

Interview with Kina Kaur Part 1 of 2

00:00:02 **SPEAKER_MS**

Are you able to hear me?

00:00:04 **SPEAKER_KK**

Yes!

00:00:05 **SPEAKER_MS**

Perfect. This is manmit singh. Today is June 15, 2023. I am interviewing, for the first time, Kina. This interview is taking place in New York in Ithaca in the home-office of my temporary residence in Ithaca, New York. This interview is sponsored by Jakara and is a part of the Storytelling and Settlement through Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral Histories Project. The purpose of this research is to document the lived experiences of Sikhs in the United States who are from the LGBTQIA+ backgrounds. We want to provide a more complete history of Sikhs through interviews that ask LGBTQIA + Sikhs about their different experiences, how LGBTQIA+ Sikhs understand themselves and their communities, and how LGBTQIA+ Sikhs make home in the U.S. Thank you so much again for being willing to sit down with me and share your story. We are going to get started with a bit more broad with our conversation. When you think about your experience of growing up, tell me a little bit about what comes up for you? To you, are there any common stories, any smells, any relationships that come to mind that help you describe growing up? I'll also drop the question into the chat as well.

00:01:41 **SPEAKER_KK**

Thank you for having me here today. I'm really excited to be a part of this project in any capacity. The question... Here, let me look it up again. You know, actually the first thing that comes to mind with that question is the volume of my parents that question is the volume of my parents speaking on the phone whenever they would call family back in India. So my parents immigrated here in the 80s, like right after they got married, and and my dad was continuing his education in the States. And it was definitely part of the brain drain from Asia in the 80s to the U.S. at that time, because my dad was college educated and and my mom actually fought to get probably what is the equivalent of an associate's degree in art before she got married. And she was the eldest in her family. So that was quite controversial for her, for the culture. But my dad's family eventually moved out here, but here, but my mom's family stayed in Delhi. And so hearing them on the phone growing up, because you would only be able to talk for maybe three minutes, and the connection was always so bad. And so they talked so, so loudly to each other on the phone. But I could hear my masis and my nani calling back to my mom while she's just trying to get some type of connection, some type of remnants of home that she had left when married, as the traditions were back then. But yeah, that one is really distinct.

00:03:53 **SPEAKER_KK**

I remember also there was an Indian store, like India's Sweet and Sour Spices. It was down the street from my parents' house. And always going there to pick up the bootleg Bollywood films that had been released. And my mom pulling up and being like, "just go drop off the video and come back and tell them it's from us." And being so nervous and running into the store. And of course, it had all these different smells that I was so familiar with, but I couldn't name. But it smelled like the kitchen at home and those things. And dropping off the video and always being like, "can we get mangoes?" Always asking for mangoes while getting back in the car. Those are some distinct ones.

00:04:46 **SPEAKER_KK**

Going to the gurdwara also. I loved prashad. I loved prashad. I I mean, what child doesn't. But I used to do this thing with my sibling where I'd be like, "I can do it in one bite." And so I would do the prayer to my head and everything. And then I'd like-- whole thing. Because you'd only get one napkin. And it was like, I can't keep making a mess. So I'd just like eat the whole prashad in one bite and then wipe my face.

00:05:17 **SPEAKER_KK**

You know, going to the gurdwara for me growing up, my parents never really had us learn the language. So for me, I can understand Punjabi and Hindi to like a certain extent, but I can't distinguish the languages. But like whenever I visit India, I can get by in conversation, but not speaking. I I can understand. And then I respond in English. Also, I get teased if I try to speak the language, so it kind of deters me. But yeah, I remember like being in the gurdwara. And because I couldn't necessarily understand what was being said, I would get distracted pretty easily. And a way to kind of navigate my behavior so I wasn't distracting others, I would go to the kitchen. So I was always surrounded by aunties and the bhais that were there that were like working in the kitchen and making the rotis and the puris and like seeing these incredible women like throwing puris on the fire and just like sticking their hands in the fire and like flipping them and thinking like that was the coolest thing. And so I would help make, get the atta and and like try and roll the rotis. So for me, like the gurdwara was often just like food oriented because I was in the kitchen helping make langar and serving langar. So that was enough for me and my parents to kind of be in Sikhi while growing up, even if I didn't necessarily understand what was being said. I was still being of service and practicing Seva and Seva and like doing things that I think fall under the major tenets of Sikhism as I relate to it. But I mean, those are memories that I honestly think I I forgot about until you asked this question.

00:07:30SPEAKER_KK

The relationship that probably sticks out in my mind the most is that of mine with my Masi. My mom has two sisters, but my mom has one sister that's like only 18 months younger than her. So she was like very close in age, but with her, I always felt like this unbreakable bond. Like I've always felt so connected to her. And so she was in India and I was here and here and I just, I always missed her so much and and I would always cry so much. And like, I understand it, like being the child in that dynamic, but now that my sister has children and now my sister's oldest daughter is five years old and she calls me Masi. She actually calls me Fasi Masi because when she was younger, she couldn't she couldn't say Ms. So she put an F there, which is just like that word. In America, it's not a big deal, but in India, like that would be so funny to say, but she calls me that. But the way she like cries now, whenever I leave, because I live far away from my family, well, seven hours, but I live far enough away that away that I don't get to see my nieces all the time. I just, I see like life continuing and now I'm the Masi. And it's just like, I want to be in their head, like the way that my Masi is in mine. Like I want to be with their hearts the way my Masi is with me. So I think of all the relationships that I had, it was with her.

00:09:10SPEAKER_KK

And I actually just went to India and I visited my mom's side just this past December. And my Masi was like, do you remember that paper you wrote about me? And I was like, no. She pulls out this paper from 2002 that I wrote about, apparently like I was assigned an essay to write an essay about like an inspirational woman in my life. And I actually had written it about my Masi. And so like I sat there and I like read it to her and I was reading it to her and I was reading it and I just started crying because I was, that part of my life is such a blur. And so to know that, oh, that this feeling that I have now that is tethered to my Masi, it's been there. Like that's been a constant in my life.

00:10:06SPEAKER_KK

I feel like these are a bit more of the positive feelings, the ones that like make my heart swell and tether me to others before I was ever tethered to myself or really understanding myself. But yeah, growing up specifically, those are some of the things that I remember the most. Oh, and a silly story. I remember going to a school in kindergarten in California and there's like, when you're like really young, that's when you're learning the basics of everything. So you're learning like words and connections and middle names and and all these different things. And I remember like asking my friends, I was like, oh, so like, what are your middle names? And I was blown away when I found out that like people had different middle names or like last names than their siblings. And I was like, you don't mean that all of the sisters have Kaur and Singh Like it wasn't, I was blown away by that. Like I didn't understand that like in different cultures. And that was probably one of the first times that I was like, oh, I'm different. One of the first times that I was like, oh, I'm different. Because in my household, all of the people who are deemed women have Kaur as their middle or last name. And all of the people deemed men have Singh. So that was like one of the first moments where I was like, oh, like I am different.

00:11:49SPEAKER_KK

And then of course with the holidays as as you grow up and realizing that all the holidays that you celebrate with your family, you you don't get off from school. Unlike the other kids who get all their holidays with their

family while they're off school. And you know, like my parents always taught me that like that difference was special. It was unique. And that, you know, while you might feel left out from what your like friends are having with their families, remember that like you always have us, like you always have us as a family, you have us as a community. And they always wanted to emphasize that like all these get together that we did with other Punjabi people and other South Asian and and Middle Eastern people, like like this is also your community, like you're a part of it growing up and you have to come, you have to, you can't opt out, you have to come. All the, oh my God, so many get together growing up that I never wanted to go to because I was like, I wanted to go, but like it was always so stressful getting ready for them and honestly like traumatic to a certain degree, like getting ready for certain South Asian parties, just because like my mom's sense of urgency is one that I now inhabit, absolutely. I now understand it and things like that, but growing up, her sense of urgency for getting ready for parties and presenting a certain way because what will the others say, if you show up not looking put together. That's stress--to this day, like my heart will increase knowing that we have to get ready for something or that we have to host a party or that something, but I mean, it was always great like meeting other people my age who were like me that we could dance and eat and I don't have to come up with the English word for everything to define what I'm doing. That was worthwhile, yeah.

00:14:23SPEAKER_KK

And then of course, and as far as like smells, the Indian sweets and spices stores, just just like the mango, I was smelling the mango skin, all the spices that now I understand is jeera and elaichi and adhrak and all these delicious things, especially with cha, adding adhrak to cha, I like--game changer, just everything in the world. Oh my God, I just recently like learned how to make it the way my maasi makes it. So I've been just relishing in it and having cha all the time and like out of the bowl, like just as real as possible, but that one's a big one.

00:15:21SPEAKER_KK

Oh, and then actually, I discovered at a young age that I'm allergic to agarbati. So whenever I would be in temple or my cousins are half Jain and so sometimes I would go to mandir with them and like get exposed to like Hindu experiences and Gujarati food and all those types of things. And they use agarbati a lot for their prayers. And I'd always be like I can't sit through this because I would feel sick, like I would get a migraine or I would get like the kid equivalent of that. And as I got older, it developed into just migraines and it's now been understood that that I have an allergy to it, which of all the things for me to be allergic to, agarbati, like, dang, it's the American in me, you know what I'm saying? But my parents are super respectful about it. And so when it comes to prayers, they try not to use agarbati or if they, they let me excuse myself and those type of things. So agarbati is a big smell that reminds me of my upbringing.

00:16:40SPEAKER_KK

Yeah, those are just some, I don't know. I also have like horrible things like pan. So pan is also one, that's a definite distinct smell. All the uncles going out during parties and and finding the uncles smoking and chewing on pan and spitting and like all that stuff and them just smelling like scotch. I, oh scotch. I, oh my God, when I grew up and learned what those smells were, like when I was a kid, they were comforting. It was interesting because some of my like my cha-cha and stuff like always had that smell on him especially at parties smell and I'd be just hanging out and not realizing what's happening. And then I grew up and I started working in restaurants and bars and stuff. And then I was like, that smell is scotch. That smell is leftover cigarette on someone's jacket. Like, and then pan is a little bit more obscure. So I remember, oh my God, that was such a distinct, distinct scent growing up. And now I'm like, just thinking about it. It's almost comical how much these things inform my childhood and my existence.

00:17:57SPEAKER_KK

And then my birthday party is, or my birthday is in the summer. So I always had like a backyard barbecue type birthday. So the smell of barbecue is also pretty like distinct with my upbringing. And, you know, my cousins who are half Punjabi, half Gujarati, they are completely vegetarian. And so I was very familiar with vegetarianism growing up. Like that wasn't foreign to me. When I went to school and I like would talk about it, people were like, they almost like used vegetarian as like an otherness. And I was just like, what? Like, I didn't understand it. It was just something that was real in my life. But my family, like there weren't dietary restrictions. Like we would eat burgers and we would eat chicken, fish, chicken, fish, like lamb, anything. So like, yeah, barbecue burgers were like my birthday, like I would associate growing up with with my birthday, which is arguably very American. For me, I'm like in California and stuff like that. And it's funny because now I

don't eat meat because I actually get sick when I eat it. But I'll eat fish. But all other meats, like they don't tempt me anymore. But growing up now and understanding how diet has been used as like, almost like punitively against people of certain castes. I'm like, oh, it makes sense why even we were judged for eating beef, even though we come from, my family are caste privileged, we would get judged for eating beef. And the vegetarianism practiced by Gujarati Jains like was the norm for them because of the way that diets are used as like a, "you're immoral" thing for people of certain castes. So my understanding of that has really evolved. Wow, that was a really long answer to your question.

00:20:23 **SPEAKER_MS**

No, I appreciate that. Thank you so much for sharing such a rich and like a beautiful response too. And I guess I kind of thinking also maybe about gender and sexuality. How did you learn more about these topics?

00:20:45 **SPEAKER_KK**

You know, I think I have been informed passively about gender and sexuality since before I was born. Interestingly enough, when the doctors read my mom's ultrasound when she was pregnant with me, the doctors said that I was going to come out as a male. They read me as a male. And then when I came out and out and I wasn't, "it wasn't a boy" or whatever. They designated me as "it's a girl." I think just from that beginning, I'm like, "how did they know?" But I, my mom always called me her helper. Like I was her best helper. And from a very young age, it was always, everything was separated by gender. All the men were on one side and all the women were on one side. Even at the Gurdwara, all the men are on one side and all the women are on one side. And that was like probably one of the first times that that I like noticed it. And I was always kind of curious about it.

00:21:58 **SPEAKER_KK**

And I remember when I was maybe like 10 years old, I told my parents, I was like, I'm not going to get arranged married. Like I told them this and I'm the youngest and I told them this and they were just like, well, like, well, "what are we going to do with you? Like what are we going to do?" And I was like--now looking back, y'all came to America. Like I get this choice. You know what I'm saying? Like I see it that way. But yeah, I was like, I'm not going to get arranged married.

00:22:36 **SPEAKER_KK**

I never like, growing up, I never saw myself getting married. I never had like stereotypical feminine, femininity, feminine expression or or what people assume people who are socialized to be girls and women are supposed to have. Except I was still socialized in that way. So I was-- I have a very loud voice and I'm very outspoken and and I'm very opinionated. And my parents got me involved in politics at a very young age. They helped, they helped challenge me. They were like, "what do you think of these things in the world?" Like, you know, and it was always from the perspective of Seva from like, "look at how much people--look at how much we have and look at how little others have. We need to make sure to help those who don't have the means to help themselves." And that's a tenant that I still value very much in me today.

00:23:37 **SPEAKER_KK**

But it was always like my mom and my Bhua and my aunties and everybody, they were always making the food, running the parties. They were the ones watching the kids. They were the one doing all the emotional labor. And my dad was working so hard every single day at his business. Like he was gone all day, every day. When I was younger than five, my dad, he worked out of state. So he would be gone from Monday to Saturday. And then he'd come home Saturday night, spend Sunday with us and then fly back on Monday and go to work. And he was trying to figure out if he wanted to fly us all out to Texas to where he was finding work until he eventually decided to start his own business in California. So we stayed in California. But I definitely, because I'm the youngest, I grew up with my parents being the wealthiest that they were. So I didn't really have to see living in one apartment. I didn't see the--But I did always have hand-me-downs, those type of things. But as far as like gender and sexuality, my brother and I were raised by different parents. Like we just were, he's the eldest. And just seeing him and understanding him and the way he's able to get away with so much that I would never be able to get away with, quote, unquote, get away with. My parents did something with me and my siblings. I'm the youngest of three, where my parents were like, you've seen your siblings mess up in these ways. So you should already know better. So I was held to the standard of "you'll be punished more because you knew better"

kind of thing, which I feel like is kind of like a reverse. That's usually what happens with the eldest kid, that they get the harshest punishments and things like that.

00:26:04**SPEAKER_KK**

I remember.. God, there's so much with gender and being Punjabi and the ways that they expect women to act and men to act. I was always a tomboy. That's what they called me. You know that term, a tomboy? It's like a girl who acts like a boy, essentially. Because I was in all the sports. I always wanted to play every kind of sport. I was always the first to volunteer. I was always the one asking questions and participating. I was uninhibited. And then as I went to school and I was told, be less, be quieter. You need to mind yourself. You're in trouble. Go to detention. All these different things. And then it was reinforced. It was at home and then it was reinforced at school as well to make myself smaller. Don't make others...like "You're talking over other people." And now I'm like, okay, I want to balance making space for others and making sure everybody's voices are heard and things like that. But before it was just like, "be quiet, be mindful." In ways that definitely affected me. The way my grandparents, my daadi, dada, the way they treated the grandsons as opposed to the granddaughters.

00:27:46**SPEAKER_KK**

Now the way that I'm speaking of ,this is from the perspective of being socialized as a woman, being raised as a woman. I am non-binary. I'm trans. I use they, them pronouns. I understand myself to be gender expansive. I don't believe myself to be limited by the institution of gender, except for when the institution of gender forces me to act in a limited way, like choosing bathrooms or the hundreds and millions of other ways--like getting paid less, trying to push me into a less challenging role, like different things that tend to be about, attributed to women in the workforce. So yeah, when I'm speaking of these experiences, it's it's from the perspective of being a girl, like being socialized in that way.

00:28:42**SPEAKER_KK**

And I'm still seen that way in my family, even though I have communicated with my mom that I use they, them pronouns. It's funny because I have friends that use they, them pronouns and my mom uses they, them pronouns for them, but she somehow, it just slips her mind. She's like, you're my youngest daughter. You are a powerful woman, like all these things. And I'm like, just switch it to person. I'm gonna feel so much better if you just say person. But we'll get there.

00:29:15**SPEAKER_KK**

I tend to not hold people whose first language isn't English to the same standard. Like my parents, I think English was not my parents' first language. My parents speak like four or five languages each and English was one of them, but it's not their first. So I don't hold them to certain pronouns things. And also I don't feel like pronouns define my gender. I feel like pronouns actually speak to how others view me. It's not how I view me. It just speaks to your perspective and your perspective, albeit, can be important, it does not nearly matter as much as how I see myself and how I feel. And so if you don't use they, them pronouns, like, I mean, that's more on you than it is on me. Like I know who I am. Like I know who I am, but it can be quite activating whenever I go home. But my cousins, like my cousins are so good about it. And my sister is really good about it. And they're very adamant about it. And my nieces, they have no idea what I am. Like they call me Masi. The five-year-old can talk. The one-year-old is still like figuring out words. She can't like speak in sentences and stuff, but the five-year-old can form sentences and have thoughts now and remember things and stuff like that. And she switches pronouns with me all the time. And it brings me so much joy because it's, I'm just happy that she's just flowing with it. She will use he, she'll use she, she'll use they. She'll just use all these different pronouns with me. And then whenever we play house, which is her favorite thing to play, I'm always something. "can you be the auntie? Can you be the uncle? Can you be the daddy? Can you be the brother? Can you be the this? Can you be my friend?" And it's people of all genders. And she actually, she also refers to my partner as my wife. So she's learning that, you know, things are different. And, you know, one time she saw me in a bra and she was like, you know, my daddy doesn't wear a bra. And I was like, I looked at her and I was like, "you know, Ava, some daddies do wear bras." And she's like, "okay." And then she just like, she just walked away. She doesn't care. Like she's just like learning. And that is very affirming for me. Like her asking me a ton of questions and trying to figure what I am out. And she, like I showed her a picture of me with long hair and she's like, I don't remember you looking like that. And I was like, yeah, baby, it was from before you were born. Like I had really long hair. But that's like really affirming for me. Right. I'm really grateful to have this opportunity to also be a

child, like heal my inner child through being with my nieces.

00:32:16SPEAKER_KK

But, you know, I also recognize that sometimes like my parents will listen to me before they listen to my sister. And I recognize that as like the Punjabi, like power dynamic where like men's or masculine voices tend to be listened to. Like they will heed what I say before they will heed what my sister says. And even though she's older than me, she is a CIS woman. And so I, whenever--as I've transitioned like internally and externally, like socially as well, I try and make it so that when I'm in a space where my sister is speaking up and speaking out, I'm amplifying her voice. Because I understand that in that power dynamic, even though that I, I've been there and I understand what it's like to be silenced as a woman. And I want to make sure that she's listened to, you know, and she's been ignored a lot or gaslit a lot about her feelings her whole life. And so I always am like, "Hey, they're valid. I'm here. I'm holding space for you," that kind of thing. And she does the same for me. So, you know, that's, that's a way that I recognize how gender dynamics play out in my family. Whereas when it's my brother, I have very little patience with the way he thinks things should be. And the way he kind of like carries himself. And I have a lot of trauma from my brother growing up.

00:34:02SPEAKER_KK

And it carries out to this day and it's really hard because he now currently like really needs help, especially with substance use. And I know that alcohol use disorder is like really rampant in the Punjabi community. And, you know, my chacha, my brother. It's not something I'd wish on anybody. And I recognize my brother needing help. And I see him as a man who needs help. And because of all, like, it's a multiple truths thing. It's like, I'm a person who if it was like one of my friends who was going through something like this, I would be pulling out every stop. I would be like, here's this resource. Let me know what you need. I'll bring you food. I'll help you clean your place. I'll help you do all these different things. But when it's with someone who has like hurt me so deeply and messed with my neural pathways so much, I'm finding myself a bit reserved. So I'm learning about my own boundaries with it. And I'm still reaching out and checking in with him and being like, "Hey, I'm really grateful that you're finally ready to get some help. This is what I'm able to do. I can check in with you once a week," Kind of thing. And now that we're adults, it's very, very different.

00:35:31SPEAKER_KK

I also left home at 17 because I knew I was different from everyone else. And I never felt seen for some reason. And I could never put words to the feelings. And then, you know, when I left home at 17 for school and I didn't go back, I learned a lot about myself. And that was where I was able to explore my sexuality and then eventually my gender. And, you know, one of the things about my gender is that I didn't actually, I didn't realize that when I had left home, the way I was living my lifestyle-- I don't know--me living authentically every day in and out, because it was just me with my chosen family, I didn't realize that I was challenging gender expectations. When I went back home at the age of 27, when my sister was getting married, it's shadi ka ghar, you have to, you have to pull out all the stops. You are the family hosting the wedding. And my sister married someone who isn't Indian. So we really had to do the entire labor of the wedding and all the things that that were expected of me as a daughter of the house that was hosting the wedding. I realized I was like, this is not me. Like y'all got me fucked up. Like, this is not me. Like I, this doesn't feel right. Like nothing. I feel, I'm feeling challenged in ways that are making me very, very uncomfortable. And it wasn't until after that, that I was like, I don't think that I am just one thing. I think I am multiple things that sometimes I think I'm nothing at all. Like when it comes to gender. And that's when I started like, I guess kind of labeling it a bit more. I'm like realizing that, Oh, I do identify with like how non-binary people describe how they feel every day and how trans people talk about themselves and their gender and like fluidity and all this type of things. I'm like, why why can't that also be real? And it really started me on this journey of self-discovery, of community, of softness for others, acceptance. Because I have to accept me, especially because I have to make this path for myself. There are ancestors. There absolutely are ancestors. I know I have queer ancestors. I know I do. It's just, and I know I have queer family members, but none of them will be socially queer. None of them will end up like letting themselves love someone of a different gender than cis-normativity, a cis-heteronormativity. And like, but they tell me-- I definitely have cousins who are like, "Oh, I did this, or I'm attracted to this person, or I flirted with this person, or this is happening and I'm feeling like wearing clothes like that, and I want to wear a wig and makeup and all this." And I'm just like, yeah, fucking do it. Like, please. I'm the rainbow sheep. Like I'm all alone out here. Like someone in the family, don't make me the angry queer at every family location that's bringing up like left-leaning things about power and like power to the people and all this stuff. And I'm constantly aware of how alone I am when it comes to being with the family I was born into. I'm constantly aware of it. And, you know,

there are some moments of joy where things are welcome. Like my mom wished me happy pride this year, which she's never done before. And my family's so welcoming of my partner, which I never ever thought was going to happen. And, you know, there is a lot of beauty, but it's, it's very, very lonely. And I just hope that by being me, that like all my nibblings, like they know they can come to me. They know that I'm different. And so if they're ever feeling different, I never want them to feel as alone as I have felt since, since I became self-aware at the age of like nine. I grew up very fast. There's a lot of trauma in my household. I grew up very, very quickly. I hope they never feel alone how I felt growing up and how I feel now at times. I feel less alone now because I'm able to build community and be with others in certain ways. But, you know, as a kid, it's really hard to find that. Or it was, I don't know with technology now, but yeah.

00:40:50SPEAKER_KK

Okay, so I'll share something that's a bit like triggering or activating. So please let me know if a pause is needed, but you know, I grew up knowing that India was not a safe place for women. That was one thing that I don't remember when I became fully aware of that, but modesty was always pushed on me growing up. And when I was like 11 years old and I went to India, no, I was 12, I think. Summer vacation in California is monsoon season in India. So when you go to India during the June to August months, you know, it's monsoon season. So it's raining all the time. And that was when I learned that I'm supposed to be wearing bras, even though I didn't, I hadn't developed breasts in any way. I hadn't started my period. I was still very much an adult, like a prepubescent. I was still a child. Like I hadn't started puberty. And that's when I learned like, Oh, I need to wear bras and I need to cover up. And it's 113 degrees and humid out there. And I was still in a child mindset to a certain degree. So I was wearing shorts and tank tops. I didn't care that my clothes were see-through, but I got punished very badly when I was in India and wearing shorts in 115 degree weather. And I was like, this is some bullshit. I mean, I'm saying that now as a kid, I wasn't allowed to swear. So I didn't. But there was this moment when I went out with my cousin brothers out there and we were buying fireworks because we were going to set off some fireworks because the independence day was coming up. And it was just me and my cousins. And it was like the first time my mom let me out like alone in India. And I wasn't even alone. I was with my cousin brothers who were older than me by like five years. And one of them only one year. And it was me and my sister and my cousin brothers. And there was this moment where it was really, really crowded. And while I was in the crowd, my sister and I were grabbed at and our body parts and we were violated. We were molested like in this crowd and people were trying to grab us and pull us away. And, you know, now when I look back on it, I'm like, was I going to be kidnapped? You know, like thinking about it because it was this very public place. And we were these young children. My sister's three years older than me. So I was 12, she was 15. So she was a bit more, I guess, like physically developed than me, but the way she was getting grabbed and the way that I was getting grabbed, it stays with me to this day. And I've done like a lot of trauma therapy now as an adult about it, but I have a lot of anxiety in crowds now, but when my brothers like cousin brothers, like realized what was happening, they like picked me and my sister up and like just shoved through the crowd and got us out of there. So they protected us. And I was, I'm eternally grateful to them for that because they were also children. Like they were, they were adolescents. They were teenagers. They didn't know, and they didn't have sisters. So they like, to this day, they feel so much anger about that time because they feel anger at the world and they feel anger at like themselves because they're like, I hate that that's how I learned that the world is different for you, you know? Cause they had the privilege of not having to worry about those kinds of things, you know? And so it was in that moment, which I didn't really remember until years later, that that I was like, something's different. Something's off. Something's different about me. This doesn't feel right. Like there are things that are not making sense to me. Why is the world different for me as a girl than they are for the boys? Like what is happening? You know, there's all these like horrible questions. And, you know, like, as I've grown up, I'm just like--and that has challenged my notions or like my comfort with my sexuality and my gender and things like that, and also wanting to make the world a safer place for women, you know, and kids and, things like that. But I think it is prudent to bring up as a part of my upbringing because it is not uncommon for South Asian femmes in India, or feminine presenting people to experience things like sexual assault or molestation and things like that. And that has informed my story. And, you know, as an adult now, like I only read about what happens in India now, you know, and you can't separate caste dynamics from sexual assault in India because of the way that Dalit women are treated out there, Dalit femmes are treated out there and they are sexually assaulted every single day in India. And the molesters--the people who are enacting these crimes on them, these horrific behaviors on them, these power dynamics--are from privileged castes and they don't get punished for it. They don't get, they've learned that they can get away with it. And it's not just a man woman thing. It's a caste dynamic thing at play as well. So it's like you can't separate gender and caste. And even though I come from caste privilege and I experienced like sexual assault, sexual molestation at a young age in India, growing up, I hold so much space and empathy for Dalit femmes, for any femmes in India, because of what they've experienced. And, you know, I have cousins out there who have never experienced anything like that. It's just, it's not unfamiliar and it's a part

of a lot of our stories. And I mean, for anybody who's listening to this, I hope this, I hope you know that I see you and I hope you know your worth and your value and and that you can love yourself more than you can hate them. And that you focus on building relationships with yourself and people that you love and feel safe with and that you feel brave in this world that tried to take something from you because I struggle with that message every day. You know, I struggle with the message all the time, but I have to remind myself that things are different for me now. And yeah, loving yourself matters more than hating them.

00:48:34**SPEAKER_KK**

But there's been a lot that's informed my sexuality and gender. And like, also never seeing any queer person in my life when I was growing up, that was South Asian. That was always really rough. It's hard to believe that you're real if you don't see it in others too, I guess. But like getting to a point where accepting that queer South Asians, queer trans South Asians exist because I exist. That's been a journey and it's rough, but to be in community with others and to be like, "I see you and you see me." I don't know, it's really powerful. I know I'm kind of going all over the place. In regards to this, but I'm okay. I'm feeling okay. It's just sharing something so intimate and personal. I just want like people listening to know that they're not alone, I guess. And that I see them. I see them even if others don't. And I hope that when they look in the mirror, that they see love, you know, at least a little bit, at least they can note some love and joy and understand that pain can be transmuted. And that I'm sorry if you ever felt less than, because I know that feeling and it's not very nice. It's not something I wish on people.

00:50:42**SPEAKER_MS**

Thank you so much for your vulnerability and for sharing that and for all your generosity too. And like trusting and like gifting a part of the story, in hopes that it like for other folks too, like, thank you for that. And I guess like, in terms of as we were just talking about gender and sexuality, kind of going off of that, thinking about how you understand your gender and sexuality today, if you had to define some of your life so far in terms of phases, what would they be like? So phases or like chapters? I can, I can drop this in the chat as well.

00:51:25**SPEAKER_KK**

Oh my goodness. Phases and chapters. How many genders have I been through? So many. That's like a funny question because I was just visiting home and I saw pictures of me from like prom and high school and I'm like, who is this person? But, yeah, I, so there was, you know, it's funny. Oh my God. I hate that thinking about all of this. My first kiss was actually with a girl, and it was with-- I don't know what it was. Okay. So I was in elementary school and I kind of like tutored my classmates. My teachers always had to keep me busy essentially. I always finished my work very quickly and then I would be distracting to other students. And so they kind of tasked me with, "Hey, when you finish your work, walk around and ask if anybody else needs help." And I remember, I have this friend and I will spare sharing her name, but she was, is, she's Muslim and she and I were friends outside of class, but she didn't need help, but I was like, "Oh, let's talk. And I can pretend like I'm helping you." Right. So So we were just like hanging out and blah, blah, blah. And we were just like talking and I just leaned forward and kissed her. Like it was almost like a reflex. And like, I remember her just pulling back and her eyes being so big and almost like, in the way I interpreted it, mortified. And then I was mortified and I just ran away and we never talked about it again. And so that thinking back on that, I was eight years old. Like there was nothing. She was so young. She wasn't even wearing hijab yet. Like it was just this like moment of like-- I did it. And if you know me now, I am so the person who like asks for consent before kissing and all this, but me as a kid, I was like, I kissed this girl. I don't know. It's just so funny. But I was just like, yeah--I grew up as a little girl that had masculine tendencies. Like I played all the sports. I played with boys. I had a lot of guy friends. So that was definitely like a chapter of my life. Like with childhood, like always [audio unclear] things that I would do. And I'd always wear shorts. Sometimes I'd walk around without a shirt on. And then I got punished for that pretty severely. By the time I reached kindergarten, if I was still walking around without a shirt on, I would get punished pretty badly. So I learned very quickly. I'm not allowed to have my chest out. I'm not allowed to be topless. And so that definitely informed gender. Kissing that girl when I was eight years old I'm sure informs my sexuality now, or it's now, or it's just like a funny little anecdote because kids are just curious and they're exploring. I don't want them to be punished. Like, it's so funny to think of now. I remember when I went to India when I was seven, I wanted to get my haircut really short, like really, really really short because honestly-- like the look kind of, but it was more that it was just so hot. So so hot. So I wanted short hair cause I was so hot and my mom wouldn't let me, but eventually they let me, but with the humidity, my hair like poofed, it like went completely up. And my parents didn't know about hair product. I didn't know about hair product. So they just let it be. So I was like really poofy short hair. And because I was always playing with the guys, I had

kids in India, my cousin's friends and stuff, they always asked me if I was a girl or a boy when I was a kid. And I remember being like offended. And I was like, I'm a girl. What are you talking about? Of course I'm a girl. So even at a young age, I knew that there was shame associated with presenting as a gender that was different than your sex assigned at birth and the gender that was assigned to you at birth. So I knew and I still had that shame. Um, and I mean, to this day, I'm still not a man, you know, you can't be calling me that, like as it goes, um, because being a man, how embarrassing. No, I'm just kidding. So there was those phases. So it was just kind of like a lot of confusion, but I knew what I liked and I really saw myself in my cousin Tiffany because my cousin Tiffany, she she was my chacha's second daughter. And to this day, I still feel so at home with her. So along with like the family relationships that we talked about at the beginning, Tiffany is definitely one of them. My cousin, she lived with me here in the States, her dad, my chacha, actually married a Christian woman, a white Christian woman from the States. So she's mixed. So I, you know, looking back on it, on my dad's side of the family, my parents are the only ones who were same the race, religion, and caste and cisgender heteronormative relationship. My Bhua married someone, Jain my Chacha married someone Christian and white. So a different race altogether. Um, so yeah, I kind of grew up knowing that difference, like atypical-ness, wasn't necessarily super stigmatized, but there was no same sex. There was no queer representation, um, in the dynamics. But my cousin Tiffany, she was, she played the sports that I played and she was so good. I like idolized her and she was so powerful and she was participating in all these masculine things, but she was still dating guys. And she was still like able to put makeup on. And sometimes she wouldn't, actually more often than not, she didn't put makeup on, but she was this quote-unquote masculine behaved woman who was dating men. And she was-- she pulled, like she pulled, I'm not gonna lie. And I just like idolized her. Cause she was also like excellent at sports and stuff like that. And she was just like the kindest person. Um, so I was like, "Oh, maybe I'm just like that, you know?"

00:58:31 **SPEAKER_KK**

That was like as I was going into like middle school and things like that. And then, you know, traumatic things happened in India. And, um, I learned a bit more about gender disparities and how people are treated based on gender, how they have to function in this world based on their gender presentations being received. Um, and and then I got to high school and I was just so depressed. High school was probably one of the worst times of my life. So as far as a phase goes with gender and sexuality, I, looking back on my friend group at that time, um, very queer, very queer coded. They would tease me about being bisexual. And I'd be like, so defensive. I'd be like, "I am not bisexual. Like, why would you say this?" I was also like not really dating people or like crushing on people or interested in people. And I was on the soccer team, so I was also around all these like, like masculine women, but then a lot of them had boyfriends. Like it's very confusing. Now that I'm still following some of them on social media, now some of them have come out as queer and I'm like, this makes sense. Um, but you know, we weren't like that in high school. I was part of GSA, the Gay Straight Alliance. So I was straight--I was part of that in high school. Um, like all these things that when you look back, I'm like--. Oh my God, my cousins teased me because I wore a headband like every day in middle school. So they're like, you know, Kina, we knew. And I was like, you could have told me, it would've saved me a lot of time, a lot of like stress in my brain.

01:00:30 **SPEAKER_KK**

And like, I know I'm like older than you, but when I was in high school, that's when Facebook started and that's when social media really started. And the internet, social media and like interacting with strangers online became a thing. And that's when I sort of started exploring my sexuality more. And I specifically only did like straight, like I only talked to men or people who identified as men. And it was a lot of like hyper-sexual behavior online to kind of navigate feelings that I was having in my body that scared me. Because my parents never talked to me about sex. They never taught me about what was normal or to be expected in my body. Like I didn't start puberty until I was a freshman in high school, which is a bit late for some people. I didn't start my period until after all my friends had started their periods. So high school was like really confusing for me because I didn't have words for how I was feeling and how I was identifying. And I didn't have anyone around me who was sharing things with me or their curiosities with me. And I was also dealing with a lot of violence at home, between like my family members. And it was, I felt very isolated at that time. And I also actually physically injured my body in high school. So I wasn't able to play soccer. So I didn't have an outlet anymore. And I wasn't allowed to exercise because my body was hurt. I got into a really bad car accident where a drunk driver hit me and like all these things that affected my body. And then all of a sudden I couldn't play sports. So I had all this energy, because I had been an athlete my whole life. I was someone who exercised like six to seven times a week, playing multiple sports, like usually soccer or swimming. And to have that taken away, it was really rough at a time where there was an onset of so many hormones and so many things happening in my life

while traumatic things were happening. Like my poor nervous system. Like I look back on that time and I'm like, Oh my God, you were a child. Like I felt like an adult. Cause I was 16 and I was like, I know how to think, I know how to do things. I can drive. But it's like, no, you were a child. You were still like such a baby. Like you just understand and feel things more, but you don't know how to regulate. And like I had very dysregulated parents because they have a lot of trauma and I can be aware of my parents' immigration trauma-- removal from home, trauma, poverty, trauma, all all these different things. I can be aware and all the trauma that my mom faced--Oh my God, her life, my heart. And I can still be like, I also feel pain from that. I also had to endure during a lot of it. And once again, it was like, I felt alone. And when I went online and I was talking to random people online, there were never any Indian people. There were never any Punjabi people, there were never South Asian or Middle Eastern people or anyone who looked like me, ever. I never saw myself in anything. So it was like, I have to just notice personality traits and be like, well, I have that personality trait. So at least I can identify or familiarize or empathize in that way or sympathize.

01:04:20**SPEAKER_KK**

And then, I went to college as far. I picked my college based on distance from home and I picked the furthest away college possible. Um, and my life changed. So then the next chapter after a lot of confusion and isolation and questioning but affirming I'm straight, I'm a woman, like all of these things are just like-- because of how much my body would shake and how like uncomfortable and different I would feel when someone would try and like call me out or quote unquote, call me in. And my friends that would tease me that I was bisexual, they were queer themselves. So it wasn't necessarily like a--well, one of them was out queer. One of them didn't come out until much later, but like, so it wasn't necessarily like bullying, you know, it was just kind of like, you're one of us. And I was always like, no, I'm not. So a lot of denial. Also because I was like, I can't take one more thing that makes me feel abnormal. Cause I'm already feeling so abnormal cause I'm dealing with like sexual trauma that I faced, substance abuse, trauma within my family. And you know, physical, verbal, spiritual abuse at the hands of different family members that I faced. That me and my siblings faced, my parents face, all of us, sometimes with each other, on each other.

01:05:48**SPEAKER_KK**

And then I went to college, and I actually got my first boyfriend and we were together for two years and he is an amazing guy. Like looking back on it, I'm just like, I'm so lucky that this guy was my first boyfriend. He's South Asian. I hold such affection for him. Right. Like we were long distance, of course, and we were actually like friends in high school. There were like two distinct South Asian Middle Eastern groups. And basically you were either part of the South Asians that I was related to, or you weren't, because there weren't that many of us. Right. And so he was part of the side that wasn't. And he was always this real quiet kind of nerdy guy. He's a little taller than me. The sweetest person, he's still like in my life tangentially. I'm actually much closer with his brother. But we were together two years. And I'm so grateful for the time that I had with him, but you know, something just didn't feel right. I also needed a lot more attention at the age of 19 than I do now, constant attention from a partner than I do now. And we were at a distance and I wasn't getting enough from it. And eventually I left cause I wasn't happy. We did actually have sex. So he was like the first person in my life that I had--Oh my God, I skipped such an important thing.

01:07:39**SPEAKER_KK**

Oh my God. You're going to learn so much about me, but I'm an open book. So this is what's going to happen. I find myself to this day still very attracted--I can find men very attractive. Like I can be attracted to them. Now I realize it's a bit more in a queer way. But back then I just was like pants feelings. Like I'm having pants feelings about this person. That's what I call it 'cause I don't really know what else to call it. But I actually ended up having sex with this guy that I met online. And he was so nice. We don't talk anymore or anything, but but we met up and we hung out for like a few months before I left for college. 'Cause I was just like, because of what had happened to me when I was younger, I was terrified of sex. Like I was so scared. So scared. I was like, this is dangerous. I'm going to get hurt. So this guy that I like randomly met, I felt pretty safe with him. It was cool. I was like, why not? And so we did. And it was so like meh, it was such a boring experience for me. Like I went through it and I was in my head the whole time and I was like, this doesn't feel very nice. I want this to stop. Do I want this to stop? Let's just see if I can get into it. Like these thoughts were just going through my head. And whatever, it it happened. First person I ever had sex with. And it was this random person that I had met online, which I don't recommend for people, but I feel like is a very common queer experience. I actually wonder what he's up to. He was super talented. like he was a musician. He a musician. He was very talented in that way. So there was that like quickie little phase and I only bottomed for this person. So it was very much like

cis-heterosexual sexual dynamic. And he was so sweet to me. He knew it was my first time. He was very, very sweet with me. He was very, very nice. So I was really grateful. At any time I needed to pause, he's like, "you don't seem like you're into it. Are you okay?" So I was grateful that this person that I had met online and had been talking to for a few months and then we met in person and then we fooled around.

01:10:26SPEAKER_KK

Yeah. But then with my boyfriend, he wanted to wait till marriage for sex. And I was like, okay, but I'm ready to have sex whenever you're ready. Like I was like, no pressure, but we can have sex whenever, which I think looking back, I had disconnected the sacredness that I now kind of associate with sex from my being, because I had been through sexual assault as a child. So for me, I was like, it's just a behavior. It's just something we can do. It doesn't matter. But for my boyfriend at the time, he was like, God-- he had three priorities in his life, God, family, and friends, and God was first. So he was very much like, I'm going to wait till marriage. And I was like, okay, wait till marriage. Like, that's fine. We are teenagers, so we're not getting married anytime soon. But eventually like a year later, he was like, okay, I think I'm ready. And so we did, and it was very sweet. Like it was very, very sweet sex. It didn't really do much for me. But I tried and I tried quite a bit. And then after we broke up, I slept with another guy cause I was like, was it just because I was having sex with a virgin that it wasn't pleasurable for me? And no, it wasn't. It was, it wasn't because it was--it just didn't work. It just didn't fit. We didn't fit. Oh my God. There's so many puns in this interview. But I'm a very sex positive person and I think awkwardness and discomfort are part of it. Like it just is. And so like, I had sex with this other guy and he was so hot and I was so attracted to him. And then when we had sex, I was like, is this over? Like, when is this over kind of thing. Once again, really sweet guy. He was like, "all right, cool, if, if you don't want to, we don't have to." I stopped us in the middle of sex and then he left. He was like, "okay, I'm going to go." I was like, "yeah, just, go," like whatever, I didn't actually care. But it was, it was chill. He was fine He wasn't angry or anything. He was just kind of like, "okay, well, if we're just going to be like hanging out, I'm going to leave." I I was like, "okay, umm bye". So that was probably my straight phase 'cause I was like an adult, able to engage in sex consensually for the first time in my life. And I was exploring, I was trying to figure things out. And I knew that I could experience sexual pleasure and sexual arousal but I wasn't experiencing it with these people. Right.

01:13:24SPEAKER_KK

And then I went online again and then I went on Tumblr and as I was like kind of bouncing around the Tumblr verse, I kind of stumbled upon bisexuality and then I stumbled upon BDSM and then I stumbled upon transness. And I actually like--I forgot the order of things, but this was like the start of queerness for me. At least like where I was kind of pursuing it as opposed to it being kind of like in the periphery. I was like poking the bubbles, poking the bear. I was like trying to see what was happening. Um, and I actually met my first partner, my first queer partner who now-- who is trans actually. At the time that we were dating, we weren't considered a straight couple. We were considered a lesbian couple, whereas now we'd probably be--now we'd just be a queer couple, but back then we were considered a lesbian couple. And we were together for two years. I met them online on Tumblr and you know, I care about them deeply and I was like, this is going to be the relationship for my life and pulling on the Indian movie storylines, the first person you meet and first person you have sex with and you feel that connection with, it's going to be together forever. And no, it wasn't. We broke up and I broke their heart and I am sad about that. Or I feel for that. And then, I entered another queer relationship. Oh wait, no, no, no. There was a gap. I had an online relationship--a BDSM relationship-- where I was a sub and they were a dom and they were actually a trans woman. And so that was like--at the time my first like gender expansive queer relationship. And I loved that relationship. That was just like fun. That was just like play. But it wasn't romantic. This was like online adventures of Kina. This was my early twenties. And then, after that ended, I started dating this other person that I had met online on Tumblr. And we were together for two years, but that was a horribly abusive relationship. That relationship turned really violent, really fast. The person I was with grew up in a household where all kinds of abuse were just rampant and infidelity was rampant. And so they treated me like I was always going to be cheating on them. And it led to a lot of jealousy and insecurity and eventually violence. I went to the hospital probably more times in those two years than I have in the rest of my adult life. I had sprained my elbow. I had a concussion. I had the police called on me and my household. I had a domestic violence case number with this person. Okay. Like looking back on it, they now identify as a man and I can't help but be like, they're all the same. Men are just awful. But that's just me coping with it with humor. But that relationship changed me because going through physical, sexual, spiritual, verbal abuse, I think it changes a person, I think it changes your brain. And this was before I was 25, so my brain was still definitely developing. Just like having the police called on us multiple times and having to talk to the police. Like it was, it it was such a horrible time and it was mainly stemming from their jealousy and insecurity because I had a lot of friends and I wanted to go hang out with them with them and they were like, you're not allowed to essentially. And that went

against me so much. 'Cause I was like, I'm all alone up here. I worked so hard to create a community up here and now you're denying me that community. Like it's one of the main abuser tactics to isolate you and like cut you off from your people, which I see now. I feel like so much of that relationship, I was just watching myself like go through these horrible things and I knew better. And I knew the relationship wasn't going to last. But every time we tried to break up, it just kept, they had nowhere to go and then they were homeless. And then I was like, well, I don't want you to be homeless. And then they were broke. And I was like, well, I don't want you to be hungry. And so I kept taking care of them, but that would feed--that would give them another way to get back into my life. And then I'd block them and then they changed their number and then they'd call me from a blocked number and they knew where I lived. And it was this tumultuous, oscillating dynamic between two people that we just brought out the worst in each other. And the way that I defended myself in that relationship, I became someone who screamed. I became someone who broke stuff. I became someone who used my body to stop arguments. And I was like, this isn't me. And it was reminding me so much of like violence that I witnessed in my childhood. I was like, I don't want this for myself. So, I mean, it took two years, but eventually it ended. And I'm really grateful that it did. And like, I'm still healing from that. Like I still go to therapy for that relationship because I notice in my current really healthy, beautiful, loving, nurturing relationship that behaviors will come up that definitely stem from the abuse that I experienced back then, a decade ago, you know. And I get really frustrated with myself and then I have to remind myself like, "Hey, you're doing your best. And you have a really understanding partner, like just share it. And then you can work on it together kind of thing, or of thing, or just let them know you're working on it and then they'll be patient with you and all you need is patience."

01:21:18SPEAKER_KK

Um, so yeah, that chapter of my life was a lot of abuse and violence and I dropped out of school and I was trying to get back into school at that time. But it was really hard to be in school while being in an abusive relationship. Also because when I would try and work on schoolwork, they would throw a fit and they would pick a fight and then I would never get my work done. Because like if I gave my attention to anything else, they felt insecure essentially. And I tried to end it so many times and I kept letting them back in. And so eventually I started going to therapy again. And the therapist was like, "dude, you you need to say what you mean and mean what you say. You need to follow through with when you say this is over, you need to stop talking to them." And I was like, "but I can't, you know." It was a lot of toxicity, but eventually I got out of it. And then I was 25, and all of a sudden I was 25 and fully queer at this point, at least sexuality wise, I was fully queer. And honestly gender-wise, but I didn't necessarily know gender wise. I didn't I didn't realize that I was performing gender in a way that people label as trans or non-binary or fluid. I I didn't realize I was performing gender in that way until my family pointed out how much I was violating what they expected me to perform gender as. So it was like, I was this free person and I was just doing things. And then all of a sudden I was told, wait, that's not how it's supposed to be done. And I feel like that's actually a really common thing with gender is like, you don't realize that you're violating it until someone's like, you're violating it. It's very, very abstract. Which didn't come later until I was 27 and I had gone back home for my sister's wedding and all these clothes that I wanted to wear was not what they would have would have allowed. And they didn't allow. So then, I was 25 and at 25 was when I actually really started drinking. Um, I actually drank in high school and then I stopped during college and I just smoked a lot. And then at 25 I started drinking, like actually drinking. I used to hate the taste of alcohol. And then I started appreciating it. So that was a bit of a wild time for me. That was the first time I dated someone older than me. Oh wait, no, sorry. My boyfriend was a year older than me, but this is the first time I dated in a queer dynamic where someone was older than me. And that person--great person, lovely soul, super gentle with me, but they had some substance abuse issues and it kind of pulled me into this whirlwind of drinking. And they did other drugs so I participated with drug use with them. And I was like, I can't, I can't be doing this. And I was fresh off of an abusive relationship. And then eventually that person told me they loved me and I told them, I don't feel the same. And I don't want to placate you in this dynamic so I'm going to walk away now. And I broke their heart, which I've had my heart broken and I've broken other people's hearts and it's rough. It's rough. It's really, really rough. I will say this. I didn't expect physical abuse from queer relationships. And when I was in one, I was kind of blown away about it.

01:25:43SPEAKER_KK

So from 25 to 27 was probably the last time that I like identified with the cisgender agenda. And when I went home at 27, this whole time I was still trying to graduate undergrad, but I was dealing with so much stuff with my mental health. And then I also started working and it was just really hard. And I started to feel really badly about myself and that affected my performance in school. And school also didn't make it necessarily navigable for me either. I went from being like this really gifted student that like, everyone was like, you're going to finish

college in three years, to dropping out of college and just struggling. Just like feeling terribly about myself. Like my mental health hit really, really low. And then the abuse really fed that self deprecating thoughts. I have fought like hell and I continue to to this day. But yeah, at 27 when I went back home to my parents' place, and it was my sister's wedding, that was where I really, really--and at that point in my life I had also befriended enough and immersed myself in the queer community in Northern California. Mind you, it was mainly the white and Latino queer community in Northern California that I was exposed to more things like drag culture. And I was exposed to more trans people who were open about it and, then non-binary people. And I was like, oh, there's like a secret third option, you know, there's like this other option. And then like the way they talked and I was like, like, "wow, I finally have all these words for all these feelings that I've had for so much of my life." A lot of my gender expression is through my hair and my clothes. And so I was like, well, I always want to wear certain things and people say no. But I was like, I love suits and I love [audio unclear] and and I want to wear a kurta and I want to, you know, be dressed in a certain way. And it just wasn't welcomed. And then I started really like, you know, connecting with other non-binary people and other trans people. And I felt so seen by them and they saw me.

01:28:53SPEAKER_KK

And I saw them and you know, now I'm, I'm 32 and I have been in a relationship for almost five years. And, you know, probably in the last two years, it has been like the first time that I've really connected with other South Asian queer people. And it's interestingly, it's also been where the most that I've learned about caste dynamics as well. My parents brought me up very much like in the way that, caste doesn't exist out here in the States kind of thing. And then, you know, I learned, well, what's our caste? Cause they never said that. That was not something I was exposed to at all growing up, which is a hundred percent privilege and it's a hundred percent attached to my ignorance of my own privilege. 'Cause with privilege comes the ignorance of it. But you know, I had the light bulb awakened when I turned, when I was around the age of 30 and then I started like--now I see it, you know, now I'm like very, very much more aware of it. I'm trying to learn about it. I'm trying to actively, you know, participate in anti-caste-- live an anti-caste lifestyle, try to, you know, more abolitionist. Like my queerness is definitely political and it informs me, and exposes me to the existence of others and the perspectives of others. And I always, always want to hear from other people about what they're going through and what's happening. And so it can better inform me about, you know, how to conduct myself and to create safe spaces for everybody. So everyone feels brave enough to be themselves. If they're not hurting people, you know, or or infringing upon other people's consent, I want them to be, you know, brave enough to be themselves and feel safe. Now I'm really learning about how insidious caste is and how it is all over the world and how, you know, last names designate caste and all these different things that you know, I try to embody within myself and in my practices in the way that I love. Like just trying to let it be a place of growth, and, and hold space for all the pain that we've all been, and like try to be gentle. I just want to be gentle and soft but hold firm to my beliefs and my values and carry that forward.

01:31:54SPEAKER_KK

And so the current chapter that I'm in is probably the most free that I've ever been with my gender and sexuality because I can perform it any way that feels true to myself. And I have a partner who respects that. And I have friends who honor it and I have, you know, I still have the issues of my gender, you know, with my family and stuff. They're still trying to catch up on it, but you know, it took my parents seven--wait, no, how many years--like seven years to get to a point where they were comfortable enough to invite a partner of mine into the home. So let's see, I have hope as I go forward with it with my family and also to be in community with other South Asian queers. And I hope that this interview, this this recording can be almost like a calling card as a way. So hopefully we can see each other. And I think it's the way that queerness has informed me in this way is that like, I am aware of marginalization and hierarchies of power and how that plays out in social dynamics, interpersonal dynamics. I feel like what I have seen with queer Punjabi Sikh people--at least, the ones who are aware of their caste privilege and are aware that it is a privilege--that it's so much love. It's so much space. It's so much awareness of our connection to each other, our connection to the world, our willingness to help and be open and to see each other. Like it's so beautiful. I'm so grateful for those relationships in my life. And I want more of them and I want to cultivate that in my life. I want to keep feeding that side of me as well because it feels more like home and it feels like belonging in a way that hasn't really existed for me in my life ever up until this point. And this is probably the most I've felt it for which I'm very, very grateful.

01:34:49SPEAKER_MS

Oh no, thank you so much for, for just gifting all of those stories and for all of those experiences to me. I'm just filled with so much like appreciation and gratitude. To just be a witness to your journey. So thank you for allowing me to be a witness, and for being just so generous with your time and with your experience as well. I have a lot of other questions, but I also do want to be mindful of your time and energy as well. So I wanted to do a check-in to see how you're doing. I know I had said the interview would take like up to two hours, but we are like over two hours now. So I want to be just mindful of how you're doing and if you would want, I'm happy to--I would love to even organize in terms of another time to continue with the other questions or if you feel up for it, I can ask the next question too, but just wanted to do a check-in to see how you are doing. This also must be a lot in the context of kind of reflecting and sharing and like pouring yourself out in this way. Like not just to me, but like also to other listeners as well. I'm sure this is a lot. So I wanted to kind of see how you're doing.

01:36:09**SPEAKER_KK**

I didn't mean to talk so long and so much, I didn't know how many questions you asked. I was like, Oh, it's just a couple of questions. I'll just share it all. But you probably have it categorized or like organized in a much different way. I am totally okay to keep going for like a little bit longer, but I also want to be mindful of your time. I don't know how much time you have to hold because I know you set it for two hours. We can absolutely move it to another day if that fits your schedule better. So where are you at? Like I could still talk for a little bit longer.

01:36:41**SPEAKER_MS**

I'm also good to continue as well. I just wanted to make sure you were also okay.

01:36:44**SPEAKER_KK**

Okay. Thank you for checking in. I appreciate.

01:36:47**SPEAKER_MS**

Yeah. No, thank you. Thank you. Kind of transitioning a little bit, but also in relationship to that question about the phases, when thinking about your relationship to Sikhi, how would you say you learned more about Sikhs and Sikhi and how-- I know you've already started to kind of touch on some of those experiences, but wanted to kind of see if thinking about your relationship to Sikhi and how it's changed and evolved over the course of your life. If you had to define some of your life in terms of phases, in the context of your relationship to Sikhi, like Sikhi, like what would those phases look like and what would they be?

01:37:29**SPEAKER_KK**

I would probably say me at my most devout was my first 12 years of life. Like that was when I was going to Gurdwara every Sunday. That was when my parents tried to sign me up for like Punjabi classes. That was the only time that I ever got out of-- or not got out, but the only time I didn't go to the Gurdwara was when I had a soccer tournament that like went through on a Sunday. And by devout, I mean when I was consistently attending the Gurdwara. So it was probably those like first years, I think after going to India when I was 12 and, you know, traumatic things happened, I like so disconnected from myself, that that included Sikhism. I've always identified myself as Sikh or Punjab, Sikh Punjabi is how I've always identified. And, you know, as I as I got older, going through high school, because I was just kind of drowning, I would go to the Gurdwara intermittently. Sometimes I would attend weddings. Learning about Sikhism came a lot from like when I would visit India and, my like Masis would talk to me about different aspects of the religion, not necessarily like quotes from the Guru Granth Sahib, but like just incorporating the morals, almost like fabulistic, like I loved fables. I loved folk tales. I loved learning about those in my-- one of my Masis' husbands, he he had all of the folk tales. So I loved just sitting and listening to him. He had so many that he taught me. So it kind of phased out a bit more in high school, but also in high school, like if you're different in the slightest way, people attack. So it was like, I was different because I was South Asian. And I actually went to a decently diverse school, it was predominantly Asian, but it was mainly East Asian kids as opposed to South Asian or Southeast Asian kids. So I was unique still. I remember taking a standardized test and anytime I take a standardized anything to this day, they don't have Punjabi or Sikh on any of them. And so, yeah, I remember my teacher being like, "what is that? Is that like Pakistani?" And I was just like, "um, sure." Like, I didn't know what to say because I was nine years old. And it's interesting because, you know, borders are all made up. I do actually have-- my family hailed from modern-day Pakistan, but they had to migrate South to Mumbai and Delhi because partition. So I'm like, "yeah,

kind of, but not in the way that you think." Like how do you put the--you can't put that on a standardized test. But I never felt like bad about my difference. I remember in high school because it was more about assimilation to be accepted, I remember feeling so anxious about being seen in any desi kapra that I was wearing. Any salwar kameez, especially salwar kameez, cotton salwar kameez was like such a comfortable, traditional thing that I would wear to the gurdwara. And then we'd go get food afterwards, you know? And I remember being like almost embarrassed to be seen in that. And now I'm like, absolutely not. Now I will walk in it in my full power in any space. Like I am grateful to be able to be wearing what I want to wear in the presence of whomever. But as a kid, it's like the, "Oh my God, don't look at me, like I'm going to die from embarrassment" type things phase.

01:42:16**SPEAKER_KK**

So I kind of like lost--like I was still involved, but I wanted to be cool, you know? And it wasn't cool to be different around like high school age. And then, you know, when I went to college, I pretty much like disconnected from from Sikhism. I didn't really understand the language. I had faced so much suppression because of being socialized as a woman and like not feeling special, and feeling like being Indian, being Punjabi meant being in service of men. And, you know, these were the stories I was living my life as. So I was like, "why would I continue that? why would I perpetuate that?" Because misogyny made me very angry. And I witnessed that so much at every single party that I went to--South Asian party because of how the women were treated as opposed to the men and how I was treated as opposed to my brother and my cousins and stuff like that. And how all the men just get to sit and talk and chat and whatever the fuck they talk about. And then all the women are just running around like crazy, making all the food, serving, cleaning, constantly. It wasn't for me. It felt very, very against what felt good to me.

01:44:05**SPEAKER_KK**

The only times that I was ever really in it was when I would visit home, or I would listen to the music or I'd eat the food. I'd feel those connections again. And I wore my kara. I still actually kept my kara. I've always had my kara. I keep it with me at all times. It's changed through the years and stuff, but that is one that I tend to keep on even to this day. There was--actually, you know, it's so funny when it's really hot out, wearing-- I have eczema--bracelets or anything on my wrists or skin tend to cause eczema reactions. So that's probably like the only time that I don't wear my kara as often. Because like the sweat and just like the aggravation of it on my skin. And then it became like a thing where I only really listened to-- in my twenties-- I only really listened to like bhajans or prayers--or even going to the gurdwara happened when I was with my family and they were going or they were playing it at home. Like they had recordings of it and they were playing it at home. Now my dad--because he can't make it to the gurdwara every Sunday--he actually is part of this, ever since the pandemic, they've started doing it online, so he just tunes in and listens to it on his phone at home. So now like listening to prayers when I visit home tends to be how I'm like attached to it, I guess, or actively attached to it. But you know, like after having my caste privilege bubble popped in my late twenties, I've become much more interested in learning about it and being more of an active participant in what what Sikhism is. And learning about learning how Sikhi, the origin of it was actually like abolitionist initiative, it was something to be like, "we're all human, why would we heed something like caste? We need to extend our love to everyone." Learning that that was what it was. And drop the last name, and that's where Kaur came from. That's where Singh came from. I was like, I don't know, it felt like a calling to me. And I was like, that's amazing. I didn't know that that was what Sikhism was. I didn't know that. I didn't know that that was what Sikhi preaches and all that kind of stuff. So I've become more interested in learning about it. And then I learned about the way that people practicing Sikhi have brought Brahminical casteist hierarchy to Sikhism. And I'm like, fucking hell, dude. Like can't the people who want us to just be like equitable and humans with each other, why can't we win? Like it's very interesting being a part of something that's not a populist movement. And then being on the side that is still for abolish the caste system mentality and goals. I'm learning so much and I'm like, this is what my ancestors tried for. This is what they wanted. This is what carries out through my history. And, you know, with British imperialism and, and Brahminical casteism, so much has been wiped from my history. I don't know anyone in my family past my dada daadi, and that is by design. And so now I find myself--I've always been very thirsty for knowledge. I've always loved reading. I've always loved learning. So now I find myself actually participating in it more, but from the angle, I guess, of political participation and trying to participate in it and carrying forth this abolitionist mentality now.

01:48:47**SPEAKER_KK**

So this phase of my life in Sikhi is probably closer to the Gurus' lessons and morals than when I was a kid just kind of following along with my parents. I feel more active in it now. And, you know, I do know that in Sikhi--my dad says this quote to me all the time, because my dad loves quotes, but he said, "women in Sikhi are strong for they give birth to Kings" or something like that. And I'm like, "he's got the spirit." The message is a bit off to me. You know, it's like, women have more to offer than just producing men, but you know, at least, I can't really think of another religion that kind of holds women to a certain--I feel like Sikhi is more feminist than other religions. And so I'm grateful for that because my dad is a self-proclaimed feminist. He does believe in the power of women. He does believe that women are powerful. He's never been one to purport that kind of idea that women do this and do this and men do this. He never pushed that on me, which I feel like is very unique. I have very unique experience with that. It was more my brother that was like, "men are superior and men can do this and women can't do shit." And all this horrible misogynistic bullshit. But my dad was like, no, "in Sikhism, in Sikhi, like women are great. Women are powerful. Women have power. We can't do anything without them" kind of stuff. And so understanding that more now, it kind of makes sense that my values are what my values are and I recognize it more. And I always introduced myself with Sikhi as part of my identity. I always have, I think I was reconciling more with my queerness for a lot of my twenties that now I'm trying to look at myself as a whole person. And Sikhi absolutely informs how I carry myself in this world and my connection to it. But I have lost my way as well, as it goes. And I don't necessarily know how to embody that spirituality in community with others, because I still feel on the outside a bit due to my queerness. And I just, you know, this is something unique to someone like me. But I believe it's possible. I believe that my queerness has, you know, my Sikhi identity, I believe that we can get to an abolished caste future. I believe in that kind of future for us where we're all welcome and we're treated by the content of who we are--not just who we are, not just by our caste or our sexuality or genders, because all of this exists pre-colonial, pre-coloniality. And here we are in the trenches, just trying to hold on to each other, you know?

01:52:41 **SPEAKER_MS**

No, thank you. Thank you so much for sharing that too. There's so many questions that are coming out from that, that I want to touch on, such as whether it's like questions about coming out, what that means, what your experience has been with that, or even in thinking further about like your relationship to Sikhi and the Sikh community, like how that's been, what does it even mean to be a Sikh and have those kinds of questions. As well as kinds of questions thinking about what it means to be part of like the LGBTQIA + community, because even that, as you were kind of naming, is something that you've grappled with for quite a while. So that has also been like in itself a journey that, of course, is ongoing. So with all of this said, how do you feel about scheduling based on your capacity and based on your time, a second round of interview for kind of these second set of questions. Just to be respectful of your energy as well. And then, from my end, being on the East coast, I haven't eaten yet too.

01:53:54 **SPEAKER_KK**

Oh my God, you have to go eat.

01:53:58 **SPEAKER_MS**

Yes. But that way, in terms of like the conversation itself though, I would love to continue it because there's just, I feel like from your end, there's a lot of things that like need to be told and I'm really, really thankful you're taking the time to share them with me and to get them archived. So I really want to make sure that the space like continues to maintain its richness while like respecting and honoring preserving your capacity and preserving your energy too.

01:54:31 **SPEAKER_KK**

Oh no, I really do appreciate that. I also have, it might be a trauma response, I don't know, I have issues with taking up space. So I feel like I'm just taking up like so much of your time. And I've been talking so much about just the first three questions. I really want to be mindful.

01:54:56 **SPEAKER_MS**

Oh no. I a hundred percent hear you and I think it also may be more so because given that it's an oral history interview where my role is to-- I'm just like, interview like, I don't even provide like, "Oh, Oh, this makes me think about" and, there's very little validation, and even very little response I'm giving. And I just move on to the

question. And I really do apologize for how that is. That's kind of one of the, I guess, limitations of an oral history because the oral history is just focused --it's supposed to be about you and less of a conversation and more of an attempt to archive your life story. But please please don't think that at all. This is the very purpose of this in terms of you have so much to offer and like the stories that you have, the journey that you've been on. As you have also named, it's hard to find validation for who you are and find even a reason for you to like be able to articulate your existence when you don't see your existence reflected anywhere. All of that to say, your story, you telling it, it's so important because other folks, we'll be able to see and we'll find resonance and something that they can hold on to to validate their own existence. So I hope that you don't walk away feeling as if you took up too much space because I appreciate that. Like for each of these questions, you've been giving such a thorough and such a rich response and I'm already taking away and I'm excited for other folks, when they do also witness, how much they'll also be in conversation with as well.

01:57:28**SPEAKER_KK**

Yeah, absolutely. And I appreciate you saying that. [proceed to scheduling Interview Part 2].