

## Interview with Jaspreet Sangha Part 1 of 2

00:00:03**SPEAKER\_MS**

This is manmit singh. Today is June 16, 2023. I am interviewing for the first time Jaspreet Sangha. Today, this interview is taking place in Ithaca, New York from my home office. This interview is sponsored by Jakara and is a part of the Storytelling and Settlement through Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral History project. Thank you so much again, Jaspreet for being willing to sit down with me and for being willing to share your story. So the first question that I have and also trying to keep it broad with our conversation: When you think back to your experiences of growing up, tell me a little bit about what comes to mind for you? To you, are there any stories, any smells, any relationships that come to mind that help you describe growing up?

00:01:29**SPEAKER\_JS**

Yeah, I think something that comes to mind, and I think it's only on my mind because I've been heavily pondering your words on spillage and overflowing and this urge to seep out of your body, is like as a kid when I think about my experiences with peers-- coming from someone who had a very unpredictable home life and just was desiring connection--I think many times I didn't understand social cues very well and like I was kind of an awkward kid. And that paired with being gay led to a lot of weird friendships with girls where I didn't really know what it was. It was like very high emotion and confusing. So I think that's something that comes to mind in terms of my childhood. Yeah, like when I think back, I can just feel that feeling of like, I just so badly wanted to merge with other people on anything. And I felt misunderstood a lot. And sometimes I blame being raised in Sikhi, maybe not in such a negative way anymore, but a lot of the fundamentals you're taught misalign with the United States, with capitalism, with the education system. And so I always felt at odds with the systems in place because in one ear I was hearing one thing, and in another I was hearing another and I didn't really know how to make both of them work the same time.

00:04:03**SPEAKER\_MS**

Thank you so much for sharing that. And I would love to hear also as you're reflecting on, like, spilling out, if there are any stories that you've been raised with that do like touch on or make you think in that particular type of way, or any relationships that have modeled that for you possibly, especially because I'm just kind of thinking that one way that people do understand themselves is by thinking about stories that they've heard growing up or relationships that they've witnessed that at large help them understand themselves. So these stories can be specific to you, like coming out stories or memories from formative moments of your life or stories that you've heard throughout your life even that have been passed down from your families. So if you feel comfortable sharing any of either those stories or some relationships. If not, we can also come back to the question or maybe the other questions may end up triggering a thought as well.

00:05:34**SPEAKER\_JS**

Can we move forward a little bit? Thanks.

00:05:36**SPEAKER\_MS**

Absolutely, yeah, no problem at all. So when thinking about your gender and sexuality, how did you learn about these topics?

00:05:44**SPEAKER\_JS**

So, didn't really know too much growing up except my dad did say, "you know, gay people are bad" at some point in my life. But like, I think my queerness wasn't really identified as queerness until middle school. Before that it was just, as I said, very deep, high emotion connections with other girls that I thought were like my best friends, but there was this weird romantic dynamic that I just wasn't cognizant of. So it was middle school where like I finally saw openly queer kids. So like I started hanging out with these people. They were the emo kids at school. And first, we kind of connected over music, but then as I got to know them more, I realized like, wait, this is totally who I am too. And I didn't realize that it was something you could do. I think this was also happening concurrently with my internet evolution. You know, like as a child who was on the internet way too much, I would say--and kind of living in their phone and computer--I was learning about those things from Tumblr. And, you know, I was meeting people and it felt like I was finding myself in a way. So I was about 12

and I think it was my birthday where I went up to my mom and I was like, "mom I think I'm bisexual." She was like, "go to bed. Like what are you talking about? Like don't even, don't even bring this up." And it was so dismissed and I was like, okay, cool. But since then, I haven't really feared talking about my identity. And in ways I thank my parents for being so dismissive and others I wish I was cherished. But it's through that dismissiveness that instead of a heated anger or complete rejection that I've been able to explore my identity. So I think I took what I could get at the time, which was a passiveness in a way. Yeah, I didn't really have any actual explicitly romantic interactions until after high school. So it's been, it's been a lot of years of me just crushing and thinking and playing with my gender. I think in the fifth, sorry, the fourth grade--I have a story, I have a story. So the fourth grade, we did a Gold Rush musical and it was paired with a square dancing routine. So for the square dancing routine, I had a boy partner, and I really didn't want a boy partner. And I was just so disgusted having to dance with him every day, like to practice. But for the musical, I really pushed for me to be able to wear the boy outfit, which is a cowboy hat and a flannel shirt instead of the skirt and the braids and a bonnet or something, because I thought it looked so ugly. So I got to, and I just remember somebody's parent on the recital day looked at me and said, "you look really handsome." And I was like, "thank you." And I think that might be--sorry, I might cry--but that might be the first time I felt gender euphoria, I think. Or the first time I was ungnous of me feeling that way. And I had a lot of issues with that teacher. I think, like as I said before, unpredictable household with a lot of unhealthy behaviors definitely bled into my school life and in ways I feel very empathetic to those teachers who had to deal with me who just didn't have a healthy outlet and acted up at school, but still allowed me to express parts of myself that I just wanted to explore. So I really do think that teacher-- Ms. Madal-- she let me do that and yeah, I'll never forget it.

00:10:56**SPEAKER\_MS**

Oh, no, thank you so much for sharing that story and for sharing about your first experience of gender euphoria too. It's so sacred to receive. And in kind of furthering those reflections on gender and sexuality, how have your ideas of gender and sexuality changed in your life? So if you were to think about understanding your gender and sexuality today, and if you had to define some of your life so far in terms of phases or chapters, maybe, what would those chapters or phases be? And I can drop this in the chat as well.

00:11:27**SPEAKER\_JS**

Cool. So I would say like after that recital, I went through phases of--like my parents bought me a lot of clothes, but I also got to pick some clothes. And when I did, they'd be very masculine leaning. And I had a phase where like I wore bow ties everywhere which I think is a chronic gay experience. It's a canon event, you can't interfere but it's awful. So yeah I would say like there was always something very masculine about me. I think that also collides with and this is taking me to a question, so let me try to stay on track here, but something to note is, you know, part of Sikhi, like keeping your kesh, growing up as someone identified as a female, that was humiliating at times because I was constantly bullied in elementary school for looking the way that I do and having so much body hair and just like kind of being socially awkward. So I think part of my socialization was people receiving me as very masculine, but from a place of disgust, you know, that it wasn't really fitting this identity that I was given and it was abhorrent and disgusting that it wasn't working. And so when I was 12, my parents were like, "okay, it's time, you can shave." And so I shaved and I shaved for years, every day. It was a huge part of my life was hours and hours of shaving. But I don't anymore. So I would say a chapter of my gender identity was very much so trying very hard to conform to feminine beauty standards out of fear of rejection and out of a desire to be wanted sexually. Going back to sorry, I'm not being very linear here, but going back to what we were talking about.

00:14:01**SPEAKER\_JS**

Yeah, so I would say I identified as a woman up until I was 18 or 19. And then my good friend Noor and I around the same time, were like, I think we're they thems. And so we both supported each other, you know, we both come from-- they come from Islam and I'm Sikh and so like these are kind of foreign concepts in modern times at least, coming from these faiths. So it was a chapter of exploring what it meant to be non-binary and all of that. And it's also during that time that I entered my first ever relationship, which was with a transmasculine person and it's over, but I can't ever repay him for how much space and love he gave me to, you know, develop my identity and recognize things in myself that I didn't really recognize before. I didn't really know how bad I wanted top surgery until I met him and how much of a reality it was for me. I think I kind of put that away because I thought it could never happen. And when I gained the confidence to actually, you know, apply for it and yeah, that wouldn't have happened without him. It was also then where I got in a lot of arguments with my father while I was dating this guy. And I was playing with my gender fluid and my dad every day would just be

looking at me like I'm gross for having a mustache and it was the first year of my life in so many years that I hadn't raised my face every day and it felt so good that I could just wake up and be like, okay, this is how I look. This is who I am and I can walk the world like this. It was also COVID, which means I was masked. So there was so much safety in it of, I can do this and I'm not perceived in any which way. So it was a beautiful time of just the right circumstances. So I'd say at that point in time I was heavily identifying as transmasculine. I would say Sikhi kind of went on the back burner for me in terms of what I was focused on. I was very immersed in this new gender movement of, you know, all of these things and but towards the end of the relationship with that guy, I was scheduled for top surgery. Things weren't going as well as they were. His treatment-resistant depression was getting really bad, and he was constantly fatigued. I felt like those Sikh fundamentals I was taught weren't serving me well because in ways I was overextending and getting trampled on because I so badly wanted to merge with this person. And it was then where we started to do Rehras every night. So yeah, I would read Rehras Sahib and we would just do our Rehras together and then we broke up and I would say towards that time when I started getting back into Sikhi is when my identity began to evolve I think, from more transmasculine to agender, more nonconformist and more not-super-invested-in-perception or my vessel or anything like that, more--you know.

00:18:43SPEAKER\_MS

Yeah, no, absolutely. No, thank you so much. And actually that's a great segue into the next question as well, which is, when thinking about your relationship to Sikhi, how did you learn more about Sikhs and Sikhi, and how has that relationship changed and evolved over phases in your life? So kind of similarly to how you were doing it for the previous question, when thinking about Sikhi and if you have to define some of your life so far in terms of phases, what would they be? And I can also drop this in the chat as well.

00:19:14SPEAKER\_JS

Right. So, like when I was really young, I went to gurdwara a lot, but it felt like more of a playground, which honestly, I feel I stand by to this day. It should feel that way for kids. It should feel like a place to play and all of the other stuff comes with it. But I think first and foremost, it should always feel like a place of community and a place to play. I had a really religious grandfather who passed away when I was really young, so I think after he passed everyone in the family kind of disengaged because he was so tightly affiliated with the gurdwara. And so once he was gone, it was this disconnect of what's our bridge, what's our tether to this place? I witnessed a lot of-- I don't know--loss of faith growing up. My dad was kind of atheist. He still won't admit it, but he walks a weird path. My mom, very early on in my life--also, she has bipolar and PTSD--so I felt like I was absorbing a lot of practical insight from my father on how the world works, and then my mom didn't have her feet on the ground. Like, she was constantly exploring all of these spiritualities, ideologies, practices, rituals, And so I think I didn't really study Sikhi that much as a child because the people around me weren't so invested. My mom has identified as many things over time and sometimes I aligned with it sometimes I didn't, but I don't really know if it was me or if I just wanted my mother to have something in common with me. And then around like the time I hung out with those emo kids in middle school, I got very atheist, very "there is no God", "there is no hope", "there is nothing", and "there's nothing but the void". Which, funny enough, sometimes I feel like atheist me is closer to Sikh me than confused spiritual me is. But anyways, I'd say then my politics really changed in high school and they deeply misaligned with the Sikh politic that we talk about. I fell for some grift and just wasn't--I don't like that person, but I was still very much so identifying as atheist, agnostic. I was very weak-willed. Someone could have converted me to Christianity so easily if they just talked to me at the right time.

00:22:37SPEAKER\_JS

Anyways, I would say then around like 19, 20, it's as soon as I felt free to explore my gender to its fullest that I was immediately gravitating towards Sikhi again. So I'd say those paths do merge. How I got there? YouTube videos, reading, Suraj Podcast by Jvala Singh changed my world. Yeah, just, I think the other thing that really kept me away was community. Being a queer person, I felt like the only one. And the queer people that I did know had already been so far removed from Sikhi that that wasn't something we could connect over. Like it just wasn't a reality. It'd be rude, you know, to be like, "hey..." So it's really only when I kind of found the Twitter community of Sikhs, queer Sikhs that it felt feasible to, because I think, and I think you know this well too, is while a lot of the disciplines of Sikhi are in solitude, without a Sangat it just-- it's not complete. It will never feel complete.

00:24:15SPEAKER\_MS

Yeah, thank you so much for sharing that. And that actually, especially like as you were outlining some of the resources, and where you've kind of turned to the different friends, the different communities, I would love to hear more about who are the friends that you found solace with or communities you found support in throughout your journey?

00:24:39**SPEAKER\_JS**

Yeah, so I'd say first of all, there's my aunt, she's queer. I believe she will also possibly be interviewed for this. Growing up, I didn't know she was queer, but she's the only person in my family that I've ever seen embody their beliefs so deeply, and I always knew I wanted to be like that and so I'd say her support of my queerness and my connection with Sikhi and also recognizing all the shitty things that the Sikh community can do. Someone vocalizing that was very needed for me to be able to engage with Sikh literature and Sikh people again. So there's that and on Twitter and stuff, just strangers, people from the UK, Sikh lesbians who I will never meet in my life. But they just had a musing or a thought that they tweeted about. Sikhi and queerness or just Sikhi in general and being able to resonate and listen and not so much debate but converse was awesome. Then the non-strangers, I'd say you, like meeting you, it was one of the great blessings of my life. I hadn't gone to gurdwara so regularly ever in my whole life, but it's only after meeting you, and it took us a long while, I think, to really see each other, but after we did, it was just so easy to meet and pray and yeah.

00:26:53**SPEAKER\_MS**

Yeah, no, thank you so much for everything. Thank you so much for everything. There's no words to, I guess, what, with what words do you pay back those with whom you discover Sangat for the first time. with what words do you even say thank you? And with what words do you encapsulate the credit that is owed? So thank you so much for that. And I actually, I was also kind of sitting with, earlier you mentioned, the Suraj Podcast, for example. You mentioned even thinking about how your own identification changed from, in terms of, in thinking about identifying as agender or in thinking about gender fluidity and thinking about gender abolition through hearing about and learning more about Sikhi. So I would love to hear more about what are some stories that you've heard that have helped you like understand yourself better. For example, those could be stories of specific family members. For example, you have mentioned your aunt or stories from Sikhi even of the Guru Sahibs, stories across history given that you also mentioned Jvala Singh's podcast, or of stories of other people in your local community or those of activism, but any stories that you really hold onto that have greatly shaped how you walk the world?

00:28:22**SPEAKER\_JS**

Yeah, I fear like talking about Sikh history or Sikh stories, because I don't want to get it wrong. So I probably won't. But even though I won't recall one here, I think the amalgamation of absorbing all of those different stories has definitely led me to that conclusion in my gender identity at this time. Something that does come to mind, and I guess I am taking this out of context but so be, it is the soul bride. The genderless soul bride, you know? Like I think there are so many people who practice Sikhi who are personally invested in keeping these sexual dimorphisms alive, even though many of the applied disciplines of Sikhi are in effort to remove those sexual dimorphisms-- both in efforts to mitigate or abolish misogyny, but also in effort to lead one back to ik, to the oneness, that there is no intricacy beyond that. Stories of... I don't know. I don't know if I have stories. I'm sorry.

00:30:02**SPEAKER\_MS**

Oh, no, no problem at all. No, thank you. What you've shared also is like absolutely more than enough too. So thank you for that. I would love to hear more also about being out and coming out. So what would you say being out means to you and what does coming out mean to you? And in your experience, has that been a straightforward or linear process? And is this something that you think everybody has to do within their life? So I could drop some of these questions in the chat, but at large speaking to coming out.

00:30:38**SPEAKER\_JS**

Sure. So I did tell you that I tried to come out when I was 12 and it didn't really go as planned. I feel like I've been out since. I feel like I was out before that, even if I didn't want to be. But, I would say people in my family hear what they wanna hear. And it doesn't matter how many times I say, I'm not a woman. I'm a woman. And my father knows what I am. He fears what I am. And we just accept that that's not something we're ever gonna align

on and we just meet each other exactly where we at. Like, I think we both have a lot of love for each other, but that being out with him means that I'm not really ever out. I'm like in this weird gray space of--he cares about me too much to remove me from his life and feels obligations toward me that he can't absolve himself of, but he won't embrace me like exactly how I am. My mom on the other hand, the moment I was out like as a 20 year old, 19 year old, she accepted it. Like she accepted that as a part of me and it was never a question. She took care of me as I healed through top surgery. That's like something I can never repay her for. I think about how blessed I am to have had that with her. We had so many terrible things happen in our relationship growing up, you know, us having a mentally ill mother. She failed me in ways that I can't really blame her for. And so there's all of this pent up anger that I had nothing to do with. So having that two weeks of time where like she saw me exactly how I was intended to me, like a mother does and yeah, it was definitely very healing for us I think. Coming out beyond that, I'm out at my job. I do get misgendered frequently but I'm out at my job. I'm out to my brother. My brother calls me his sibling, his brother sometimes, you know, whatever comes to him. I don't really care. We talked about this before, about roles and how sometimes it feels like, not that your identities come second, but that they're almost unimportant in some context, or they can be considered different in some context because there's some underlying understanding or there's a dynamic there that's been pre-established and you want to maintain that for the reasons that it provides, like what it provides for the two of you, you know? So I don't mind being his sister. I love being his sister.

00:34:12**SPEAKER\_JS**

What else about coming out? So I told both of my grandmothers and they were both really scared of my chest now. Like it's-- we don't talk about it. Yesterday I was on the phone with my naniji and I was feeling very masc and I play around, like I'll say things to her and she'll be like, no. So I was like, I kind of look like a munda today. And she was like, no, you don't. You're getting married to a man after you're done with college. I was like, I know we're joking here because you better be. But you know, like she can say whatever she wants and I know she still cares. It sucks in ways that like I'm not really out. It doesn't matter how much, how out I feel like I'm communicating, it's not absorbed or received that way. So it's just what it is, you know? And I just live, I live in that weird limbo with a lot of people in my life, I would say.

00:35:17**SPEAKER\_MS**

Thank you so much for that and for sharing that as well. And I guess like this kind of moves us into the next question as well, which especially as we've been reflecting a lot about identity and identity formation and how those identities have also changed and also continue to be changing situation to situation even. So I guess if you had to think about and thinking about how you think of yourself too, how has your understanding of yourself looked like at different points of your life. So if one way that people do understand themselves is by thinking about their identity through common categories or the communities that are part of such as like, say, queer, trans, working class, sibling, caste location, migrant, parent, disabled, Californian or Punjabi. But I just kind of wanted to, I guess, also create some space for you to be able to share how you do think about yourself.

00:36:15**SPEAKER\_JS**

That's really hard. I don't think about myself as a self very much these days. Sometimes I feel very disconnected from all of that. But identifiers, I'd say, yuck. Queer, Sikh, Agender, they/he pronouns, preferred. I identify as a Marxist. Usually I say I'm a Sikh Marxist. My Sikhi comes first. Because I feel like there's so many... Like it just provides such an in-depth political framework that sometimes I feel like I don't need anything else to kind of visualize my politic, but I would say like in the Western political context I align with Marxism. Caste positionality, I come from a caste privileged background with a lot of caste violence. And I think like growing up queer, I always saw that in my family. And like, was always disgusted by it because I knew that in some way I'm next. You know there was a lot of anti-Blackness and I don't know, I think I wish my family saw what I saw in those things, but they don't. And so I'm almost grateful in a way because growing up with all of that, I knew exactly what I didn't wanna be. Like through negation, I've developed my identity in many ways through being a contrarian. So, I'm sorry, let me look at the message. Oh, sorry, I don't see it. It's okay, let me think.

00:38:35**SPEAKER\_MS**

I also just dropped it in the chat as well if you would want to see it. Also happy to move on to other questions that further do provide opportunity to continue this conversation about identity formation?

00:38:48**SPEAKER\_JS**

Cool. Yeah, I'd say I identify as a sibling very heavily. It's only in these later parts of my life I've really identified with that. Younger me was parentalized very heavily. And so like now is only the time that I can see my brother as more of a peer, as more of someone that I can advise, but not have to micromanage. So like, that's been really cool, is this new evolution, new iteration of siblinghood in my life. Californian, I don't really say I'm Californian, like never does that come up in conversation, but I guess yeah, I'm Californian. I was born and raised here in San Jose. I live in San Francisco. I will probably live in Sacramento. And so I think I'm from here. Yeah. Punjabi, yeah. Yeah, I would say, yeah, these things come easy.

00:39:54**SPEAKER\_MS**

Thank you so much for that. And I guess and kind of reflecting further about like your identification with Sikhi as well. What would you say is your relationship with Sikh communities, with Sikh Sangat and the larger Sikh Quam, the larger Sikh community more broadly?

00:40:22**SPEAKER\_JS**

I comfortably go to most gurdwaras nowadays and I feel connected to the greater sangat. I think a lot of that comes from me and not the other way around, but it's kind of the way I have to operate to feel that way. You know, I can't really get that feeling if I don't convince myself of certain things, I guess, but yeah, I feel engaged in Sangat. I feel hopeful for Sangat. We've had some shared experiences with Sangat that I feel are very disheartening, but also led us to find new ways to hope and dream and envision. And so it's even through those pains that I experienced being part of Sangat that bring me even closer to it. I don't feel like I'm the best Sikh. There is no best Sikh, but I don't feel always like I am embodying Sikhi in the way that I would like to. Some of that is due to my environment. Others are my own doing. All I can do is every day wake up and hope I do Japji Sahib. And if I don't, then I don't.

00:42:09**SPEAKER\_MS**

Thank you so much for that. And actually, I would love to ask you, since you do bring this up, how would you even define a Sikh?

00:42:19**SPEAKER\_JS**

I feel like I've met Sikhs in my life who don't know that they're Sikhs, who don't have the vocabulary to explain that they're Sikh. They just, they use other words, but I think that's exactly the point is that Sikh is anyone. Sikh is anyone who's desiring that understanding that we hold as Sikhs to our relationship with the cosmos, I would say, is it in its most concentrated form is, you know, as human beings, where do we stand in relationship to everything around us. How do we recognize the illusory nature of existence? How do we connect with the divine? So many people have these questions, but they don't call themselves Sikhs. So I would say I call a Sikh anyone who's-- well, this is where it gets complicated. I guess you really do have to self-identify as a Sikh to be a Sikh. But the word Sikh, you know, as we all know, is, student, learner, we're all that if we choose to be. So my idea of Sikhi is very inclusive. And, you know, yeah, it's just, yeah. Sorry.

00:43:53**SPEAKER\_MS**

Oh no, you have nothing to apologize for. That makes total sense. So thank you for sharing that too. And as you've reflected about your relationship to the Sikh community, I would also love to like hear about your reflections on what it means to be a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. So what would you say, does it mean for you to be part of the LGBTQIA+ community? Do you think it's a single community or a set of communities?

00:44:21**SPEAKER\_JS**

I'd say it's a set of communities. I wish it was a single community, but there's just, not every gay person is my friend. Not every trans person is my friend. I think by spending time in certain spaces, you learn very quickly, you're not always welcome as a brown person, as a religious person, as someone who doesn't like to drink very much. Like, you know, I don't really participate in a lot of the things that unfortunately our modern queer community has recognized as crucial social ventures. I don't know--you know, like it's just--it's hard, especially like from the Sikh lens to be in those spaces. I've definitely found people, you know, found other queers that I feel align with me and, can connect with in a safe manner. It's not everyone though. And so that's for that reason,

I would say it's a set of communities. I would say like most white gays, most white queers I don't really find a lot of connection with. It's challenging. Unfortunately, positionality and identity does ultimately determine a lot of your beliefs and the way that you unconsciously walk the world. So yeah, but it's only this last couple years that I found a lot of queer joy. I'm going to a Desi Dyke brunch on June 25th. Yes. So I'm excited for that. I am, you know, it'll probably also feel similar, like I'll feel the same feelings that I do, but I'm hoping I'll feel it a little bit less. Yeah, sorry, did that answer the question?

00:46:26**SPEAKER\_MS**

Yeah, absolutely. And I'm very happy for you to go to the brunch and also very sad that in terms of not, especially after having left also, I wish I was there with you to be able to share in some of those moments. But what, I guess like, as you've also reflected on a lot of heartbreak with both the Sikh community, as well as the LGBTQIA+ community, I would love to hear like what influences your relationship to Sikhi and being a Sikh. Do you think there are factors that maintain your relationship, what keeps you there? How would you describe your experiences with maintaining a relationship with Sikhi and or the LGBTQIA+ community?

00:47:12**SPEAKER\_JS**

Right. Being queer, I think, as we said before, at such an early age I felt that yearning to merge. I feel like I was self-actualized and suddenly thrust into this philosophical nightmare where every day I wake up and I'm pondering what it means to be me, what it means to exist, and all of these questions. And I've learned many different ways to bandage that through different political identifications, gender identifications, different sets of friends, and trying to use my environment to outline what it meant to be here. And it's really only through Sikhi that I've found a comfort. Oh my gosh, my phone's at 1% friend.

00:48:28**SPEAKER\_MS**

Oh, no problem at all. No worries at all. We can also pick back up on another day. Would that be good?

00:48:37**SPEAKER\_JS**

I'd love to do that. I'd love to do that.

00:48:42**SPEAKER\_MS**

No worries. That sounds good. Thank you so much.

00:48:45**SPEAKER\_JS**

Thank you friend.