

Interview with sahiba

00:00:06 **SPEAKER_KM**

This is Karmine. Today is February 13th, 2023. I'm interviewing for the first time sahiba. 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 LGBTQIA+ Sikhs about their different experiences, how LGBTQIA+ Sikhs understand themselves, and their different— and their communities, and how they make homes in the U.S. Unlike 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. Do you have any questions before we get started today?

00:01:25 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

No.

00:01:27 **SPEAKER_KM**

Cool. So we are going to start pretty open-ended and very broad. So when you think back to your experiences of growing up, can you please share a little bit about what comes to mind to you? Are there any common stories, smells, or relationships that come to mind that help describe how you grew up?

00:01:55 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yeah, so I moved here when I was like three from Punjab. I was born in Punjab. I came here when I was three and lived in Sacramento, and then when I was seven my mom sent me back and it's because she was pregnant with my sister. But basically, like when I came here, we were like in a whole big, joint family because my grandpa was like the first one to like to come, but like he died when I was like five and the entire family then like split and my— so it was just like my mom and my dad, like were on their own type of vibe. And we lived like across— we lived in these like low-income apartments and across— my bhua ji and fufar ji, their family, like lived across the hallway from us, like the apartment was across the hall from us. And anyways, that was like, wait actually backtrack. Sorry. So my mom sent me back when I was seven to go live with her family, meaning her mom and dad and their family because both me and my brother were sent back because she couldn't afford to take care of us, especially because my sister was on the way. So my dad didn't work because my dad was disabled. His entire life, he has struggled with a lot of like disabilities and was diagnosed with, like, kidney failure, so he was on dialysis, things like that. So anyways, my mom sent me back. So I grew up in Punjab from the age of like seven to like nine with me, my brother and my like my mom's— my nanake basically. So I lived with my nanake and then I came back and I was like nine, ten. And while I was in Punjab, you know, I did have a lot of like, some resentment of like 'why did my mom like, you know, leave me here' like, you know, there's that little bit of, like, of course, like abandonment type of vibe. And then when I— then my mom came back, when I was like nine, ten. We got— and then I moved back to the U.S. around that time when I was like nine or 10-ish. I think it was 10, when I was 10. So, we lived there for like three years, seven to 10. So, in 2010, I moved back to the U.S. and we lived in Sacramento. And I remember like, the apartments, it was like a one apartment like low-income housing, like in the quote-unquote "ghetto". It's in South Sacramento, so it was a lot of, like I remember like growing up with like a lot of abuse and just like a lot of fighting like in the house. When we were, when I was 12, my bhua and fufar bought a home. So they bought a home in like suburbia of like Sacramento. So it's still in Sacramento in South Sacramento, but it's on the border of like Elk Grove. So they bought a home there, and fufar ji was really, and my dad was abusive, but because, like, there were layers of like, disability, it was a little different, but fufar ji was like, very, very, extremely abusive, like, in terms of like content warning — abuse. Should I continue, or should I not continue?

00:05:18 **SPEAKER_KM**

You can continue, provided. Thank you for providing the warning.

00:05:25 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yeah, no no. Absolutely. And if, at any point, it's like too much please feel free to pause me. If you need to take care of yourself or anything like that. Like, I'm more than happy to pause the recording or in terms of like, I guess you would pause the recording, but I'm more than happy to take a break. But yeah. Things like bhua ji's wrist would be like, you know, fufar ji broke like, anyways. Things like that. So anyway, I'll just say, physical

abuse, emotional, mental abuse was like a thing. So, anyways, bhua and fufar ji bought a home and they bought like a four-bedroom home. So they asked us if we wanted to move in with them and it's been my mom's dream to buy a home. One day, like to live, like have her own house and she hasn't yet— that has never happened yet. So, anyways, because like, we lived in the apartment, also in the area that we lived in, they— like my mom and— like we decided to move in with them because it was like a house. They were like, you know, 'what are we going to do in a four-bedroom house?' So we— so ever since 12 I've lived in their house basically with them so we pay like rent to them but we again as I like named, you know, that was also like moving in with fufar ji, being as abusive as he has been. So it was like basically all that to say, I hated home like I did not like home. I hated going home. I remember like each— like I would just— I was just waiting to get out of, to go to college. You know. I was just waiting to leave home and get out of that situation and just yeah, I like I would get— my feelings, my— I don't have the best like feelings attached with childhood because things that come into my mind are, for example, going to school and like my school would get out at 3:07 and around like 2:50 I would start getting like anxiety and panic that like, 'oh my god, it's time to go home now, and I don't know how fufar ji's mood, is going to be,' you know, like what if he's mad at someone or then you know, I don't know how the house environment is going to be. So it was just really scary because like— things erupted, things could erupt at any moment and they did erupt at any moment, you know. But I was also like the oldest so I was the translator. I called Medi-Cal like because they don't speak English, no one speaks English. So, I was also like the, like, from an early age, like, the one who communicated with Medi-Cal Insurance, like all these official things. Like, I coordinated from a very, very young age and with no space to mess up because, to mess up, people would get like mad and like really abusive. So, anyways, I just— my childhood wasn't the best space, actually, like, a lot of it was full of a lot of fear and anxiety, and stress and disappointment, like, 'oh why is my mom not saying anything, why is she not speaking up.' things like that. So it was, it was, it was a rough childhood, but I don't want to be like, 'oh I learned a lot because of it. Blah, blah blah.' I like used to do that a lot where I would like, try to twist it and be like, you know, 'if I didn't have the abusive household I had, then I wouldn't be who I am,' but, you know, that's like I said, I shouldn't do that. But anyways, yeah, it was not the safest place.

00:08:54 **SPEAKER_KM**

It can be like sort of hard to put a silver lining on those things. Thank you for sharing. It sounds like childhood is a difficult time and you see... [recording unclear] and had a lot of pressure on your shoulders at a young age. So I was wondering during this tumultuous time in your life, were there any friends or extended family who you found solace with, or community with, or support in?

00:09:40 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yeah. Like school was where I found a lot of support like that's why I love going to school. Like I was really good at school from the very beginning because that's what I was like where my home was. You know I could, I could go home and go to school and like be someone else, like I could just be myself, you know? I was— I would be like someone very different. Oh my god, I don't know why I started to cry. Sorry, I would like— if I have to turn off my camera at any point like I'll just turn off my camera and keep the audio on but right now I'm okay. But yeah, home— school was where I found a lot of support. I would be someone completely different at school like I was so loud and like always running around and like would ask a lot of questions. I was like, I was just like— I had friends at school that I made and I was just really like someone very different. Then at home, I was like— I would go home and become this very quiet person, like I didn't talk at home. I was, I was just, I always just nodded and said, 'yes' to everyone, anyone needed— like I was just like with— and then— at home I tried to stay as busy as possible, so that way, even when I would go home, I would have so much homework, I would have so many things to do. I loved reading. That was also another place I found a lot of solace from a very, very young age. Like, all the— I know Harry Potter is canceled— but all the Harry Potter books. Like Percy Jackson, like all these fantasy books. I was such like I— it was what— where I found solace. Like, every time I would be at home and all I would do is just read. I would be doing homework or I would be reading books and I read so much when I was young and all of them were like fantasy books. So I, and I always like, you know, just dream that, like, maybe I will take these powers that these characters have. Like, maybe I will have like this power, and I would be able to do like save myself, type of vibe, or are you still there by the way? Oh, hello?

[this portion of the interview had interconnectivity issues]

00:12:58 **SPEAKER_KM**

Perfect. Thank you. So, the last thing I heard is that you were really drawn to reading and school and especially fantasy books because characters had a lot of power and like different abilities that you wish that you could

channel in your own life.

00:13:24 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yeah. Yeah, no. Absolutely. No. Thank you. Yeah. So that I felt so books and reading were a huge resource for me, but even that sometimes I remember, I had to like read in hiding because my family would like— like I would get admonished for reading actually because like no one really went to school in my family, like my mom only went up to high school, but in the pind, and so you know that was like— it wasn't really— like she didn't really do schooling. And then my dad dropped out when he was like in sixth or seventh grade. So they weren't really educated and I would get admonished for reading like all these big books because they would be like “aye kee pari janda”, “what are you reading?”, like “just filling your mind with all these words and books.” Like “you're going to go crazy, you're going to go insane,” and they would share stories of like someone from their pind who apparently did go like that, like have mental health issues in terms of— and they accredited that to like— the way they would say it is this person wanted to be a pilot and went crazy quote-unquote reading and studying so much. So anyways, I'll just say like, they don't really understand the importance of reading, and I remember when I would bring home books, they would be like, “what are you doing, reading such a big book?” Like “you can't be reading.” So I would I remember reading at night, once everyone would also go to sleep and I would literally, like, once everyone slept, I would pull out my book and like, read in hiding to get through like the book that I was reading at that time. So anyways, all that to say, reading was a solace. And going to school was also a comfort.

00:15:15 **SPEAKER_KM**

That makes a lot of sense. That school was a place that you could find solace.

00:15:41 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Hello. Okay, sorry Karmine, I think you broke out again.

00:15:52 **SPEAKER_KM**

Can you hear me now?

00:15:53 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yes, I hear you.

00:15:55 **SPEAKER_KM**

Sorry about that. I was wondering, what about school drew you to that experience? Was it like the physical place, the classmates you had, or just the aspect of learning? And if it was learning, what sort of subjects did you like the most?

00:16:14 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yeah, I think it was all of it. Like in terms of just like, not being at home, you know, that was like, and being in a place where I knew I was safe. Or at least I felt much like— I felt safe there. I rather like the friends that I made, who I could be wild and just like around and just be myself. I love learning too and some of my favorite subjects, I loved history. I loved English. I really started— I loved English actually, like especially towards the end of my time, or my end of high school. That became like one of my favorite subjects, as well as history. But overall, I did well in like all my classes actually, so I— just because I spent so much time on school like school work, so I really liked all of it, but I especially loved like English and basically humanities. Like the humanities classes were my favorite growing up.

00:17:22 **SPEAKER_KM**

So, I know you meant.

[this portion of the interview had interconnectivity issues]

00:18:14 **SPEAKER_KM**

Okay so sorry about that but I know you mentioned enjoying History and English, and somewhat related to that, what are the different histories of representation that you have grown up with and what have been the symbols and people or historical figures that have been meaningful to you as you've grown up?

00:18:45 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Historical figures trying to think, I have actually also really bad memory of my childhood. So I like, don't really remember like too much things, like slash, really kind of struggle with memory of like, especially from like high school and earlier. I am thinking, with different histories of representation. At school it was– are there any? I can't, I really can't remember any. I'm so sorry.

00:19:21 **SPEAKER_KM**

We can totally skip that question or come back to it later. If something comes to mind later.

00:19:29 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yeah.

00:19:32 **SPEAKER_KM**

So, I know you talked a lot about your childhood, but I know you also went to Punjab as you were younger and you grew up, translating for your family as well. So we've heard a little bit about your Punjabi identity, but I was also wondering, when thinking about your relationship to Sikhi, how did you learn about Sikhs and Sikhi and how has that relationship changed and evolved throughout your life?

00:20:12 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yeah, I know, absolutely, thank you for that question. I think for me, because I think I grew up in like an abusive context, Guru Sahib was like a sahara to me. And kirtan was like huge to me. Like, my family is, not really religious, although we do have, in the house, one of the rooms is like the baba ji's room and people would like pray there, and by pray, like you know not everyone really like understands. Our bhua is the only one that kind of does paat like, you know, every day. Like she does her nitnem. And my mom also does nitnem sometimes, like, in terms of nitnem, she does like Japji Sahib in the morning, but overall, like everyone else was more like, kind of like 'we would just do matha tek' type of thing, but not necessarily like, we didn't really grow up going to the gurdwara too much actually. And now that I kind of– like recently, like now I also know– since I've been learning about that, you know, narcissism and like abuse like it was kind of one of the ways that like my fufar ji would isolate, I guess, us. Like in terms of like we, we didn't go to the gurdwara because there were people there. People like– he would like make up just different things. And basically, all that to say we didn't really go out to go to the gurdwara too much. We would go here and there but we didn't go like every Sunday, so. And we didn't really have– like our family didn't really have friends like that and friends weren't really seen as a good thing either. Actually, they're not really like valued. It's not like a– it just like 'oh family', people would just like– they would just talk bad about people outside so we didn't really have– but I think like but like in baba ji's room like kirtan would always be playing and I also remember I had a close relationship with like my bhua more because bhua, like she worked for this one guy who was visually impaired and we would go clean his house every like Sunday. So since I'm the oldest, I would go with her to like clean his house, like his apartment, to take him around, like to help and she, they're also like babysitters. So sometimes they would take me to go with them as well so my bhua– like for her I think Sikhi is very important to her in terms of, in her car, always kirtan would be playing. So I like, you know, really grew up like listening to and having kirtan really close to me because I spent like, you know, all this time like safely and like more intimately with my bhua because I would go with her to clean houses. I would go with her to like, like, you know, wherever like she went and also like, in times of abuse, like, you know, like you I found a lot of like support and solace and like comfort in kirtan. So, I remember– for me, like, for me from like a very young age, Sikhi became really huge for me. Like, I don't even remember, actually, when I was in Punjab and when I was like from like nine, like seven, eight, nine, I would go to the gurdwara there by myself, like I would just, I just loved going and just sitting there and complaining to Guru Sahib about different things and like, ah wow, I'm like remembering these things now that, I like– I haven't even thought about– but I remember, I would like sit there and like talk to Guru Sahib about different, ah sorry. I don't know why I'm crying, I think I just haven't thought about these things in so long. I would like, yeah, I just go to the gurdwara basically and like because we lived in the pind– so you know, how like pinds have gurdwaras, like you know, they're pretty like it's like right there versus like it's a walking

distance type of vibe. So I love going to the gurdwaras, even when I was young and then coming to the U.S. after like 10, I would like to listen to kirtan and was surrounded by— in terms of like I would hear from bhua. And I remember when I was in 7th grade, like my dream was to be a granthi. I wanted to be a granthi. So I actually learned to do nitnem, like, by myself. I would like wake up at like 2 a.m. actually, like at one point in my life, I was growing my hair out. I was going to keep my hair and people in my family weren't really supportive. You know they were like “oh”— because for them, I can also see, it was like we came all the way here to the U.S. like you know, like we want to be like with the class status that we have here in the U.S. like you know, like I can't— like this is disappointing that you want to be a granthi, you know, like granthis don't make money, you know. That type of vibe. Like what do you mean you're going to be a granthi? So I was growing my hair out at one point when I was like, in seventh grade too like and I wanted to be a granthi. I would wake up at 2 a.m. and do like the nitnem, all the nitnems. I would do like all the panj baniya. I would do like Asa Di Vaar. I would just like listen to it on YouTube and like have this app pulled up where I would like read it and learn its meaning as I went and then like things just got, but then I think in eighth grade we had to go to India to— and then I had to cut my hair because my hair wasn't grown a lot. It was like growing and it was like shoulder length. And then there were like, you are not going to India looking like this. So then I had to cut my hair and then ever since then, once I came back, I just didn't keep my hair again. I didn't really try again but like I still kind of like have that relationship to Sikhi but overall I think like, and I think now it's like over time, it's just gotten like stronger and on my own terms because like, from the very beginning, no one taught me Sikhi, you know, like I didn't go to the gurdwara learning from the granthis, or from the, like people there. I didn't learn it from like my family. I learned it on my own terms like by myself, in a way to support myself and like find solace and make meaning out of like all this stuff that was happening in my life. So I think because of that, I've been able to really like, develop a relationship with Guru Sahib and think about what Sikhi means to me and like do the work of actually understanding Sikhi for myself versus just taking it from an authority figure on what Sikhi is which give makes me even more adamant in why I believe in Sikhi so much and why— because like for me, like I've done the work of like learning what Sikhi is on my own. And I know what Sikhi is, that all like I because, I like— and hence I'm so adamant about when I do my anti-caste work, like, when I like talk, like speak up, like against like queerphobia, transphobia like why I'm able to back it up as in like “in Sikhi, this is what it says” because I know it. And even right now casteism, queerphobia, and transphobia, like all these like ‘isms’ are so rampant in Sikh communities and I'm able to point to my own faith and like, have a firm understanding of what Sikhi means to me and what the Guru Sahibs said and taught.

00:27:50 **SPEAKER_KM**

Thank you for sharing. It sounds like Sikhi played a significant role in your life and you initiated a lot of this exploration of your Sikhi yourself and on your own terms. And I know you mentioned you weren't really able to share you know, your journey with Sikhi with your family as much, and it was discouraged. And also, like, having friends was discouraged as well, and I was wondering, are there any people in your life that, over the years, you've been able to like find sangat with and, you know, talk about your Sikhi more with?

00:28:40 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yeah, I know, I think recently now it has happened, where I've like, finally started to build sangat because I've also just been scared of like Punjabi Sikhs actually, because I remember like growing up like at my high school. I would be, you know, teased. I would be like bullied. I like— I hated and stayed away from like the Punjabi like cis-het men because they like, I would be called like a kusra. I would— things like that. So like, I feared them, like, I stayed away from them. I lived in fear that, like they would show up to my house and like talk to my family and be like, “What is your child doing?” Be like, “Why does your child act like they do? Why do they walk the way they do? Why do they talk the way they do?” They're like all these things like so I was really scared of Punjabi Sikhs and it's gotten better now, but for a long time like and it still happens now but not as bad, but seeing Punjabi Sikhs in public like my body like, somatically, I would have a response. Like I would— my body would kind of— like my heart would skip a beat when I would see any Punjabi Sikhs in public. Like, if I saw someone else like, just like my heart would just skip a beat and I would just get scared. And now it's gotten a lot better, recently, but I think like it has been kind of like queer and trans Sikh that I have come across who I finally have learned what it means to be in sangat. This is actually me quoting prabh, but prabh said sangat is not just someone that you're like— you're not— just cause Guru Sahib gives a lot of value to sangat, right? Like sangat is literally where liberation's found, but it's like how— but when we're taught that like all these people are our sangat— like how can I believe that when these people also want me dead, are like the ones calling me slurs, like those who like despise my existence, like the ones that are like so violent, and who I don't even feel safe around? But prabh, like they said that “sangat is not who you just are in sangat with because you share an identity with them, but it's those that you struggle alongside towards both spiritual and political

liberation". That is your sangat, and that takes labor. And I totally— and that was such a beautiful way of saying it. Because you're right, Like you just aren't in sangat just because you got born into a family or go to a specific gurdwara, or look a certain way or share a specific identity. Like you're in sangat because you have to do the labor of being in sangat, because you have to do the labor of working towards liberation. So I think like it's been recently that I've actually found people who I can like talk to Sikhi about and I think like this, and I've been so so thankful, like that's been so beautiful to like find and actually build sangat for the first time and it has been all like mostly folks who have been marginalized by Sikhi. Or sorry, not marginalized by Sikhi, marginalized by Sikhs.

00:31:56 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

And I also feel like dedicated to this work because I know like for myself that, like, Guru Sahib has like, helped me in like, like such, like, lonely, like times has gotten me through so much. And I like, I truly have like a conviction that like, Guru Sahib holds my hand, you know, like I— because I've gotten this far and I've like survived, you know, this far and I have been in those times where I've relied on kirtan to like cry and like you know like grieve or like take care of myself and just like find solace and comfort. When I was like struggling so bad and trying to find just like hope to like, you know, like things are going to be okay or whatever. So I like— Guru Sahib has helped me for so long and I do, truly do feel a conviction that like my faith and my Guru Sahib do, like, protect me, like always like, you know, walk with me.

00:33:02 **SPEAKER_KM**

That's such a wonderfully articulated description of sangat through relationship with Guru Sahib. Would you be able to share a little bit more about these people who you've been able to like find community with and struggle alongside, you know, spiritually and politically?

00:33:39 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yeah, I know absolutely. I mean I have to give first and foremost credit to prabh because like, they were one of the first like, queer-trans Sikhs and who also like, it was also them who like, really also started like, they were such a huge, like, influence on me coming to terms with my own like transness because I remember, like when I was really young, I would like in the gurdwara or not, sorry, the gurdwara— in the bathroom, which was such a safe place for me, this is so interesting. But I have this like, not a poem, but I would often think about it, that the bathroom is like, one of the safest places in my house because, you know, you could just go and, like, stay there and like, have like, some, like privacy and like safety and, like, blah blah blah blah blah, because we also didn't have individual rooms, so, you know, like we shared rooms because it was like, like it was me, my brother, my sister, my cousin-brother, and now recently my cousin-sister too so it was like a lot of people in the house so we didn't have like— everyone, we didn't have individual rooms like so all the kids like stayed— anyway, okay, long story short, bathroom was a safe place. Anyways, I'll have to say I would, you know, try on like mummy's clothes because people would put their laundry clothes in the bathroom basket. So I would like, you know, try on her clothes when I was really young. I remember when I was like three or four, I don't have like much memories of the time, you know, when I was like three, but I do remember, like, with my cousin-sister— so this was before I even came here for the first time— I do have like, a little bit of memory of, like, me and didi, we both would like dress up, like, take the chunnis and dress up, and make them, make saris out of them, like dress, like wrap them around, like, saris and dance

00:35:34 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

in the rain or just like dance all the time or we would like cover, you know where the, where the chunnis like all the women in the family, like whether it was my mom's chunnis or like bhua's chunnis or whoever's chunnis were lying around, we would like, you know, do things with them like such as like wear them, like saris, or wear them, like over our heads and like dance around with them and like do acting from the movies we were watching or whatever. And I remember in high school and middle school, I would take my mom's eyeliner and I would like wear her eyeliner to school, like, I would hide it. I would wear it right before leaving the house, or I would take the eyeliner, like I would steal the eyeliner with me. And, like, before coming home, I would rub my eyes and try to wash it out so that no one would like to know that I like wore eyeliner. So to, like, hide it. So I did like all these different things and like, anyways, like I remember like prabh was— once I met with them first because, like, for grad school when I was applying for PhD programs, like they were in a PhD program. So I reached out to them to ask them questions. And I asked them this one question that someone had asked to me, and I didn't know the answer and someone had asked me "who, or what," because I was trying to figure out

what my work was about, what I wanted to define my work for a PhD program. They asked the question, “Who or what do you want to mourn or honor with your work?” And I couldn't find the answer and I asked a lot of people that question. So I would do PhD interviews... with different people. Like my— who I would reach out to try to get like support from and I would ask them that question. A lot of people would be like, “oh, like I'm mourning and honoring my family. I'm mourning and honoring, like, I'm honoring my community, my ancestors.” But like, for me, like, all three of those are oppressive, you know. As someone who comes from like, an oppressor caste background, I can't take honor in my ancestors. I can't take honor of my family that like, has been abusive. Like I can't take honor in my community that has been abusive and violent. Like so I just could not— like everyone would say the same shit about like being well, like, “Oh my god, like family, community.”

00:37:57 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

And I just could not find affirmation in that and well, and then I remember like prabh was the first one whose answer resonated so deeply, and their answer was, “Me”. Like, I'm honoring and mourning myself and all parts of myself that I've had to kill to survive. All parts that I've had been killed, like honoring my younger selves like and it was such a beautiful answer because I was like, oh my god, yes, like that resonates so deeply. I have so much to mourn and honor and I think it was that that like kind of brought me to terms, like started my journey of coming to terms with my transness. I'd like— like, thinking back and be like, wow. Wow. That was like a younger self that I like killed and lost like the one who would secretly wear eyeliner to school. The one who would like, steal my mom's makeup and then like quickly wash it off before coming back home and think I was so slick about it, too, and, like, things like that. So, anyways, the main questions that you asked me was people. So, first and foremost, I would say prabh. I've learned so much about Sikhi from them too, and have really also unlearned a lot of things about Sikhi that like, you know, I've like learn from people, like authority, telling what Sikhi is that don't actually know what Sikhi is and really like that practice of like learning and developing like my own relationship to Guru Sahib I've also learned from them. So I would first and foremost say them. Like other like queer and trans Sikhs, such as like some folks I'm thinking about, who I am because of whom I started to like take more, or at least come back to like being a little bit more comfortable with like in Punjabi Sikh settings and like kind of being like, ‘Oh like I want to speak Punjabi like, with people.’ Like I want to kind of claim parts that are— like actually build sangat on my own terms. Like such as, other folks like my friend, Manu. Like Armaan. Like Jaspreet. Like, there's so many folks who I'm like, in community with and I'm so, so thankful that I've met them and have been building with them like, in these beautiful ways and like, have had space to talk about Sikhi. I've also— like I met, I also met up with prabh back over this summer as I was doing my Master's thesis and conversations with them like because they encouraged me to like think more through Sikhi and that, like, starting my own journey of even diving more further into Sikhi and like learning about more things. So, it's just been like a, I feel like it has been, because of this, like, beautiful, very small but like, very beautiful sangat that I've like built that— oh my god, interestingly some of this... a lot of this thing that I also built through like Twitter and a lot of it I built through social media during my age, when I was very like, maybe this is definitely not the smartest thing now that I've learned and grown, but also kind of thankful that I found the folks that I did find back on Twitter. Oh my god. Arguing on Sikh Twitter, like defending my existence on Sikh Twitter which is— I would not recommend because that goes nowhere except like just causing so much hate, but I remember when I made a Twitter, one of the first tweets I made was that like, “were the Guru Sahibs queer?” And oh my god. Like that brought me *so* much hate and also, like I met so many queer and trans Sikhs who like came to my defense, but just overall like who I was, like who we're like working through. Like what does it mean to think through about Gurus Sahibs as queer and like to build that relationship with them through queerness and just overall like learning and finding more, learning about and finding more queer and trans Sikhs was really, really beautiful like although it happened in the context of so much violence online. And I of course was in a much more like unsettled place. Not to say, I'm like settled now because I'm still pretty unsettled. But at that time it was like, “we need to win these battles even on social media.” So I would be like, you know, really fighting all these like cis-het, casteist, transphobic, quote-unquote Sikhs on Twitter who had like, who were just like nasty and just made really horrible comments. But anyways now I'm just rambling. I'll just stop talking and hand the mic to you.

00:42:32 **SPEAKER_KM**

Thank you so much for sharing about the sangat that you found over the years and I know Sikh Twitter is such a toxic place and I'm sorry you have had to deal with that but I know you shared a little about being queer and trans and I'm just want to backtrack a little bit and provide some context for the listeners about how you like learned about topics of around gender, and sexuality, and kind of how your gender journey has evolved over time. And like the way I'll phrase this question is: thinking about how you understand your gender and sexuality

today, if you have to define some of your life so far in terms of phases, what would they be?

00:43:35 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Okay, so I think like maybe starting off before I even like, you know, had internalized— a lot like in terms of— before I like, before society got to me, like, I guess when I was really, really really young like two, three, there's that phase of like, you know, just dressing up with like the— and like wearing those saris and like running. I don't know if I could run, or like I think I could when I was three but like you know like wearing saris and like wearing chunnis and like running around and dancing and pretending that I was— cause we loved Kuch Kuch Hota Hai, that movie. So pretending like I was Kajol because I loved Kajol when I was really young, so pretending like I was like one of those like actresses from Bollywood movies. There was that phase. Then there was a phase in elementary school when I had crushes on girls. But later, I realized that they weren't really crushes because I didn't, it was more so like I wanted to be them because I like— I would pick up on their mannerisms and things that they did, the way that they spoke. I would like start to do, like would do that, a lot. Like, I would start to— I would start to look, speak like them. Like talk like them, like kind of like move— do things that they would do. And of course, like I always had to like— I got called out a lot about like speaking with my hands a lot, you know, like they're like oh stop doing that. Like you're talking like a girl like blah blah blah. So I wouldn't do that at home or at least like I learned to like not do that at home or like just I learned to be quiet at home. I learned to just be silent and not talk at home, but at school I would then like, you know, and I thought I had crushes on them, but then like I was like, oh my god, oh my god this is like on a side note, I remember, like my very first— because you know they started like like sexual education in like fifth grade I believe was the first time that you watch, like you learn about sex and you watch like videos. I think in the seventh grade, they showed us childbirth. But just overall, like, fifth grade was our first, what do they call it in California? Like it wasn't sex ed, they did not call it sex ed, was it family ed. Uh, I forgot what they called it. Do you know what I'm talking about?

00:46:00 **SPEAKER_KM**

Yes, I am not from California. We called it Family Life Education. Maybe that rings a bell. I'm not sure.

00:46:12 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yes. Okay, yeah, it was Family Life Education. That's what it was. Yeah. I remember fifth grade. And I was so confused about like what they talked about because I had never heard of or imagined like the vagina. Like in terms of just overall like I had never like thought about— like I was just so shook and people were making fun of me because they were just like, “you didn't know? like you don't know that we have like different body parts?” and I was like “No, I didn't”. I really didn't. Like what I was imagining and now that I have more language, I was imagining anal sex the whole time. I was always, I always imagined the babies also came out of like the anus. Anyways, so, I know, literally, and I was so shook in fifth grade, and then I was like, wow, like these people who I've had crushes on, in terms of like the girls that I would like crush on, I would— I was like, oh my god, there's— I could not imagine like any sexual attraction at all and I was like— me then of course, like kind of peeling— me that was what I, me processing after like looking back, like wait, like am I really gay? Like, cause like I had crushes on girls, but it was like, and that was me coming towards, coming to terms with I thought I had a crush but it wasn't necessarily a crush, I just wanted to be like them. And also like at that same time I would have like sexual dreams of Bollywood actors and like different like different like, not like, there were some, there was this like one guy or like one boy in my like elementary school class, I forgot which one who I had like a— it wasn't a crush, I was really trying to like gaslight myself, slash like evade it, like, “you're crush is not a crush,” but then I would have like my dreams about him and like I would think about him and like it just overall, like I had a lot of like fantasies about Bollywood actors like Shah Rukh Khan or like whatever or Salman Khan and like things like that. So that was the phase. And then in middle school I, of course, I got asked a lot, “Are you gay?” because I was a very flamboyant, flamboyantly, like, I would talk with my hands, like the way they would talk, because I would like, pick like the girls that I had a crush on, or at least I thought I had, though I would say I have a crush on, I remember like in fifth grade it was Nancy and in sixth grade it was Diana. I would start to talk like them and like pick up their mannerisms and be like them. Anyway, so people would ask me, “Are you gay?” And I would be like, “No, I'm not gay. I have a crush on Nancy. Anyways, good times or like not so good times. And then, in middle school, I stayed away from the Punjabi boys because they would bully me and in high school, I— that was a phase where I first came out to, oh my god, I actually came— the first person I ever came out to was in sixth grade. I remember I came out to, was it fifth grade? It was in sixth grade elementary school and I came out to my best friend at that time, Lily. And the way I came out was like, I was like, I'm gonna write something. I wrote it on a teeny tiny tiny paper and the smallest handwriting

ever. And I was like, "I think I'm gay." I showed it to her and then I ripped it apart and I was like we're never going to talk about this ever again. And that was like my first time I like came out to someone. Turns out, later like when I connected— and then we like, I moved right around that time in middle school. I moved. So then I never saw her again because I moved high schools since we moved houses, but like in high school when I connected with her over Facebook, because Facebook was the thing that back in those days, it turns out she also was gay and she also came out as gay too, LOL. But anyways so what were we talking about before this? So, so high school. People, some people knew, some people speculated like there was just, I would get asked the question a lot if I was gay and I would be like, no. I remember like an 11th grade, I even got asked by this Punjabi guy who was like walking his dog at the park and he went to our school and he just like— I was like playing around with the kids because I was like a boy, in terms of like a small, little like boy, at that time. But you know, I was like really young and in that phase of like playing around with the other boys. And they were all really young playing around with other little boys on the playground. Wait, this wasn't 11th grade then, it was, I think it was maybe 10th grade. So I was still like, you know, at that age where I would play around with, on the playground, with the little boys and this guy who was like older than me. Oh, he was two years older than me, so I think I was in ninth grade at the time. He came up to me, and he was like, "Are you gay?" And I was like— and he went to my school and I was at the park. And you know, Punjabi people at the park. So I was like, I got really scared, and I was like, "No." And he was like, "Do you want to go out with me?" And I was like, "No." Later, I found out he was actually also like lying. He was— he wasn't gay. He was actually— unless he was like gay and repressed, and, or in terms of like, you know, like just being homophobic— he would, because later, I was like, "Are you actually gay?" Because I like, I was gonna actually— like I was down to go out with him. So I was like, maybe he was for real, maybe he was for reals and not just kidding. So like many, many months later, I actually asked him and he was like, "What the fuck? No, I was just, I was just messing around." Anyways, okay, back to the question about what phases in high school. I became slightly more comfortable, but I still wasn't necessarily out to anyone and then I went to college. So college was like a huge awakening that was like a big phase. I like— actually at orientation, I came out publicly and like as gay. Like we had a, "I am Cal Poly" like photo campaign where we were supposed to write on this white board. And this was like, the first week of college and I was like I don't want to be like in the closet anymore so I wrote like "I am gay" on that board and they took a picture with it and I posted that too. Of course, after, I went through my Instagram and like, vett, literally unfollowed and removed people as followers, made my story as private— like, I went through all of that like to make sure that there were no Punjabi people on there and no like Punjabi men from high school especially. So, that was my first time I like came out. Then— and it was like a lot, of course, I was like really nervous, but yeah, I feel good. In ninth grade, or no sorry, in freshman year was like my time of like coming out as gay like, more publicly, more open. I had my first sexual experience as well. Like got my heart broken by this one guy and then was in my ho phase. So that was that, throughout my college. I've never been in a relationship before, actually, in my life. So I've never had that phase before, and then second year of college or was it second year

00:53:50 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

or third year of college? I think it was third year of college. I became— it was the pandemic, it was during the pandemic. And that's when— because it was during the pandemic, I like was alone. I was quarantined, like, I was on campus because I made up lies to not go home and I started to come more to terms with like my transness and like found like a lot of affirmation and in like being non-binary in terms of like the term non-binary. And I was like experimenting with makeup, like experimenting with like quote-unquote women's clothing and that's also like— right before that was like also when I met prabh and like— just like talking with them, like seeing their pictures, I was like, oh my god, like I want to, I want to do that. Like I want to, like I've wanted to wear like a skirt. I've wanted to like wear makeup, and I didn't know I could do that, you know, like the possibilities. And that's why I'm like genuinely so, so thankful to them for— and I also understand, like also acknowledge like, how much like harm and like violence— like how much it takes to be publicly out as like trans and like presenting too, in terms of like how the risk and the backlash that one gets and at the same time, and that's alongside like so many other folks like feeling like getting that power as well. So I think it was during the quarantine that I started to come to terms with my transness and then came out as non-binary. So that was another phase of like then me, trying to find what affirms me when it comes to gender, and what doesn't affirm me, and a lot of things, like it's just hard to find, like things that affirm me, so that has been another phase. Oh, another phase was coming out to my family, when I like— this was December 2021. I ran away from my house. I wrote like a 12-page letter. When I tell you I'm a writer, I'm definitely a writer. I wrote a, it was a four-page single-spaced point one margin letter that I wrote in English but because I know they don't speak English, I asked a friend if she can translate it in Punjabi. So she took my letter in English and wrote it in Punjabi and that came out to 12 pages. So I left that and I just ran away. And the letter, the letter was like me coming out, but also, more importantly, was just like, from the views that was just, I could not do it, like, I couldn't, like, I hated going home so much and every time it was

harder and harder, and I would get anxiety like a week before break thinking about how I have to go home, like every week, I try to avoid going home as much as possible. I made up so many lies, like left and right, and I think I didn't even get to see my dad like the weekend before he died, and I didn't know he was going to die, you know, like because he just wasn't like doing well, but like I didn't realize it was like to the level that he was like sick. Because I— I was supposed to have gone home that weekend because it was a three day weekend. So my mom was like, “Oh, come home. It's a three-day weekend.” Because they made me come home like whenever it was a three-day weekend, but I didn't want to go home, so I actually didn't end up going home. I made up a lie. I was like oh because the buses are not running because of the pandemic. I made up— like I staged a whole thing, I was like, “Okay, I bought a ticket the bus didn't come... oh, my god.” It's like a whole thing. Okay. Now I'm just skipping around, but yeah, December 2021, I came out by running away from my house. The same day after, I had to come back the next day. I had to come back because I ran away and I was like, “I'm not going to Cal Poly. I'm leaving, like don't try to contact me,” or like, “You can contact me via email because I know I pay all your bills so you can message me to do things, but I don't want to be in contact more than that.” And I blocked everyone, but then they were like— they found a way to contact me through like emails and they were like, “Just pick up the phone.” Like, so then I— and I couldn't say no, like I couldn't keep my boundaries. I wasn't like strong enough. So the next day, I like had to go home, even though I didn't want to. So I went back the next day and we never talked about it ever again. I did try to bring it up to my mom actually that like mummy did you understand what I said about being like, you know, gay, about being trans? And she, like, what I got was just like, just don't show people. People don't need to know. You don't need to show anyone anything. You don't need to tell people anything. Like, we understand. We get that you're gay. No one can control that. We get it, but still pray to waheguru, waheguru, will have kirpa, and you will not be gay one day. And you don't need to tell anyone that you're gay, and you don't need to show anyone. Like you don't like, you cannot walk down the street and unless like, “people don't know if you're a gay or not,” like, “people, don't know if you're trans or not,” like you just walk down the street and like don't tell anyone, like just go back in the closet type of vibe and of course I couldn't stand up for myself again, so I just like quiet it down again and went back in the closet and have been back in the closet. I've tried to bring it up to my mom once before, when I like before going to my M.A. program here, like a few weeks before moving into SF State. I like was sitting with her and I brought it up to her. I was like, do you remember when I ran away from my house? Like you have any questions? Because I know that was like a lot. Like you have any questions? It's all so new. So if you wanted to ask anything like I could explain it to you and she was also saying the same thing like no one needs to know. So I was telling her, “Why? That doesn't work for me.” I was like, “I don't want to, it's like, you know, I fight the whole world. I don't want to be fighting you all like blah, blah blah.” And then two days later she was literally beating her chest in the clo— in the, she was in the garage because, our kitchen, like, you know, how Punjabi people make a little kitchen in their garage cause she cooks, she was and she was beating her chest. Thankfully, I wasn't there, so I didn't get to see that. But didi told me because didi were like then giving her solace and trying to calm her down, but she was literally beating her chest, weeping super loud. Like being like, “ene mehnu ro thitha.” Like, “ene ma nu shad gayiya, ene mehnu ro thitha.” Like what that like translates to, like he— and her from her language, like, “he has thrown me away,” like “he's gonna like leave us,” like “he has people in SF,” that because I told her, I was like, you know, all my clothes, all my dress— like I have all these clothes that I like to wear, and I had to give them to a friend before coming home to hold onto and she interpreted that as like I'm going to like, just go and live there and never come back. Like, “ene ro thitha sanu.” Anyways, so that happened. Anyway, so after that I like decided again like I will never tell my mom anything again, but it just, anyways, so I just live these two lives of being at home and being someone else, and then being here like away from home, slash at school and being someone else, being out and about to the world, but not to my family. And with moments where I've tried to bridge it, but it just hasn't worked. And yeah, that's— those are the different phases in terms of thinking about Sikhi, ‘if you define some of your life so far in phases, what would they be?’ Okay? And in Sikhi context, there was a phase I remember being, wanting to be a granthi. So you know, I was like that was a phase of doing nitnem everyday, like starting at 2a.m. in the morning. And then there was— then I like kind of lost that but I still like remember some of the banis. Then there was a phase of going to high school or college, and the guy with— the first guy kind of— I wouldn't say, I fell in love with because I don't, I've never fallen, I don't know what that word means. LOL. But this guy that I was interested in, was the first Punjabi— he wasn't actually Punjabi, but he was really involved with the Punjabi Sikh community and he was gay and he was the first guy I ever slept with. Like he was— and from him I learned, from YouTube, the tablas. Like I started getting more into kirtan and I learned it like, on my own actually because I wanted to play with him, slash I wanted to play— like I wanted to play with him. Because we would— in San Luis Obispo, there's a very small, very small, Punjabi Sikh community. It's very, very small because SLO is like a very white town but they would host like kirtan slash like rehras sahib nights where you would come together and like cook food, do rehras sahib together and then sing kirtan. So I wanted to learn, so I could play like the tabla. So I learned from YouTube, and got a tabla from Amazon, that was my first tabla that I got and I like learned from YouTube by myself. So that was that phase and then I think that when I came to terms with my transness like that also really escalated my like relationship

with Sikhi because I think I was just like— I for one like, I don't know. It just opened up so much for me from within. I— like my relationship to Guru Sahib grew so much stronger. Like I came to Sikhi on another level because of my transness, and through my queerness and transness. It was also in coming to terms with like my queerness and transness and like putting it with my Sikhi that I like, also like found more of the like queer and trans Sikhs out there. Like built sangat with them, and that's what that was like. And then my Master's thesis, I think also was huge because I did so much work like research and reading on learning more and then growing even stronger. So that was another one. I also did shrooms actually over the summer. I did it like twice over the summer and both times it was like the shrooms actually also like brought me closer, like also unlocked different things. Things like that I like understood more through Sikhi so that they also brought me even stronger to Sikhi and now I just I'm in this, like, phase of like I don't know how to define it, but yeah, I guess those are some different— like I don't like, I wouldn't say like phases because it's a little hard to like kind of categorize them and put names over them, but at least different like markers and different milestones that have like contributed to like the relationship changing and evolving.

01:05:44 **SPEAKER_KM**

Yeah, thank you so much for sharing all these stories to describe your phases, your relationship to gender and Sikhi. I was wondering, like, you talked about your experience, coming out and living these double lives and you touched on this a little bit, but what does like being out and coming out mean to you? And in your experience how straightforward or linear is this experience of coming out and is this something that everyone would have to do at some point in their life?

01:06:36 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yeah, well, I think for one like I mean, you know, I can't— I definitely can't speak for everyone, really. Like it's like everyone has their own conditions and their own things that they're battling, you know, their own things that they're coming to terms with their own like

01:06:51 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

spaces where they do or do not feel safe. So there are different like factors, so I can't definitely can't like— I think for me, I thought I could live in the closet or like live the double life my entire life, like many times. I like early on, I would even think about like, kind of like the lavender wedding, you know, like find someone who is also like a woman who's gay and I could— like we could both be like a fake marriage or whatever. Like I like came up with all these plans when I was younger, but living in the closet is just so suffocating, you know, it's so suffocating. It's like, every time having to go home and be someone else and like lie all the time, like continuously like, like, like continue to hide things like takes so much effort, takes so much energy. It's so heavy. It truly, it just— like you get, you get out of breath. You get out of breath, just running back and forth. It's just running around. Like it's so fucking suffocating to like deny yourself your full humanity, you know, to like— it's just, it's painful it's like so, so suffocating and also very disabling, like I'm diagnosed with bipolar now. I'm diagnosed with like ADHD, and I often think like how much of like my diagnosis of bipolar for example, in this swinging, like the mood swings, like all these things like has to do with like living like two lives where I just swing back and forth between being this like loud and obnoxious like out and about person and then being this like quiet, very quiet like you know, it's like yeah, that was also like coming— when I got diagnosed with bipolar in college, that was like one of the— like that was also one of the factors that led me to like kind of coming out or like running away from my house because I was like, wow, like all that abuse, all of that like hiding, like this is where it's led to, like it's led to like me, like me not being able to operate in my life anymore. Functionally, like in operating in these cycles of like being here, and then being non-existent because I just like crashed and I can't like even get out of bed for like a long time, and then I'm like out and about again and I'm like running around and doing everything, and then I'm like crashed again for, like, so long, for like months. Um, so I, that was so I think for me like— wait actually could you drop that question in the chat, I kind forgot what the, all the, all the components of the question.

01:09:52 **SPEAKER_KM**

Sure. I think you answered it pretty well.

01:10:00 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Okay. Okay.

01:09:52 **SPEAKER_KM**

I will still drop it in case, in case you'd like to add anything.

01:10:07 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Okay, 'what does being out mean to you.' Okay, I guess 'what does being out mean?' to me, is like just being able to live my truth. Like, you know, just being able to like exist, right? Like without like— I mean even like coming out is such a like exhausting thing like I don't want to like go around telling people, like having that conversation that oftentimes it's awkward or like it just, like oh my god, like awkward and in terms of like as people make it awkward, or people like make it into a big deal when it's not, just like everyone's going to be— like I use they/them pronouns, like I don't identify as a man, like I am gay. Like okay. People should be like, okay cool. Like moving on, next point. Right? Like it becomes like a whole ass thing and like just like oh my god, I don't want to explain it everywhere I go and like kind of like prove my existence and shit. So I think being out just means like, just being able to like exist, you know, like with like, who I am, what I want to do, what I want to wear, what I want to like, how I want to express or how I don't want to express. Like, like, I don't know, like I guess like the word sovereignty has been in my mind recently, a lot. Like just coming out and being out, it's just like being able to like literally claim and like practice one's sovereignty, like one's inherent self sovereignty that we all have as like part of this creation and 'how straightforward and linear is this process?' Like definitely not linear. I literally came out to my family and then went back in the closet the next day. Like literally, I'm in the closet again and it's just, uh so exhausting to always be fighting. I'm just so exhausted and burnt out from like constantly fighting and fighting and fighting and just can't do it no more like all the time like that. But yeah, I'll leave my answers there.

01:12:25 **SPEAKER_KM**

Totally understandable. And I know you mentioned earlier in your answer or maybe earlier just in this interview about you know staying away from Punjabi people and Punjabi boys, and the school bullying that you faced from the community and kind of that fear that you had because of your identity and I was wondering, how would you describe your experiences with maintaining a relationship with Sikh and LGBT+ communities? And like, how you reconciled those tensions that you felt?

01:13:23 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yeah, I think, I think it's definitely been like, first of all, like me kind of coming to be more like self-assured with myself for one, like being able to feel safe with myself and safe in myself, like, safe in my body like, safe, with who I am, like, and self-assured with who I am. Like to be able to even like fight this world. Oh, another thing, like since we talked about, like, Punjabi men or just like men in general, like another, I remember, like, when I was coming to terms with my transness, I was just reflecting on like, how I never have really felt safe with men, like being grouped— like there would be at Cal Poly like men of color spaces. And like at that time, I was also being— I had applied to work for the Multicultural Center and like they wanted to instead— like their staff was full because everyone wants to work for the Multicultural Center. But inside they had another Center, the Men and Masculinity Center and they wanted me to work for that because they wanted to keep me in the center but they didn't have a spot for me in the Multicultural Center. So they were like, oh, you should, but I was like I literally cannot, do not feel safe with men, like I just don't— like I've never, like I'm always, all my friends, have always been women, like have always been girls. Like I never hang out with or feel comfortable with men. Like I just don't like feel safe. Like, don't feel like, I resonate with the experiences of like men, or, like, or facilitating in like a space, even, for like men of color. Like, it just doesn't, it just doesn't feel right— anyway that was like a tangent when, that I remembered actually, that also like anyways, okay, back to the point of like I think like finding— I think for one like me coming to terms with my own like— I guess claiming my own sovereignty for one like has really helped bridge Sikhi and like my queerness and transness because like to be queer and trans and to be Sikh all like are like bridged by like agency and are bridged by like sovereignty. Like I have to develop my own relationship to my Guru Sahib like, like, I've been, I've been sitting a lot with this like, line from the Guru Granth Sahib Ji recently and it's been coming to my mind like everyday nowadays actually recently, but it's, "**Aapan Hathhee Aapanaa Aapae Hee Kaaj Savaareeai**," like, "with your own hand, settle your own affairs," is the very imperfect English translation, but like, and just thinking about like agency like sovereignty, like, it's like I— now my English is failing and I don't know what I'm trying to say no more, but I feel as if like, for me like queerness and transness and Sikhi weren't actually in conflict. People see them as in conflict, most of the Sikh community think that they're contradictory to each other, you can't be— but for me,

because I came to Sikhi on my own terms, I learned about Sikhi on my own terms, nowhere, have I learned from the Guru Granth Sahib Ji that I could not be queer and trans like nowhere, have I learned that I cannot smoke or drink. Like nowhere, like no, like nowhere. As a Sikh, what I have learned is that I, as a Sikh, I'm accountable to my Guru Sahib. I'm not accountable to institutions like Akal Takht. I'm not accountable to the Rehat Maryada. I'm not accountable to the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, like I'm not accountable to any of their bullshit that, that they have to put out in their very like, sexist, casteist, homophobic, transphobic shit like that furthers the idea that queerness and transness and Sikhi all contradict each other, and that there's even that, they— we need to do even the work of bridging them, or like what I'd like for me. Like, as someone who like learned about my Sikhi through my Guru Sahib outside of hearing it from like someone from like a gurd- someone from these committees or someone like I learned it from my Guru Sahib. And from what I've learned from my Guru Sahib like my existence is not criminalized. Like nowhere is my criminal existence criminalized by my Guru Sahib. It's criminalized by these institutions that are like led by these like cis-het casteist men, but it's not, it's not criminalized by my Guru Sahib like and I— so I think for me like my labor hasn't been of like bridging them for myself. Because for me, like, I know from the very beginning that they're, they are not in contradiction. It's been instead the labor of having to prove it to like the rest of the panth that this is what the Guru Sahib is saying y'all, like, how do you all not get it? I don't know if that answers the question. Sorry. I like, I kind of deviated, a lot. It's my ADHD but I did take my medicine today but I'm still going on tangents.

01:19:03 **SPEAKER_KM**

Just thank you. That was very insightful and I'm sure a lot of people will be able to relate to your answer.

[this portion of the interview had interconnectivity issues]

01:20:14 **SPEAKER_KM**

Oh, Perfect. So sorry about that. And thank you so much for sharing about your experience with the Sikh and LGBTQIA+ communities.

What does it mean to you to be part of the LGBTQIA+ community? Do you think it is a single community or a set of communities?

01:20:46 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Hmm, umm. Hmm. I— I— Hmm. That's interesting because I'm like, both Sikh community and LGBT— like the word “community” just feels like a set of failure, you know, like but I uh. Well for one like definitely a huge amount of diversity in that, right? Like in terms of like in the LGBTQIA+ Sikh community, like people, like, everybody's like different like with different politics, different like commitments. Some people are invested in liberation, some people are not. Some people are invested in only certain types of liberation and not others, and it's been really hard to find like actual like trustable like queer and trans Sikhs like who you can kind of like “Okay, like I can trust their politics and can...”— like and that's why I think like I really resonate with like the term sangat, more than like community because with sangat you have to labor, like it's not just like taken for, from what I've— in terms of using— based on the definition that like of prabh. Like it's not just like, it requires a commitment, and it requires like a practice, versus community like one can just claim, just by, like, just by like sharing and being an identity. That like doesn't actually mean much like there's so many like queer and trans sikhs out there who are like extremely castist and like who are not actually like practicing accountability— like who are like, who come from backgrounds that are— like there's just like so much like layers. So I feel as if like I only got— also like what was the what was the question? I feel like I started to go on my tangent and then I forgot the original question. I'm so sorry. Oh, Karmine. Are you there?

[this portion of the interview had interconnectivity issues]

01:24:41 **SPEAKER_KM**

Okay. The question is, how would you define queerness for yourself?

01:24:51 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Hmm. How do I define my queerness? ... Oh my god. That's such a, I don't know. It's like hard— cause I think also to define is to then limit, right? Like to define is to put up borders already, unlike— queerness already like, should be, or at least for me, like it's anti borders, right? It's anti definition. It's felt, it's practiced. It's a spirituality, maybe, like all of those all at the same time. And it's when it starts to get defined, when it starts to like, deviate from what it's supposed to be— and I guess, partly, that maybe Sikhi helps with explaining it right like, in terms of, in thinking through it, like miri piri, like thinking about the temporal and the spiritual and the gap between them, like a contradiction between them, like you still have to engage with the temporal, but the temporal is like illusionary. The temporal is like inherently limited because it also like that which defines the separation from like Guru Sahib, you know, like so it's like I feel like queerness is then like— queerness is that which is like on that spiritual plane, you know, it's like on— it's that begumpura. Like it's the... it's on the spiritual plane that like we try to put into words and practice temporally but like inherently fall short because like... because that inevitable, like disappointment, that inevitable falling short is like a manifestation of our separation from Guru Sahib, like we're like just there but like we're not there, we're almost there but not really like you feel it, but it's not like tangible. Ugh, I feel like I'm not really like answering this question really well, because like, and almost like intentionally because... for me, like I don't have a definition for queerness. Because I like, I'm seeing the violence of people trying to define it and like where that violence is like ending up.

01:27:22 **SPEAKER_KM**

That's totally valid. And no, there is no right answer or an answer, period. Just your thoughts on queerness are also really valuable insights, and I know you— going back to earlier in the interview you talked about some of your mental health diagnoses and, like in the midst of your gender journey, and I was wondering what types of resources or support did you seek to help navigate your experiences, either with gender or with these mental health diagnoses?

01:28:30 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

I think some of it was definitely very isolating because I had to kind of figure it out on my own, but I think like friends were, for one, the small like sangat that I was building through like social media was another. At Cal Poly, like we had a psychiatrist. She's the one who diagnosed me when I got the diagnosis. So those were like some other resources. Like the mental health services they weren't the best, actually. They were very under-resourced. And it took like a really long time to get the help that I needed. So, that was another, but I think— and all while like I was advocating for— so someone like me trying to use resources, access resources, had a need for them, all while I was in the midst of like advocating for them since I was also an organizer at Cal Poly. So those are some other things that like kind of come to my mind for that question of, like, what resources were there. 'Do you think being Sikh influences your decisions?'

01:29:33 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

I see. And I would definitely say, like Sikhi has always been like— in terms of for sure, especially like for my mental health, like when I'm in my depressive episodes, like gurbani has been, definitely been— and kirtan— especially kirtan, like listening to kirtan, has been a huge huge support in that the ways that it has, I think allowed me to kind of like take a break from the temporal, you know, to just like step away from the temporal. Yeah, just but— I did like try seeking resources and support from here, but it just wasn't— like I couldn't reach out to, you know, family like for any, anything that I was going through. And I kind of just had to like figure it out on my own in terms of like build[ing] my own arsenal, because it wasn't handed to me.

01:30:44 **SPEAKER_KM**

Thank you for sharing about the resources that have been helpful and how you navigated those feelings of isolation. I'm going to transition to some, a few questions about geography and settlement. The first of these is: in what ways do you think where you grew up or lived influences your relationship to Sikhi and being a part of LGBTQIA+ communities?

01:31:19 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

I think, for one, like it's definitely a privilege, it's interesting because it's like, I mean, at the end of the day, like I'm a settler here and like complicit in the, you know, the upholding of this nation known as the U.S. And like reliant on like indigenous dispossession and like ongoing like violence against like— but— and that is like also

alongside like, and it's also like a very huge privilege to be here. And I guess I use the word privilege intentionally because privilege is built on violence. So it's like a privilege because that [connotes] like my complicity in like multiple levels of violences because I think about how like if I was, for example, in Punjab, I would not be where I'm at right now, like where I'm able to be out with my identities, able to like fight in the ways that I do, able to like do the work that I do. Whether it's like activism or organizing work, etc, etc. Like coming to terms with my queerness and transness. Like I wouldn't, if I was in Punjab, I wouldn't have this safety because I mean even to this day, like I, or in terms of like multiple times like on social media, for example, people have tagged like the police of Punjab or have tagged like the CM or tagged the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and things like that, so like I know how unsafe like a lot of my work is, like, made possible because like I'm removed from like being– not being in India and like not being in Punjab and not being amidst other Punjabi Sikhs but having like that space to like kind of be– so I think that is like one thing that I'm thinking about for that question. I think also having grown up like in– with the class background that I grew up and like where I've lived and how I've lived, in like South Sacramento. I think that has also been like an area that's also very diverse. I've also– then like that has led to kind of the inter-racial and inter-caste like solidarity work that I do. So I think that has also like played a huge role. That's another thing that kind of comes to mind. But yeah, those are the yeah, those are some things that I'm thinking about. Also like I wanted to check in, how is your energy feeling? Because I know all of this has been really heavy, I'm sure and, you know, just a lot. So how are you kind of feeling with your energy?

01:34:29 **SPEAKER_KM**

Thank you for asking and also for explaining, you know, this kind of complicated feeling of being removed from India but still doing– being a part of work that affects people living there. I'm doing alright, and know that like, don't worry about me, but are you feeling okay? And okay to continue? I know that we've been going for over an hour or so, so I can also like wrap up depending on your energy levels as well.

01:35:11 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yeah, I think I'm starting to like– or at– my energy starting to go down, I think, especially since it's been like emotionally intensive stuff that I've been sharing. So maybe we could like start– try to wrap it up, sorry about that. Unless like, there are like a lot of questions that you wanted to ask and I'm also happy to kind of like keep going as well.

01:35:33 **SPEAKER_KM**

Yeah. No problem at all, like this interview, I think it was like, it can be like from, you know, an hour to like two hours. So, it's really dependent on your energy levels, and like how much we get through, and you shared so much like valuable insights. There's only like a couple more questions that I'd want to ask before wrapping up, so I can go ahead and do that now.

01:36:05 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Perfect.

01:36:07 **SPEAKER_KM**

So I definitely wanted to get to asking about– something in Punjabi, we say, 'umeedan,'[ਉਮੀਦਾਂ] and I wanted to ask what are your hopes, aspirations, or umeedan for yourself and also for the different communities that you identify with?

01:37:00 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

That's a really important and a very beautiful question. And... I feel like sadly, also, I'm like at such a place where like it...

01:37:25 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

just it's hard and exhausting to have hopes, and dreams, and umid, and umidan for like the community. I'm really like trying to think about what are some umids that I have. I do have like umid for myself– to rest. And I think for far too long I've been like running with the umida for others and the quote-unquote community over any

umids for myself. And I think it just like led me to become more and more disabled. And at this point where it's like, so— I'm just so exhausted in, like, all ways, like spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically, and it's— I, don't know if I have any umides to share. I do have, I do have conviction and faith, and trust in my Guru Sahib to guide the world as it, as they do, and for me to like follow in their hukum or like— my umide for myself is that I can keep following in their hukam and so, can other people, like not in the way that people should convert to Sikhi. And that's because that's how other people, other— some Sikhs will interpret that of like when I say other people following the hukam of Guru Sahib like that means like people need to like convert. And look at that, Rehat Maryada and follow that, etc etc. That's not what I mean when I say people follow the hukam of Guru Sahib, I just, I just, you know, like haha and like in gurbani, in rehraas sahib, we say, like, “Kaahe re man chitaveh audham jaa aahar har jeeau pariaa || Sail pathar meh ja(n)t aupaae taa kaa rijak aagai kar dhariaa.” In terms of like Guru Sahib as like— Guru Sahib looks after all, you know, Guru Sahib like... I think I've become like more and more like... like let me put down the burden thinking like I'm going to take care of things and take care of people and let Guru Sahib take care, who is the one who takes care of it all anyways. And I just like, sometimes become like maybe I am a vehicle in some places, like I'm like assigned, like, given Guru Sahib's hukam to show up in certain places to do certain things. But at the end of the day, like, I don't know, who am I to have like— I think I'm at a point where I have no moral need for others. Like I guess, maybe I do, and I just feel so exhausted. Not because of this conversation, but because of like things going on, like, and where I've gotten to at this point in my life and where you're catching me as a part of this interview. Like or I don't feel like hope as much as I feel like faith that Guru, Sahib will do as Guru Sahib does, whether it is— and all I can really do is like be there to try my best to respond in whatever way feels best to do in the hukam of Guru Sahib. But besides that, like whether it is the world ending or whether it is like... I don't know, I feel like that's such a depressing response but, and I maybe if you had caught me like two years ago, maybe a year ago even, I would have offered something much more like beautiful and much more like optimistic and hopeful to say and now all I have to say is like I don't really have much like umides to offer, except like, like I accept that may I walk and continue to walk in that as I have, like, Guru Sahib, whichever way it goes and may I continue fighting in whatever way that looks like, on the daily basis and like may I continue to like maintain my faith in waheguru as like, waheguru's hukam in like where this world goes and how this world goes and how we walk this world.

01:42:27 **SPEAKER_KM**

Thank you for sharing. This interview is just one little snapshot of your life and you're constantly like growing and changing. So I totally get how, you know, your Umides are constantly constantly changing but your answer beautifully ties into, like what you mentioned earlier about, you know, who or what do you want to mourn or honor with your work, and it sounds like, it's like a phase where, in your life where, you know, resting and investing in yourself and your relationship with Guru Sahib is a priority.

01:43:27 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

I think so. [broken audio]

01:43:40 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yeah I think so. I think like also maybe like, upon reflecting, I feel like I wonder if it's also like, just overall, like exhausting to like maintain hopes and dreams and like continuously have umides in the face of constant like disappointment and constant— like how much like hope and dream... like, I mean, I'm signed up for a very, like, hopeless project to start with, you know, like, serving and doing seva for the Sikh community that wants me dead. Like in my entire lifetime, they're literally incapable of loving me back, and yet I continue on, you know, like I, yet we continue on loving those incapable of ever loving us back in our lifetime, and knowing that we continue on, like, knowing that— like so it's like we're signed up for so many— and people make that clear at any, every point of the, every point, every point they can, they make it clear that we— like of our place and where we're supposed to be, and where we're not supposed to be, and yet, we continue on. So, it's like, I feel like, in the face of like constant heartbreak, it is like so exhausting to still be expected to, or still have and maintain hopes and dreams for our communities. And I think that like what I want to do right now at this point in my life, is to just like give my dreams, like submit my dreams to Guru Sahib like to just like, I just want to like leave those dreams like those very flawed dreams in their footsteps and just like— and that doesn't mean I like disengage, of course, it like absolutely does not mean I like walk away and disengage from the world and the things that I need to do, but instead, it just like, it just means that like, you know, as they say, Wahegur Ji Ka Khalsa Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh, like I will engage and continue fighting for the Fateh, but like, I don't know how to like say it, like say exactly what I'm feeling, but it's just like, I guess I'm just like, I just want to keep fighting in their raza without like trying to take it on for myself, pretending like I'm the one who's going to fix it or I'm the one

who's gonna bring about all this change and save things and save people and like carry this like really heavy weight and burden when I can't actually do it and never actually did. Like at all turns it was like, it was never me, you know, but I may think it is but it's not actually, but I don't really know what I'm like– I hope that kind of makes sense. I feel like it's hard to put this like feeling into words.

01:46:53 **SPEAKER_KM**

Thank you so much for sharing and articulating this feeling as best as you can. And I know you asked if it makes sense, but it totally makes sense. And I just have one final wrap-up question and it is: what do you hope comes out of sharing your life history with us?

01:47:18 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Yeah, I was thinking about that earlier too. I was like, “Hey, where's this going to go?” I really wonder from like, you know, who's going to pick it up and you wonder where this is going to go, in like, I guess like I mean, I'm just here passing on this earth, you know, for as little, as long as I'm here, passing on this earth and as we all are, you know, and maybe like, I don't know, maybe someone will like pick it up, maybe someone will hear something and it'll be like what they needed in that moment. At least, maybe that's an Umide. Ha ha ha, it is an umide that like maybe something that I shared it's just what someone, just what someone needed as they, in their path of walking this earth and their time, like I just, maybe that is like an umide that I have that, yeah, that something, that maybe something I said, whether it was part of my experience, part of my reflection, part of a lesson I've learned, a lesson someone else has passed on to me, something will be useful to someone in their own journey on this earth which is like a very, very lonely– oh, we won't, I guess we don't have to go into that. Yeah I think, so I hope, I hope something I said is useful to someone in some way and provides them with something that like helps them in their path here.

01:48:59 **SPEAKER_KM**

I know it was definitely useful for me to listen. And I'm sure it will be useful to the listener right now.

01:49:12 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Oh, thank you, Karmine, I appreciate you.

01:49:16 **SPEAKER_KM**

Thank you so much for your time. I am going to stop the recording now.

01:49:22 **SPEAKER_sahiba**

Thank you so much.