

Interview with Simran K.

00:00:03 **SPEAKER_SB**

Alright. And we're live. Okay. This is Sukhmony. Today is July 25th, 2023. I'm interviewing for the first time Simran K. This interview is taking place virtually from my residence in California. And I don't know if you want to share generally where you are.

SPEAKER_SK

Sure. I'm also in California right now, in NorCal.

SPEAKER_SB

This interview is sponsored by Jakara and is part of the Storytelling and Settlement through Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral Histories Project. Alright. So, Simran, so we're going to start kind of broad with like the conversation. And so I just would like you to think back to like way back to when you were growing up and tell me a little bit about maybe what comes to mind for you. Are there any common stories, scenes, smells, or sounds, relationships that kind of come to mind for you growing up?

00:01:38 **SPEAKER_SK**

Yeah. So for me, that kind of the relationship that comes up is like with my parents. And I think, that it feels really profound. And I think it's actually felt more profound as the years have gone by. The quick context for that is I do have a younger sister, but when she was born, my naniji decided or— not decided, but offered to raise her in India because my parents were not fully documented at the time and were still raising me. And so my naniji took my sister to India to live with my nanke. And so then it was just like three of us knowing that I had like a younger sibling that wasn't living with me. So I think that kind of made that relationship feel really vivid. But my parents, you know, they are convenience store owners and they've kind of been in that journey and path, trajectory since I was born. So like I've always had some sort of presence at a convenience store, whether that's 7-Eleven or a liquor store growing up. I think that's been kind of the, that and school, have been the two spaces I know fully. So like I can't, smells don't come to mind as much as just like, if any smell comes to mind, it's like the smell of like, like burnt coffee or like liquor, like smell, like, you know, cause like I would— like some, like a bottle would smash and like that smell just like stays for a couple of days, even, no matter how much you mop it. And like, I'd be playing around and sometimes like it'd fall because of me. But yeah, I think that's kind of just been like something that's been a really integral part of who I am. And I think that'll also come across when I talk about some of my interests with what I'm studying now. But yeah, I think just the convenience store is just kind of something that I think has really shaped a lot of how I understand the world and kind of how I've connected with being American. Also with being, at the time I would say with being Indian, and now I would say with being Punjabi as I've kind of learned more about how I want to identify in that way. But yeah.

00:03:58 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah. Thanks for sharing about that. Yeah. Do you feel like growing up, you know, with your, with your immediate family, your parents, were you surrounded by a broader Punjabi community? I guess, outside of your immediate home, what did that kind of look like for you growing up?

00:04:23 **SPEAKER_SK**

Yeah, it's so interesting. Because I've compared kind of my experience growing up with when I went to undergrad, and I was actually really introduced to other Punjabi, you know, Punjabis my age. Um, so I guess the context would be like the closest Gurdwara to where I grew up from, where I grew up, where my parents still live, was an hour away, in like the ba— in the proper Bay area, then there was like quite a few in that area. There is being— a Gurdwara being built now, where I'm where I am, but it's like still being built. And there has been one, but it's like, it was in a in like a old, like a house that had just been repurposed. And so it wasn't, you know, I mean, in one way, it's very respectful— respectable that like the local Punjabi community was able to do this. And it kind of, I kind of really started, I would say maybe when I was in... like going into high school. So it's been like, you know, 10, 10 years, maybe a little bit more, actually. But my dad never wanted to go to that Gurdwara because he felt like the local, like a lot of the local Punjabis in the area are store owners

themselves. And so he felt like it was really just a space for people to be like gossiping and, and like not really focusing on, on, you know, just being present and like trying to connect, connect with Sikhi. Even though I will qualify like my dad is not, you know, he doesn't keep kesh like we're not, you know, a... like we don't aesthetically look like Sikhs. I don't know, I'm trying to figure out how to like word that appropriately. Um, but that being said, like we would go to, at least especially when I was younger, we would go to the Gurdwara like every week. Of course, we wouldn't know anyone there. Like because it was such, so distant, like the— I wasn't really connected with like the kids in that Gurdwara or like my parents not with that community. Like they maybe knew a couple people here and there. But really, it was just like, we were going to Gurdwara and like, just kind of, yes, there was a lot of other people there, but it was just my family. And like, that's all I knew. Which like compares, like comparing to other people's experiences with Gurdwara growing up, like they were going to, you know, the Sunday school, like, you know, taking Gurmukhi classes, learning Punjabi, learning about Sikh itihaas. And like, I didn't get to do any of that. Um, even though there is a Punjabi community where I'm from, like where I am, but I think without the presence of a Gurdwara, it really wasn't like, the only time you would really experience that is if there was a wedding. And you would, or like someone who was having a paat. But even then, it's like, growing up, I did not, many of the other store owners kids weren't like my age, they were either much younger or much older. And so I was always kind of like the odd one out. And yeah, I kind of just like and also then in the context of being like a single child, but not really a single child, or only child, but not an only child. I think I was just more used to being by myself anyway. And just kind of just kind of vibing.

00:07:29 **SPEAKER_SB**

Mm hmm. Yeah. Did you visit your sister often growing up? Or... Or even, yeah, were you able to go to back to Punjab? Or, I guess with your parents?

00:07:47 **SPEAKER_SK**

Yeah, I only, I've only gone to India twice, and Punjab, which is where they are. And so I only met her in India twice. And then she came here and visited. I want to say three times total, before she eventually came here. And like out of her own will, like she was, she was young, she was like, 10 years old. And I think she was like, *Okay, I think I want to live in America now*. And it was like, kind of crazy that she decided to do this. I don't know how or what influenced her at that age. But yeah, otherwise, we would just stay in contact, like through Yahoo Messenger. So we didn't use Skype or anything. But like Yahoo Messenger, we'd do like video calls. And like, it was kind of cute, cool, like, you know, when webcams were still like a really big thing. And it was funny, because like, they had these little like, I'm gonna say bitmojis, because that's like the contemporary equivalent. But it was like, in like Hindi and like Punjabi. And it was just like these little cartoons that would like also say like a little audio greeting. And you could send them over the chat while you were on like on the video call. So we would do that. I don't know how often, it wasn't like a weekly thing. Like, I'm sure, I think like, weeks would go by. And there'll be no contact between like my parents and me and my sister. But I don't know, like, I actually don't know that fully. And maybe, maybe my mom was calling more often. But I think, like, before then, like WhatsApp wasn't really big. We didn't have smartphones. I don't think my family in India had smartphones. And so the only way to really connect was like, using like the, like the calling cards. And then at one point, Vonage became a thing. It's like we had Vonage. And I think that— I think that point onward was when it was like, a bit more frequent. But before that, it was like, you had either had the phone card, and you would call, or then we would then like set up a time to be like, *Hey, are you free to video?*, and then we would video. But yeah, otherwise, no, we, I didn't really like connect with my sister until she came here. And even in that first year it was like, very chaotic, just for us to all kind of get used to this new dynamic, until you know, she got used to it, we got used to her.

00:10:11 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah, yeah. Okay, sweet. Yeah, we'll come back to that when we talk a little bit more about like geographies of being and knowing. Let's see. So in terms of, kind of backing up to what you were saying about your relationship with Sikhi growing up, how has that relationship to Sikhi maybe kind of evolved since you've graduated high school and kind of continued on?

00:10:47 **SPEAKER_SK**

Yeah. Um, so I think before college, my idea of Sikhi was not like, was— it was just something that was like, kind of imposed on me. Like it was like, like, there's definitely a point where I dreaded going to Gurdwara on Sundays. I was like, I don't do this. Like, you guys can just go. I had no idea what was happening. It was just

like, you know, you follow the rules, you'd go matha tek, give the dollar, give the dollar and go sit down. Like that was it, right? And then eventually— then I was very fortunate to, when I went to undergrad, join a Sikh Student Association, but I actually didn't join fully until like, right at the end of my first year. Because in the very beginning, I, I used to go by Sam, instead of Simran. Because being like one of the only Punjabi people when I grew, where I grew up, like in my schooling, at least, I went by Sam. And so when I started introducing myself as Sam at undergrad, I could, I felt like I was being judged. And like, I kind of was, I was insecure about my, my lack of connection to growing up, like in a, like having that “Punjabi experience”, I guess. And so I didn't really get involved with, with the SSA until much later, until I finally met some friends, and I felt like, *okay*, like, they encouraged me to come because I went to like one meeting, I was like, *Oh, my gosh, I'm not gonna fit in here. Like, I'm too, I'm too*, I felt whitewashed, even though, like, now I'm like, why did I ever think that? Like, I'm not whitewashed. But, anyway, so yeah, and then I think, like freshman year and sophomore year, late freshman year, and then most of sophomore year, I was definitely very involved. And I definitely learned a lot more. And I think I just was lucky to have some people who, meet some people who were very judgment free, and just like very interested in teaching, and not so much as like, *lecturing* about Sikhi. And from that, I really just kind of like learned about just how beautiful our religion is. And I think that's still something I'm exploring a lot. And like throughout these years, I mean, I think I've connected partly just because of learning more about... I think I kind of, I would say, I guess the big pivotal moment after joining SSA was when I was able to meet, there was like a queer Sikh hangout over Zoom, like during COVID. And it was like with people from all over the world, basically, I think it was mostly Canada and the US, but like, in principle, it was all over the world. And I joined that, and I was just in a break room. And like, I still remember, like, this person who, like, you know, kept kesh, was a Sardar, but also queer. And it was like, whoa, like, from there, I just started, we followed each other on Instagram. And then from there, I just kind of followed more people on Instagram, I just really got to see, like, how much space there is with being a Sikh and also being queer. And I think once that happened, and then once I kind of just saw, like how people are using Sikhi and the teachings from Sikhi, to also appreciate their queerness and kind of, like, make that connection, I was like, this is so beautiful. Especially, you know, in America, where we see, like, such a, you know, big tension between religion, organized religion, and, and, you know, the LGBTQIA community. Yeah. And so I, for me, my journey is still evolving. But I think I try and get closer. Like, I try, like, very recently, my most recent, like, learning was about, like, the timings of raags. And just like, you know, like, when to listen to, like, when is the, you know, correct time to listen to, like, each raag and, you know, know, kirtan and specific raag, depending on the time of the day, or like the season. And I think it's just so beautiful, just like, like, especially the kirtan aspect of it. So I try and pull up, like, Search Gurbani. And, and, like, when I'm at the Gurdwara now, like, I'll, you know, figure out what shabad's, you know, is being sung and try and just read that and try to understand and appreciate it. So, yeah, I think it's, it's definitely something I get closer with every day.

00:15:01 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah, that's really beautiful. Thank you. Yeah, I want to look into, like, the seasonality of the different raags, because I don't, yeah, I don't know. Like, what's for summertime or?

00:15:21 **SPEAKER_SK**

Well, there's, I think there's only, I have to verify my sources, but there's two seasonal raags, and right now it's Raag Malaar, I don't know if I'm gonna say it right in Punjabi. But that's like the raag during the rainy season. And then the other seasonal raag is Raag Basant, which is like, right after Lorhi, like Maghi, from Maghi to Hola Mohalla is kind of Raag Basant. And it's just, it's so beautiful. Like, even if you just listen to, because a lot of these raags are also raags connected with Hindustani classical music, like North India, right? So, like, it's not just Sikhi, like a lot of these timings and stuff. It's not just in Sikhi, like it's, it's other classical, Indian classical music. And it's just so beautiful to, like, listen to the instruments. And then of course, when you add in the Shabad with it, it's just like, it is meant to have this, like, different experience of enjoying it and hearing the Shabad. So yeah, it's cool. And yeah, yeah, maybe maybe it'll it'll be a cool way to connect. And, for you as well.

00:16:26 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I'm gonna look into that after. So you mentioned, like, one of the first spaces where you saw, or you reconciled, like, your queer identity with Sikhi, or saw that being brought together was in that virtual meetup. So I'm wondering, like, were you questioning your sexuality for a while before then, and then kind of saw it reflected? Can you take us on that side of the journey? Was that the first time where you saw that overlap

as well?

00:16:54 **SPEAKER_SK**

I'll have to think about the overlap question, I think, for the first part. I think I, like, accepted that I was gay, like, my first year of college. And I was like, okay, like, yes. I said it out loud to myself. And I was like, okay, that's true. But I think the rest of college, like, I was really just balancing, sharing that... Okay, I think the two parts, it's like the internal and the and the external struggle. So the internal part was, like, never feeling like I was gay, in that, like, you know, this is a problem with social media. And just, like, not feeling like, oh, I stereotypically embody or have the characteristics that can signal me as, like, a gay person, right? So I was like, what did that mean? So not feeling gay enough. And I think that was, like, a common theme throughout until, like, actually this moment, like, that queer-Sikh hangout. But also because something else was happening in my life during that time. And then I think the external part of it was, I also then, as I got involved in Sikh spaces, I also got involved in, like, Punjabi spaces, which I think is always an interesting, like, that we distinguish between those two. But by that, I mean, I got involved in the bhangra team, a lot. And that also then became very characteristic of my undergrad experience. But that is also a very, you know, hyper-masculine, toxically masculine space, even though it was a co-ed team and like, right? But then it really felt like, how can I, like, how can I fit in with these people? Because I think one theme of being, like, the gay person I am, is that I've always had a, I've always been insecure about my friendships, like platonic friendships with men. Like, a lot of my friends were girls growing up. And so I think when I was in this space, and I was like, trying to fit in. And I think it's like, it's like all these, the way I understand is like, it's all these themes are coming up, like not feeling Punjabi enough, not feeling gay enough. And, and at some point, maybe not feeling Sikh enough. But like, having that kind of those, those tensions, made me like, just kind of try and fit in as best as I could. And like, I was just kind of, equipping each identity as appropriate, but I was never really like making gay friends, or other queer friends, or really just like, having that kind of safe space. And so I kind of just like, was dealing with everything by myself. And then maybe I had like, one or two friends, who were girls, who were like, straight girls. So like, you know, of course, they can relate, like, they can be really nice and sympathetic, but they're never gonna be empathetic. It's never gonna, they're never gonna understand, like, what I'm going through. So that was kind of the, that was like, all of college, essentially. And then when I graduated, started a job, I met someone who was Pakistani, he was Muslim, but he, I think, kind of helped me figure out what it meant to be a queer brown person. And like, that was happening during, and that was kind of happened during COVID. And like, I was actually, I was actually hanging out with him when I was on this like, queer, like, Sikh hangout Zoom call. And it was just like, such a cool, cool memory. Because it's like, at that time, I was also just learning like, what it means, like, just how to embrace being gay and feel like, yes, I am gay enough, like, that, that I've always had these interests in me and just get kind of encouragement to, you know, like, put on some rings and like, kind of like, you know, put, you'd try jewelry, or just like, the things I watch— anyway, like, I felt that validation. And then I also saw this, like, whole new space. And so I was still kind of like a, like a baby gay, in general, and then also seeing that, wow, this, this other space exists, where there are other Punjabi, Sikh, queer people. And they're all like, some of them are living their lives. And some of them are just living just like me, and like, you know, selectively showing these parts of themselves as appropriate. So I think that was that question. And then so you said, what was the overlap question? Or maybe?

00:21:29 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah, no, yeah, that was... Yeah, my second question was, was that the first space that you had seen Sikhi kind of coalesce with queerness and transness?

00:21:47 **SPEAKER_SK**

I believe so. I'm trying to think. Like, I think, yeah, I don't think any other space, I've been in any other space that would have had that before.

00:22:04 **SPEAKER_SB**

And I guess, for you was, once you kind of, like, not only came out to yourself, but also saw like, this broader community of queer Sikhs, like, I guess, before then was the relationship between your Sikh identity, your queer identity, like— I guess, because you were hanging out in mostly like Punjabi or Sikh community, like, social circles, like, maybe it was always a relationship for you. But I know for me, like, for example, like, [Sikhi and queerness] was very separate. So like, yeah, I guess, could you share a little bit more about like, did you always

feel like those identities naturally came together? Or was it, did it take some work or? Yeah.

00:23:01 **SPEAKER_SK**

Yeah. Um, good question... I think I saw them as separate, because I don't think I even like, really tried to reconcile them. At like, at that time of my life, like when I was an undergrad, like when I was learning about Sikhi, it was for it was for specifically learning how to be a Sikh. It wasn't like learning like learning how to be a queer Sikh, or like find that validation with being queer. It was like, that was a separate identity of mine I was figuring out. And then, like the queer identity wasn't really something I was figuring out. But when I was, like, it wasn't with brown people, it wasn't with anyone related to Sikhi. And so I think it was just naturally separated. And so yeah, I don't think I didn't necessarily feel like a struggle or like a, like an incongruence with like being both. But I also don't think like the queer and the gay part— I also, I just want to I guess, clarify, like I do use queer and gay kind of interchangeably, although they're very, like specifically defined. And so I think that's also something I'm figuring out for myself right now, because I— I might come back come out later. But like, I might... I'm, I'm figuring out kind of what gender, gender identity, I identify with. Anyway, so just to clarify, because I don't want to sound problematic by using those interchangeably. But what I was trying to say was, like, I wasn't really thinking about what it meant to be gay or queer at that time of my life, like I was, but not enough. And it was just like more about being Punjabi, and like being Sikh. And I think that is like kind of the overwhelming theme of my undergrad. Like at some point— I graduated college with like, basically, an exclusively Punjabi-Sikh friend group, which I didn't really think possible when I came in, right? So like, that was that aspect. And then eventually I came out to them, which was its whole separate, beautiful thing. But yeah, I think with Sikhi, it was much later. And I think it was when I met this guy, and then I was like, really figuring out what it meant to like, be queer, like be a queer brown guy. Then I was, I think dealing with the challenge, because I also had moved back home after graduating. And it's like, you know, my parents are like, *Oh, you've graduated college, and you're an adult now, what are you doing? Hmm, maybe think about marriage.* Right? So then it's like, at that time, that's like, whoa, like, no, I'm definitely gay. I definitely am not thinking I'm gonna marry a woman ever. And I think the Sikh aspect, like, it almost becomes... like, I wanted to say that it's almost like a tool. That's not the word I want. But that's the word that's coming to mind like, it's like, well, I know that my family, like extended in—and otherwise, immediate and extended, are Sikhs. And maybe if I can use the weight of religion, and the weight of what we believe in, to explain to them, like why I am the way I am and who I am. Maybe that would be like, like, I think it was like, yes, Sikhi is beautiful. But Sikhi is also what my family understands. And actually, they don't even fully understand, right? Because they're not, they're not Amrit Shakh. They're not like, like, I think that's, in some ways, I'm more connected to Sikhi than they are, in different ways. And I'm not, I'm not trying to say that, like, from a moral standpoint, like, it's just different relationship. But I almost was like, intentional to like, really delve into Sikhi, to then gain knowledge and see that compatibility and then use that as like, for an arg— for a hypothetical imaginary argument down the road and be like, yes, I am the way I am, and God made me this way. And this is okay, too. Um, yeah. Sorry, I kind of lost track of the question.

00:27:23 **SPEAKER_SB**

No, that was, that I think definitely answered the question. And yeah, I just appreciate you sharing like, because I, it's very interesting to see how you're approaching. Yeah, like, how can I... how is like Sikhi and queerness framed within different relationships within your life, right? Like, your family versus within your, your interpersonal relationships or within like, social circles through college. So yeah, it was, that was interesting.

00:27:55 **SPEAKER_SK**

Yeah, sorry, I just, not to get off topic, but I feel like I might forget this point. I actually also wanted to say, at some point, I think I— I feel like being queer made me a better Sikh as well. And what I mean by that is because I think what queerness kind of, can allow for, is a way to escape the normative, right? And to do unlearning and think about and question why things are the way they are. And of course, queerness is not the only way to do that. You can just be a critical thinker, and just be critical and that's also great. But because you're kind of forced to do that, to then like have to reconcile, you know, with your experience— your existence in the world, then you can also question like a lot of the like, Maryada of like, of contemporary Sikhism, of Sikhi and like, why things are the way they are, and like, kind of then see that a lot of these rules we have about how to, what it is to be a Sikh are not, like are human constructs and not necessarily something coming from Gurbani or like the Gurus. So I think that kind of helped me understand that as well and say, okay, I *can* be a Sikh because the way that, like, the way we're taught and told of what it is, [what it] means to be a Sikh and how that, how to do that is not necessarily the only way. And I think that also made me appreciate Sikhi more,

because you kind of like go to the source and then you can kind of just see like, hmm, like this document [the Rehat Maryada] that was created, like, you know, a century ago is a document that was created a century ago. Like, it's not from the Guru. Yeah.

00:29:39 **SPEAKER_SB**

Hmm. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Applying, like, queer methodology, like, in a more academic sense—

SPEAKER_SK

Yeah! That's what it feels like.

SPEAKER_SB

Like, queer thinking to any sort of field of study... or form of thought, like, I think, allows for a more expansive view and like, yeah, breaking from traditional patterns of thinking of certain things. So, yeah, appreciate that. Um, alright. So, yeah, I feel like we've definitely talked about identity formation at like, different points in your life. I guess, do you want to delve a little bit more into like, your relationship to like, how you're thinking about your sexuality and gender identity these days? Like, what are some of the maybe tensions that you're struggling with, if you feel like opening up about that?

00:30:56 **SPEAKER_SK**

Sure. Yeah, I guess. I mean, they're still kind of raw thoughts. But something I've been thinking about a bit more, as I kind of get used to the idea of like, hmm, trying to... let's see... so, I guess— okay, here's like, the raw thought that I have to, I want to learn more about, and like, think about, and learn more about and ask people about. So, like, there is this... and I don't know if the connections are even there, but in my mind, the connections are there. So, bear with me. So, like, obviously, in a lot of, in a lot of like, I'll just say poetry, generally, like, Punjabi poetry, which would, you know, also include Gurbani, would also include, like, Sufi poems, right? And like, it kind of, like, more culturally than, like, religiously, thinking about, like, the embrace of male poets, using, like, the feminine, like, female voice, right? And then also thinking about that relationship with, with Waheguru with, like, a higher being and, like, you know, we are the soul bride, husband lord, that dynamic. So, thinking about that, and then, but saying— thinking about how that might, in one way be upholding a binary, but also then allowing us, the human, to not have to be confined to that binary. That's just kind of been something I've been, something I've, like, I want to, I do want to learn more about and explore more about, like, where is this, like, where did that tradition come from? Am I actually think— is that actually what I'm, is what I'm thinking actually what happened? Or is it, like, more practical? Or is it because women weren't allowed to be poets? Like, what's going on? Which, so that's— that's kind of one thing I'm thinking. And I'm also thinking about my own desire, right? And I was actually asked, talking to a friend about this kind of recently, I'm like, you know, being gay, like, the stereotypical aesthetic of gay, of, like, being gay, like, a gay cis man, is that there is some flexibility in terms of, like, wearing stereotypically feminine clothing, or, like, jewelry, right? Like earrings, like, I'm thinking about, about, like, from a Western standpoint, like crop tops, skirts, dresses, whatever, right? Like, that can be fine— like, that's cool, and you can be gay. But that doesn't actually mean, necessarily mean you are not a cis man. And then I also, you know, then there's, like, some of that like, some of that flexibility with, like, or not flexibility, you know, then there's also people who are doing that, like, in a South Asian context. And like, you know, like, there are people who, and I'm not sure what the gender identity is, but like, they, for lack of a better word at this time, like, look like a man, but dress like a woman. And so I'm kind of like, figuring that out for myself, because like, growing up, and I don't, I think this is kind of common, but I haven't, like, confirmed with every single gay Punjabi person I've met. But like, you know, there's kind of a fascination with, like, women's wear. And like, growing up, like, when my mom, my parents were not home, like, I would definitely be like, getting my mom's chunni and like, trying to style it in different ways. And like, had some fun imagining myself, like, like in a serial, like a *natak* or whatever. Anyway, so I guess I'm just kind of like, remembering that, especially now that I've been home for the past two years— two months. And like, this is also just a thing of the time in my life, right? Because it's like, I was in grad school, I was in Virginia, like across the country, now back home in California. And it's like, I have definitely learned a lot more. I've definitely been exposed to a lot more of the world. Because, going back a little bit, when I was an undergrad, I was just like, everything was new, like, kind of like what we were talking about, right? Like, *everything* was new. But also, like, there's so many options, you don't know what you're doing. But now I went to grad school, it's like, you're kind of in that same space of undergrad, where you see the world, you see all the options, but you have a slightly better sense of who you are, and like, what you are, right? So I came to

undergrad, I came to grad school, knowing like, I am a gay Punjabi guy. Like, I didn't know that [before]. And so because of that, I have been kind of, been exposed and seen some more things in the world. So now I'm back home for this time being, and I'm like, this is a time for me to be a gay Punjabi guy who's done a year of grad school, now back home, like in his childhood home, and just kind of re-evaluating, reflecting on kind of different experiences. So that all to say, kind of what I'm thinking about is like, what the binary, gender binary means for me. I don't, like, I need to just do some more, like, thinking and hearing more about, like, what it means, because I think there's, like, I don't know if at this time, I'll say, like, I am a, like, a trans person. But I think I'm more open to the idea of, like, being non-binary, and kind of feeling the freedom of dressing the way I want to dress, and not giving a fuck, and just, like, going for it.

00:36:21 **SPEAKER_SK**

Because I, but the problem that comes up, that's the kind of last thing I'll say, is that, again, it's that, again, it's like, as much as we don't, as much as, like, I, my earlier point was, like, you know, being queer allows us to challenge the normative. For better or for worse, there is, like, a normative that comes into what it means to be queer, right? And what I mean by that, going back, is, like, this example of a gay man dressing like a woman, like, that can be just a gay man doing that, and that's cool. And, like, maybe it's, you know, it's still because we want labels, we want some sort of definition, we want to be able to identify and define and capture whatever we're viewing in the world, and we can't just be okay with total fluidity. And by we, I also mean, like, myself included. But I think it's just reconciling that, like, am I just trying to be a gay man who likes to wear, like, traditionally feminine clothing? Or is it something more than that? I don't know. So that's kind of where I'm at. And just, I think the problem is, I'm seeking a label, in a space where labels have been, like, not productive. But I think sometimes, like, it's finding that balance of, like, it's like, what do I need? I don't know what I need. To learn about that, learn that about myself, and make that decision for myself. Yeah, so curious if you have any thoughts about it. It seems like you might, but yeah.

00:38:02 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah. Oh my gosh, that was, yeah, that gave me so much, like, food for thought. But yeah, I studied biology and English in undergrad, and I, yeah, I enjoy reading and writing poetry, and so your lens on kind of, yeah, like, Gurmukhi, and also, like, these kinds of more ancient poetic texts that kind of, or even, like, just translations of those texts, and how those maybe shape, yeah, our thinking for different things. Like, either they help us conform to the, like, heteronormative, like, binary, or they, yeah, have a potential to, like, break the, break us free of those, is really interesting. So if you run into any texts, please share, because I'm curious.

00:38:53 **SPEAKER_SK**

Yeah, I don't—I want to just say, I'm not going to take credit for that thought. It's actually something someone we mutually know, that I'll probably mention off the interview, has tweeted about this, and... or the person who recommended me for this interview. Yeah, they've tweeted about this, and I think that's kind of like, whoa, like, you're like, that language, again, just to reiterate that point, is like, that language, especially with translating to English, is kind of what's part of the problem. Like, in one way, prescribes the normative, like, the normative, but also then allows us to embrace, like, embrace a disruption of that. So yeah, I think it's just something to kind of think about historically, and kind of, like, of, like, where that idea comes from. And historically, but also, like, trying to make that connection with Sikhi, I think, is what I want to do, and think about, because, you know, I mean, it's like, like, it's just interesting to imagine, like, is it a wild thing for, like, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, like, one of my favorite shabads, if we're allowed to have a favorite shabad, from, of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, is like, he's singing, or he wrote about, like, from the perspective of, like, someone who is, like, a very dolled up, decked up bride, [I'm] maybe getting it somewhat wrong, but like, you know, and she's, like, trying to, like, figure out how to appease the husband lord. And it's like, is it maybe kind of wild and radical that, like, this guy was writing about, like, this specific thing, whereas, like, that's appropriate, and if that's appropriate, why? And I think just because our, being Punjabi, I think, is, like, just so beautiful, because we already embrace so many religions so much, like, I mean, our religion itself, right, is pulling, and, like, we have non-Sikhs contributing to Guru Granth Sahib, so I think there's already just, like, an even contemporary, like, there's, I don't know, that was just kind of a ramble, but yeah, but yeah, a lot to think about, a lot to think about, and kind of figure out for ourselves. Yeah, and then also, like, your last point of, you know,

00:41:06 **SPEAKER_SB**

in the, like, queer and trans community, are we, like, limiting ourselves to, like, we need labels, but to an extent, like, do we have, like, a, as humans, a tendency to try and stick to labels, you know, and, like, because I feel like when I'm in conversation with queer [and] trans folk, like, it's very easy to see that these labels are just temporary things that we're using to identify ourselves in this moment, but when I'm all alone, and, like, trying to contend with these thoughts, often I feel like I have to pick and choose, or, like, I have to give up something, or I have to push myself to fit something, and so, yeah, so I appreciate you, like, acknowledging that, because because I think it is a struggle that, and, or even see on, like, social media or something, like, like, accounts to, like, represent or capture what queerness looks like, it's, like, it does end up having a certain look to it, and it can even be, like, just what, like, the Americanized like, the Americanized Western queerness looks like, what, like, if you go to, like, South Asia, or, like, what it looks like there, it looks so different, I feel like, but when you're in that world, you're, world, you're, like, oh, like, I, I feel, like, this tendency to want to conform to, like, this Westernized version of queerness.

00:42:43 **SPEAKER_SK**

Yeah, no, that's giving me a lot to think about. I'm gonna, like, write it down. I'll share my thoughts, because that is, I liked your point about, like, when you're in conversation with other people, like, other queer or trans people, like, it's, we don't have that pressure, and, like, it's just, you know, I like the point, like, it's, it's, it's just temporal, like, it might be this now, but it's, it can change, and that's okay. But I guess, like, and maybe it's just the space, right? Because it's, like, what I'm thinking is, like, because even, like, the same queer and trans people, not those same, but, like, queer and trans people can also uphold this rigidity on, like, online spaces, and, like, maybe it's something about that, and, like, kind of how you represent yourself, and, like, the word that comes to mind for me is branding. I think, like, we use that so, like, colloquially, commonly now, about, you know, like, what's your brand? Like, you know, who are you? And, like, it's, like, almost, like, we're branding ourselves in, like, a rigid, like, foundational way, and maybe that's, like, part of the problem. But, like, you know, it's, like, that, we have to do that in so many ways, like, especially, like, professionally, right? Like, when you're thinking of yourself as an academic, it's, like, you have to figure out, like, what are you committing to? Like, you're studying what? Or just professionally, even, like, non-academically professionally. Or, you Or, you know, when you meet people, it's, like, you got to have something about, like, something consistent about who you are. You can't just be, like, oh, yeah, like, I'm just living life. It's, like, like, no, I, you know, play tennis regularly, or I work out, or I, you know, play the violin, like, there's something. And I wonder if that is maybe also, like, kind of that tendency is, like, seeping into, then, our tendency, this, like, idea of identifying ourselves, like, to create that parallel. I don't know. But it's very, I just found that very interesting, especially your point about, like, when we're with other queer and trans people in, like, in that live moment, it's so much easier to just be and exist than every other moment, whether we're by ourselves in life, in our lifetime, or when we're online, or I don't know, what's on, yeah.

00:45:01 **SPEAKER_SB**

And is it because, like, these online or institutional structures just, like, don't, they, yeah, they, they funnel towards that, like, like, kind of constricting, you know, is it just because those structures are, like, the one, you know, like, we can't exist freely. And so, when we are in person, we're able to, like, actually be how we are. That's, yeah.

00:45:29 **SPEAKER_SK**

Yeah. So, it might not even be a human tendency, just, like. You know.

00:45:34 **SPEAKER_SB**

Because, yeah, like, a lot of these digital platforms, the only way you can truly be seen is if you have a strong brand, like you were saying, or if you, like, have a picture of your face, or, you know, attached to it. Algorithm prefers that.

00:45:51 **SPEAKER_SK**

Or, like, and then even just, like, you know, like, what kind of, like, and even to be socially seen, like, it's like, what kind of gay are you? Like, are you, you know, are you, like, the, are you femme? Are you, like, masc? Are you into working out? And is that your aesthetic? Like, and maybe it's just, like, my algorithm that's part of the problem right now. But, like, I feel like that, I just see very rigid. And I'm, like, who, what am I? And maybe it's,

and it's, maybe it's, it's, like, a closer introspection, or closer analysis would be, like, it's actually not even that. Like, you were, it's just something that comes up in your head. But it's actually, they're being very fluid, and we're just not able to perceive that. I don't know. But I think that's part, I think that ought to say that, for me, like, that's part of my problem of, like, and, like, what you were saying, like, when you're alone, like, who am I? Like, what am I doing? You know, what, what is true to me? Because I think that is the problem with— the problem with fluidity is, like, it can, like, if you're not okay with just being transient, like that, you know, then it's, like, what am I? I don't know. Like, then it's just, like, well, then, like, the whole world is kind of overwhelms you. And it's, whole world is kind of overwhelms you. And it's, like, well, if everything is fluid, then, like, how do I know what this person's like? And how do I know my, I don't know. Maybe those aren't the same problems, but it starts feeling like the same problem. Or if that makes sense. Yeah.

00:47:20 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah. I mean, I, when I, I think for me, because yeah, I'm also very into, like, I work in agriculture, but I, like, I try and, I don't know, I just hate, like, again, using all these labels to try and justify my, like, connection to nature and stuff. But I think even, like, in the Gurbani, like, there's so much strong symbolism through nature, and the seasonality of all these things. And so I love, like, connecting this sort of queerness and the fluidity of queerness to, like, our inherent nature as a human on earth. Like, we are, you know, we are made up of different elements, and we are connected, and a part of all these seasonal cycles. And so it is, I feel like that's the most all-encompassing kind of backdrop to kind of frame our fluidity.

00:48:28 **SPEAKER_SK**

I like that. Yeah.

00:48:34 **SPEAKER_SB**

You know, so that we aren't just, like, floating— like, maybe that is the experience of some person, like, oh, I'm just floating in space and this is how I want to identify or whatever. But, like, yeah, I think for me, like, it's, like, our nature of, like, conceiving— of perceiving our life and conceptualizing our life can be, I think, understood in many ways when we reconnect ourselves to nature.

00:49:09 **SPEAKER_SK**

And that is a really cool point. And I think that, like, kind of addresses that, the concern I'm having, and, like, thinking of it as, like, a background, like, an all-encompassing background. That might be a nice way to, like, embrace the fluidity.

00:49:19 **SPEAKER_SB**

It's actually just, like, a good reminder for myself, too, that, like, when I'm feeling, like, you know, like, lost or, like, kind of unsettled, like, just go outside, observe something.

00:49:31 **SPEAKER_SK**

Touch grass. Yeah.

00:49:40 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah, exactly. Go hug a tree. Because there are so many moments of, like, unsettlement through, like, various weather or phases, but then there are moments of, like, calm and beauty and, I don't know, all of that. So, hahah.

00:49:58 **SPEAKER_SK**

Yeah, no. And, like, even, like, emotionally, it's, like, we've always, you know, been able to go through our, what we think are the worst moments. Like, it's a testament to us being present in this moment right now, right? Like, we get through it. But, yeah. And I guess, you know, I think, like, Sikhi, maybe, like, try and be addressing, tries to address that, too. Like, it's, it's, like, kind of, like, that steadfastness, like, you know, like, towards this aim, towards, like, a goal as you kind of just go through it. I don't know. So that actually might be

also something addressed in Gurbani.

00:50:31 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah, okay. Such good— yeah. I want to, like, ponder on all these things.

00:50:40 **SPEAKER_SK**

Well, yeah. So the last thing, actually, that this made me think of is the nature aspect. Like, one of the common metaphors is, like, we need, I don't know, we need, like, either, like, good sangat or, like, you know, the saints or, like, the Gurbani to, like, carry us across the ocean. Like, that, like, the ocean, like, there's this, like, the sansar, like, I'll send you a shabad that, like, talks about, like, that has this, like, specific imagery, where it's, like, please save my ship. Like, please guide me across this river or this ocean so that I may, like, get to you. And maybe that's, like, kind of a metaphor, like, if, like, the ocean is, like, just that fluidity or that, like, confusion. And it's, like, we just stick to our practice of Sikhi as, like, the one constant. I don't know. But yeah, I'll just, I'll send you that. Because it has, like, a nature aspect. So, yeah.

00:51:29 **SPEAKER_SB**

Thanks. Yeah, no, it's, I haven't come across that imagery. And it seems very, very, like, epic. And I don't know if, like, kind of humbling. You're, like, surrounded by this giant ocean, but also, like, promising, because you, yeah.

00:51:52 **SPEAKER_SK**

You know, I think, I mean, I'm not, I'm not, I'm not a Gurbani expert. But I think if I remember correctly, that's, that's kind of the vibe.

00:52:09 **SPEAKER_SB**

Awesome. Okay. So speaking of traveling, tell me about the area that you live in now or grew up in. But actually, I kind of want to, because I feel like I've heard a little bit about where you grew up, like, and what that was like for you, I guess. How did when you left for graduate school, like, in Virginia, how did that maybe alter or shift the way that you have kind of perceived yourself? And now, moving back, I think we all kind of felt that, like, during COVID, moving back with our parents. That's, yeah, I guess. How has, like, location shifted your identity? Yeah.

00:52:51 **SPEAKER_SK**

Sorry, I'm laughing. I just have such a love-hate relationship with Virginia. And I feel like, I feel like, you know, on a spiritual level, like, I'm either, like, gonna do— like, I'm either gonna be stuck in Virginia for much longer than I want to be, or, like, I don't know. I don't know. Or, like, maybe Virginia be like, okay, fine, just get out of here. And I'm thinking about in terms of, like, PhD applications and, like, where I end up or where I don't. But okay, Virginia. So I'm two hours two hours south of DC in Charlottesville, Virginia. It's not, like, it's, it's kind of, like, North Bay area in terms of population density, but even less so. Definitely, like, an embrace of a quiet, quaint-er, you know, life. Definitely a lot, a lot of white people. And it's, like, politically, it's, it's a donut. So, like, the city itself is pretty blue, like, it's pretty democratic, but the rest is not so much. But in terms of, like, queer, being queer, I think, again, I think this is, like, the problem, maybe with, like, social media, and just, like, kind of media in general, where maybe, like, the expectation, at least for me, right, because, like, I came into grad school, like, as a much more realized gay, brown person than I was when I started undergrad. So I think I definitely had some hope that, like, this would be the chance to, like, you know, meet a lot of other, like, queer and trans people, you know, make a lot of friends and, like, kind of have that, like, have those have those experiences I didn't get to have in undergrad. Maybe, you know, go out and experience the nightlife, like, the stereotypical nightlife, or really just, like, kind of make these connections. And so I think I had definitely set myself up with high expectations. And so I got there. And it's like, you know, again, it's not much, it's not very diverse. So a lot of, like, the, like, there is, like, a prominent gay, queer community, like, that's affiliated with the university, and also, like, with just the community, but it's very white. And so, like, already, I think, you know, being a queer person of color, being a queer brown person, being a queer Sikh, like, there's just so many differences in that, like, it can feel very hard, and just, like, like, not worth the effort to even try and connect with people, like, who are just, you know, from so— even though they're queer, but they're queer white people,

because the experiences they've had, the problems they have are just are different. And I can just, like, not feel like what I need. Um, it's also a small city. I'm sorry, it's a small city, right? And so part of me does feel like to really experience the full, gay experience is to go to us like a large urban city. And I think it's just because, like, statistically, right, like, there's just a lot more people, a lot more queer people, a lot more queer people of color, hopefully, and just, like, get those chances to interact with others. Sorry, I lost track of the question. But like, yeah, like, locationally.

00:56:26 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah. Do you feel like, like, before you moved there, did you have, like, these hopes of, like, oh, I'm gonna, like, meet all these people, all of a sudden, and then going there, it was, like, very different from what you thought it would be?

00:56:46 **SPEAKER_SK**

Yeah. Yeah, I definitely came in with higher hopes than I should have. But I also, I do think, like, the learning moment from that is that there is no... I think, I think kind of going back to our, like, conversation about, like, just looking for specific definitions. Like, I probably also came in looking for specific definitions of, like, or types of people I wanted to connect with. And when that didn't happen is when I felt like, hmm, this isn't right. Because I like, I like that this is almost, this is me being dismissive of, like, just other queer people. Like, you know, whether they're white or not white. Like, that should, this shouldn't diminish, like, the kind of friendship I can have with them. And I think this is, like, I think the problem, right, is, like, I went in with this expectation because of, like, of influence from social media, and just being, like, well, I didn't get to have this, like, queer experience that I envisioned in my head in undergrad. So now I'm gonna have it in grad school. And like, it's gonna be so fun and great. And then it's like, it doesn't happen for a variety of reasons that are not within my, not in my control. And I think it's, like, part like, part of that unlearning as well. It's just like, or not, it's not even unlearning. It's more just, like, changing expectations and knowing that these expectations aren't healthy or productive, probably. Because I definitely have met a couple queer people who, I think... I'll just kind of, this is a little tangent, but there is, like, a queer, like, a QTPOC a queer, like, a QTPOC graduate student org. And so it's, like, you know, for queer, trans, people of color. And this friend and I, who's in my program, we actually, like, kind of bonded over not feeling super feeling super welcome, not even welcome. It's not about, we were definitely welcomed into that, into that that, into that space, this, like, organization, but just not feeling we really vibed with it. Because that space is actually, like, very, not to sound like a prude, but just, like, very pro sex. But it almost got to the point where, like, they were then embracing, like, like, this definition of being, like, a sexually liberated, you know, sexually liberated queer, trans people, such that that is, like, what that, how that space became defined. And it's, like, like, well, that's not, like, the queer experience we're looking for. Like, we just, you know, we, like, that's not what we're looking for. And then that, I think, is, like, again, just part of that challenge, right, of, like, having to navigate these spaces. It's, like, there is, at least for me, just a tension between wanting something specific that is defined, that is captured, but not being able to navigate and adapt when that isn't met, and, like, just kind of being open to the fluidity of it all. And also recognizing that even those definitions, like, I think it's what I have to unlearn, is, like, those definitions don't define all that's there. Like, there is a lot more going on. So even if, like, this org on campus is, like, very pro sex, that doesn't mean, like, that's all there is to it. Like, there's definitely more commonality, a lot more commonality than that one difference. And that's, like, something I have to kind of, like, practice, I guess, as I kind of go into spaces. And I think, like, that's why, like, that's why, like, these one-on-one moments are actually really cool. Because it's, like, you kind of have a chance to just delve across, like, the spectrum of experiences, and then kind of see those, like, common threads, rather than, like, you know, probably something that's, like, more in a big group setting. It's, like, you kind of just focus on that superficial, like, how am I going to present myself in this one moment that I have to interact with someone? And that is how exactly, like, how you get perceived. And that kind of defines, like, that kind of then determines what things you talk about, what conversations you have, and what impressions you give off, and what impressions you get. So, I don't know, that's just the kind of thing. Yeah, that just all came out. So yeah.

01:01:04 **SPEAKER_SB**

No, that makes total sense. And it's like, when you're going to a new place, and you have, yeah, these expectations for how you're going to form community, or how you might think of finding community, and what that looks like. And then kind of, yeah, adapting to the reality of the communities that currently exist right there. And yeah, I mean, to, like, navigate that, because you're like, okay, yeah, in some ways, I do identify with them.

But in some ways, I don't. So is it worth me still trying to make an effort? And like, or? I don't know. Yeah.

01:01:43 **SPEAKER_SK**

And what do you lose by not joining that? Right? Because yeah, it's like, it's just you have to get through that initial bump. And then actually, it's they do become really cool people. I don't know.

01:01:53 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah, that's true.

01:01:54 **SPEAKER_SK**

And then also, the last point is, like, you're also been entering a space where it's like, you have to— I mean, specifically, when you're in a new space, just period— but like, especially in this context, where it's like, you have to then figure out everything else to like, yeah, how are you? Where're you gonna grocery shop? You know, what other friends are you going to make? Like, are you getting along? Like, how are you going to balance all your schoolwork and other responsibilities you have? Then I think it's like, is it worth the time trade-off? I think that comes into the calculus.

01:02:31 **SPEAKER_SB**

So I guess going into your second year, I'm guessing, how... do you feel like more established? Do you feel like you have meaningful connections in that area? What are you looking forward to for this year? In terms of...

01:02:46 **SPEAKER_SK**

[Laughter] I don't even know why I'm laughing. I guess I'm not looking forward to it fully yet. And I think— sorry, excuse me. A couple of reasons... Okay... Sorry. Okay.

01:03:18 **SPEAKER_SB**

And if, I mean, yeah, you're always welcome to like, skip the question, you know, like, no pressure to answer any of these questions.

01:03:26 **SPEAKER_SK**

Yeah. I mean, I guess, yeah, I don't really have much related to like, my experience as a queer Sikh person. It's more just like, well, I guess if anything I can tie it to, because one thing that that hasn't come up though, is like, I, so my parents are first generation— or they immigrated here from Punjab. So one of us is a first generation immigrant. I don't know which way, people have different definitions of labels. They didn't go to college. My dad didn't even go to high school. So they have like limited English proficiency, like they have enough. But in a lot of ways, they are very dependent on me. And I think that was like a big tension going into— Okay, so I think, yeah, this is actually a very indirect answer to your question. That's something we haven't talked about, but I think it's very like, part of my struggle of being figuring out who I am, because our culture, and even to a degree, our religion teaches us right to like, value the family, and value family life and everything. So I have like a lot of naturally as like the only son, the first born son. There's like expectations that come with that. And like, we kind of laughed about it when we were like, Oh, our parents are talking about marriage. Like that's, that's already like a pressure. That's already something I know, like I, they have this dream. And no matter how much I can, you know, socially, like analyze the source of that dream, and like, know that it's a total social construct. And like, it has no purpose in life. That is still what they feel, like that affective, like, capacity that they have for themselves is like, so real, and not something I can change. And it's not something that can be unlearned that easily. So there's always like that, like kind of subtle pressure. This is why I don't like coming home. At least like during the school year, because it's like, when you're, when I'm at school, and especially because I'm across the country, as you will be soon, like you like get to be yourself in a whole different way, you get to control your life. And I mean, for me, like, I don't know about your experience. But for me, like, at home— this actually is connected. Wow, this is going all over the place. Um, because I mentioned, like, you know, like, when you asked me, like, my first question, like, what is it like growing up? And I was like, Oh, really close to my family. And I was like, that's something that's felt more like a thing as time has gone on. Because I have... because I'm really like being, having to confront this like closeness, because for better or for

worse, like my parents are very light on me in a lot of ways. Like, I'm pretty sure my dad has ADHD, too. Because he is just like, like, he needs like a personal assistant just to like, make sure and like, that is the kind of role I've taken on at home. Like, not only am I managing my life and figuring out my like, things for school, but I'm also helping them with their stores. I'm also helping them with their personal life, like making calls, you know, following up emailing people and like, just doing all all that work. And it's like not necessarily hard work. But it's time. And it's like time that you do not, like if that's time you do there, then it's not time you have for other things, other priorities you have for your own life. And anyway, so when I went to school last year, I was after, you know, three gap years, of which all of those are at home. And then like the last like that second, like the year and a half right before grad school was me working full-time with my parents at the convenience store, like managing one of them. And just having a big, like adult role in the family, in some capacity. And also then having to be, being treated like a child that sometimes where like, my dad is like, like, I don't know, I don't know what it is like a little micromanaging a little just like, whatever. But he's just like, he wants me to be showered by a specific a specific time. Like he wants me to like, like he gets mad when I don't eat, like the roti and stuff because I'm trying to like, watch what I eat and kind of like, you know, eat more protein and whatnot. So like, maybe I'm cooking things at home and he gets mad about that. Or he's like, don't go to the gym to do cardio. Like you need to be lifting weights. And he's like, you don't need to do like leg work, like just focus. And I'm just like, Oh my God, like, I know what I'm doing. I'm 26 now. Like, I've done, I've done the readings. I've done the research. Like I know what I'm doing. Anyway. So just having to deal with like that daily, but then also feeling that tension of like, I have a huge commitment to them. And like, now like the family feels even closer because it's like, they do need me somewhat consistently. And so anyway, I went to school last year, and I just kind of, obviously it wasn't, it was not easy, like moving and be living alone and all this stuff like had its alone and all this stuff like had its own challenges. But anyway, I came back this summer and I realized like there was a lot that I put off that I shouldn't have done for my parents, I should have made time for while I was in Virginia, and like done things and they weren't they weren't necessarily difficult things. But I think there was like an antagonism in my head that like, even when I'm in Virginia, even when I'm across the country, I still have to like, be beholden to my family in this way. And I think of, that tension comes from feeling this pressure, like they expect me to get married. And at some point down the road, that the road, that is going to turn like, those little nods and prods are going to turn into a full-fledged like, argument, like discussion. And it's going to have to come out that this is why I can't get married. And that's just really tough to balance. And now that I've been home for two months, at first, I really dreaded it, because those conversations were coming up as soon as I got home. Now it's kind of died down, because my parents are used to me being home. But I still have like, like, that is one aspect, and I still have just like the normal responsibilities to my family. And so I am worried about like, how am I gonna go back to the school year, and stay on top of it, because I feel like I owe them this much, like they have sacrificed so much of their time, of their health, of their money, for me and my sister to have like, much easier lives than they did. And I feel, and I know it, like, I know, like, in the American sense, it's like, you don't owe anyone anything, like, whatever, like, be your individual. And like, that, I think is a big clash. Because when you're trying to figure out what it means to be a queer person in America, the big line is always like, *be yourself*. But it's, the asterisk is like, be yourself. And that means being independent from everyone. And it's like, well, I can't be independent, because I don't believe in, I don't believe in independence. Like, I know, and I believe that I have this responsibility to my family. Like, my religion teaches me this, my culture teaches me this, like, my heart tells me this. But I already know that I'm going to fail them in this other big responsibility. And that's just a constant tension. [deep breath] And like, you know, my friends are getting Roka'ed these days. And it's such a beautiful thing to see. But it's also like, really sad. Because it's like, I don't know if I'm gonna have any of those experiences. Like, they all get, I get to meet their parents and, and see all their family members. And like, I don't, I don't know if I'm gonna have any of that. And, yeah, so, like, going into this next year, to answer that question, it's like, I want to make sure I'm a better son than I was last year. Like, I want to make sure I don't drop the ball and like, make them deal with things that they shouldn't have to deal with. And even though yes, like, in the American sense, it's their work, it's their chores, like, go for it. But it's like, no, like, I cannot, I can't just like, leave like, leave them like this. So yeah, I guess I just haven't really figured out how I'm going to be doing be doing that. And I don't trust myself to resist the impulses and the fun of being away from home and having that complete freedom to being like, no, I have to sit down and do something for my parents. So hopefully, I practice that better. But um, yeah, that's also just like a big thread. I think that we just we didn't get we actually didn't touch on until this moment. But yeah, welcome to being a queer Sikh.

01:12:28 **SPEAKER_SB**

Oh, man. Thanks. Yeah, for sharing that. That's, it's hard. Yeah, it's like, that whole concept of like, the independence of, just cut ties, be yourself, be free, be on your own, find your chosen family, all that I think is, you know, maybe it does work for some people. But like, also, yeah, within our culture, it's like, like, I would

not be without them. Right? And that's the, that's the dilemma that I think we're, as, like, newer generations are always going to feel. Yeah. Even though the basis of like, you know, our parents' or grandparents' generation is like, in many ways, that ends with ours, I don't know. But we're still like, nonetheless connected. And you have to respect that.

01:13:36 **SPEAKER_SK**

Yeah. And you don't like *have to*, but for better or for worse, I think like, it's been instilled in us that we, I don't know, this is like, it's like an agency question. It's like, do we actually want to or do we feel like we just, it's just been instilled in us that we want we want to? And like, maybe that's not even a productive question. Like, at the end of the day, it's day, it's like, you got to trust your gut. And just if you feel this connection to them, you have to. But I think, and again, I think this being in academia can be, it'll be exciting, or insightful, but then also just like, you got to, that means we have so much more reading to do. Because it's like, we come across like the term emotional labor, and intergenerational trauma. And like, now we can really understand what that looks like, and what that means. But then it's like, how do we use those terms to figure out what to do next? Right? Because it's like, and I don't know, like, I guess what I mean by that is like, how do you stop intergenerational trauma? Right? Like, is it going to be cutting people off? Because I don't know if that's like an option. And so what is like the Punjabi-informed, like the Punjabi-Sikh-community-informed kind of response to that, or like emotional trauma, like emotional labor? Like, it's like, we see this going on all the time, we see gendered labor, like, it is so integrated, as it is in like every, in many cultures, in human societies. But what do we do? What can we do? Like, what is the appropriate, what is the Punjabi-informed appropriate response? Because like, it isn't as easy as just being like, hey, like, that's unfair. Like, why does mom have to do all of this work? Yeah. Like, maybe, maybe in the white family, that'll work, but not in ours. So I think that's kind of like another, I don't know, just something else to think about, and see if maybe people are, maybe that's just on our generation to then like, figure out and think about and maybe offer some words of advice. But, yeah.

01:15:54 **SPEAKER_SB**

I was gonna say, maybe try and model that, but I think it's it's hard when, yeah, it's like, as queer Sikhs, like you're, you're not even allowed to like, take a step in like, marriage, or even like building, I don't know, setting that home up.

01:16:09 **SPEAKER_SK**

How do you model that?

01:16:10 **SPEAKER_SB**

Right, exactly.

01:16:10 **SPEAKER_SK**

And, and this is like, again, something that I think is very common amongst all of us, is like, we're always, maybe we're like, this is just overcompensation at work, right? Because we already, like, for me, I feel like I'm already know I'm going to fail in this big way. And so you feel like everything else is to balance that failure. And it's, again, so yeah, how do you model that if you already have this, like one stain? Maybe not right now, maybe right now, you are the perfect model, you're the perfect child. But some point down the road, you will not be. And then that does also, that could also destabilize any other good work you've done. Or, or lose, do you lose credibility for all that other work? Up to that point? I don't know. And it's tricky. And it's like, it's like almost like a like game theory, like kind of like decision, like, *Hmm, what's, what's the best move forward?* But we don't know what it looks like in our culture. Which is why a project like this is really important. Because it's like a way of connecting and seeing and learning but I don't know.

01:17:17 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah. Okay, let me get my charger really quick.

01:17:21 **SPEAKER_SK**

Yeah, yeah, sorry.

01:17:25 **SPEAKER_SB**

I was at home this past weekend. And yeah, didn't pack all the way. Alright. Yeah, that's really hard that you're going through that. And you can physically be as far away as you can. But you're, yeah, like, heart and like, mind is like tied down in certain ways to certain like obligations or, um... yeah, I guess. I don't know, I kind of want to, I kind of want to like, find maybe some hope or something. I don't know. Like, I don't know. Like, because I have those thoughts too, where I'm like, Oh, I don't know, like, yeah, marriage is like a thing. If I, yeah, if that's something like I will experience or even yeah. Is that something I want to genuinely experience? Or is that something that's been like, you know, fed to me?

01:18:52 **SPEAKER_SK**

Oh my gosh. That question.

01:19:00 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah, I'm like, in a similar boat where I like, feel people around me, and I see them like, in such beautiful celebration of their love and yeah and so I guess, you know, part of this archive is like, yeah, we're trying to like, whether it's sharing stories, or try and open up, like, a different world into existence through sharing stories, or like, yeah, I don't know how this archive will be... you know, what it will do, but it will hopefully do something. And so I guess, what is like your vision of like, a future where people are... what sort of like, future do you want to like, see for yourself?

01:19:55 **SPEAKER_SK**

Um, I don't know, it's like, I think it's like, maybe. I don't know if I've been thinking about the future like that. That's not fully true. I have. But like, it's, it's never felt like I've never felt it like it's a tangible reality to experience. It's more been like a dream, or it's not even like a dream, like a dream field has that positive connotation. It's like, it's been an imagination. And that's like, that's just all it feels like it's like, oh, this is just like it's like, oh, this is just something as equal to like, the imaginary, like things I used to do as a kid, like, I can envision it like that. But I cannot feel it and grasp it as something I aspire towards, or something I want to have. But like, what that imagination is, is like, you know, I mean, I think of myself like... like, I don't know. And it's like, the very specific image. And it's maybe just kind of inspired by like, what we've been talking about. And like, what I've been seeing recently with my friends is like, you know, it's like a celebration, like a very Punjabi cultural celebration. And I'm wearing like, not stereotypically masculine clothes. And it's just like, you know, but like, I think that's like the limit. Like, I can't, my mind doesn't even want to think about imagining my family there. Because that's like, that feels scary. Like, it stops there. The spotlight is on me. But who else is there? I cannot tell you. My friends are there. But even then, it almost feels like uncomfortable. Like, that's, that's just where I am right now. It's like, it's uncomfortable for me to feel like I can be my truest self. Even with my close Punjabi friends who I'm out to, and everything. Yeah. So I know, I know, we're seeking hope. And I think, like, the hope is for sure still there. It's just, the hope is in... in the ability to embrace a future, because like, the world changes so much, right? And like, who knows between that, like this point, and that imaginary point, like, there will be just a wave of, you know, like, Punjabi, Sikh, queer trailblazers who are going to, not trailblazers, but like, you know, people who will just show like, I don't know, it's almost like I want them to just do the labor and like, start these, you know, hard conversations and like, deal with all the anger and hate from the world. So that it can be easier for us, or for me. Because I don't know if I have the capacity to like, do all that fighting. I think that's like, that's kind of the struggle also is like, especially with like, participating in this kind of project, right? Because it's like, individually, it's like, so beautiful to be able to have this conversation, to be able to like, just think and be asked these questions and feel totally safe and comfortable doing so. But then at the same time, like, who knows what kind of hate? We're not like, we're we're not even signing up for it. I'm not like, you know, but who knows, like, what kind of animosity and like, hatred people could have and then be directed. And I'm not saying that, like, in terms of like, there's a possibility of that safety, like, being violated in this context. But I'm just like, that's just like the struggle we have right now, right? I think if I could even fully realize myself because it's like, if I want to fully be myself in this way, it has to be when I'm safe. And also know that I will not be safe every single time. And I'm thinking about like, kind of like some of the like, the Instagram, so like, the kind of role models we have already. Like, I'm thinking, I'm not, I'm not, I'm not sure if I'm the biggest fan of this person. But like, I do think that just their presence is important, like Alok Menon, right? Like, they are a trans individual. And like, exist in the world and just totally killing it, but then they also get so much hate. And

it's like, I don't like, is that is that what we have to sign up for? Is that what we have to do? Is that the only way right now? And then it almost feels inauthentic to do it selectively. I don't know. Maybe it's not like it's not like, that's just the safety mechanism. I don't even know. This is not this is not a hopeful dream question. The answer to your question. But I guess just all the words you said or just before this, like I wrote them down. It's like, open up different worlds. And maybe that's like, that is the hope is that these are different worlds that will be made possible, be imagined and realized. But I, unfortunately, I cannot say that I'm able to dream of those worlds right now.

01:25:21 **SPEAKER_SB**

I mean, what you shared was a dream. I mean, right, like the quality of dreams. It's like, like, obviously, you can't paint every single detail in that vision, but you do have a vision, which maybe has a feeling to it, which is very clear. And it's like how, you know, not not being able to imagine certain people like, that's like, the feeling is still there, right? And, yeah, I don't know, there is always... I don't know, I sometimes think that like to achieve a dream, you have to take different steps. But also, you have to like, protect that dream. Like, you have to build towards that dream, but you also have to do the harder work of like, protecting that dream, which I think is so hard, be when you're being like, attacked from many being like, attacked from many different sides, or you don't know when you'll be attacked, or all these like, unknowns. And, yeah, I think, I don't know, I think, or all these like, unknowns. And, yeah, I think, I don't know, I think, yeah, the more people that share their dreams, the stronger that like, vision becomes. So you are part of that, like, bigger dream we're trying to create with this archive. So that's what I try and like, lean on.

01:27:09 **SPEAKER_SK**

I like that, I like that.

01:27:10 **SPEAKER_SB**

I think, if anything, we're less alone. So, yeah. Let me see if I have any other... I guess, yeah, are there any parts that you would like to touch on that we don't really maybe get to talk about get to talk about today, or dive deeper?

01:27:37 **SPEAKER_SK**

No, I just, I just, I'm still thinking with what you said about like, you know, we're less, we are less alone. And then sharing dreams for the purpose of a bigger dream. I think that is, maybe it's just like, yeah, that vulnerability, like, I'm just doing some more self-reflection, I guess. Like, I think it was hard for me to articulate this dream, because I have so much of my own shame and like, hesitation and fears that have like, stopped me from fully thinking about it. But it's just really, it is really nice. Yeah, I think, to like, be reminded that by sharing that as a way to make that dream possible. So, I appreciate that.

01:28:28 **SPEAKER_SB**

Yeah. It's okay. Yeah. Feel everything. Yeah. And I don't want to like, diminish any of that like, those difficult feelings that you're experiencing because those, those need to be felt. And like, um, it's like years, if not, yeah, many... It's a long time that of like, experiencing that. And so, I don't know! Yeah, like, I say these things, but I'm also trying to create hope as I speak. Because I like, don't feel this way like, all the time. Like, I have to remind myself.

01:29:03 **SPEAKER_SK**

No, I think the hope that you're creating is like, it's less verbal and just more experiential, right? Like, I think this experience is hope generating. And it's just the chance to do this is way more impactful than, you know, because, I mean, words can sometimes just be like, oh, guys, we have to hope, right? Like, okay, yeah, it's just been done, right? So I think you are, you are doing that work. So thank you. And, you know, yeah, but this has been super— such a cool experience. Like, I, yeah, I just, there's a lot to think about. And I, I guess I do feel hopeful to know that like, you know, I guess these questions that I've been trying to figure out from by myself, for myself, are questions that a lot of other people have in different ways. And like, there's just more learning to be done. And more community to be felt. Like, I think, I think that is like, the through line, right? Of like, my struggle is just not having yet found consistent community. And I'm fortunate for the people like, you know,

who've connected me to things like this and, and kind of had that, those experiences one off. But I think there's so much value, excuse me, in community. And I think like, that's, that's my hope is to find that. That's enough. That's enough for me now.

01:30:34 **SPEAKER_SB**

Thank you. Yeah. Should I stop the recording?

01:30:39 **SPEAKER_SK**

Sure. Yeah.