what happened, why they moved here ... I keep on learning [new] things.

I have kept my health on the last priority ... I don't have regular breaks or intervals to eat food. I [end up] eating a lot of junk food. Whatever is available easily, quickly, and is cheap.

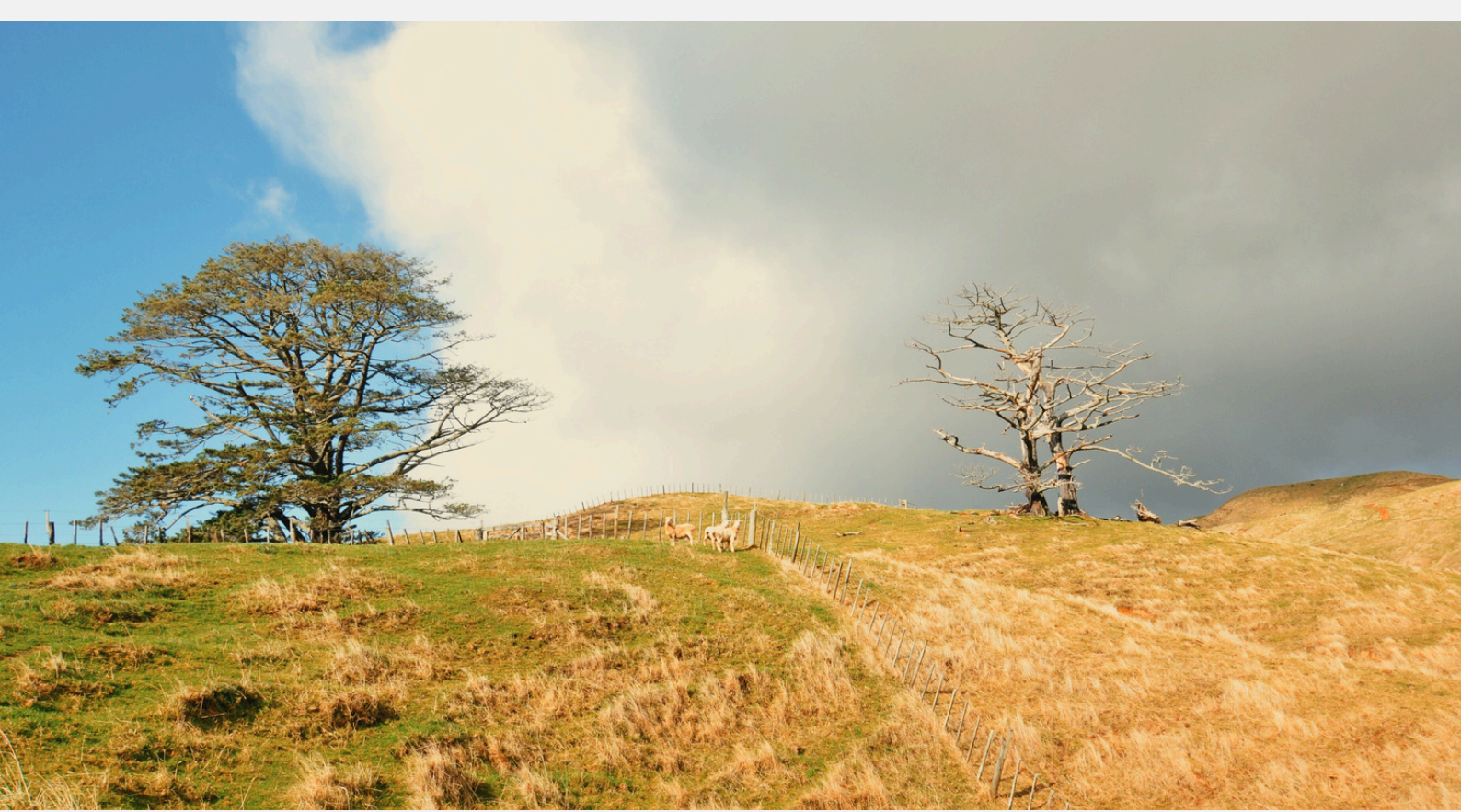
I make sure that my car is completely clean ... this comes from my customer service background. I want the person riding [in] my car to have the best experience. I get tipped a lot.



I like talking a lot. Every time I have a new person in my car, I try to communicate ... I got a chance to improve my vocabulary, my grammar. I can hold a conversation with a random person. And that has made me better professionally because I'm a sales person and these kinds of qualities are important for my profession ... it's been an amazing experience, and I think it has contributed to my character.

”





Perception vs. Reality

Almost all the participants had a better perception of Canada than the reality they experienced. Their perception changed drastically after the challenges they encountered.

“

I felt like I could make a difference for my family. [By coming to Canada] I would be able to change [my family's status] from working class to business class ... The grass, which is not greener here ... looked greener [from India].

Coming to Canada was a dream come true ... You had seen [on social media] people who come to Canada suddenly had money and everything ... [But after I came here, I asked myself] am I in the right country? Is this the Canada that I had heard of?

[If I had known about the economic situation in Canada] I would have stayed back in India and not come here. But since I'm here now, I have to fight my way out.

Reality is reality. It is more difficult than [we had] imagined. And to be honest, it has become [even] more difficult since the time we came here.

”





Immigrant optimism

While a few of the participants have found full-time employment, many still see themselves in the 'struggling' stage of their life and are driven to carve out a prosperous future for themselves in Canada.

“

[Canada] is not that shiny. The struggle is real ... but still, the dream is there. We'll do something about it ... this country pays for time.

I'm looking for [a] great future here in Canada ... I want to see my daughter grow [up] here.

The reality, it is more difficult than imagined. We're adapting. Whatever happens, we're okay ... we will always be okay.

For everybody who is coming, or who has come in recent times, just don't lose hope. Times will be good. They will be.

”



Profiles

Kulbir Singh
Bhullar

"Nobody wants to come here and drive Uber," said Kulbir Singh, a Sikh-Marathi immigrant from India, who came to Canada in March 2024, along with his six-year-old daughter, to join his wife, Jagjit Kaur. Jagjit is an international student at Algoma University, Brampton, Ontario. Married in 2012, Kulbir and Jagjit had high paying jobs in India. Having completed an MBA in finance, his wife's last position in India was Vice President of Bank of New York Mellon (BNY Mellon) in Pune. Meanwhile, with a background in Information Technology (IT), Kulbir worked with Microsoft for nine years before joining Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), a company with 150 locations across 46 countries.

They first planned to move to Canada in 2018 for a better future, particularly for their daughter, Bani. They applied through Express Entry PNP (Provincial Nominee Program) but didn't qualify. Then when COVID hit, Kulbir lost his father and their plans to move to Canada were put on halt. They decided to pursue their goal of settling in Canada again in 2023, this time through the educational route, with one spouse studying, and the other taking up full-time employment to support the family.

The three of them were initially planning to travel together, but Kulbir and Bani had to stay back because they couldn't get their visas in time. This was due to rising political tensions between Canada and India, which resulted in a temporary reduction of Canada's diplomatic presence in India. Before coming to Canada, Kulbir was hoping that his company would transfer him to their Canadian office, but as that was taking too long, and the separation of mother-daughter was taking an emotional toll on both of them, he decided to quit his job and travel to Canada with his daughter soon after they got their paperwork.

Given their professional backgrounds, Kulbir was confident that they would be able to secure good jobs and eventually be able to establish their roots here. For a little while it looked like it may be an easy transition. Only two months after moving, Kulbir got a job with a company at an annual salary of \$80,000. "[I thought] I'm done. I've achieved my goal in life," he said. But after month and a half of employment his contract was terminated. With depleting savings and the pressure of having to save up for his wife's fees, Kulbir decided to drive Uber to make ends meet. "I end up doing 17, 18, 19 hours a day of driving [seven days a week]," he shared, just to meet the bare minimum expenses, leaving him with hardly any time to apply for jobs or interact with his daughter. She is often sleeping when he leaves home early in the morning, and sleeping again when he returns late at night.

Only allowed a specific number of hours to work a week as an international student, Jagjit is employed as a server with an agency, and only gets called to substitute when someone is off, or when there is a huge event. Despite these challenges, Kulbir is optimistic about their future in Canada. He hopes that one day, when he and his wife are well-settled with good jobs, they would be able to look back at these days as a phase, when they "did those jobs as well."

Mehakjot Singh



"Every [Punjabi] kid loves the maple leaf," said Mehakjot Singh, when asked why he chose to move to Canada.

Born in 1990, Punjab, India, Mehakjot completed a post-graduate degree in pharmacy and worked in the industry for five years, before moving to Canada in December 2019. With many of his friends and family members having settled in different parts of the world, including UK and Australia, Canada - particularly due to its historical connection to the Sikh diaspora - held a special charm for him.

Despite having a post-graduate degree, significant work experience, and an extensive network in Canada, Mehakjot had prepared himself to "start from zero," as a new immigrant. While he would have preferred working in the pharmaceutical industry and applied to a few jobs, he was open to all kinds of experiences, and even took up a couple of factory shifts to get started. His employment search was further exacerbated by the COVID lockdowns that happened soon after he moved. He eventually found full-time employment as a logistics coordinator at a trucking company, where he is currently employed.

Mehakjot started driving Uber in 2021 for additional income and continues to do so in his spare time. "Time is money, here in Canada," he said. He now lives with his family, wife and daughter in Brampton.

A poignant moment of Mehakjot's interview was when he described his initial departure from India, having to say bye to his family, particularly his wife, who was six-months pregnant at the time. At the peak of COVID lockdowns, Mehakjot was in Canada, when his daughter was born in India, and he couldn't see her till she was around two-and-a-half years old. He vividly described the moment when he first met his daughter at the New Delhi airport. He recalled how while driving from Delhi to their home in Ludhiana, he desperately wanted to hold her, but despite their daily multiple video-calls, he was still a stranger for her, so she preferred sitting with her grandmother. They applied for her visa while they were in India, but it got rejected, so Mehakjot had to return to Canada without his daughter, separated once again from her. "That was the hardest moment," he said.



A portrait of a man with a shaved head and a well-groomed beard, looking upwards and to the right. He is wearing a dark blue, textured zip-up jacket over a dark blue crewneck sweater. The jacket has a small "Columbia" logo on the left chest. The background is dark and out of focus.

Rammah Mohammad

When Rammah landed at Toronto Pearson Airport with his brother for the first time in 2018 through the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) program, a woman who was helping them at the airport asked him what he wanted to do in Canada. Rammah had an undergraduate degree in Arabic, with some experience of English to Arabic translation and Arabic teaching in the UAE, and six years of experience in customer services at a travel agency in Dubai before coming to Canada. But that is not what he aspired to do. "I want to do something in music," he responded.

Born in Damascus, Syria, in 1988, music had always been an important part of his childhood. In his interview, he recalled singing for his family members on community gatherings and festivals. He took some music lessons in Dubai, but only began pursuing it professionally after moving to Canada. Through the woman at the airport, he was connected with a music organization, which he joined as a singer, allowing him to establish social connections in a new country, while also providing him with a platform to pursue other musical avenues.

However, it is difficult to survive just as an artist in Toronto, so Rammah was also pursuing other employment opportunities. He sought the help of a settlement agency, but always ran into the obstacle of lack of 'Canadian experience.' "But how will I get it, if I don't get a job?" he asked. He was recommended to volunteer to gain this 'experience,' which he did, and that eventually led to a diploma in community services. Still not able to find employment in the industry of his preference, Rammah resorted to working in a factory and then a warehouse to make ends meet. He eventually took up Uber, when scheduling conflicts began to arise between his day job, and his music career. Driving Uber provides him with the flexibility of pursuing his artistic ambitions.

He hopes that eventually he'll be at a place in his musical career, which would allow him to stop driving and focus just on his art.



Yalgar Singh



"Deep inside [me] there was a feeling ... just somebody say the word, 'don't go.' I'll just cancel my [ticket]." Yalgar Singh recalled his experience of saying bye to his family at the Delhi airport before flying to Canada.

Born in 1991, Ludhiana, Punjab, India, Yalgar was raised by a single mother, with the support of his maternal uncle and aunts. Having lost his father at the age of three and witnessing his mother and uncle hustle for money, Yalgar was keen to become financially independent. After completing his undergraduate studies in Information Technology (IT), he took up a job with IBM and put himself through graduate school. He joined the provincial bureaucracy and was working with the highest bureaucrat of the province before he moved to Canada.

"The grass looked greener from watching [Instagram] reels," he said when speaking about his motivations to move to Canada. He had seen it on social media, heard from other immigrants and students, and particularly followed the journey of one of his friends who had moved to Canada after his graduation and done incredibly well.

But a lot had changed for Yalgar between the time he applied for his immigration and the time he received his visa. His application got delayed because of the COVID lockdowns, allowing him the time to re-evaluate his life goals. He was doing well at his job; a long-standing property dispute had finally been resolved and Yalgar had managed to build a new home. However, he decided to go ahead with his initial plans of moving to Canada nonetheless due to what he described as "peer pressure." He shared how everyone (relatives and wider community) around him knew that he was planning to move, so by the time he got his PR, he felt there was an expectation that he should go. Hoping that things would be better for him in Canada he decided to immigrate.

Supported by an informal network of acquaintances but with a rapidly depleting financial reserve, Yalgar realized that he would not get a job commensurate with his professional experience and education after his initial interactions in the job market. He shifted to applying to lower-level IT jobs; then clerical; and eventually to McDonald's and Tim Hortons, before taking up work at warehouses. He started driving Uber in 2022.

"Everyone should have the experience of [driving Uber]," he said. "You understand the country's working culture." He talked about how he saw the early signs of recession as an Uber driver, with a drop in the passengers, and more drivers on the street, severely undercutting revenue for Uber drivers.

He recently found full-time employment with one of the transits of GTA, not at all connected with his previous experience and education, but hopes that he would eventually move up the organization with time.

Niharika Aggarwal



PROD

ROLL

SCENE

TAKE

Interviewer: Anam Zakaria
DIRECTOR: Niharika Aggarwal
Interviewee: Darryl Le Blanc
CAMERA: Day.Night Int Ext Mos
DATE: 26 Oct. 2024 Filter Sync

"I told them everything is great. This country is fabulous. You know the trees are colourful," laughed Niharika Aggarwal, as she told us about her phone calls with her family back home in India. So even when Niharika was struggling - not hearing back from jobs relevant to her experience, being rejected from retail and other similar jobs for being overqualified, and not having strong community support around her - she felt she couldn't share her exasperation with her family. Leaving behind a well-paying job and an extensive family network, Niharika moved to Canada because she felt the country would provide her with an opportunity to make good money and support her family back home.

That is what she had heard from people around her, that one could potentially make decent money even through odd jobs in Canada. That is also the impression she had gotten from the social media accounts of her friends, relatives and other acquaintances who lived in Canada, people who didn't necessarily have a lot of money in India but were now doing quite well, or so it seemed. The allure of economic prosperity was the primary motivator, behind Niharika's decision to move to Canada in 2022.

She was born into a business family, but the business had crashed around the time Niharika had completed her post-graduate degree in computer science. This economic downturn had taken a huge toll on the family, and severely impacted the health of her father. Soon after, she became the primary breadwinner for her family. While she continued working in India, she also applied for Canadian immigration but the process got delayed because of COVID. Around this time, she found a well-paying remote job that allowed her to stay close to her family. "I started thinking, India is not as bad. You can grow (financially) here as well." However, just when she had begun imagining a future in India, she heard back about her PR application and eventually got her visa.

Niharika's office also had a presence in Canada and she was hoping that she would get a transfer here before moving, but as the process was taking too long, she decided to move anyway, optimistic that she would be able to find some sort of employment here.

But her experience of Canada was drastically different from what she had imagined. She initially applied for jobs in her field of data analytics, but after receiving no responses, she shifted to applying for roles in retail sales, restaurant service, and similar positions. With rejections from here as well, she wondered if this was because of her ethnic-racial background. Eventually her office in India managed to transfer her to their Canadian office, where she currently works.

In addition to her employment challenges, Niharika also found it hard to settle in a new country without the support of her friends and family. She was accustomed to a big network of community, having grown up in a joint family with many uncles, aunts, and cousins. She met an old friend from college, Yalgar Singh, around this time, and eventually married him. Like Niharika, Yalgar too was struggling with finding employment aligned with his educational and professional experience, and was driving Uber to survive at the time. While Niharika is currently employed, she is still searching for jobs to get 'Canadian experience.'

Mohd Javed Khokar



"We were always considered as Pakistani who never belonged in the society," said Mohd Javed while recalling his experiences as a Muslim child studying in a government school in Mumbai, India. Javed grew up in a Muslim-dominated area, which meant that all of his friends were Muslims. However, despite having a pre-dominant Muslim student body, he recalled how he never had a Muslim teacher at school, and that most of his interactions with his teachers in school were tense, and openly discriminatory towards the Muslim students. His experience at college was also shaped by this anti-Muslim sentiment.

He got an undergraduate degree in pharmacy in 2014 and worked in the industry for three years. It was during the pandemic that Javed decided to take a "chance" and pursue his higher education in Canada. He secured a financial loan to fund his education and got an admission in a pharmacy program at Durham College in Oshawa. However, due to last minute delays in the visa procedure he couldn't travel to begin his program on time, while deferring his admission for a year wasn't an option. Reluctantly he transferred to an international business program in the same college and got to Canada just in time to begin his classes in the winter semester.

Recalling his days as an international student, Javed reflected on the challenges of balancing a demanding academic program with part-time employment. Having started as a part-time cook at a fast-food chain, Javed eventually took up full-time employment at the restaurant after he graduated. He quit this job and started driving Uber full-time after he received an invitation to apply for his Permanent Residency (PR) in 2023, hoping that Uber would provide him with the flexibility of applying for jobs, relevant to his education and experience.

After a job-hunt that lasted about nine to ten months, he found work that aligned with his interests and is now employed there. "There is definitely less fun in life [in Canada]," he said when comparing his lifestyle to that in India. "But I think I am a better person - more empathetic, good listener and totally independent. It's a fair trade-off."



**Anam
Zakaria**



"I got to experience what it means to constantly put yourself out there and get rejected, because all the experience you've accumulated counts for nothing," said Anam Zakaria, speaking about her challenges of trying to find a job in Canada after her immigration. As the last interview of the project, Emily Burton, Oral Historian at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 interviewed Anam Zakaria and Haroon Khalid, founders of Qissa and creators of the project, *Driving Canada: A Front Seat View of Immigration through Uber*, to learn about their immigration journeys and how that inspired the project.

Anam first moved to Canada in 2008 for her undergraduate degree in international development from McGill University and was planning on staying here permanently after graduation, having found a job in the non-profit sector. However, she decided to move back to Pakistan due to some family circumstances. In Pakistan she took up the position of Director at Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP), a non-profit organization, conducting oral history interviews with Partition survivors and heading cultural exchanges between Pakistani and Indian students. This formative experience propelled her writing career, that includes three published books, which utilize oral histories as their primary methodology. In addition to her writing career, Anam continued working in the non-profit sector for over a decade in the capacity of director, began teaching part-time, and also trained as a counsellor. Anam won the KLF-German Peace Prize in 2017 and contributes to regional and global press regularly, writing about war, violence, narrative-making and the construction of the 'other.' Her work has been cited in The Guardian, The New York Times, NPR, Reuters and BBC, among other outlets.

Forced to move to Canada in 2019, due to the political situation in the country, Anam went back to school and completed a master's degree in anthropology from University of Toronto. Given her 'Canadian education' and her extensive work experience, Anam was not anticipating the challenges she experienced during her job hunt. "I wouldn't hear back. [It] was cover letter after cover letter, resume after resume. There's something very isolating about [it]. [One feels as if] I don't even know if anybody is reading this."

While Anam understood the systemic barriers she was up against, she witnessed them first-hand, when after a year of search, she eventually landed her first job at an immigration settlement agency. Leading the volunteer department, Anam worked with highly qualified immigrants, who were volunteering with the agency to get 'Canadian experience and references.' She witnessed the lack of opportunities that were provided to newcomers and immigrants, and the corresponding devaluing of their experiences.

Her own personal story, compounded with her interactions with other newcomers, inspired her to tell the story of immigrants to Canada. She understands that the journey of immigrants is not always of upward mobility as popularly imagined and feels strongly that immigrants need to tell their own story in their own words if one is to understand their nuanced and complex experiences after they arrive in Canada.

Haroon Khalid

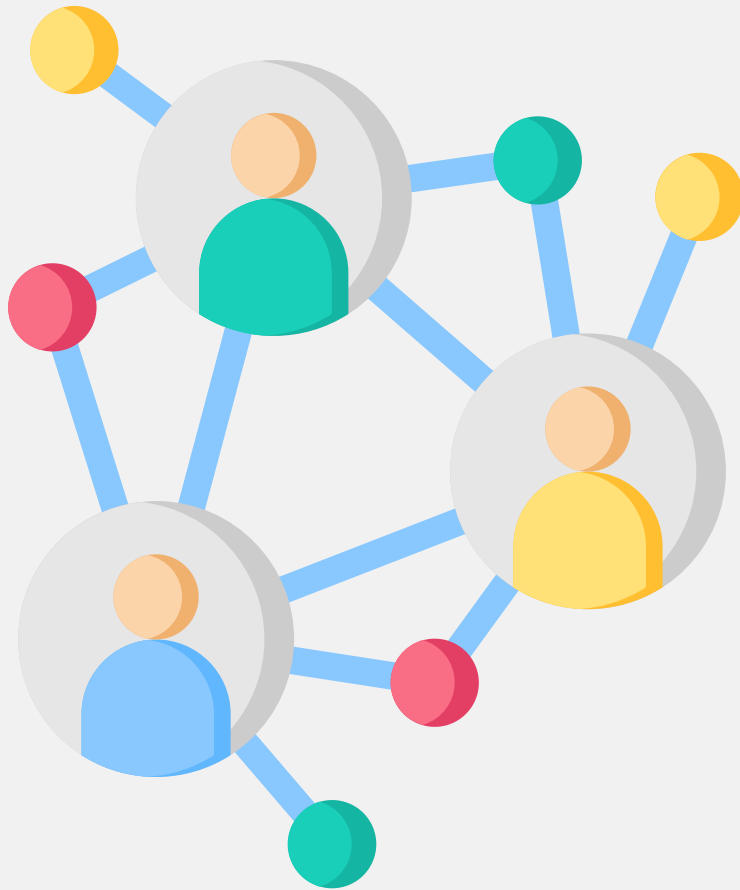


"How do you translate your experience?" asked Haroon Khalid, co-founder Qissa, and co-creator of the project, *Driving Canada: A Front Seat View of Immigration through Uber*. Married in 2013, Haroon and Anam first met at the Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP), where they were both working as directors. With an academic background in anthropology, and professional experience in journalism, Haroon was heading the Minority Project at CAP, collecting oral histories of religious minorities in Pakistan, a project that eventually led to his first book. Since then, he has published five books (Penguin Random House), using oral history as the primary methodology, focusing on religions, cultures and histories of Punjab. He has written hundreds of articles for various publications including MacLean's, CBC, Al-Jazeera and HuffPost. His writings have been translated into six languages, and he has been cited in the BBC, Forbes, Vice, CNN, Reuters, AFP and several other media and academic publications.

While continuing his writing career, Haroon eventually began teaching A levels, and had no desire to move to Canada, until the political situation in the country forced them to consider immigrating. On one hand, due to the South Asian focus in his writing, Haroon was apprehensive about his employment prospect in Canada, on the other hand, he was also excited about the opportunity of engaging with diasporic communities here and collecting their oral histories, which were otherwise inaccessible to him. Starting as an artist collective in 2020, Haroon and Anam founded Qissa and began collecting oral histories of different diasporic communities in Canada.

"When we had our daughter, we started taking Uber much more, and were having conversations [with the drivers]." He talked about how as recent immigrants as well, he could relate to so many of the experiences shared by the drivers, most of who happened to be newcomers. Inspired by these conversations, Haroon and Anam created the *Driving Canada: A Front Seat View of Immigration through Uber* project.





Outreach

The outreach of the project was undertaken by Qissa, through personal contacts, social media and traditional media, and through relevant organizations.

Soon after Qissa initiated a conversation with CMIP about the project, Anam and Haroon started broaching the topic with drivers anytime they would take an Uber for personal use. They got about **thirty phone numbers** between the two of them, and when the details about the project were finalized, they reached out to all the drivers who had shown initial interest to confirm if they would like to participate in the project. They heard back from only **four potential participants**. **Three out of these four** eventually dropped out, with two of them cancelling on the day of the interview. More context on outreach challenges is provided below.

As soon as Qissa shared a post about the project on social media, there was a lot of interest, with two interview requests coming from Punjabi language media (radio and television). Haroon from Qissa, represented the project and also shared that they were still looking for more participants. They received **two participants** as a result of these interviews.

Given that Haroon and Anam are also Punjabi, and recent immigrants, they were able to tap on some of their personal contacts and received **three participants** through these efforts. In addition, Qissa also reached out to settlement agencies and other stakeholder organizations for outreach.

Outreach Challenges

"I really hate this phase of my life and I don't want to be put in a museum around a thing which I hate about myself."

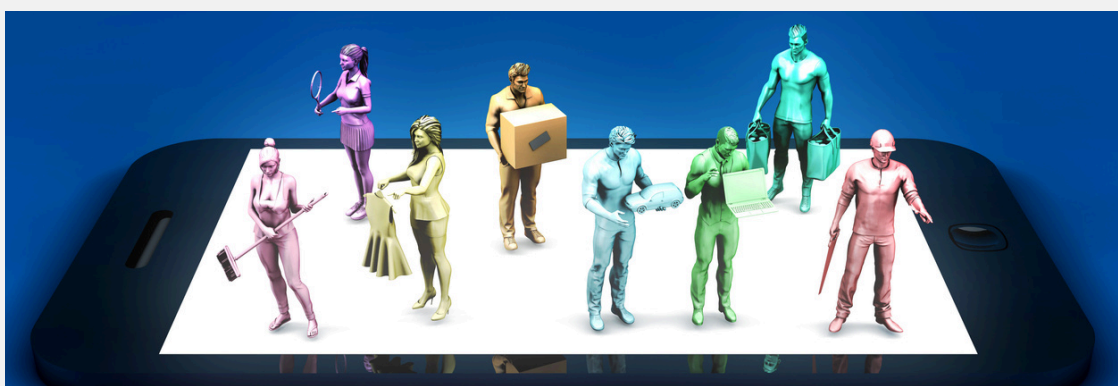
We received this message a couple of weeks prior to the recording of the interviews. This was from a potential participant, who had initially agreed but eventually refused to be recorded for the project. Another South Asian immigrant, he had left behind a successful business in his home country, moved to Canada in 2018, and began driving Uber soon after he arrived. We had met him by chance when we booked an Uber ride to visit our daughter's doctor. Within the confined space of the car, without the gaze of a camera, and no structured interview, we had an honest conversation that encapsulated several of the themes spotlighted in these interviews.

There were many such cancellations and refusals to participate. In many ways, you can tell a lot more about the project by understanding why people felt reluctant to be interviewed for it.

Here are some of the reasons that were communicated to us by drivers who shared their stories off camera but were reluctant to be recorded:

- Their family back home doesn't know they drive Uber
- They don't want to be known as an Uber driver
- They are a refugee and don't want to put their face out there, while their case is being processed
- They feel uncomfortable in light of the recent changes in immigration policies, which is creating increasing vulnerability and uncertainty about their future in Canada
- They feared that their interview will result in them facing online backlash amid growing anti-brown and anti-immigration sentiment

A point that wasn't expressed to us, but something we feel also added to the reluctance of participants is the precarious nature of the gig-economy. Several of our interviewees mentioned that 'time is money,' so to be able to take out three hours of their time for an oral history interview, when they could be 'making money' in that time period was also a deterrent.





Methodology

Each interview is roughly an hour and forty-five minutes long and follows a life-history model. Using a semi-structured questionnaire, the interviews are divided into three main categories:

1. Life before coming to Canada
2. The process of coming to Canada
3. Life in Canada

Questions about their Uber experience were asked of participants, but Uber served as an entry point into the stories of these immigrants, rather than the primary focus of the interview.

In addition to interviewing Uber drivers, we also wanted to interview family members to gain insight into how the gig economy impacts family dynamics and economies. We are grateful to Niharika Aggarwal for agreeing to be interviewed for the project. As a newcomer herself, there were many overlaps between her experiences and those of other participants. At the same time, her interview also provided new insights and perspectives.

Adding interviews of the co-creators of the project, Anam and Haroon, helped establish their positionality in relation to the participants and the project, as well as map their unique newcomer experiences.

All the interviews were conducted by Qissa's Anam Zakaria or Haroon Khalid, except for their interview, which was conducted by CMIP's Emily Burton. Darryl LeBlanc was the videographer and media editor for all the interviews.

Future Plans

While Qissa is planning to exhibit these interviews through various artistic mediums and public platforms, including designing a virtual exhibition, we are also keen to conduct more interviews with gig-economy workers, as a separate project from the CMIP collaboration.

In 2025 and 2026, Qissa is also planning more oral history projects with newcomers and refugees, working in different sectors and industries. These projects will provide a better understanding of the different experiences of immigrants in Canada, especially of those who have come in recent years.

With the announced changes to immigration policies in 2024, it has become even more urgent to capture some of these stories to understand the human implication of these shifting policies.

Stay tuned or get in touch for more information.





Collaboration

Call to Collaborate

We invite individuals and organizations to collaborate with Qissa in the following ways:

1. Organizations interested in oral history / life story reach out for potential partnerships
2. Help spread the word by sharing this report or hosting a conversation with the authors and participants
3. Be interviewed for one of our projects or nominate someone to become a part of our archive

Contact:

Contact us at info@qissa.org to get in touch

Visit www.qissa.org to learn more about Qissa and our upcoming projects



A special thanks to the following people for their immense support to this project:

- Emily Burton
- Jan Raska
- Sarah Little
- And all Museum staff who facilitated the collaboration
- Darryl LeBlanc
- Shamira Madhany
- Sarah Kastner
- Sheila Pin
- Ashley Craddock
- Emma Love
- And all WES team members for their support in spotlighting the narratives from this project
- Maysoon Sheikh
- Manpreet Sahota
- Loveen Gill
- Ganeev Dhillon
- Sivathmiga Kumaraswamy
- Camilo Garay
- Dina Al-khooly
- Prashina Paudel

Behind the Scenes



Haroon Khalid taking a picture of Yalgar Singh and Niharika Aggarwal.



Haroon Khalid taking a picture of Mehakjot Singh.



Haroon Khalid, Anam Zakaria, Emily Burton of CMIP, and Mehakjot Singh sitting around a table before an interview.



Mohd Javed Khokar, Anam Zakaria and Emily Burton engaged in a conversation after an interview.



Haroon Khalid, Anam Zakaria, Emily Burton of CMIP, and Yalgar Singh sitting around a table before an interview.



Haroon Khalid, Anam Zakaria, Emily Burton of CMIP, and Rammah Mohammad sitting around a table before an interview.

Photo Credits

Image 1 (Cover Page): © Tim Samuel via Canva.com

Image 2 (Contents): © CoWomen via Canva.com

Image 3 (Page 1): Anam Zakaria of Qissa interviewing Mehakjot Singh. Photo by Darryl LeBlanc

Image 4 (Page 1): © Prashant Kumar via Canva.com

Image 5 (Page 1): Haroon Khalid observing Mehakjot Singh's interview. Photo by Darryl LeBlanc

Image 6 (Page 2): © KeithBinns via Canva.com

Image 7 (Page 3): © Josie Desmarais via Canva.com

Image 8 (Page 4): Niharika Aggarwal, Yalgar Singh, Anam Zakaria and Emily Burton sitting around a table. Photo by Darryl LeBlanc

Image 9 (Page 5): The Canadian Immigration Hall exhibition, 2016. Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 [17374-2]

Image 10 (Page 6): © Manjurul via Canva.com

Image 11 (Page 7): © Snappy Cactus via Canva.com

Image 12 (Page 8): © vm from Getty Images Signature via Canva.com

Image 13 (Page 9): © Anna Shvets via Canva.com

Image 14 (Page 10): © 89Stocker via Canva.com

Image 15 (Page 11): © Tuangtong via Canva.com

Image 16 (Page 12): © aga7ta from Getty Images via Canva.com

Image 17 (Page 12): © bambaleq via Canva.com

Image 18 (Page 13): © Kelly via Canva.com

Image 19 (Page 14): © Instants from Getty Images Signature via Canva.com

Image 20 (Page 14): © Sabir Mallick via Canva.com

Image 21 (Page 15): © Juani Sanchez via Canva.com

Image 22 (Page 16): © MF3d from Getty Images Signature via Canva.com

Image 23 (Page 17): © nkeskin from Getty Images via Canva.com

Image 24 (Page 17): © rattanakun via Canva.com

Image 25 (Page 18): © DesmondD from Getty Images via Canva.com

Image 26 (Page 18): © alexsl from Getty Images Signature via Canva.com

Image 27 (Page 19): left to right - Niharika Aggarwal and Yalgar Singh. Photo by Darryl LeBlanc

Image 28 (Page 20): Kulbir Singh Bhullar. Photo by Darryl LeBlanc

Image 29 (Page 22): Mehakjot Singh. Photo by Darryl LeBlanc

Image 30 (Page 23): Mehakjot Singh, Emily Burton, Anam Zakaria, and Haroon Khalid sitting around a table. Photo by Darryl LeBlanc

Image 31 (Page 24): Rammah Mohammad. Photo by Darryl LeBlanc

Image 32 (Page 25): left to right - Haroon Khalid, Rammah Mohammad, Anam Zakaria, and Emily Burton. Photo by Darryl LeBlanc

Image 33 (Page 26): Yalgar Singh. Photo by Darryl LeBlanc

Image 34 (Page 28): Niharika Aggarwal. Photo by Darryl LeBlanc

Image 35 (Page 30): Mohd Javed Khokar. Photo by Darryl LeBlanc

Image 36 (Page 31): left to right - Haroon Khalid and Mohd Javed Khokar

Image 37 (Page 32): Anam Zakaria. Photo by Darryl LeBlanc

Image 38 (Page 34): Haroon Khalid. Photo by Darryl LeBlanc

Image 39 (Page 35): Haroon Khalid and Anam Zakaria being interviewed by Emily Burton. Photo by Darryl LeBlanc

Image 40 (Page 36): © husuny from nhohuy08 via Canva.com

Image 41 (Page 37): © kentoh from Getty Images via Canva.com

Image 42 (Page 38): © Andrey Maximenko via Canva.com

Image 43 (Page 39): © Darya Sannikova from Pexels via Canva.com

Image 44 (Page 40): © 1001Love from Getty Images Signature via Canva.com

Image 45 (Page 41): © ivosar from Getty Images via Canva.com

Image 46 (Back): © James Blon from Getty Images via Canva.com

Images 47 - 52: Photos by Darryl LeBlanc

