

Interview of Meena

00:00:00**SPEAKER_SB**

All right. This is Sukhmony. Today is February 15th, 2023. I'm interviewing for the first time Meena. This interview is taking place in my home in the Central Valley of California and this interview is sponsored by Jakara and is part of the storytelling and settlement through Sikh LGBTQIA+ oral histories project. The purpose of the research is to document the lived experiences of Sikhs in the United States who are from LGBTQIA+ backgrounds. We want to provide a more complete history of Sikhs through interviews that ask queer Sikhs about their different experiences, how queer Sikhs understand themselves and their communities, and how queer Sikhs make homes in the U.S. And like a job interview or a survey, oral history interviews are all about you and your life. We can talk about anything you want and in any order. All right. So, yeah, so the way I'm sort of going to organize this interview [to] just have you share a little bit more about your experiences growing up and how maybe you came into your own understanding of your Sikhi and queer identity and then we'll move to other aspects of your life.

So with that said, we're going to start a bit broad. So when you think back to your experiences growing up, Meena, tell me a little bit about what kind of comes to mind for you? Are there some common stories, smells, sounds, or relationships that kind of rise to the surface when you were growing up?

00:02:12**SPEAKER_Meena**

Yeah. Thanks for setting it up. The experiences, I mean, like, you know, like I'm just getting like a whole like a whirlwind of things that are like kind of stamped in my brain about the past. Obviously, my dog also has something to contribute today. But I think there's like been a couple of formative experiences that kind of hover around me understanding kind of like my identity and who I am. And I think one of those is sort of growing up with like a strong sort of sense of family. Like we're really kind of the folks that in their community, like back in Punjab, in their various sort of different locations, integrated and were kind of the people that other people looked up to for help and support. And so our household in San Jose growing up in the Bay was always kind of like the filter through which everybody transitioned their life from Punjab into the U.S. or into California. And so like my parents had friend circles that were expansive and beyond than just who they grew up with and who they knew back home. And so that was like very formative. We always had people over. And because of that, there was always like an event, you know, like, kisse na kisse da function hunda si or like, you know, we're always like going to the Gurdwara for like a wedding or, you know, and like kind of integrating that way. And then my parents made it like sort of their kind of like goal to take my brother and I to India almost every year.

So like over Christmas break, we used to go to Punjab all the time. And for them, it was sort of like, I want you to like stay connected to your culture and like the language and all of that. So my brother and I like really have sort of remained connected through being able to speak Punjabi comfortably and confidently. And that's because my parents put in that much work and effort, you know, to keep us like exposed to that with everybody coming home and staying with us for months on end and telling us as children to interact and you know, be communal. So there was always like this sensibility of like, Punjabi and Punjabiyaat like always being there, you know. I didn't know any other way, right?

00:04:55**SPEAKER_Meena**

Because that was like, just kind of like what we had and what we were sort of experiencing. And then I remember like, kind of going into school and like elementary school, I was like, to my parents, I think I was in the fourth grade or the third grade. And I was like, to my parents, I'm gonna walk to school. And my parents were like, you know, tu tah kudi ya, you're a girl, you're not gonna go by yourself. You know, this is not safe. And you know, back in the day, San Jose was like super safe, even though we lived in like ghetto San Jose. But it was just like, you know, it was not that bad. And things weren't happening as crazily and unsafely and all that stuff now as they are now. Anyways, but you know, then I was like, eight. And I was like, No, I want to walk to school. And it was like, you know, it was about like, probably like a 15 minute, 20 minute walk. And so I did, you know, I just ended up going and like the couple of times like my parents, like kind of followed me in the car and stuff, because I was just like adamant that I would walk by myself. But like, you know, I always was like a person who was kind of vocal about what I wanted to do and how I wanted to do it. And I like, yeah, just kind of was that way. So that's a very like a breaking out of my shell moment that I can like sort of remember.

And then there were like other instances where like, I wanted to do something, but I was told that I couldn't do it either directly or indirectly because I was female. And I think like, that was really when like, things just started to be like, Okay, well, what's my identity? Who am I? Like, you know, like, how am I going to like, sort of understand all of this. And then so like, the culture ended up becoming the excuse for which we like, hold up these gender norms, you know, not thinking about it in retrospect. And so I like was then not really like proud of being Punjabi and like not feeling connected to it and kind of feeling distant because of, you know, sort of this experience. And then I went into high school, and I just gravitated more towards people who were like me, because I was finally, you know, in in public school in San Jose, like we saw a big influx of people who were kind of like, you know, speaking Punjabi and like, are comfortable with their culture and want to identify as such. And so it was like a big deal to kind of own that when we were in high school. And so like, I was like, reconnected in like a different way. And then I also reestablished my relationship with Sikhi in high school. I, you know, like was really thinking about, I was doing paath a lot. I was a vegetarian for, for like two years. And, you know, it was like a big thing for me to like really reconnect with the principles of Sikhism and like sort of how they were operating socially in our inner sort of society.

And so yeah, so like, I, you know, went back to that and stuff. And then I moved away from college, and I realized like, this is like a huge part of how people kind of see me. And so like, yeah, I thought about my childhood in sort of these sort of snippets, you know, how they, how it's been kind of a constant struggle to reconcile who I am as a human and what sort of like, you know, socially what we keep on, you know, upholding as in like gender norms and caste norms and, and racism and like all of that. But then also at the same time, we want to not be adhering to sort of the general human principles of what Sikhi really is supposed to teach us and how it's supposed to unify us.

So I think I was always kind of struggling to kind of understand and I wanted to like sort of learn how to read and write Punjabi from a very young age. And my folks, you know, I remember us at one point, we're sort of like, you know, that's great, but like, how are you going to use it, you know, because there was no outlet. And then I was like, oh, you know, maybe I'll go study Sanskrit, because that's like so common or whatever, you know, and it like overlaps. So like, there's always been these sort of paradoxes and like sort of ways and of being like, well, okay, so you want me to be Punjabi, but you don't want me to be that Punjabi, like, I don't know, you know. And so, yeah, so there's been confusion. And there's definitely been like contradictions and stuff, you know, things just didn't make sense as a kid. And that's sort of my relationship with Sikhi and like my gender and stuff.

00:09:43 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah, yeah. Thanks for sharing all that. Can I ask, when you were in high school, and you reconnected with Sikhi, what, can you delve a little bit more into what kind of prompted you to go into that? And maybe where that journey took you?

00:10:05 **SPEAKER_Meena**

Yeah, so it was strange. I don't know, maybe, when you're like a teenager, you know, you're just trying to find something that kind of helps you make sense of the world around you, you know. And so in retrospect, I remember we were, we were at a Gurdwara. And, you know, we were having a paath at the Gurdwara. And it was like a close family friend. So we were there the whole entire time, you know, and stuff. And I remember, like, sitting behind the Guru Granth Sahib and like, just kind of feeling this energy, you know. And, and I just sort of like sat there and I was just sort of like, I think this is what I want to do. And I remember it being like a very like specific moment, you know. And I was like, yeah, I'm gonna try to get into this, you know, and I feel like I just really felt this like, deep, sort of seeded connection that was kind of there and trying to make sense of it, but it's just never like sort of surfaced. And so yeah, I like, fell into it from that moment. And I think I was using it as sort of a vessel to sort of understand myself to kind of reconnect to, to my identity in a way where, you know, being born in the US, it's sort of, it's hard to kind of be in both worlds completely and fully, you know. So yeah, so I think that was sort of what prompted me.

00:11:44 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah. And if you feel like, can you talk, I know, could you talk maybe a little bit more about, because you kind of expressed how you approach Sikhi and even, I think, your Punjabi identity from kind of this place of trying to understand. And so I see that as kind of like an intellectual kind of approach. Has that, I, you know, I know you're a PhD student, like, is that like, connected to your, like, going into like, academia, or just like pursuing

this route to try and understand your culture? Could you talk a little bit about that?

00:12:31 **SPEAKER_Meena**

Yeah, you know, I, you know, I'm, I think something that's fair to say, too, is that I'm not as connected as I was with Sikhi, as that moment in which like, I sort of got pulled into it, you know. And there's like, sort of push and pull still continues to happen. And I feel like my relationship is evolving, you know, overall with Sikhi. I think I did have a sort of intellectual desire, but also this strong sense of responsibility, almost to kind of let the world know about the like, plurality of India, you know. And I think I like from, I went to a social justice sort of driven college, and my idea was to kind of like, then step into like, becoming a physician who's going to work in India and kind of like, fix the healthcare infrastructure, like it was like a one woman job, you know. But like, I seriously was like, that was like, my motto. Like, I was just like, this is what I want to do. If you would have like, talked to me, like, after high school, and up until grad school, that was like, my motto, that was my goal. Like, I wanted to go to India, I always like, sort of had my curiosities embedded into whatever is relational to India. So I had that sort of like, social justice driven sort of like, ethos from the beginning, and it was for India. My relationship to Punjabiya and culture and all of that actually came more in, in my like, doctoral program, I started recognizing that— A: in academia, we don't have enough representation. And also B:, why is it so challenging for people to do work in India? Like, I had a master's in global health. And I was just like, struggling, you know, to kind of get work. And, you know, NGOisation, and all of that is like another political schema that we can talk about later. But like, you know, it just ended up becoming like this challenge. And I was like, you know what, I'm going to create it on my own. And so that's what sort of prompted my PhD journey.

And then doing fieldwork in Punjab recently has been sort of filled with Yeah, I need to go back to my roots. And yes, I need to establish my connection. There's so much richness and oh my god, politically, socially, culturally, history, you know, like all of this stuff like that, I, I have a right to know, you know, and I also feel like I have the responsibility because I'm so privileged to kind of share. So it's like a multiplicity of emotions and feelings around that.

00:15:34 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah. Yeah, let's let's dive into your Yeah, like, sounds like quite deep connection and like commitment to Punjab like it's Yeah, really cool that your parents, you know, committed to taking you and your brother every year. I had a similar experience where like, like every other year, my family was like, let's go to India. And I'm really grateful for that perspective from such a young age, because you just absorb it all when you're going, you don't go in with any expectations or you know, my parents would just pack a few like American things like pancake mix and you know, things like that. But we just go and would have a blast in the Pind. So um, yeah, tell me a little bit about what were some of those experiences like for you growing up? Do you have some memories that really stand out? What? What was kind of the atmosphere?

00:16:47 **SPEAKER_Meena**

Like, it's kind of Yeah, um, yeah, I have beautiful memories. I mean, I recently got married in Punjab ~~to~~ and by recently, I mean, like four years ago, but like, yeah. And that was also something that was like, really important to me is that if I was to have a wedding, I wanted to have it in India, you know. But aside for that, there's one really specific, like sort of childhood memory that I adore. So , you know, the beauty of going to Punjab when we were younger was because a lot of our family still hadn't migrated out of India, you know. And so we had a lot of family there. So like a bunch of my parents' siblings and their kids. And so we were all around the same age. And so I remember in our pind, in the veranda, like all of us kids would get together, and we would play pittu. And I don't know if you're familiar with the game. So like, you, you get a bunch of rocks that are kind of flat, because the idea is to stack them. And so you have two teams, and one team's job is to get like a, it's not a tennis ball, but it's like a racquetball, so it would hurt, right if you were to get hit with it? like a racquetball. [used to hit the other team member with] So it hurts, right? But the idea was to knock down the stack of rocks. And the team that was in charge of like, trying to knock it down has to then rebuild it before the other team gets the ball and hits you with it. So they hit you. And then if they hit you, then you're out. And then you kind of just keep on going till you get everybody's out [on the team]. And so you're trying to dodge the ball while you're trying to stack up the rocks. So we played this like, every day, multiple times a day, all the time, you know, and then like, you know, so those are like some of my formative memories of like in Punjab and all us kids, like just yelling and screaming and like all the bibiyaan being like, what the heck are you guys doing? Because daal dul jandi si, kisi di cha, you know, be making roti in the outdoor kitchen and it would hit the dishes. Or like, we'd have someone come over in the front gate, and they like, it would hit the guy in the face, like, so it was like,

always like, ruckus, right? And so like, that [was] just so playful. And it was just so great to kind of integrate yourself there and, and to play and to like, learn that game and all that, like, we won't play that here, you know.

But then my brother and I, when we came back after that year that we played so much, we actually got all of the neighborhood kids to play in our driveway. And so we had like, Vietnamese kids, Filipino kids, Mexican kids, everybody coming into our like, driveway, because we were living in an apartment complex, and we had long driveways in between the alleys. And so we would play in the alleys of the parking lots. And so it was like, perfect, because it was like, long enough, because you also need enough of like, a field to like, play. So like, you know pinndaan de verandey, like, used to be really big. And, and so yeah, so like, we used to get all the kids to play. And eventually, kids would like, come knock on our door and be like, Oh, we want to play pittu Meena, can Meena come out and play. So like, the whole neighborhood, like, knew about it, you know. And so it was just like, that was just something that's like, Oh, yeah, you know, I think in retrospect, it's like, it's really cool, we can like, come back with something to share, and not be afraid to kind of be ourselves and be who we are, you know. But yeah, that's a sort of informative.

00:20:13 **SPEAKER_SB**

Wow, that is incredible. The legends of that neighborhood.

00:20:21 **SPEAKER_Meena**

Yeah, there are.

00:20:23 **SPEAKER_SB**

That's, that's amazing. Yeah, that. Yeah, thanks for that, sharing that. I, I get like that image of just, you know, puri ronak pindan vich. So yeah, that's what it's all about. Like, everybody's just in the same space. And, you know, like children, and older people. And so, yeah, that's really cool. Yeah. Do you feel like you, like you had, you were saying how you had a lot of either family members or family friends kind of coming in and out of your house, like, like, that was kind of similar to your experiences in Punjab? What felt maybe different about it? How did you kind of process that?

00:21:19 **SPEAKER_Meena**

Oh, yeah, it's totally different, you know, now, because capitalism, you know, like, honestly, everybody's like, working in different fields, either they're there or they're not, or they're abroad. Coming back to Punjab is only like, sort of, oh, maybe someone's getting married, wants to have their wedding reception, or if it's an unfortunate event, where like a grandparent's passing away or something, you know, like, those are sort of the only situations in which, like, my generation of kids are going back to Punjab. A lot of Punjab's pinds are empty. And, you know, it's kind of sad, Punjab is dying, you know, in that sort of sense, where we're not able to kind of uphold sort of our role, agriculture sort of identity, because modernization is taking over and capitalism and globalization, you know, is like forcing a lot of people to migrate out of, not just out of the pind to the city, but also outside of those cities outside of India. So there's definitely a brain drain phenomenon across India that's happening. And, but I would also say on the flip side, my experience in Punjab was not in sort of the pinds this time, it was more intellectual, because I was researching for my dissertation in Chandigarh. And I was really impressed by sort of the energy and the dedication that people have there to intellectualize Punjab too. And to really bring it to the forefront of issues and how they're really trying to speak up for issues and things like that to rebuild and also sustain Punjab. Despite all the challenges that are happening, you know, not everyone's purpose in Chandigarh is that, but I think, you know, the people that I like sort of integrated with and was able to research with, have that motivation. So that was refreshing, because I think as children, we took it sort of, you know, as a privilege and something granted for, right, that we have this home. And what does it mean for us? It was a transitional home, you know. But what does it mean for people where it's like a permanent home? That's very different.

00:23:47 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, no, that's, that's really real. And we have the luxury here just to go whenever we please. But yeah, what about the folks who grew up there and hopefully can, you know, want to live there, you know, for years to come? Could you describe the project that kind of led you to go back to Punjab? Yeah. And yeah, what was, like, was that project, it sounds like it was transformative for you. Yeah. Tell us a little bit about that.

Maybe. also like how long you were there.

00:24:28 **SPEAKER_Meena**

Yeah, yeah. And it has, you know, ties to this project in a unique way. So my dissertation is looking at sexuality amongst youth in Punjab, specifically in Chandigarh. And I'm looking at sort of, you know, what are sort of the dating cultures? What do people think about when it comes to love? What does romance mean? Intimacy? And what has been sort of their sexuality education experiences? More so from the angle of trying to decipher what are the gaps or the limitations and where should it sort of improve? And also, what sort of real life experiences are not really incorporated into those curriculums? And how it sort of falls short in reality. So the idea was to look at sexual literacy, but it's sort of organically developed into looking at sexuality sort of more broadly, and looking at components of like love, romance, and intimacy, and what that means for like agency and personhood, and how they sort of influence decision making processes. What are sort of some of the cultural or social sort of scripts that people like, hold on to, in order to make those decisions? So yeah.

00:26:01 **SPEAKER_SB**

When you say decisions, is it kind of like, like the decision to marry or decision to have sex or any relation? Yes and yes, Okay, cool. And the decision to hold a certain sexual identity?

00:26:23 **SPEAKER_Meena**

you know, in what spaces? And why? The decision to hold a certain sort of perspective in college, but not at home? And why? You know, sort of those sorts of experiences.

00:26:41 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah. Awesome. That actually leads into my next question. Kind of for yourself, like how you were able to step into maybe your current gender, sexual identity? Can you maybe take us through that journey for yourself? And yeah, where you are right now?

00:27:07 **SPEAKER_Meena**

Yeah, yeah. It's sort of fresh and fragile, you know? So actually, my trip to Punjab made me really question my sexual identity. The term queer in Punjabi circles, it sort of made me rethink on how, you know, A, is this just like a Western sort of way in sort of experiencing sexuality? And or is it sort of a way in which we can actually bring people together? And how does that sort of operationalize in a different sort of situation, you know, and community and geography, with its own sort of implications, you know, and nuances. And so like, coming back from Punjab, I was like, yeah, I definitely think I'm queer, you know, and it was, it was holding on to this philosophy. And the philosophy being that I don't want to categorize myself. And I also want to create spaces where others feel like they don't have to do it either. And I think that is the most sexually just thing I can do by embracing the category of, or the a category of, or the discategory of, I don't know, of queerness, you know, or the anti-category of, I guess, is the right term, of queerness. And I think then I ended up going to a conference in the summer after my fieldwork. And I was sort of sitting with some folks and things like that. And, you know, pronouns are big in sort of academic spaces as well. And so I started using they. And, you know, I still use she, her, and I use they. And, you know, we were like knocking back a few drinks and things like that. And someone asked, like, you know, what does queerness mean to you? So it was like, interesting, because my question was kind of coming back to my own sort of like question that I had sort of posed, you know, in the field with my interlocutors. And so I was like, imagination, you know, at that moment, I was like, it's really imagination. I think it would be really sad if as a society, we had to limit our imagination based on whoever is supposed to be my heterosexual counterpart. You know, like your sexual imagination to be like, sort of restricted because of that. And you know, and I was like, holy crap, like, I felt like it was like a big radical moment for me, you know, and, and I was just sort of like, wow, that's kind of intense, you know, to kind of do that. Because, I mean, truth be told, nobody's having dreams or doing their things, you know, or having their sort of sexual inclinations or desires or imaginations or experiences that are exactly that, right, like prescribed already, just because of the sort of sexual identity they hold. Now, whether you term it queerness or not, that's up to you, you know, but that sort of is where my sort of like philosophy and experience kind of sort of lands into falling into that.

And I think, in all fairness, the other struggle is, you know, to be politically correct and not harmful, you know, while you're trying to understand these terms and understand that, you know, they cause harm to people, you

know, when they're used incorrectly, and also not appreciated and respected, you know. Oh, yeah.

00:31:42**SPEAKER_SB**

Thank you for sharing that. Do you, your last kind of part there is bringing up the question of, I mean, were a lot of like the interviews and fieldwork you did in Punjab carried out in Punjabi? And if so, like, how did you navigate kind of the language around queerness and sexuality and identity?

00:32:07**SPEAKER_Meena**

Oh, yeah, totally. That's a big part of my chapter, that's TBD right now. You know, I think one of the, and that was actually what I was presenting on at this conference, where I was sort of like, you can't just take this Western academic, like, language that has its own sort of colonial history and imperialistic, like, sort of, you know, intention, and then drop it into somewhere else and expect everyone to think the same way, you know. And so the journey then, like, so my first few of my questions was sort of like, so how do you have intimate relationships and stuff like that? But then questions started becoming, I don't know what intimacy is, I need to know what you mean by intimacy. And so I started asking the questions, so what do you mean by intimacy? Like, you know, you define it for me, because that's what I really want to know, you know, and how it sort of operates amongst our social circles and stuff, because we also are very much not just individuals in one moment, right? We're also very communal and social in the same moment in Punjabi society. So yeah, so I think there's like, it's a really good question, because it really begs to sort of ask who gets to determine the language that we use around sexuality and sexual freedom and sexual justice. And so yeah, so I'm hoping that this will give a little bit of insight on sort of how we need to right those wrongs, and not assume that Western sort of, you know, knowledge production is everyone's knowledge production.

00:33:55**SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, thanks for sharing your project. I, I'm excited to kind of engage with that. Yeah, moving forward, I think it's really, I don't know, I just find it really like courageous that you went to Punjab, because I think a lot of, at least from my experience, like, I know, personally, I feel like maybe sometimes I would be too comfortable here to like, even venture that far out, and wouldn't feel equipped to thoughtfully, like, engage Punjabi community. I know, you know, I'm sure you struggled with that tension. But I think the way that you've approached that project was, yeah, really, like, thoughtful. And yeah, so that's awesome.

00:34:56**SPEAKER_Meena**

Thanks. Yeah. I think the reason why I could be courageous is because I've had this connection with Punjab, you know, I think that helped me sort of feel comfortable and sort of pursuing it. I also come from a radical thinking institution. And so they're definitely much about breaking the boundaries and sort of promoting social change from below, right. And so it starts with us. But the other flip side is that it's very challenging. And for anyone else who's like, sort of listening and wanting to pursue this, you know, it's like, it's very limited funding. And it's, it's because Punjab has its own sort of like historical connection, you know, to, to different institutions and things like that, that choose not to include Punjab in like, sort of Indian scholarship. I think it's changing. I think there's a lot of change that's happening for the good and giving direction and stuff like that. But yeah, you know, so there's a lot of, a lot of hurdles that had to be sort of overcome. So thank you for naming that.

00:36:10**SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, no, that that's really real. Yeah. It sounds like, I don't know, in many moments, you've, you've had like many transformative experiences, whether it was like, through this fields work project, or different experiences. Yeah, just growing up. And I'm curious, you know, now, well, first, actually, I'm wondering, did you ever consider your sexual identity, question it before this experience of going to Punjab? Yeah, it may be in, I don't know, you have been a part of many radical institutions. But yeah, what is, I guess, what was your relationship to your sexuality and like, your different phases of your life?

00:37:10**SPEAKER_Meena**

Yeah, yeah. I'll answer that question. But the other thing I wanted to also mention about studying in Punjab and stuff, or researching in Punjab, or on Punjab, is that there's major fear, you know. And there's also not just major fear in doing research in Punjab, especially with sort of the current climate there. But also, there is major stigma

in studying sexuality, you know, and having these conversations. And I think what sort of entry point I was able to sort of tap into, that made it a little bit easier was that I was married. And so people had sexually specific questions, and curiosities that sort of led into me asking, like sort of the things that I wanted to sort of query, you know, and engaging in conversations that way. Where it'd be like marital advice, or dating advice, or, you know, other things. And so in those moments, I was witnessing and absorbing and observing people who were questioning their sexual identity. And it made me reflect sort of the times in my life where I could have possibly have done that too. I think when I sort of, you know, started college, and all of that, and started exploring the world, I think I was like, exposed to different modes of sexuality, you know, and I was just sort of like, no, heterogeneity is exactly what we're supposed to be doing, you know, like, we're all supposed to be like, you know, all like, each an individual person, and be heterosexual. And this is sort of what it's supposed to be. But then, you know, I lived in San Francisco, and I was like, okay, this is like, sort of the queer community, this, this is why pride happens, like, and pride falls close to my birthday. So I made it like a ritual to always be part of pride during my birthday. And so like, it's just like, those sorts of things were happening around me.

And oh, my gosh, hopefully, parents don't listen to this, like, we're never sending our kids off to college. But that's not my point. But like, you know, um, yeah, college sort of changed my life, you know, as it does. But I don't think I ever thought about queerness, and being queer and holding on to that identity till much, much later, which was like, very recent.

00:40:02 SPEAKER_SB

In that sense, you mentioned how you're very much still in like, this fragile state with your, with your sexuality. And can you maybe take us through, I want to know, like, what does coming out mean to you personally?

00:40:31 SPEAKER_Meena

I wouldn't know. You know, I, my dog's like, hacking away in the back, sorry. But I, I think it's different for me, because I'm in a monogamous marriage, you know. And, and my partner and I, you know, for me, it was sort of like, I wanted to share this sort of sensibility around queerness and sort of what I'm exploring and experimenting with and really sort of grappling. I felt like I was only accountable to my, my, my relationship. And I think that's sort of what I presume maybe coming out is sort of like holding yourself accountable to yourself, and also to the people that you love, who may be sort of influenced by this decision, or your experience, and only from the framing of love, like not from the framing of like, oh, I'm afraid, or I'm fearful, or I have to do this, otherwise it's morally or ethically wrong, or whatever. I think just in sort of the framing of love, if it's something about, if it brings you sort of loving energy, and sort of understanding, then that's, I think, should, that's what should determine who you are coming out to. But I think, you know, this whole, like, coming out sort of thing, too, is sort of, is problematic in some ways, where it feels like it's a lot of pressure for people, because they feel like they have to do it, and, and, or they're sort of peer pressured into doing it, or it just feels like, oh, my God, there's just so much around this, and it's overwhelming and anxiety driving, and unhealthy, you know. So yeah, so I think there's a lot of sort of more sensitive and intentional language that is being sort of developed around the process and stuff, but yeah.

00:43:29 SPEAKER_SB

Yeah. I, yeah, thank you for sharing that. I guess, before I ask my next question, but like, what is your relationship to Sikhi, like, today? And has it evolved since? Yeah, you kind of reorienting yourself around your sexuality?

00:44:09 SPEAKER_Meena

Yeah, I don't know where it fits, you know, like, quite honestly. I think engaging in this project has made me feel a little bit more grounded. And I don't want to say like, allowed, but more like, there's space for it, you know. And I don't know why, you know, I don't know why I thought that I can't make my religion or my faith or my spirituality fit to my own sort of way of reasoning, you know. And I don't know why I thought that Sikhi was just a shut door, you know, that it wouldn't be able to reconcile that. And I think it has to do with like, sort of how I was mentioning growing up. And I think we have all these social constructions that we're willing to uphold, but we really are not looking back into why sort of Sikhi is the way it is, and what sort of its purpose and ethos and stuff, you know. So I thought maybe the social performance of it has been more dominating than the actual real literal, like intellectual connection to it, you know. And so I thought I've been kind of distancing myself from the performance of being a Sikh that has not made sense to me, and is not welcoming, because

that's what I've been sort of experiencing as like, a woman, you know, as a Punjabi woman. And then now it's like, no, my faith is how I sort of want to define it. And that includes Sikhi, you know, and that includes however, I'm showing up, regardless of where my sexuality stands, and there is space for everyone and anyone, you know. So I think it's just sort of like that transition. Yeah. Ooh, this gonna get us in trouble.

00:46:07**SPEAKER_SB**

That's what we're up to, just, we can trouble. So no, it's, this is, but this is, yeah, the, yeah, this is what we need to create those radical imaginations, right? So yeah, again, yeah, appreciate you sharing and like, yeah, being, being courageous in all the little ways. Do you feel like you have communities of support around either or both of these identities?

00:46:47**SPEAKER_Meena**

Yeah, I want to go back to the comment you just made, you know, like that we have to create these like radical imaginations. And I think it is that, you know, I had stopped imagining what is Sikhi. And I stopped because I just felt like it was a closed universe, you know. And so yeah, I think now I'm trying to find community who is willing to kind of disentangle that and open it and, you know, this group and people that just sort of understand, you know, and now friends that I have in Punjab that are also holding on to this together. You know, and yeah, it's really, it's really interesting. I think it's still a challenge in friend circles. You know, I think it's easier to hold up the social aspect of being a Sikh than it is the faith, spiritual, intellectual, religious aspect of it. So I often find myself agitating the circles that I'm in, you know, and so I don't feel connected to them and stuff. But yeah. Yeah. I have maybe assumptions of what like those maybe conversations might look like amongst I'm assuming like married folks or women and heterosexual relationships and have some of those instances where you've kind of pushed or press people's buttons a little here and there.

00:48:55**SPEAKER_SB**

What was kind of, what was that like? I'm sure it's, yeah, I'm sure it's emotionally like not fun to do. But do you feel like you have some hope?

00:49:10**SPEAKER_Meena**

Oh yeah. I think, you know, my partner and I were talking about this when I came back from Punjab. I came back with like such a newfound, renewed energy. Like it was incredible. You know, now I've gotten into my like routine and I want to tap back into that feeling. But I was just energized. I was just hopeful. I was like, this is awesome. Because I think it's the curiosity that's like always like sort of driving, you know. And it's like when we stop being curious, when we just take life as it's presented to us and expecting us to just fall into these like roles and be rote about our lives, it's just sort of like you are sidetracked. You don't know what the point is of loving endlessly. You don't know what the point is of being intimate with everything and everyone. Species and non-species, you know. I think it hinders a lot of your relationships. And if your relationships are hindered, you're sort of like thought processes are blocked, you know. Like all of these things are interconnected in so many different ways. You don't have a deeper sense of connection to your body. And so like I think a lot of these things give me hope because I came back and I was just like, wow, you know. And not to romanticize or exoticize my experience in Punjab, you know. At the end of the day, I'm American, you know, on paper, you know. But like at the same time, I was sort of like so happy that the intellectual curiosity wasn't preventing action, you know. Was like more like, no, I need to consider these sorts of like dilemmas. I need to consider what this might mean in my future kinship, you know. Maybe I don't want to marry, you know. And or maybe I don't want to parent, you know. And so like a lot of these things, a lot of these questions gave me a lot of hope. Because I think it's also about choice and freedom and agency, you know. And all of those should be sort of the driving force. So I am very hopeful.

And it is emotionally taxing to come to the U.S. and kind of feel like we're behind, you know, to a certain extent. And at least in the circles that I'm in. And that we're not willing to sort of think outside of what's been prescribed for us. Like, why does love have to be prescribed? Like, come on, dude. You know, like, oh, that person has to make this much money. That person has to be this caste. That person has to be able to do this, this and that. Like, you know, and I'm not saying Punjabis are the only ones that do it. You know, we all do it. You know, we all have our biases and our preferences and things like that. We all do it when we're trying to find love, you know. There are choices. And preferences that should be honored. But I think at the same time, it's sort of as a social, like, sort of thought and structure, we don't realize what harm we're doing, you know. And what other

sort of casteism, racism phenomena that we're upholding as we're doing these things. So yeah, I think it's really like, it's hopeful up until the extent we have curiosity. And I think curiosity is omnipresent. So yeah. So I think we'll be, we'll be here forever.

00:53:05 **SPEAKER_SB**

That was beautiful. I definitely got some chills at some point. And oh man, my question left me. The last point you were just making about. Oh, yes. So yeah, this sort of idea how, maybe even somehow in the West and Punjabi Sikh circles, we're a little bit behind. So to that point, I kind of ran parallel with what you were saying, with how before, what you were kind of resisting about Sikhi was the performative aspect of it. And in some ways, it seems like there is like this performative aspect to sexuality and relationships that is performed within our communities that maybe stands in the way from like approaching love from a place of queerness and fluidity and true relationship connection. And so I thought that was really interesting.

00:54:34 **SPEAKER_Meena**

Yeah. Yeah. I know people who, I'm sorry to kick you off, but I know people who choose to not come out because they just don't know how to do it, you know, and choose to just follow whatever is sort of expected of them. And to watch that as an outsider is really hard, you know? Yeah. And so what are we doing to the true nature of people and themselves and stuff? Because we're a lot about optics, you know? Yeah. Yeah. I'm, you know, speaking of true connections and true, like pursuing true relationships, I'm curious, yeah, what does desire and intimacy mean to you? Yeah. I don't know. I think it depends on the context and situation. I think intimacy is constantly evolving, I feel like. And I also think desire is too, actually. Right. And I think that's the fluidity that we want everyone to be able to explore. But yeah, I don't know. I think desire should be self-motivated, you know? And in a loving sense sort of received respectfully and, you know, honorably. That'll work. Honorably? Honorably, I think. But, and then intimacy, it's interesting, right? I have a different intimacy with my partner. I have a different intimacy with my pet. I have a different intimacy with my mother, you know, or my brother. And while they're premised on love, I think it's just sort of this different facet of love, right? And with that comes different expectations, right, within that sort of like facet of love. So my expectations of like my pup versus my partner versus my brother versus my mom is gonna be different, right? So I think intimacy is really about sort of being understood within that sort of expectation and love. Yeah.

00:57:58 **SPEAKER_SB**

What do you think, for you and in your experiences, are the circumstances kind of required for creating intimacy?

00:58:11 **SPEAKER_Meena**

Safety, you know? I mean, a lot of it is emotional, spiritual, physical safety, you know? Yeah. And that goes with like, you know, friendships and romantic relationships and collegial, familial, like all these relationships, you know? It's like, I feel like, yeah, I was actually having a recent conversation. And I think that sense of where you can be yourself completely creates the opportunity to be intimate, you know? But I also think that, you know, we hold different personalities and stuff based on what situations we're in and the people we interact with. So, and those could be safety precautions that you're taking or measures you're taking to protect yourself, you know? So yeah, so I think generally it's safety. And yeah, being able to be vulnerable.

00:59:28 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah. In the context of, you know, this archive, trying to create something that hopefully changes, you know, hopefully makes other queer Sikhs feel safe. And just, yeah, dreaming up these kind of new imaginations. What does that vision or future look like for you? How does it involve intimacy and safety?

01:00:07 **SPEAKER_Meena**

Yeah. I wish it was less about like saving face, but more about being human. And that I wish people would really embrace putting people first rather than their identities first, you know? But it is really hard because constantly we're surrounded by different ways in which we're told to think differently and to fit differently and appear differently, you know? So yeah, I think the future kind of holds a sort of imagined place where people can be themselves and reach out for support and expect it, you know? Despite sort of the identities that they're

holding or contemplating. And to have a space to be like sort of co-curious, you know, and co-constructive. I feel like that's definitely something I wish that I had growing up. I think a lot of my peers and I, like, we just sort of went with the flow, but there was really no like co-construction. It was just like, no, things are defined for you and you just need to follow these defined paths, you know? So I wish there were more intellectual spaces in which like sort of you felt like you can question these sort of big questions, you know, and thoughts and imagine. I actually didn't get like reconnected to my creative side till much later in my life. Earlier, it was very much like, you know, like this is all I'm supposed to do and now thinking about it. And I was like, yeah, because I closed off that part of me. I just like, it was not encouraged, you know, to sort of tap into it and stuff. And I think a lot of these points that we're sort of crossing too have to do with that. When you're sort of stifled in your creativity intentionally and sort of forcefully, it hinders like other aspects of your life too.

01:02:38**SPEAKER_SB**

What does that creative practice look like for you?

01:02:41**SPEAKER_Meena**

Today?

01:02:42**SPEAKER_SB**

Sure, today. What have you done in the past, maybe?

01:02:51**SPEAKER_Meena**

Yeah, I got into filmmaking, something I like really wanted to do in college, but just couldn't muster up the energy to just tell that to my folks. You know, like a typical Desi Punjabi like girl dilemma. But I also, you know, had my other dreams and stuff too that were strong. So I pursued those. But yeah, I mean, I wanted to sort of do documentary filmmaking from the get go and do like, social change oriented films and stuff. But yeah, so that's the that's what I'm tapping into now. I mean, you know, I'm privileged, you know, I have shelter, I have food and all that stuff, and I'm living a really good life. And so, you know, becoming a creative is a little bit easier in that way, because like, I don't have to worry about those basic needs. But at the same time, I wish I could have tapped into it much earlier. But yeah, I'm excited. I have a different lens and a different approach to life and things like that. And that's also part of my creative process, you know. And it lets me do things like this. And I'm being able to kind of think out loud and publicly about, you know, certain things that need to be talked about, need to be explored and demystified.

01:04:27**SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah, that's awesome. When you said, I have a new lens, I was like, oh, which like camera

01:04:36**SPEAKER_Meena**

Do you know? I took it both ways. So yeah, that's really awesome. Filmmaking is just,

01:04:48**SPEAKER_SB**

I think a lot of us depend on films for a lot of understanding, absorbing like different like, histories, experiences. And I think sometimes the creative thought and labor that goes behind filmmaking is just so much and it's so it's like, I'm not sure about like documentary filmmaking. I know just cinema, cinema in general, like it's a combination of so many different art forms, which I find so, so cool. So, yeah, I really hope you continue with that. And it's like woven into kind of, yeah, the like more scholarly work you're doing. And even just your personal fascinations. Yeah. I guess looking towards the future, like looking ahead a little bit, what are what are you most excited for right now?

01:05:58**SPEAKER_Meena**

Yeah, I'm excited to get my research out. I'm excited to get, you know, these oral histories out and to get to know more people intimately, you know, and have vulnerable conversations. I think, yeah, publicizing these experiences is gonna really help change, hopefully, the sort of narratives people are contemplating, possibly

already, and be a little bit more motivated. What else am I looking forward to? I'm looking forward to growing more scholarly research that's looking at sexuality amongst our communities in different places, like not just in the diaspora, but also in the elderly, and also, you know, amongst a little bit older couples, you know, that may have teenage kids and stuff, not just here, but also in Punjab. Yeah, and I'm hoping that a bunch of our sort of histories resurface, and we have a renewed sense of connection to our Sikhi as a collective that is all-encompassing and embracing and loving and insightful and curious. Yeah.

01:07:50 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah, that's super beautiful. I love the idea of engaging with our elderly, and yeah, I

01:08:05 **SPEAKER_Meena**

Think conversations around intimacy and relationships, they naturally involve care and how we create a more caring world. And yeah, that's so important with like, yeah, so many of our elderly.

01:08:29 **SPEAKER_SB**

How do you hope that this archive, you know, lives out in the world, and what do you hope for it to do?

01:08:38 **SPEAKER_Meena**

Yeah, I think similar, you know. I hope it's like, it's motivating, or it's motivating and encouraging conversation, and change of the narrative for folks where it's more positive and more accepting to them, and welcoming. And you know, that it sets an example of where there's a mutual understanding that we're all creating history together, you know, and that there is a shared struggle, and sort of not feeling isolated in the struggle. So yeah, I'm hoping that it will attract people in a way where we're sort of co-creating relationships that are helpful, and loving, and accepting, and yeah, mutually like sort of understanding. Yeah.

01:10:04 **SPEAKER_SB**

Thanks. Yeah. So we're kind of at the stage of closing out this interview. Is there any maybe experiences, stories, or kind of major life events or transformative events that you feel like we haven't touched on yet that you'd like to, yeah, share?

01:10:41 **SPEAKER_Meena**

I mean, you know, there's just so much richness in this project, and in our histories by extension, and sort of what we bring. And I just hope that this conversation is sort of landing in a way that prompts people to want to engage in the conversation more constructively, you know? Yeah. So yeah, that's all. I think there are definitely things that may not sit well with some folks, you know? But yeah, I'm entitled to my perspective. But yeah, I do want people to reach out, and to help me learn too. And I hope that we can by extension do that in our communities more where we're sort of co-learning and being curious together. Yeah. Yeah, this is like one part of the grander conversation you're saying. Yeah. Cool. And my last question is, how do you find healing in your body, in your spirit, in your mind? Yeah, that's a good question. Oh, boy. So, I think, kind of going back to trying to figure out how to reframe this. How do I frame this? So I think like, you know, I'm just going to say it. Mental health sort of issues, you know, in our sort of communities are really sideswiped, you know? And I think a lot of this can be triggering, and also could be a previous trigger, or be associated with some sort of traumatic trauma, or traumatic event, or multiple events for people and stuff. And I think healing is something that our society, Western society has sort of commodified in something that's a privilege. And that victimhood is a forever state. But, you know, as we know, from like our Sikh history, and all the valorization that we're sort of familiar with, you know, healing is about being in community. And, you know, like, it's kind of hard to use English language to kind of explain sort of the feeling and the sentiment of what I mean by that, you know, it sounds very like jargon related, when I'm like healing is community, you know, but like me, like I, healing is, you know, when my mom makes, you know, saag and makki di roti for me when I visit, you know, healing is when I have bhiniya every morning, because it like connects me to my family. Yeah. Healing is also like, you know, being able to be present with my family and go on long walks in the evening with my dog and my partner. Healing is also feeling a deep sense of connection with my body. And so I do strength training, and I do yoga. And those physical activities not only give me sort of a reconnection to my body, they also give me sort of the mental clarity that I kind of need to move on because flexibility is also a thing that you lose as you get older,

you know, so like, I, you know, need to do those things in order to feel mentally clear. But yeah, so healing is a lot of things, it's manifested in different ways for me.

01:15:21 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing. Yeah. Yeah, I appreciate you and all the experiences and spaces that you've created and navigated through and are continuing to create and yeah, swim through. So yeah, thank you for all of that. It was Yeah, honestly, like an honor to hear your story. So yeah, any any last thoughts or questions for me or anything?

01:16:10 **SPEAKER_SB**

Awesome. Okay, I'm going to stop the recording. Okay.