

Interview with Jiwandeep Kohli

00:00:03 **SPEAKER_MM**

All right, I think we're recording. Yeah, okay. All right, good morning. This is Manu Multani, and today is August 3rd, 2023. And I'm interviewing for the first time Jiwandeep Singh (he/him). And this interview is taking place in my home online and I'm based in Los Angeles, California. And this interview is sponsored by Jakara and as part of the storytelling and settlement through Sikh LGBTQIA+ oral histories project. The purpose of this research is to document the lived experiences of six in the United States who are from LGBTQIA+ backgrounds. We want to provide a more complete history of six through interviews that asks LGBTQIA+ Sikh about their different experiences, how LGBTQIA+ Sikh understand themselves and their communities, and how LGBTQIA+ Sikh make homes in the US. Unlike a job interview or a survey, oral history interviews are all about you and your life. We can talk about anything you want in any order. So I'm gonna start with a little bit of a

00:01:27 **SPEAKER_MM**

broad question and a little bit of a historical question. So 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 common stories, relationships, maybe even smells that come to mind that help you describe growing up?

00:01:53 **SPEAKER_JK**

That's a broad question. I mean, when I think about growing up, I think about sort of, you know, family and home here in LA, where I am also from. I was born and raised here in Los Angeles. My first memory, as far as, you know, I know, is of moving into our childhood home here. My parents lived in apartments before we moved into this house when I was probably around three years old. And so I have pretty vivid memories of just kind of arriving here and starting the process of getting settled into our house in LA. And, you know, from there, when I think about growing up, I think it's a very typical story of kind of child of immigrants by cultural experience. So navigating a very Western culture and in LA and a public school system here with some more traditional values from our Punjabi culture and then integrating within both of those really values from Sikhi.

00:03:27 **SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah. Yeah. And so how sort of has that developed kind of your formative experiences? You know, you've talked a lot about like public schooling and then traditions and Sikhi and kind of like how they all kind of brought something and meaningful, something meaningful to you. So what is that for your childhood? And now maybe as you are looking at it.

00:03:57 **SPEAKER_JK**

Yeah. It's hard to say exactly what it was like back then. I think growing up, you just become more kind of thoughtful about these things. So I'm probably projecting a little bit of my experience as a person now onto what it was like to grow up, but you know, being Sikh, wearing a turban, a pagri as a really core identifiable feature of my identity, that has really colored my experience. And before I even, you know, brought the intersection of queerness into that, or that was sort of became apparent to me later on, that has, you know, wearing a turban has been a really core aspect of my identity. And the meaning of that has also kind of developed along with growing up here. I think it probably carries different meaning depending on your social context. And so, to wear a turban in Los Angeles, California means something different than if I were growing up where my parents grew up. So, navigating that issue of visibility and educating people around me about what it means to be Sikh, that was kind of part for the course for me growing up.

00:05:29 **SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, yeah. So have you been sort of embracing the pagri like from the beginning and sort of have found yourself navigating that often in public schools as well?

00:05:40 **SPEAKER_JK**

Yeah, definitely. Parents raised me with like a very strong value for my pagri and I'm appreciative of the way that they did that and making it clear that it's not you know it's not a burden, but rather a gift and a responsibility. And to really have highlighted for me that it is a good thing to be identifiable and to be able to be a source of support to other people. So yeah, I'd say from the beginning it has been really important to me and that helped with the challenges of kind of coping with otherness in Western society and kind of build up a little bit of resilience against I think what a lot of people struggle with and having a turban be perceived as something negative or having a lot of other connotations with that that are challenging to deal with.

00:06:55SPEAKER_MM

Yeah, yeah, definitely. And I think you're doing something that's really interesting, and I want to unpack that a little bit more because some listeners might not make the connection to this counter narrative right where you're saying you know this symbol is sort of a gift and a responsibility. I know what that means but maybe some people don't so if you don't mind sort of elaborating on that.

00:07:22SPEAKER_JK

Yeah, absolutely. So the lessons that I've been taught along the way and sort of understanding that I've come to of my reason, my why for why I wear a turban is that it's a sort of uniform for Sikhi, and it is meant to make me identifiable as a helper. So that people out in the community can know that I'm someone who they can rely on for support. That's sort of the primary reason that I see myself wearing my turban. And so that is, you know, something I consider to be a gift in that it is an honor to be able to help other people and for other people to feel like they can rely on you and trust you with things. But it also means that I am representing a community when I go out into the world, and that is a big responsibility. So it means that I have to be maybe a little bit more or extra thoughtful about the way that I am conducting myself in the world because, you know, whether or not I like that, other people may be judged based on the sort of way that I present because I'm so visible.

00:08:46SPEAKER_MM

Yeah, yeah, definitely. So do you think, you know, this sort of like representation of yourself has helped you understand yourself better or your connection to Sikhi better or how has that been sort of evolving?

00:09:05SPEAKER_JK

Yeah, I'd say it's been sort of the turban has been central to my understanding of Sikhi and my relationship with Sikhi. And you know, that's dynamic and ever evolving. It's been for me, largely throughout my childhood and young adulthood, the appeal and value of Sikhi has been in the way that it conveys values, actually. The way, the really kind of pragmatic, practical ways of thinking about the world and, you know, your goals and values and this limited life that we have here, that's really been the frame of the religion for me and less so about the sort of more spiritual aspects. That's something that I'm still learning about. And that is probably I'm forging more of a connection with as I get older, but Yeah, it really has been about the more kind of core values that have, that's been my relationship to Sikhi.

00:10:27SPEAKER_MM

Yeah, if you don't mind elaborating on those core values and how you're evolving in your relationship with Sikhi and what that's meaning to you now spiritually. And we can then talk about topics of gender and sexuality and sort of how are you navigating all of that together?

00:10:49SPEAKER_JK

Yeah. So for me, the core values that I refer to along the way are really this value for justice and equity, standing up for not only for yourself, but really for other people standing up against oppression of all varieties, sort of a value for service to others. And yeah, I'd say those are the sort of the core ones that I think about kind of on a daily basis when it comes to framing my activities.-And then so there are all there is a whole not separate but you know related actually aspect of this that has to do with spirituality and your relationship to God. And that's something that I have only more recently started to grapple with and sort of think about, well, what does this mean to me and how does that fit with my other aspects of my identity?

00:12:13SPEAKER_MM

Yeah, yeah. And so how do you, how do you navigate, consider, think about your gender and your sexuality and sort of those conversations and those sorts of values with Sikhi? How does that sort of yeah surface for you?

00:12:33 **SPEAKER_JK**

It's an interesting thing to me, kind of reflecting on how just like seamlessly compatible the, you know, the values of the religion are with issues of sexual and gender minority existence. And, you know, it brings me joy to think about how like progressive our religion is in this sense. And at the same time, how kind of challenging and sometimes unfortunate ~~is~~ it is that this is situated in a social context that is less progressive and understanding and kind of seamlessly accepting of people who don't fit norms. So for me growing up and now reflecting on it, you know, certainly in the current time period, it's, if I had to sum it up, it would be this sort of tension between very progressive accepting wonderful kind of religious values with more conservative kind of patriarchal, colonial. [unclear audio] They're somewhat at odds with each other. And I think there's something to be said also of growing up here in the US and Los Angeles and again, another fairly progressive, liberal kind of social context and being able to kind of third party observe, you know, the experiences of my immigrant parents and their community and how those are maybe more at odds with each other than my own experience of kind of social, social facets.

00:14:51 **SPEAKER_MM**

So what I'm hearing is also, it sounds like you've developed sort of your own community from your parents' community, but still holding on to certain values and sort of Sikhi and embracing sort of what's important to you, is that correct?

00:15:11 **SPEAKER_JK**

Yeah, I would say, as someone who presents as religious, I'm often having this conversation about what it means to be religious in this society here. And my overall kind of take home message is, it always boils down to, it makes sense to me to take the aspects of something that work for you and enhance your life in some way, and there's no reason to take the parts that are burdensome to you. And so like you're talking about, you create your communities and you take the pieces of what your parents want to give you. And you sort of, you forge your own path with those things. And people have different degrees of ability to do that, the freedom to do that. I've certainly had lots of freedom to do that. So I've been able to leave one foot in my parents' community, but also certainly expand into ones that are more, that serve other needs in my life, that are more comfortable to be fully myself. And that's been a really, I think, important part of growing up as a queer Sikh here.

00:16:41 **SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah. And so when earlier you talked about sort of Sikhi being seamlessly compatible. Can you share more about that? Because then you elaborated on the tension but not the compatibility. So I wanted to know what sort of was that, and if that compatibility has been kind of your experience all the time, or were there certain scenarios where that wasn't the case?

00:17:08 **SPEAKER_JK**

Yeah, I would say, I mean, growing up, I had a, and also I should preface all of this with saying that my understanding of Sikhi is relatively rudimentary. Like I, having not engaged with the more spiritual components of the religion, can't say that I am an expert on the values or any other aspect of it by any means. And so in the way that I've talked about, I've taken the pieces of it that I do understand and that work for me, and really integrated those into my life. And there's probably lots out there that I can't comment on. So when I talk about it, kind of seamlessly integrating with my identity and my queer experiences, some of the broad things about the egalitarianism, so equality, equity, and sort of the progressive nature of it that, we're all human beings, that's what it boils down to. And no one is sort of, everyone deserves the same rights essentially. And that's kind of a key historical component of the religion that I think integrates nicely with that. There are also other, other things that I've been taught along the way, like the idea of our souls being genderless, essentially, that I find really appealing and compatible with that as well, that you strip away the temporary pieces of being a human and at the core we're all kind of the same. So that's been another big one that's been really lovely to carry with me as a way of connecting with other people that at the core of it, we're all just human souls having a human experience

on this earth.

00:19:25**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah. And so when did you encounter or become more aware of sort of how Sikhi sort of conveys this idea of the soul being genderless?

00:19:39**SPEAKER_JK**

That's a great question. I don't think I can think of off the top of my head where I first encountered that. But I think where I really started engaging with it more as an idea was probably in college. So I went to UC Berkeley, and one of the neat things about studying there was that they offered Punjabi classes. So I got to take a couple of years of Punjabi and the professor was really great, obviously teaching us what we needed to know about the grammatical and kind of language components of it, but also introducing a lot of nice cultural education. And for those of us who it was relevant to, just like anecdotes about Sikhi. And so, yeah, a lot of my engagement with that type of material came from one, being able to understand it a little bit better from learning Punjabi, but also being immersed in that kind of cultural educational experience.

00:20:43**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, yeah, that's awesome. I'm so glad. Thank God for like, and what a blessing for public schools to embrace that sort of opportunity for people like us, right? And offer it. Yeah, that's awesome. And so how has your sort of relationship with your gender and sexuality then evolve, you know, how has it been developing and things like that, based on sort of how you're picking up and engaging with these different philosophies as you're sort of growing up?

00:21:17**SPEAKER_JK**

Yeah, it has certainly evolved, I would say. You know, there's a unique aspect of it. It's unique for everyone, I should say, but like the unique aspect of it for me is of growing up with a kind of bi/pan sexuality and in my childhood and adolescence, not even really having the language to convey what I was feeling, what my experience was. So I think that has been a really big part of the evolution was just exposure to the language to describe different aspects of gender and identity and exposure to different people who carry those identities and be able to kind of grapple with what mine is. So that's what mine is. So that's one feature of it. Another kind of layer of that is kind of growing up in a traditional household with more conservative values and not kind of dating when I was growing up. And so I think I feel a little bit developmentally delayed in my understanding of my sexuality and relationships to other people, because it just wasn't considered important early on in my life. This was, again, in a kind of typical immigrant household experience. Like, you need to focus on your education. And I was relatively compliant in that sense. And then I was like, okay, I guess I'll just focus on school. And didn't really feel the need or pressure to figure any of that out, you know? And that's not to say that on the more kind of day-to-day basis, I didn't wonder what I was experiencing or think about these things, but it was easy to kind of just push aside in surface of other goals and values at the time. And so again, in a fairly kind of typical developmental trajectory, it wasn't until like college and grad school where I had a little bit more freedom to explore and kind of expectation to start figuring those things out that I started grappling with issues a little bit more deeply. And so that's kind of the secondary layer of kind of my family and social values that have impacted the development and evolution of my understanding of my sexuality. And then there's the religious piece of Sikhi, where those would have been that I would have considered them completely separate growing up. Like I've already mentioned that I wasn't really thinking about sexuality very deeply at that point, but I certainly wasn't thinking about it in the context of this religion and what that means for that. So again, it wasn't really until young adulthood that I was kind of holding these things together. And again, kind of pleased to discover that with at least my understanding of Sikhi that I can hold them together quite easily and feel good about that, which has been nice.

00:25:06**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, yeah. And so what does it mean to you to be part of both communities? It obviously makes you feel good. And so I wanna know like sort of what that means to you and sort of how it sort of helped formulate your identity and sort of where you are at today.

00:25:28**SPEAKER_JK**

Yeah, I think I can maybe summarize this well in coming back to kind of like a historical lens for this. So Sikhi, again has among the core values this idea of standing up for other people and shared humanity. So we're all taught the stories of Sikh people helping other oppressed communities under the Mughal Empire, for example, and not being concerned with just kind of insular protection of other Sikhs, but really standing up for other minority communities. And so that translates very nicely to me to being a part of the queer community where we do have this kind of, there can be silos of LGBTQ plus. And for me, that's not really the point, right? Like, we all have this shared feature of being a minority in some way, and a similar way. And so it doesn't make sense to me to focus entirely my advocacy efforts on the bi/pan community when standing up for other oppressed people or people who are more oppressed than I am will serve that advocacy effort as well, if not better.

00:27:09**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah. Yeah. And so, you know, coming back to like how you were like saying at this moment, when you were like in sort of grad school and in college, you were kind of almost forced to think about your sexuality. So did you also then think about coming out or was there like a moment that that occurred for you or what does coming out even sort of mean to you maybe? Yeah.

00:27:40**SPEAKER_JK**

Yeah. So there is this aspect of being bi or pansexual that comes with a sort of choice about coming out and the ability to, if it works for you not have to share that aspect of your identity broadly. And as I got older and sort of the expectation was to start dating and figuring out what I wanted out of my future and a family life, what I was finding was that it wasn't possible for me to forge intimate connections with people while hiding that aspect of my identity, whether it was, regardless of the gender of the other person in the relationship. And so this was probably around the time that I was like 23, 24

00:28:39**SPEAKER_JK**

kind of grad school years. And that's when I started to think about the issue of coming out, because I was like, well, if I'm not able to share this aspect of my identity with people who I'm trying to develop really intimate relationships with, then I'll be pretty much just kind of stuck. And I, having grown up in a generally loving, supporting family, didn't feel like I could do that with quote unquote, strangers until I had dealt with the issue with my family. So that's when I started thinking about coming out. And again, and probably a trajectory that other people will relate to, I chose to first talk to my sister about it. So I grew up with my parents and my older sister. They're my kind of core family. And my sister and I have a really excellent relationship, kind of best friends growing up situation. And so, yeah, I decided to tell her first and talk to her about it and then kind of consult with her about how to tell our parents. And yeah, I think I was, it was around the, I think I was 25 years old when this was all happening. So I kind of told my sister at a family visit over Thanksgiving or so of that year when we were together, that all went, you know, she was obviously not surprised and very supportive. And then we sort of just like left it at that. And it was later that year during the next set of holidays that I was at home. And for some reason, it was just me, my sister wasn't there, so it was me and the parents. And I decided just kind of like on a whim, before I was going back to San Diego where I did grad school, I just needed to get it off my chest and just like get on with my life. I just, I had no idea what to expect. I was uncertain about what the outcome of this conversation would be with my parents. So I was imagining scenarios all the way from like, it's totally chill and they already knew and it would be totally fine, all the way to, well, I'm gonna be disowned and then I'm gonna have to figure out what to do from there. And I would say it sort of landed somewhere in the middle of that, where it continues to be a challenging discussion and it's happening in a really fortunate, kind of, like I mentioned, loving, supporting relationship. So yeah, very much a synthesis of kind of the two extremes, an ongoing process and an ongoing conversation. And so it continues to be that for me as well.

00:32:06**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, yeah. Thank you for sharing that. It's extremely vulnerable. So thank you for laying that out and describing, because it is very challenging, right? And it's also, I don't know, if you had to sort of kind of explain that sort of dynamic of how sexuality is being explored. I don't know if that's sort of how you have the conversation with your parents, or if that's sort of been your evolving relationship with this conversation with your parents is like sort of describing your sexuality and sort of like identifying with it and stuff. Have you had those conversations too? Did it sort of beg those conversations because you were sharing this about yourself?

00:32:52**SPEAKER_JK**

I would say, I mean, I'm not in their heads, so I can't really ever understand what their understanding of sexuality is. And so, commenting only on the actual conversations that we've had, I'd say it's more rudimentary, sort of like, okay, you're bisexual, so why don't you just marry a woman and have a family and it's fine, right? Like we're talking about that level of understanding. So I would say for me it has very much been about kind of like exploring and understanding that these things are dynamic and fluid. And like, there's no reason that it has to be one concrete thing at any given moment. That's sort of my belief about it. But that's not probably the way that my parents and I think a lot of the community see this issue.

00:33:50**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, and it also seems like to me the way you're sort of explaining your phases of your life, you've had like communities that you could rely on as you're sort of navigating different aspects of your life. So how do you find community now and sort of what communities do you rely on at this moment?

00:34:10**SPEAKER_JK**

Yeah, I would say growing up it really boiled down to your friends and your family, right? And your friend structure is largely built through school and you, you know, as typical, you kind of find people who you share qualities and characteristics and interests with. And so, I was fortunate to have a really solid friend group around the other aspects of my identity and goals in life when I wasn't grappling with the issue of sexuality. And then by the time I got to college, we're the generation of the internet. And so there's this whole added feel, you know, you've got your friends and your family and friends can start to break down into lots of different groups of friends. And so you got your school friends, you've got your extra curricular friends, you got your internet friends. And so there are all these like somewhat overlapping circles of community that will kind of serve the different needs and desires in your life. And that's sort of been the way that it's continued to evolve for me. And online community has been a big part of that, especially since I've been so, so extremely online. And that's been a big part of like, visibility for me. So yeah, that's, that's been a big part of finding community. And there are the communities that you find sort of like second degree from your own. So Just being like, I think more open to like forging and finding community through other people and yeah, you know, having your friends or your family scaffold other relationships for you.

00:36:22**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, I hear that. So how would you describe your experiences with maintaining a relationship with like Sikhi and LGBTQI plus people?

00:36:32**SPEAKER_JK**

Sorry, I'm realizing that there are gardeners outside and I don't know if you can hear that, but it's quite loud on my end.

00:36:38**SPEAKER_MM**

Oh yeah, yeah, I could, I heard a little bit of a mumble, but not much. Should I repeat the question?

00:36:46**SPEAKER_JK**

I will need you to repeat the question, but we might want to wait like two minutes for them to like move along. I don't think it'll take very long.

00:36:54**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, yeah, no worries.

00:36:56**SPEAKER_JK**

Sorry about that.

00:36:57**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, not a problem. We Can we take a water break?

00:37:09**SPEAKER_JK**

Okay, I think we're good.

00:37:10**SPEAKER_MM**

Are you also a cha drinker in the mornings?

00:37:15**SPEAKER_JK**

I am very much a coffee person.

00:37:18**SPEAKER_MM**

It looked like cha. Yeah. So my question was, how would you describe your experiences with maintaining a relationship with Sikh and LGBTQIA plus communities?

00:37:31**SPEAKER_JK**

Oh, this is, I think, a really kind of like fun question to think about because forging kind of like queer, Sikh relationships has been a part of like maintaining my relationship with Sikhi and expanding my relationship with Sikhi and really, you know, continuing to integrate that within my life. So, you know, meeting people of the similar experience of trying to fit these identities together and then figure out what kind of life that means for them. That's been really a nice way to exist in both of the communities, kind of coming back to that issue of shared humanity and how at the core of it, we're all just trying to figure out this common, yeah that we have this overall goal of kind of just like finding our place in the world.

00:38:40**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah. So in addition to finding community or sort of forging relationships, what other sort of types of resources or support do you seek to help navigate your experiences? Do you think being Sikh influences your decisions? I mean, this can also include like, you know, professional resources, but also spiritual resources like engaging in Gurbani, like sort of how does that, what does support look like for you?

00:39:08**SPEAKER_JK**

Mm-hmm. Yeah, I think I mentioned that it's only more recently that I've come to even start thinking about spirituality as a resource, as a source of kind of like existential resilience that hasn't been a big piece of how I've navigated the world up until now. And so I can't comment so much about coming back specifically to Gurbani as a way of navigating these experiences beyond the very, again, my simplistic understanding of it. So like I do come back to our values of like no fear and no hate. That's 100%

00:39:58**SPEAKER_JK**

something that I think about on a regular basis when it comes to making decisions about how I'm going to navigate the world. You know, there's, we'll ask ~~them~~ there, you know, my professional identity is partly as a clinical psychologist. So that carries its own whole set of ideas about how to exist in the world and how to navigate challenges and a lot of really helpful, you know, perspectives and techniques for managing the challenges and stresses that come with living these identities in this world. So I can say, yeah, that's certainly been a resource for me, just the work that I do. And then sort of more broadly speaking, that has also been in my identity as a scientist and as a healthcare provider, coming back to the idea of service and orienting my work and my world around being able to help other people. I think of that as a really important resource for maintaining resilience.

00:41:28**SPEAKER_MM**

Did you say your profession is, the title is oncopscychologist?

00:41:34**SPEAKER_JK**

Clinical psychologist.

00:41:36**SPEAKER_MM**

Clinical psychologist, got it. And what's your focus in clinical psychology?

00:41:40**SPEAKER_JK**

So my focus is in a specialty called neuropsychology. So basically looking at different disorders of brain behavior relationships ranging from things like developmental disorders like autism to dementia in older folks. And I am moving on to the fellowship stage of my training. So I'm gonna be working now on brain tumors and epilepsy as my primary clinical and research interests now.

00:42:16**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, wow. So you kind of have like this sociological dynamic of like your own sort of life and how you're sort of like thinking about it psychologically as well and kind of like how these things manifest. So yeah, what a way to kind of resource yourself that way too, and sort of your field and also your personal experiences. Yeah. So in what ways sort of do you think your connection to, like, let's say, geographically where you're located, you know, and your connection to like California and sort of your institution, obviously, you know, grad school has such a formative influence on your life and college and sort of now where you're going with your career. How has sort of your relationship geographically you think influenced your relationship with Sikhi and queerness?

00:43:11**SPEAKER_JK**

It certainly has greatly influenced. I think there, you know, growing up in Los Angeles comes with even the ability to have kind of strong, Sikh community down here. At various kind of stages of my childhood, we were more or less involved with the kind of broader LA area as a community. You know, there were spans of like years at a time where we would go to Gurdwara regularly, or, you know, every summer we would go to Gurmukh camp. And so that was a big kind of part of that. And I think, or I consider myself fortunate to have had the ability to do those things, where, you know, there are places you can live in the US or more broadly out in the world where that wouldn't be an option. And at the same time, that carries with it, you know, challenges and disadvantages for, you know, again, I wasn't really I didn't, I don't, you know, reflecting on it, I wasn't struggling with the sexuality piece of my identity at that stage of my development. So it wasn't in an overt way that I felt like it was a challenge to be a part of that community. You know, but if I really kind of sit down and reflect on it, there has been a sense of general discomfort in some Punjabi and Sikh spaces that I think comes from the like otherness of some facets of my identity probably. But, you know, a flip side being that, you know, growing up in Southern California and doing my education up in the Bay, it has been awesome for exposure to other kind of socio-cultural contexts, like being able to grow up with comparatively more diversity than in other places has been really influential in developing and understanding of myself even for people who I don't share aspects of identity with. And so I think that's been really fortunate as well. And there are like subtle differences, just in the different places where I've lived in California. So largely Los Angeles, the Bay Area, and San Diego, where like in LA or the Bay, it's not uncommon to run into, by chance, other Sikh people, other Indian people. But in San Diego, I could go years probably at a time certainly without running into someone else wearing a pagri, right? And that's not like, I don't think that that hugely makes a difference on the day-to-day aspects of my life, but it does certainly influence that aspect of forging community, right? It's harder to do down there for the times when I want that aspect of community than it would be when I'm in LA.

00:46:36**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, yeah. So did that give you like a certain heightened sense of awareness of sort of, of like kind of like how you present yourself?

00:46:47**SPEAKER_JK**

I think about this time I was in a cafe and this woman runs up to me and she is extremely excited and she just wanted to tell me how excited she was to see a man in a turban. And she was like, they must have lived somewhere in like North County of San Diego. And she was like, you know, we never see Punjabi people around here. So that certainly made like for a heightened sensitivity, just like, you know, for this to have like served its purpose, right? Like this woman saw me from across the street sitting in a cafe and was so excited to see me. So there's also kind of like the general sensitivity to looking different out in public. And I'd say that like in general, I have more of like a heightened sensitivity to that, but there's also the kind of habituation that comes along with that being your baseline state. So people look at me and I don't think about that as much as I used to as a kid, probably.

00:48:04**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah. So I'm going to ask a little bit more of a micro kind of individual levels kind of question. So we're jumping a little ship, but it's still talking about, you know, thinking about hopes and aspirations and sort of how we forge community. So tell me what you think desire is, And to you, how is this different from intimacy? Because another way people understand themselves is thinking about desire, and it helps them understand themselves. And this could be about the relationships that you've built, you know, the community that you already built, the community you want to build, wish to build, and who you're close with, and sort of what type of futures you also see for yourself.

00:49:04**SPEAKER_JK**

So the first part of the question is what does desire mean to me?

00:49:08**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, and if it's different from intimacy or if it's the same.

00:49:23**SPEAKER_JK**

Hmmm.. I mean, so the way that I would think about it, or, you know, that's initially hitting me is that it's not quite the same. That desire is perhaps a component of intimacy, but intimacy is sort of broader and encompasses a lot more than, you know, just the one facet of desire. To desire, I mean, it's, it boils down to like sort of wants, like what do you want? I think about how what you want isn't necessarily what you need, and how that's also kind of different from intimacy. Intimacy to me has to do a lot more with meeting needs, emotional needs, psychological needs. And desire is, again, a component of these, but not the entirety of it. You may desire something that you later discover is not good for you, or not what you thought it would be. And sort of my hope is that in developing intimacy of whatever kind, it would be serving not just desires, but also kind of like core needs as well.

00:51:01**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah. And so earlier, you had referenced a little bit about desire and intimacy in which how you were navigating your own sexuality and stuff and then realize in order to build intimate relationships, you have this desire to tell your folks. And so, yeah, it's interesting how you brought that to the fore earlier. And I think now I'm interested in thinking about how do you create the space for this now, now that you're in a more refined space, I think, or a more like aware space where you center your sexuality and your Sikhi. So how do you think about desire and intimacy now?

00:51:51**SPEAKER_JK**

I think it comes back to the themes that we've been hitting on along the way, that kind of idea of shared humanity. So for me, you know, again, like with things just kind of coming together in a sensible, seamless way, you know, being bi/pan whatever language you want to use, like so much of my desire when it comes to relationships, whether that's of a romantic nature or other, has to do with like.... the more kind of intimate parts of a person. And so for me, it matters less how someone presents in terms of their gender if we have shared humanity when it comes to like values and goals and interests. And it's been really nice to not have the more kinda like surface-level aspects of it as like confound for forging intimate relationships with other people, like not having to worry specifically about whether someone's a man, woman, or non-binary. It's just like a whole layer of it that I don't have to worry about when it comes to thinking about desire and relationships with other

people. So that's kind of neat. And again, like something that I am grateful for and like feel good about and integrating the different pieces of my identity.

00:53:46**SPEAKER_MM**

And is that from a place like, because I am sort of fluid in the way I understand my own sexuality, therefore I extend that same sort of space to the people I encounter? Or is it something different where maybe before, like I'll give an example, like I feel like when I was growing up, I always had to sort of think about a person's response because they were contextualizing it because I was a female, you know? And so like I always thought my the interaction was always gendered. So do you feel like that's not the case anymore that and that was the case or is it something else?

00:54:29**SPEAKER_JK**

I'd say it's more a matter of degree, right? So like, I'm not removed entirely from our social context, where things are binary and people are kind of conditioned to think in these ways. But I like to think that I benefit from a little bit less of that kind of binary thinking and sort of at a like more emotional level that those things matter less to me as like the core features of the way that I interact with a person, right? So the way that I, one example that I can give is that I've always gotten along really well with women, like more so than you would expect from certainly like a cisgender, a straight man. And I think that that's because less of that interaction for me is about like, well, is this gonna develop into something romantic, right? Like that's, you know, the expectation of it being like a man-woman binary, it's just like less of an influence over the way that I engage with people. And so I see a reflection of that in sort of the strong relationships that I've been able to develop with women throughout my life.

00:55:49**SPEAKER_MM**

And then do you see that kind of echoed in sort of the Sikh queer spaces you're navigating now, or is that something you hope to kind of build for your future?

00:56:01**SPEAKER_JK**

In terms of like less of a binary understanding of the world? Yeah, I would say that that sort of goes hand in hand with that for, you know, the reasons we've been discussing along the way, but you know, that at our core, our souls are the same, you know, this like gender and other aspects of like socio-cultural contexts are impositions on who we are truly as people. So yeah, that's certainly coming from the, the Sikhi part of my identity.

00:56:38**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, and so I was wondering, have you like heard like common narratives or maybe some stereotypes in sort of LGBTQI plus histories or Sikh histories that may have influenced you? Because there's also like this, what we're talking about also is sort of how we're socially conditioned, right? And so I'm wondering if there are things that you've heard and then you're like, no, this is not the way I want to be. I want to be this way.

00:57:16**SPEAKER_JK**

So the question makes me think of the internal commentary I noted in talking about the process of coming out of like, oh, I'm going to be disowned. That's one of the really salient stories that comes out, I think for anybody broadly, when it comes to the question of coming out, but certainly within our cultural community. So, you know, therein lies an example of something that I hoped wouldn't pan out for myself, and fortunately didn't. But trying to think of but trying to think of something else that kind of stands out as... It also makes me think of sort of a goal that my parents would often comment on for me. Sort of like, we want you to grow up and do something for our community, to do something for this community. And I think that's probably like a shared narrative. I'm like-

00:58:33**SPEAKER_MM**

Every Punjabi. Every Punjabi. Yeah. There's like pride associated with all of that. There's like, yeah, all their aspirations associated with that.

00:58:42**SPEAKER_JK**

Yeah. I mean, that could be like a whole other like six hour thing to unpack of like, you know, what is influencing that desire of doing something, what it means to do something for a community. But again, certainly as I've gotten older, I feel like in a lot of ways, I'm trying my best and I think succeeding at living up to that ideal that they had for me. And it's definitely not in the way that they imagined, but it is in a way that is in line with my more personal values. And so the story of like being out there, being identifiable and having done something for the community, that is the story that I identify with. And being out there as a visible queer, Sikh, I think, has been of tremendous value to me personally, but also in ways that have been very kindly conveyed to me, it's been of value to other people as well.

01:00:04**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, it seems like you started off our conversation by saying family and love are sort of the center of your world. That's kind of what I took away from your first, right when you started this conversation. And it's such a beautiful thing to see how it kind of unraveled where you had, simultaneously you were trying to be that great son, you know, and that sort of like, you know, a great child for the family and sort of the representation of what the family sort of wanted, But then you were also like, no, there's so much more to me that I want to explore and expand. And then sort of how experiences in your life have afforded that opportunity. And you're trying to bring that back now also in kind of being more publicly queer and all of that. So that's kind of like what I'm taking away is that you're centering a lot of your relationships that really mean a lot to you and sort of on this premise of shared humanity and love. So yeah, that's really beautiful and I'm really happy you have that. And so like when you think about sort of centering love in your family and all that, what do you think about aspirations for the future or hopes for the future?

01:01:31**SPEAKER_JK**

I am like approaching a time in my life where I am starting to feel like more settled and grounded and just like thrilled to you know be able to meet my needs and at the same time the future is still like a big question mark. And there are so many things that are uncertain about generally what that looks like, and on a more personal level like decisions that I haven't fully made for myself about what I want my future to look like. So again, in kind of like typical stereotypical ways I'm grappling with this immense pressure societally and familial-ly to settle down and have a family and sort of live out that traditional life, which for a long time was the way that I imagined things would be for myself. And that part of me still sees as like a primary road, all while also like being exposed to different understandings of what it means to create a family and have a future. And so I'm trying to approach everything really flexibly and be open to where life takes me. That has served me really well, particularly over the last few years of just like being open to things that I am not intentionally seeking out. But yeah, I think about it in the way that I want to feel almost. It sounds cliché, but I'm not thinking about the specific place I want to be or people I want to be with other than an understanding that I want to be surrounded by friends and family who I love and doing work that is in line with my value for service and meeting existential needs. That's what the future, that's the future that I want. And there are a lot of different ways that I think I could meet those needs and be happy and fulfilled.

01:04:07**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah. So in the midst of balancing these pressures, how do you sort of heal and nourish yourself in sort of these sorts of spaces?

01:04:19**SPEAKER_JK**

I think it always does come back to like shared humanity for me. So, and that's probably also like a very like clinical psychologist thing of like, if you're feeling down or stressed, you need to like socialize essentially. But yeah, the way that I grapple with challenges and pressures in life has been in my relationships with other people, spending time with other people. A big thing that we didn't sort of like come around to in the conversation was like a relationship with like earth and nature. And that's been a really big source of existential support for me as well. So I'm kind of like the thing that allow you to get outside of yourself. So whether that's like being out in nature and understanding that you're just like a small speck of dust or focusing on friends and family and seeing

the immense network of people and connections out there outside of yourself. That's how I cope.

01:05:29**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And maybe I'll probe a little bit more, since you're a clinical psychologist, what are sort of your suggestions and sort of directions or aspirations and hopes for people that might be sort of that same person you were when you were sort of figuring things out in college and stuff. What would you like to say to them? What would be your message? Message?

01:06:03**SPEAKER_JK**

I'm going to hit on all the themes. I feel like a little bit of a broken record. But take the pieces that serve you. So much of what we are taught and socialized into is binary thinking of like, I'm a Sikh versus I'm not a Sikh, or I am a man or I am a woman, or whatever it might be. And that's just like such a simplistic understanding of a world that I think is so obviously more complex than that. So yeah, in terms of core advice, It's, you know, take the pieces of something that enhance your life and allow you to enhance life for people around you. Something else I kind of learned along the way. I think this might have also been a little like nugget for my time in job classes at Berkeley, but the idea, I wanna get this right. So the way it goes is that we are not human souls on earth to have a spiritual existence, but rather spirits here on earth to have a human existence. And so that also like helped orient a lot of like my more adaptive, you know, understanding of the world and like reduce, I feel like just thinking about things in those terms took a lot of pressure off. Like I'm just here to live a human life. I'm gonna experience the joys and challenges of being a human being. And that's my point here. That is the purpose. Yeah.

01:08:15**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah. Yeah. That's beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. Do you know what it was in reference of, like what the text was or how-

01:08:25**SPEAKER_JK**

I don't. Every time, every time I come back to that, I'm like, wow, I really wish I could like attribute this to someone or figure out what the broader context of that was.

01:08:34**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, yeah. Well, more to explore on your own for sure. Yeah. Yeah. Those were most of my questions, you know, and Yeah, and if you have anything else to add and what your hope might be of sharing sort of your oral history with us. But yeah, that's sort of the wrap up.

01:08:59**SPEAKER_JK**

Great. I mean, I appreciate any avenue through which to kind of share my story and appreciate your time and work on this really fantastic project. Thanks for thinking of me. There's a part of me that always still like is baffled that anybody wants to hear me talk about anything. But it's come with like so much positive reinforcement from other people that it's hard not to continue doing. And, it just brings me real joy that anybody finds any positivity in connecting with my experience. So Thank you.

01:09:46**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, no, thank you so much. I think, yeah, you were kind of saying words like, oh, you know, like a typical story or like if this is a broken record or whatever. I wanted to be like, no, do you mean like this is unique to your life, you know? And we also were talking about how sharing stories helps us relate to other people, right? And that's the relational bit, is that we are going to have like vibrations that are similar, you know? So Yeah, so thanks for sharing those vibrations today.

01:10:19**SPEAKER_JK**

Thank you.

01:10:21 **SPEAKER_MM**

Do you have any questions?

01:10:23 **SPEAKER_JK**

Not right now, but yeah, definitely feel free to let me know if there's anything else I can do to help. I look forward to seeing how this unfolds.

01:10:34 **SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, for sure. Okay, I'm gonna stop the recording.