

## Interview with Harpreet Nahal

00:00:04SPEAKER\_KM

This is Karmine. Today is August 16, 2023 and I'm interviewing for the first time Harpreet. This interview is taking place at our respective residences in Virginia and California. This interview is sponsored by Jakara and it's 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 and provide a more complete history of Sikhs through interviews that ask LGBTQIA+ Sikhs about their experiences, how queer Sikhs understand themselves and their communities, and how queer Sikhs make homes in the U.S.. Unlike a job interview or survey, oral interviews are about you and your life. We can talk about anything you want and in any order. Alright. So, to start off— we're gonna start broad with the conversation. When you think about your experiences growing up, would love to hear about what comes to mind. Are there any common stories, smells, or relationships that come to mind that can describe growing up. Oh, Harpreet, I can't hear you. No— Okay, I'm going to press the reconnect button to see if that fixes things.

00:02:22SPEAKER\_HN

Can you hear me?

00:02:22SPEAKER\_KM

Yes.

00:02:24SPEAKER\_HN

Okay, perfect. Did you want to, do you need to repeat the question or no?

00:02:34SPEAKER\_KM

Okay. I hear an echo. It looks like it's recording. So I'm going to hope it caught that [the question]. So you can go ahead and answer it.

00:02:49SPEAKER\_HN

Okay, so I actually— me and my family— I was actually born in India and I immigrated to America when I was young. I was two years old, so very young. So childhood for me was, you know, my grandparents, my mom's parents, my nanke [*mothers family*], they had four kids. And so we all lived in this big house in California, and it was my aunts and uncles. And I was the first, I was the first born of about 10 plus cousins. So I remember like early childhood just being surrounded by a lot of just, love, to be honest. A lot of, you know, you— you're like, you're the first niece and nephew of your maasi and maame [*mothers siblings*] so it was just like a very special time, to be honest. And then growing up beyond that, I remember moving actually a whole bunch. And I do remember, I remember, you know— I guess I remember issues with just like family drama. I remember issues with my mom, with her in-laws, my dad's parents, things like that. Um, yeah, yeah. Is that the kind of answer you were looking for, or did you want more like detail or more general?

00:04:38SPEAKER\_KM

Yeah it's really about whatever you feel is important. [*jumbled audio*] So, growing up, when thinking about your relationship to Sikhi, how did you learn more about Sikhi and how did that change throughout your life?

00:05:07SPEAKER\_HN

That's a good question. So my mom's parents aren't— I mean, they're Sikh, but they're not very religious or very committed, I guess. They're more like Sikhs by name, you know how you have Sikhs by name. I grew up— I mean, I wasn't really taught about Sikhi until my dad, around when I was in the sixth grade, I think it was like the fifth and sixth grade, before, like a few years before then, he had been introduced to a deep, you know, more depth in Sikhi and something within him just connected. And so he and my mom started, you know, reading and just becoming more involved at the Gurdwara-ish, but really more about like learning about Sikhi, at least for my dad. And so, so my very, very, very first, like— not very, very first, but like I remember that my first, you

know, this like memory that I have of Sikhi when I was younger is them telling me like, I can't cut my hair anymore because I had been cutting my hair. And so now all of a sudden it was like this new thing that I can't do. And I remember that was frustrating for me. But then I think around like a year or so after that. Hm, I don't know, something about the way my dad would tell stories, and tell me about like all of the Sakhis in Sikhi, but also like, you know, what Guru Ji meant in this Shabd and what Guru Ji meant when this was written and what this says and all of that. Like, it's compelling. It was very compelling. And I think that's— that is my like my strongest connection. And just my that's kind of how my relationship began with Sikhi.

00:07:13 **SPEAKER\_KM**

You mentioned like Sakhis and the stories were compelling and growing your relationship with Sikhi in the beginning of your journey. What are some of the stories that kind of helped you understand your relationship with Sikhi? Whether they be Sakhis, like you mentioned, or just stories of family or history.

00:07:42 **SPEAKER\_HN**

It was a mix. When I was younger, it was much more Sakhis, a lot more of you know just like the ones that we all hear like you know Guru Nanak's— you know how he— I don't know if pilgrimage is the right word, but his travels, his journeys through a lot of Asia, a lot of all of these countries, all of that. Like, I remember a lot of that. And I remember a lot of his best friend, Bhai— oh, I'm forgetting, blanking on his name. But like, yeah, so a lot of stories there. And then just as you go through the different Gurus, just like Sakhis when I was younger, and then I think as I got older, we began talking more about like the philosophy and just, you know, the goal of Sikhi, which, as I got older, it's— it's, it's become more about how to connect back to Guru Ji and, you know, like, kaam, krodh, lobh, moh, [ahankar], like, stepping away from that. And it's like that kind of philosophy now, and more so about just like, you know, how to live your best life according to Sikhi. [chuckles]

00:09:09 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah! So I guess you kind of made this distinction, like what Sikhi meant to you at that point and now. If you have to describe your relationship with Sikhi in terms of like phases of your life, what would those be?

00:09:32 **SPEAKER\_HN**

What would the phases be?

00:09:34 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah.

00:09:38 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Okay. I think like my first experience would be me pushing it away because as like as someone who grew up being able to do certain things, eat certain things, act, you know what I mean, do all of this and then being told “No you can't do this, no you can't do this,” it just felt like restrictions and it felt like, “I want to do this.” And I can still, I mean, I can still understand why I would have felt that way, especially as a 12, 13 year old or whatever. I think so my first was kind of like, it was this big change, you know, they had never been this religious before. Nobody, nobody in my family, in my extended family, talked about Waheguru. And all of a sudden, like, my parents were just talking about Waheguru and talking about Sikhi all the time. And it was this kind of like— and I remember my aunts and uncles would make fun of my parents and so I feel like there was a lot of— oh, did I cut off?

00:10:43 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Nope, you're good.

00:10:44 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Good. I think that also— that slight level of almost shame that they kind of threw on me, it was also a part of like why I would push it away. And then I think, and then there was— oh my goodness, this makes me so emotional. But there was a time— I think it was like towards the end of middle school, beginning of high school,

maybe a couple of years— we were going to Simran camps every weekend, every weekend. And it was like— have you ever been to Simran camp? Are you? [KK shakes head]

00:11:25 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Okay, so it's a camp, like they have them, I guess they have them all over. They teach you about Sikhi, but then they also teach you about Simran and about the power of Simran and how like you know, the way to connect to Guru Ji through simran and there's people who would speak who had met Guru, Guru Ji like through Simran right? So we were going to these Simran camps every week. And every night after dinner or whatever. And we would sit for an hour or two and do Simran as like a family. And that was probably like the first spark of me really feeling like, "Oh my gosh, this is real." Because I remember when I was doing Simran that much and that often— oh my god— the feeling is— I'm trying not to get emotional, but the feeling is so incredible. Like I literally, like what I— I would close my eyes and I literally would feel like there's this like light over there and I'm walking towards it. But not only are you seeing this light, but you're feeling like the most unconditional form of love that you have ever felt. It was a lot. It was a lot. And like, this level of peace, it was incredible. [chuckles] And so I feel like that was my first, like, oh my gosh. I feel like having felt that, I would always go back to Sikhi because I know that it's possible. Like I know that, you know?

And then after high school, like late high school into college, I had just— I moved away for college and some stuff had happened with my family where I like, I just did not really connect to them at all. I mean, I think there was about a year, a year and a half where I just saw them so minimally. Like I barely was home. I would barely visit. And I live like an hour and a half away. You know what I mean? It wasn't a far drive, but it was just a lot going on in my life. And I think at that point, I turned away from Sikhi because, I think because me like separating in my mind at the time what I needed to do from my family, Sikhi just ended up falling into that and unfortunately, right? Like I wish I would have been able to hold on to both, but at the time like I wasn't. And so, I don't know how to even describe that phase. That was just like a very lost phase, but at the same time like you know it's how you find yourself, right? So I don't know. I— There's a lot of things I wish I would have done differently, but I need to like stop saying all that because I wouldn't be who I am and I wouldn't know what I know now if I had done things differently. But it's not my most proud phase, I will say that. So there was that. And then I think, I don't know. I don't know exactly when my journey and my connection to Waheguru grew stronger. I don't know exactly when that happened, but it was after, like semi-after college, after the stuff had happened with my family, and I see them a lot more often now. I actually like make an effort to see them, I prioritize them, I miss them. And those those things weren't true back then. So with all of those changes, and just like being able to talk to my dad about Sikhi again, and like knowing that the, knowing the piece I felt doing Simran regularly, again, I feel like knowing what that feels like, there's no way that I wouldn't have gone back to Sikhi at some point because it was just such a beautiful feeling like, you know, you're meant to chase that forever. [smiles] And so now, yeah, that's, I think that's where we're at now.

00:15:54 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Thank you so much for walking us through that journey. [You talked about] pushing Sikhi away, connecting with Sikhi deeply and maybe Sikhi becoming connected to family at certain points. And now, you know, gradually [forging your own relationship with Sikhi]. Earlier you mentioned that there was like shame from other members of the family, [for your] family prioritizing Sikhi. [*this portion of the interview had connectivity issues, jumbled audio*] Can you share a little bit about that feeling?

00:16:51 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Yeah. So my, yeah, my parents had begun prioritizing Sikhi and it was like this new thing that they were learning. So they were excited. They like deep dived into it. And my mom's side— so my dad's family mainly was at that time mainly in India or just not even around, just India or England or wherever, but not in America, not around us. And so it was a lot of my mom's family that he was with at this time. And they are typical Panjabi. It was like this.. Oh, okay, well, also, let me tell you. So they, there's different dynamics that go on. My parents speak Panjabi. My parents mainly speak Panjabi. My— and then, so again, my mom has four siblings. One of them is my mom. She speaks Panjabi. And then her brother, who's the second oldest, also mainly speaks Panjabi. These two went to high— like they were grown up, I mean, born and raised in India, but they went to high school, I \*think\* high school and college for sure out in America. So they knew English. They, and that like, I mean, that's such a divide, right? I mean, I think it— I think growing up, it wasn't as big of a divide because everyone spoke Panjabi around me still. You know, my grandparents spoke Panjabi, all of that. But as they got married, as they went off and got married, it's like, you know, their partner speaks English. I mean, they

also speak Panjabi, but I don't know how to describe it. They have this elitism, to be honest with you, like of who hangs out with one another. And, there was just a lot of— and it's not just Sikhi, I guess. So my dad at the time drank casually but he's never been a heavy drinker. And so not drinking or giving up alcohol for Sikhi wasn't hard for him at all. But he stopped socially drinking, and so like that was another divide right? Because now it's like I think they started feeling like 'oh, this is a baba ji [*religious man*] in front of us and we're drinking versus like, "Oh, our brother-in-law" or whatever that was before. And so I think all of these changes and all of these things were kind of like their— I don't know if subconscious factors of the shame, if that makes sense. Does that make sense? Like it was almost like, it was almost like they were becoming more Westernized and then my parents weren't. Right?

00:20:02 **SPEAKER\_KM**

That's really interesting. I'm just kind of sitting with that. Those dynamics of like being in the diaspora— like maybe expectations that come with that on like how to express your Sikhi almost? Yeah, thanks for sharing. It sounds like, you know, maybe after moving to the West, maybe there's like an expectation to like assimilate, or that getting more in touch with Sikhi could seem almost like 'regressive' to some people.

00:20:54 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Yeah, and my grandfather wasn't like, he, you know, he's the one that's in charge in some ways. And he was never that religious at all. He was never, I mean, he would like, make his kids cut, you know, their boys cut their hair kind of a thing because he didn't want them to look too religious. You know what I mean? Yeah. Yeah, and that's like back in India. So, I don't know. It was a change.

00:21:32 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah. And you talked a bit about your family, in just growing your relationship with Sikhi, like the stories that you heard from your dad. Were there any other people in your life that you would find support in when it came to your Sikh identity?

00:22:03 **SPEAKER\_HN**

It was mainly my dad, to be honest. I guess that's a really good question. Um, not as a child. I mean, not.. yeah, not as a child. I think now it's still mainly my dad. To be honest with you, I don't know that— like if I wanna talk about Sikhi, if I wanna talk about something within it, what this means or whatever, I mean that's who I would call. I don't even know who else I would, who it would be, you know?

00:22:42 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Now, thinking about your gender and sexuality, how did you learn about those things growing up?

00:22:53 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Yeah I, I never, my parent— my mom and dad never, like I never heard anything about, anything negative or positive about people who— I mean, I never heard anything period, growing up about different genders. Like gender identity and like gender expression, that I for sure learned in college. But in terms of sexuality, I don't know, they never said anything positive or negative. But I think there was a little bit of like— maybe it was a protection, you know, like non-exposure kind of a thing, like not exposing me to it, kind of thing. But I know that when I would bring up now— or like not now— but two years back, when I would bring up queer people, I think what it is now— sorry, what was the question? Oh my goodness, I am going way everywhere.

00:24:05 **SPEAKER\_KM**

No problem at all. Just how did you learn about gender and sexuality growing up and how did your ideas of them change throughout your life?

00:24:15 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Okay so, yes: Gender I learned later in college. Sexuality, I became exposed to queer people and people of like different sexualities in high school. And I don't remember ever feeling like— because I had never received any

kind of positive or negative thoughts, my first exposure to sexuality was fairly positive. And it was a little bit like through school, it was through high school. Yeah, I don't know, yeah. I think with my own sexuality, I didn't, with my own sexuality, didn't, hm. With my own sexuality I never really identified in high school as queer or anything, but I do remember having feelings for both men and women at the time. And, but not really thinking anything of it, not really knowing much, you know what I mean? Like not really connecting anything. Like it didn't feel like— I didn't realize maybe, I don't know. But it was later in college when, I think during that time of me breaking away was a part of me figuring that [my sexuality] out. And I think at the time I didn't realize or understand that Sikhi could work with gender and sexuality. Like maybe I felt like I had to choose one. And so and so I think that like time I broke away was time for me to figure that out. And then— I mean after you do some research, I feel like, I don't know— I haven't found anything that tells me that like Guru Ji wouldn't accept people that are queer or anything like random and weird like that. Cause that doesn't even make sense.

00:26:33SPEAKER\_KM

Yeah, thanks for sharing that. It sounds like you first got exposed LGBT communities broadly in high school, but more so on your own independently in college since you didn't hear many messages growing up about gender and sexuality.

00:27:02SPEAKER\_HN

Yeah, basically. Mm-hmm,

00:27:09SPEAKER\_KM

And you said that the first exposure that you had was positive. Can you share a little bit more about that?

00:27:18SPEAKER\_HN

Yeah. I mean, it wasn't like, because I hadn't— I mean, it was just my, you know, just friends coming out to me and telling me that they were gay and just being happy for them and being like, "Oh my gosh." You know, it was like an exciting thing. And so that was back in like actually eighth grade. But I'm lucky that I had never heard anything negative because like, I don't know. I think we live in a different time now where— well, let me stop. It's just because now I feel like there's more exposure, which is good, but I almost feel like there's more negative exposure in some ways. Like more people are more comfortable talking with their kids about— at least in my experience, because in my experience, I grew up not hearing anything about queer people, positive or negative. So like now my cousin is already being fed stuff about queerness and she's, you know, not able to make her own, have her own thoughts and have her own opinions and all of that stuff. But, um, so sorry. What was your question? Oh my goodness.

00:28:33SPEAKER\_KM

Well, I think I just asked more about like your first exposure to queerness. Yeah.

00:28:44SPEAKER\_HN

Yeah, so it's just my friends coming out and it was an exciting time for all of us. Yeah.

00:28:54SPEAKER\_KM

Related question— what does, like you mentioned your friends came out, what does 'out' mean to you and what does 'coming out' mean to you?

00:29:06SPEAKER\_HN

Well, coming out is like super outdated and I know that. And I know that it's actually like a super— it's, it's kind of— it's a ridiculous term, right? Because I mean, I think now, back then— I guess I'll speak for back then, and I'll speak for now. Back then, coming out just meant sharing, telling someone, letting someone, you know, sharing someone— sharing this piece, part of you with someone. Actually, to be honest, coming out felt like somebody revealing their secret to you. And now that is like, it's such an issue because it was never a secret, right? Like it was never their secret. It was always their identity. It was always their personhood. And they

chose to share that with you. And they chose to— they decided that you were safe enough to share it with you. And so I know that now, but I think back then, it definitely felt like this secret was being shared with you, you know?

00:30:17 **SPEAKER\_KM**

*[this portion of the interview had interconnectivity issues]* I guess, contrast to your understanding now.

00:30:26 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Oh, could you repeat that? You cut off.

00:30:29 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Oh, no problem. How would that idea of coming out feeling more like the secret being told in high school contrast with your understanding of it now?

00:30:43 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Well, I think it being a secret has a lot to do with it being taboo, it being maybe even a thing of shame, maybe even— it's got all these like things attached to it that I didn't realize at the time. But now it feels more like letting somebody into your life. You know what I mean? Like opening yourself up to someone to share this with them. And it's unfortunate. I mean, I have like shared this with my family before, shared this part of myself with my family before. And it's hard to hold this definition of, "I'm inviting you into this, I'm inviting," like when you're met with like shock and shame, you know? It starts feeling like a secret that you have to keep or whatever. But I think I try to live my life now knowing that that that nobody is obligated to tell anyone anything. And like not anyone, anything— but especially about your sexuality. You know what I mean? Like you, it's not— you don't have to, cause you don't— the thing about coming out is people meet new people all the time. So with that logic, you'd be coming out every single time. And that kind of— that implies that you're, you're coming into any relationship, anyone that you meet, with a secret, with something that you're hiding, with something that you're not telling. And that's unfair. Like, that's not what it is. Do you know what I mean? That's ridiculous, because we don't expect that of straight people or whatever. Yeah. [pause] I don't know if I'm answering your questions. I feel like you ask me a question and I'll have a thought and then I go completely everywhere. And so if you need me to like clarify or reframe something, please let me know.

00:32:54 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah, definitely. And you're definitely answering the questions. This is supposed to be really open-ended. So definitely encourage that if any related thoughts come to mind, feel free to share those even if it's not directly answering the question. Yeah. You mentioned like, like since people meet people throughout their life coming out is I guess always, happening I guess because it's kind of, I guess, often thought of as a singular event. But in your experience, I guess like how straightforward or linear is the experience of coming out? And do you think it's something that everyone would have to do at some point in their life?

00:33:54 **SPEAKER\_HN**

It's not for me, it's not linear at all. At least— like yeah, it's not very linear at all, at least with— especially with family because I have told them that I— you know, how I feel about women and how I feel about my sexuality, how I feel about this, how I feel about that. But, and it was like a whole issue, it was a whole conversation, it was a whole like family meetings with my aunts and uncles that we had— it was a whole thing. And now I think everyone just thinks it was a phase, something I did for fun maybe, I don't know. And so it feels like, "Damn it, I have to do it again!" Oh, it sucks. It sucks! But no, I don't feel like everybody has to come out because I don't think it's safe for everyone to come out. And if you feel like it's not safe for you or if it isn't safe for you, or if, you know, you don't owe anyone anything. Like especially in terms of something that personal, something that deeply connected to you. It's really just about how, like— It's about like, I guess for me— so I'm currently in a therapy program. And so a lot of my thoughts around this have/are being shaped by that. And so I've begun to think about it because, you know, there was a time when I thought people should come out— or not that you should come out, but to people to be fulfilled, maybe you need to come out. Or maybe to be the truest, honest version of yourself, you need to come out whatever. And that's so unfair because it's like— first of all, who am I? [laughs] Who am I to say any of that? And second of all, I just, you know, if your inner world and your outer

world can— wherever it meets, wherever your inner world and outer world meets, whether that is with you coming out, with you sharing this part of yourself, or if that's not, then that's where you live. And that's okay. That is your truth. And that is still your reality, like that you are still living the most honest version of yourself that you can. As comfortable as you feel. You know what I mean? Like everything, everyone's story is different and everybody is gonna have different reasons for coming out, different reasons for not coming out for all of this or whatever. And I don't think it has to be something anyone has to do. I almost wanna ask what you think about it. [laughs]

00:36:30 **SPEAKER\_KM**

I know, maybe after we can talk a little bit.. But that was really well said. You mentioned like— you tied it into your own experience about how when you came out to your family, it seemed like a big event, but then maybe now they see it as a phase. Why do you think that perception changed? And how did that make you feel?

00:37:13 **SPEAKER\_HN**

So, [sighs] It was a big thing. I mean, it was huge. I wasn't living at the home. I wasn't living in my, like at home in my parents' house at the time. So like, I guess for some context, my parents live in this house, and then with my sisters, and then my aunts and uncles, all of them, all three of them, with my grandma, live within like a two, three minutes drive, maybe five minutes max. So they live very close to each other. So I moved an hour and a half away when it happened. So then I'm living out an hour and a half away. I'm back at home and I share this with my parents and it's like this ginormous thing and everyone gets involved and everyone wants to talk to me. And like a whole bunch of things just kind of happen. And it gets to the point where my aunts and uncles met with me and were like, “You know, you did this too quick.” Like “You should have talked to us first and we could have helped you share this with your parents. Like maybe we could have educated them. Maybe we could have talked to them about it. Maybe we could have done this together or whatever.” And then they were like, “We really wanna help you through this. We really wanna be there for you and wanna support you. And we want your relationship with your parents to get better and to be more stronger and you know, there.” And so they were like, like, “Why don't you just move back? Why don't you just move back?” And this will be, you know, “This is how it'll be. We will support you. We'll talk to your parents. We'll do this. We'll do that. We'll do all this dadadadada,” like long list of things that they would do. I moved back because I believed them, which like is looking back. I don't know. I feel like, “Damn, you really believed them,” [laughs] but, I did, and I moved back and it was all— like it was all a lie. I mean, no one checked on me, no one talked to my parents, no one said anything, nobody brought it up ever again, nobody wanted to talk about it. If I brought it up or some— like, it just, it made me feel, I mean, I will, I felt very betrayed because I felt like “I thought you guys had my back. You said you would and you didn't. You, we had all these conversations. What was the point of doing this to me to get me back in this house?” And now, and so then, at that point, you know, my parents just had a lot more control over what I did, who I saw, where I went. And there was a long time that like, I would tell my mom like, she'd be like, “Yo, let's get you married.” And I'd be like, “Yeah, as long as I can marry whoever I want, right?” And that was just such an issue. And she would be like, she'd just roll her eyes and be like, “Shut up” or whatever she would say. And then I actually moved away for a while— for about like eight to nine months. I had moved out of the country temporarily. And I, after that, so like I was gone for a while, right? So when I came back, I lived with my family for maybe like five or six months before I started my program, my school, my like therapy program. And so I moved away to start my therapy program. I think that the time that I was gone, those eight months, like they just didn't hear anything about gender and sexuality to where they were able to move forward as if it [the coming out] never happened. So now when I come back, it's just like it's very, I mean, they very much think like, “Oh, it's over now” or whatever. Yeah. [pause]

00:41:32 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah. It seems like... proximity to your family made a difference in that situation. It was like, maybe out of sight, out of mind.

00:41:52 **SPEAKER\_HN**

I mean, it's always out of sight, out of mind, but for sure, like they, I mean, they were able to forget. And yeah, we were, [sighs] it was hard, you know, like it was really, really, really [pause] hard having to, you know. There's no language, there's no language for it in Panjabi. I can't say like, “Oh, I'm queer.” They're gonna be like, “What the hell?” I don't know. So it was just such an uncomfortable conversation. I don't even know how I did it. Like, I don't even know. I mean, I don't even know how I had the courage to do it because that sounds

crazy. Like I *now* am afraid to do it and it's crazy because [I've] done it though. So, yeah, it's like, now I know, like, okay, I'm gonna have to— I don't know, it's gonna have to be something again.

00:42:48 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah, that's such a great point, with how like, language can affect just communicating about identity and like coming out with Panjabi words. I guess like, just like knowing it [would be] difficult, what made you ready to share with them regardless?

00:43:19 **SPEAKER\_HN**

My partner, they are incredible. [smiles] And I mean— I didn't like, I didn't share that I was with them, but I wanted to at some point. And I knew that if I wanna get to that point, that means I gotta tell them how I feel about sexuality and stuff like that. And the reason I, I mean, I never wanted them, I never wanted them to ever blame my partner and say like, “Oh, it's because of you” or, you know, “You can't,” I don't know, nothing like that. So I wanted them to accept this about me before I introduced someone else. I didn't, I didn't really, yeah, yeah. So that was my like, that was my timeline. That was my like ideal timeline is I tell them. You know, maybe two, three years, like whatever it is, we get comfortable with it, we're having more conversations about it. [laughs] Looking back, it's so funny because it's like, I can't believe I had this ideal map, right? But, and then I can like introduce them to my partner as my partner, because they had met them as my friend before. And just like this fairy tale, but yeah. So that was my, like, that was kind of, yeah.

00:44:53 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah, it makes a lot of sense, to want your partner to feel safe and to, you know, take baby steps to get there.

00:45:13 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Yeah. It's hard, It's hard. I mean, my partner's family is very— my partner never had to come out kind of a thing. Like, they brought home people of all genders, and there was never a conversation, which like is completely foreign to me. And so I did want to take some baby steps because I knew that, like I did want to make my partner feel safer, right? Because I just— I think it was getting to a point where, I don't know. I don't know. It was [sighs] a hard time.[laughs]

00:46:00 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah. And throughout this time, who are the friends that you found, or communities that you found like support in?

00:46:13 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Yeah, okay, so. My partner, of course, was a big source of support. I had friends that I shared this with, but it was, I think, I never wanna— I mean, I never wanted to— it's not something— either like, it's not something that they can personally relate to. Either they're not Indian or they're not queer or whatever. So I don't know, I have a hard time sharing so much about myself if I know that— like, it's hard for me to talk about something over and over and over and over again if I know that you don't relate. You know what I mean? Cause I'm just gonna feel like, I don't know. Like— don't know. So I actually found a very large community in Sarbat which is a queer, Sikh, like LGBTQ+ Sikh-based community of people. And this was like, so 2020 was beginning, and Sarbat is based in the UK, but because of 2020, they were doing a lot of Zoom and virtual meetings. And so that was my first introduction to them. And it was really, really cool being in a space of queer, Sikh people. And then seeing that most of them were older than me. They're my parents' age, and they're my uncle's age, and they're my, and it was like, I didn't realize. I just never— that was my first time meeting, like meeting people that were queer and Sikh. And so I think I really dove into that community. And just like, you know, I don't know all of that, because it was just, it was it— It felt good. It was very freeing at the time. And now.

00:48:21 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah. [I'm sure] that feeling of being in community was such a help for everyone. And that you were able to connect with elders in the queer community who are Sikh as well. I feel like oftentimes it can be a very isolating

experience, and just knowing that [other] people have gone through this I'm sure was powerful.

00:48:55 **SPEAKER\_HN**

For sure, definitely. Just knowing that they had lived their lives, you know, the fact that they had— knowing that these were people who had gone— who had these conversations with their parents, with their families, with their loved ones and all of that, and been able to move through it, and have partners, have marriages, have weddings, have whatever, have everything that they want or whatever. Yeah, it was inspiring for sure.

00:49:32 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Thank you. Now I'm going to move to some questions about identity formation. And I know we have been talking about that already. But starting broad, tell me a little bit about yourself.

00:49:54 **SPEAKER\_HN**

That's so broad, how I think of myself. [chuckles] Okay, Okay. My perception of myself has really changed. I mean, I'm 27 now, so I feel like I'm in peak formation years of all different sorts, right? Like, I'm sure that this isn't going to be the last perception I have of myself, but I know that my— in general, my perception of myself has really improved. I think [pause], how I think of myself, okay. So, along like just, just becoming more comfortable in, in who I am. Hm, how do I say it? Like becoming more comfortable, well, one, you know, with what I look like, how I am, whatever, all of that, but then also becoming familiar with who I am and my values and what I think is important and how I— I remember like, I guess I remember in high school when I had a, I had a, like a boyfriend at the time and he was two years older than me, and so I was a sophomore and he was a senior, and we had this big fight because he was asking me, "Who are you, Who are you?" And I'm a sophomore and I was like, "I don't know. I don't know!" And he was just going through this period of time where he's like figuring himself out in different ways that I was. And so he was like, "Well, I can tell you about me. I'm dadadadada I'm this I'm this. I'm this. I'm whatever," like a whole list of stuff. And then he was like, "Okay, so like, who are you?" Or whatever, and it was just like, I don't know what to tell you. And it was such, I mean, at the time, at the time I really didn't know what to make of it, but now looking back, I can tell you, like, we were just in different places and I think he was expecting me to be where he was and I didn't get it. And so, I think about that because now, I think about how I didn't know myself, like how I knew how I felt about things, but I was so far away from having actual like, confidence in myself, because I think a lot of confidence has to do with knowing yourself and becoming comfortable with that person that you figure out who you are, right? And so I wasn't anywhere close to that. So now I feel like I'm at a point where I really— I feel like I'm getting to know myself every day and all the time. And I mean, I like myself. I think she's pretty cool. I think I'd be her friend. [giggles]

00:52:48 **SPEAKER\_KM**

You talk like about— You talked about discovering your values and how you have built more confidence over that, or in that. How do you think like, your various identities like, put you into that process?

00:53:18 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Like in my values. I think that— hm. I think during my like, my more formative periods of, or not formative, I don't want to say formative. When I kind of discovered myself, like, "Oh, this is who I like, this is, you know, who I am and how I identify most with." There was a lot of confidence built from that also because I was able to— you know, again, like you're able to identify yourself, you're able to say like, "Yeah, I am queer." And "Yeah, I—." You know, so with the with my pronouns, she and they, I don't— I have a hard time with like, both femininity and masculinity. I don't wanna— it's hard for me. I don't wanna be perceived as either. [laughs] And it's like, it's— unless I want to, right? Unless like, I want to be perceived one way or the other. But it's funny, because even when I want to be perceived, like, even when I, this is such a, this is like off topic a little bit. But even when I want to be perceived, like when I'm in my house, I wanna be perceived one way, right? Whatever that way is. And then as soon as I leave and someone perceives me that way, ugh, like I don't want it anymore. Like I don't, I don't, oh, I don't. And that's such a random thing, but like, that is such a weird thing to be honest. When I say it out loud, it sounds even weirder. But it, it gave me a lot of confidence in knowing that like, in knowing that I was able to stand up for myself and knowing that I was able to know what I want, say what I want, and you know, just like live in that space, live comfortably in that space, I guess, if that makes sense. Does

that make sense?

00:55:26**SPEAKER\_KM**

Thinking about what you said, like, I guess, what is it like having people perceive you in a way that maybe doesn't align with how you feel internally? Like how did you get to now feeling more comfortable in that, like, tension?

00:55:52**SPEAKER\_HN**

I think just definitely in how I express myself, like with both my body language and both, you know, how I look, my clothing, whatever, all of that. But also how I come into a space. I think before I was doing a lot of things because you're taught that this is how women or girls or are or whatever. And so, so now, now I, so like for example, ugh this is so annoying. But like traditional gender constructs, right? So like maybe, okay. Like I would make myself smaller for men, or for like any male presenting figure, I would literally make myself smaller. Like I'd get quieter, I would, all of that. And I know growing up, I was always uncomfortable with myself when I did that. But I didn't get, like, I don't know, I just, I just shamed myself because I was like, you know, I the fact that I felt uncomfortable in a space situation and allowed it to keep happening or keep playing into it. I shamed myself for that. And so now I'm in a place where I do take up space, or I try to take up space when I want to. And I'm different with men now. Like I don't center men the way that I used to, the way that I, and like everyone's [taught to do]. Centering men is for sure how we're taught to be, like by society. And so being able to step out of that and just break that bubble, like this bubble of everything that we were taught. I think I gained a lot of confidence in both my identity and my sexuality through that because everything felt like a lie. Everything felt like, like everything that I had ever learned felt like a lie. So it was easy for me to build something from the ground up at that point. Does that make sense?

00:58:11**SPEAKER\_KM**

It's like de-programming, almost this, I guess, the way we just center men in everything. Just sitting with that.

00:58:30**SPEAKER\_HN**

Yeah, no, I mean, that's like an example of like a very prominent way that I have changed that has both helped my self-view and how I approach gender and sexuality.

00:58:55**SPEAKER\_KM**

Thank you. Um, if you— and that kind of relates to some of these identity questions. What does it mean to you to be a part of a LGBTQIA+ community? And do you think it's a community or a set of communities?

00:59:16**SPEAKER\_HN**

What does it mean to me? I never really thought about that. I do think it's many communities though, and I think that's, I think my answer would change depending on the community I'm in. So like if I'm in a LGBTQIA community that is made up of people that come from all over the world, to me that's going to mean something different than a community of Panjabi people who are like a group of Panjabi people that are queer. That's going to mean something completely different. And so I do think there's like— also, you know, it's hard because, sorry, okay, wait, oh, I lost my train of thought. Wait, could you repeat the question, please?

01:00:01**SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah: what does it mean to you to be part of an LGBTQIA+ community?

01:00:09**SPEAKER\_HN**

Okay. Yeah, so it would depend on like, It would depend on a lot of things. It depends on who those people are and what we're made out of and all of that. But it just, I mean, it feels like community. It feels like community. I think I still have a hard time actually, to be honest with you, I have a hard time feeling like I fit in with— if it was just LGBTQIA plus people, for some reason, I have a hard time feeling like I fit in and I think it's because, I don't know, like I just, I look straight and people perceive me as straight and I don't know. I don't, I, like if I'm in

that space, I feel like I do everything I can to not look straight, whatever that looks like. So it's hard to say because I don't 100% feel like I fit into those communities yet.

01:01:13 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Well, it makes a lot of sense, like, I guess, the concept of being like 'straight passing' or whatever. Yeah. Like maybe like in those spaces, there might be some sort of expectation to express your identity in a certain way.

01:01:35 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Right, and there shouldn't be. I mean, it's like, that's not any better than me having to go into a space that is like primarily Panjabi and have to change my clothes or have to change my appearance to make sure I feel comfortable there. Like, it's really not any better. It's just different. And I mean, that's kind of why I say that there is, like, subsections or different, you know, smaller communities within because I hope, I mean, yeah, because I feel like in those smaller communities, you could actually grow a community of people who you do feel safe and comfortable around to show up as your full, complete self, if that makes sense.

01:02:20 **SPEAKER\_KM**

If you do identify with one of the labels of LGBTQIA+, how would you define that label for yourself? And more broadly, how would you define queerness?

01:02:36 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Okay. Well, I would identify as queer. I identify as queer because I go back and forth between a few different identities. So it's just easier for me to be like, oh, queer. But how would I identify queerness? [pause] I think, I mean, everything is, it's all a spectrum. So I think that if you, you identify as queer, then that you're queer. That is what it is. I mean, right? Like, I feel like sexuality I'm learning is such— and attraction— is such a spectrum, because sexuality is just attraction, right? So like, there's so many things that, like. There are so many things that we should allow ourselves to do and not be afraid of the label of being gay or being queer. So I say that to say, like, hm. This label, it's just such a spectrum. I completely believe that you can have experiences that may be gay in nature or whatever and still not be queer if that's not how you feel. I think queerness is completely individual, very personal. And it's up to you personally to describe and identify in the way that you feel like fits you best, right? Yeah. [pause] What do you think? [chuckles]

01:04:27 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah, it makes me think of like, I guess like, you know, cishet white men might be gay, but maybe they don't consider themselves or are not queer in the sense that, you know, maybe the way they operate in the world is with privilege or is in a way that's like, pretty much like the status quo. But that's like me, [projecting] my own definition of queerness.

01:05:13 **SPEAKER\_HN**

No, but that's a good point. But that's such a good point because queerness, I mean, it's not an identity that you wear on your face, like race is, you know, or ethnicity is. So there is a whole conversation there to be had of the privilege that people show up with, especially white people, white men show up with in spaces. And a lot of times I feel like, I don't know, this might be problematic, but I feel like sometimes people with privilege will wear certain identities as almost like armor. Do you know what I mean? Like as if to say, "Well, you know, like how could I, I've also had a hard life because I'm X, Y, Z," because I'm, you know, and whether that is queer, whether that is like sexuality or gender related or, you know, whatever that looks like, whether that's a class or what—I don't know. But I do think that there is a conversation to be had there because I do think that identities can get weaponized. And it's a good point.

01:06:27 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah, it's really interesting to think about all the nuances when it comes to identities. How did you come to understand yourself as queer?

01:06:45 **SPEAKER\_HN**

I honestly didn't like— I had relationships with people of all different genders and I, there's like just certain genders that— or certain people— that I would feel more close to or more connected to or more you know and all of that, but ultimately I also don't think you have to have a relationship to identify as queer. But I know that my own journey was just like seeing, was just seeing how I felt, like seeing my own feelings and observing my feelings, observing my experiences in relation to other people. I, I— it's such a hard question for me to answer because I always feel like, I always feel like people have a story behind like how they figured out they're queer or whatever. And I don't know that I do. Like I do, but I don't, like it was just a, it was just like a, something that felt comfortable, I guess. Like I, could I— let me open the door for my dog really quick.

01:08:00SPEAKER\_KM

Go ahead.

01:08:17SPEAKER\_HN

Okay. So yeah, I feel like other people have these larger stories and I don't. I just know that it felt pretty comfortable, and it closely aligned, most closely aligned to how I was feeling on the inside. And it allows for space. It allows for fluidity. That's what I appreciated about that term specifically, is the fluidity of it.

01:08:56SPEAKER\_KM

And I guess, instead of categorizing something more narrow, it just allows for space for like exploration and change throughout time. I have some similar questions about Sikhi. So how would you define a Sikh?

01:09:27SPEAKER\_HN

I think that you, only you will know like yourself. Okay, well, let me, before I say that— I guess I would, I, I would feel uncomfortable defining. I would only define myself as a Sikh. I wouldn't go around telling people, like, “Oh, you're not a Sikh or you're Sikh,” because that's— who am I, again, right? But I think that— I mean, only you know, if you're trying to the best of your ability. It's hard because everyone's on their own journey. Like I think with Sikhi, everyone is on their own journey. Same thing with queerness, but everyone's on their own journey and you get to things at different points. Like I know that when I was like in college and not connected to Sikhi very much, I would still identify as a Sikh because I grew up as a Sikh and I've been a Sikh my whole life. But I also know that I wasn't doing my best or my hardest or even interested in like putting energy into Sikhi at the time, right? So it's like, I don't know that I'd be considered a ‘real Sikh’ at the time. I mean, I for sure wasn't, I for sure wasn't. Let me tell you, I was not. But like, I still identified as one. And now I'm at a point, I guess, where I feel like, I don't know. I'm not a fan of like— it's hard, it's so hard, because I'm not a fan of like, it's hard, it's so hard, because I'm not a fan of like, because I'm not a fan of like, *dil-saaf*<sup>1</sup> Sikhs where they feel like, “Oh, your *dil* just has to be *saaf* and then you'll you're fine, nothing else.” Like, you know what I mean? Like, I don't like that. But at the same time, I'm not one to police someone on their journey either. I just think that that can't be where you stop. Like, Sikhi to me has so much depth. Sikhi has so much more to do than just this world. And so I really, really want people to go deeper into Sikhi and into like, you know, Guru Ji, like what Guru Ji, what he, what they said. And like, I guess the more, the more spiritual parts of that, I feel like people get stuck on the more physical realm and the rules and all of that. But I don't have an answer for what's a real Sikh because I, I don't— someone would say I'm not a real Sikh, right? Because like, so I don't know.

01:12:10SPEAKER\_KM

Yeah, like everyone has their own definitions.

01:12:15SPEAKER\_HN

Well, yeah, for sure.

01:12:16SPEAKER\_Karmine

---

<sup>1</sup> Literally translates to ‘clean-hearted.’ Colloquially used to refer to Sikhs who hold the belief that only being pure-hearted matters; often using this as justification to not engage with Sikh philosophy in deeper ways.

What is your relationship with Sikh communities like Sangat and the Kaum more broadly?

01:12:38SPEAKER\_HN

It's— so my Gurudwara here, like, you know, the one down the street or whatever. It's like a Gurdwara, like not a Gurdwara where people are really there to listen to paath, right? Like people aren't— so it feels like sangat, but it doesn't feel like sangat really, like on a spiritual level it doesn't feel like sangat if that makes sense. So my experience with— at least in my hometown, my experience with sangat and out here is just like, oh my god it's gonna sound so bad, but like these aunties, right, who like, like gossip [laughs] about you and they're gonna tell your parents this and that or whatever. I don't know that I've like— I would like to be around— oh, okay, okay. I think the closest that I was to like a real sangat that I would consider is like when I was going to those Simran camps, because that for sure felt like that— that was incredible. I mean, that was like this sense of community, the sense of togetherness, a sense of like family. That felt good, that felt really nice and like comforting. But I don't have like an ongoing relationship with that community still or with those camps any better at this point.

01:14:17SPEAKER\_KM

What about the Simran camps made you feel like you were a part of more of a true Sangat compared to, you talked about like your local community?

01:14:32SPEAKER\_HN

Like what about them?

01:14:36SPEAKER\_KM

Yeah.

01:14:39SPEAKER\_HN

Yeah, in Simran camp, I mean, I just feel like at the Gurdwara— in Simran camps, we would have like lessons and workshops. And we would, you know, talk about, like, we'd have workshops about, like, Simran, of course, but then we'd also have workshops about like, you know, just different teachings of different, like, right, you know, just teaching of different writings through throughout Sikhi. And then a workshop about like, just very in depth things that relate to Sikhi as, as historic, as like historical, in that way. Versus the Gurdwara to me feels like a more social space, which I also do appreciate. I'm not gonna, you know, it is nice to be in that kind of a social space where we do share an identity, where we are, you know, here. But there's just not as much depth for me and like, as there was when we were at the Simran camp.

01:15:57SPEAKER\_KM

Do you feel like the presence of a Sangat, you know, you feel like more like adept to the connection to people around you.

01:16:10SPEAKER\_HN

I think people, okay, okay. I feel like you're trying to get me to answer what I think a real Sikh is. But I think, I think as we talk about it, what made me really feel like I was in a real Sangat is that we were all trying to get closer to Waheguru. That was the goal. Like we were all there doing Simran to get as close as we could and to feel this love, feel, get there, right? And so, yeah, that's, that's what made me feel like, “Oh, this is a real Sangat that is like— this is what we were supposed to be doing or what we should be doing,” or whatever.

01:16:49SPEAKER\_KM

I guess, for the sake of the conversation, how would you describe your relationship, I guess, even like outside of your local community or your home or the experience you had in the camps. Yeah, I just like how would you describe the nature of your relationship to the Sikhs broadly?

01:17:20SPEAKER\_HN

Yeah, that's a hard one. I have a hard time with that just because I don't know that I would be accepted by them as a Sikh. So it's like, that's, you know, I don't know what that relationship would look like. I feel like there's a lot of shame there, a little honestly, like some, you know, like, not shame, but a little bit of shame. Just like made to feel shame, if that makes sense. Made to feel like the whole like idea of you're not a real Sikh, you're westernized, you're doing some *goray [white people]* stuff by being this way or being doing that or whatever. So I don't know that they would accept me. Like, I feel like it's funny for me to talk about, it'd be funny for me to, it's funny for me to talk about my relationship with them or how it would be when I don't feel like they would accept me in the first place.

01:18:29 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yes, like this feeling of not being accepted, feeling accepted by the larger Sikh community. I guess, do you think that stems from in-person interactions or just things you've observed?

01:18:51 **SPEAKER\_HN**

I mean, I think it's all of it. I think there's just so much more discourse that I've seen at this point of Sikhs who like don't think that Sikhs can be gay or queer or trans or any variation of anything. There's so much discourse around it. There's so much passion, aggression behind that ideology that I've seen online and in person, and just so much dismissal, so much looking down on, so much disgust that it— I have a hard— I don't know. It just feels violent and it feels aggressive and a part of me just wants nothing to do with it because I don't know that there's anything I or anyone— I don't know that there's anything I can say to change the general— the bigger Sikh communities' mind at all.

01:20:00 **SPEAKER\_KM**

In spite of all those feelings and messages from the Sikh community, how would you describe your experiences with maintaining a relationship with Sikh and LGBTQIA plus communities?

01:20:28 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Okay, you're asking me how what would my relationship look like with?

01:20:34 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Just like how would you describe your experiences with maintaining a relationship with the Sikh and LGBT communities in spite of this feeling?

01:20:45 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Yeah. So now I don't listen to what these people say. I mean, I— because if you, you know, I'm sure all queer people, all trans people, all like Sikh people under this like large, very large umbrella have looked up, like what does Sikhi say about X, Y, Z identity or whatever— we all have! And you know, it says that it doesn't say anything [chuckles] and so why am I gonna listen to people? When like, like you know what I mean, the Guru Granth Saahib Ji it says nothing in there about anything like this. And I just think it's ridiculous that the idea that this like all loving Waheguru would cherry pick people to like not love. That sounds ridiculous. That sounds like a joke. I don't know, to me that just sounds like, okay. I kind of just laugh at it to be honest. Like I laugh at this, they're thinking of “You have to be like this, you can't do this,” because it's like, “Oh god,” like you're so far away from what being a Sikh means and what Waheguru really intended, that I just feel like, I don't even— I don't want to, I wouldn't, I don't know. I don't know that that's something I would waste my time with. Hm, your question though was how have I— okay, so that's kind of how, like I don't really— I try to just, I try to go by what I read in Guru Granth Saahib Ji and what I understand of it and all of that. I try to go off of that versus anything that people say because who are these people? Even the Akaal Takht, you know what I mean? And see, that's when it gets hard because these people actually have power and these people are actually imposing. So like all, everything I'm saying is easy on an individual level, but then when you get to a structural level, when you get to a level with actual power, it's like— if I had— if I were in those spaces of power, I wouldn't have the liberty to say the things that I'm saying because it would just be a different like, you know what I mean? Like I would— I would feel more obligation to teach or to explain or to get because these people have actual power that are impacting Sikhs all over the world, that are impacting the way other Sikhs think and the violence that they end up putting on other people, like different things like that. So I think it depends. It depends and it's very

hard to say like, you know, don't listen to the Akaal Takht, which, do you have to listen to it? I don't know. That's up to you to decide, but it's hard because a lot of people, I think have grown up to see it as this authority figure. And so now I just think people need to think critically more often. Okay, I hope that answered your question. [laughs]

01:24:01 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah, thank you for sharing that. Like you mentioned, this like 'canon event' — like looking, up what the Guru Granth Saahib Ji says about queerness [online]. I was wondering what [other] type[s] of resources did you seek to help navigate your experiences such as that? Like, you know, could be resources, online resources, or Gurbaani.

01:24:42 **SPEAKER\_HN**

I think growing up, since there's such a difference in my Sikhi and my gender and sexuality, because I had never heard anything at home, so my only experience was my school and friends and stuff like that, it was easy for me to step into my gender and sexuality growing up outside of my culture and my Sikhi, right? So like, it was easy for me to step into this and be like, "Yeah, I'm this, I'm that, I'm okay with this, I'm okay with that." But then when I came to combining the two, that's when I needed a lot more resources. And so Sarbat again became like a very, very large resource for me, just in meeting people, just in getting to know people. And then through Sarbat, I was actually able to meet some people here in the States, here in California on my side. And so it was, that was also, it was nice. It was very nice to have that, like, have those people.

01:25:44 **SPEAKER\_KM**

That's great that even though it's an organization abroad, you're [still] able to find those connections where you live. And on that note, we have a couple of questions about the geography and movement. And you mentioned you were born in India, but moved to California when you were a kid. Tell us a little bit about the area that you grew up in and how the places you have lived have shaped how you think.

01:26:21 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Where I grew up in California?

01:26:26 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah, I'm not sure if you moved around, if it was just one or multiple.

01:26:32 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Okay, got you. I mean, again, I was like two years old, so I don't really have too many memories from when I was like before two. But I do have memories of going back like as five and seven, when I was five and seven. But I mainly grew up in like in the Central Valley. So it's this like farmer town with like cows everywhere and I don't know I mean it's not, it's not that. I don't know [laughs], I but I grew up in the Central Valley. So, and that means that I also grew up around a lot of— we actually have a very large Panjabi community here. But at school, I grew up around a lot of white people, a lot of white people, and a lot of Hispanic people, but the part that I was in my school was mainly white— majority white. And so that's influenced, in terms of just like my whole life. So then I moved from Central Valley to the Bay Area, and that like changed my world just because I didn't realize how big the world is and how many different kinds of people there are and just the different thoughts and different perspectives, but that was like mind-blowing for me a little bit. Did you ask that question in relation to queerness or Sikhi or did you just ask in general?

01:28:13 **SPEAKER\_KM**

That was [in general], but the follow up would be how/if, where you lived affected your relationship to Sikhi and queerness.

01:28:29 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Hm. It's hard to say, cause I've only had that experience, but I think, I mean, I'm sure it has. I think— yeah, no, for sure. I grew up in a place where, again, most people were white and most people were like Republican, very right-wing, you know, like. So especially growing up, there was a lot of shame just around being a different culture, being a different religion, like just all of that. And so I think that I had to break out of that, like moving away from the Central Valley helped me break out of that mindset and out of that thought. And it actually made me feel really shitty for myself for having felt shame for these things that are so beautiful. You know, I don't know. Um, yeah. I mean, at the time, I didn't realize how— I didn't realize how— what a bubble I guess I was living in until I moved. And so that would go with my, my gender identity and my like queerness to it, everything just felt very like “You're either this or this or this,” like “There's three or four options and pick one” kind of a thing. And when it's actually a lot more broad than that, and it's actually a lot more open to to your interpretation to your, you know, to your to whatever, however you want to identify with yourself. I do think if I grew up in a place with more Panjabi people, with more non-white people, with more cultures— ugh, that would have been beautiful. I actually think about that sometimes. Like sometimes I really wish I was raised in the Bay. But it's okay. We're here now, so.

01:30:28SPEAKER\_KM

When did you make that move to the Bay Area?

01:30:34SPEAKER\_HN

I originally made it in 2014.

01:30:38SPEAKER\_KM

So it's been some time.

01:30:40SPEAKER\_HN

Almost ten years.

01:30:43SPEAKER\_KM

*[this portion of the interview had connectivity issues]* You also mentioned working with some people from the group in California. And I was wondering if you could share a little bit about how you made meaningful connections in the areas you lived? And how has it been easier or harder based on where you are?

01:31:25SPEAKER\_HN

Well, with COVID happening, like everything switched to Zoom. So it made finding community so much easier. So then, right, so now first, it made finding community all over the world easier, but then I was able to stay connected with them for months to the point where I became more connected to people through them. So like through this, on this side, I would meet someone who's been working with queer— I don't wanna name drop, but anyways, you know, who's been working with queer, like Sikh, Panjabi, Indian people, just as abroad, like, you know, and so I met, like, I met her and we did some work together. And then she introduced me to a friend who was like just discovering her queerness as a Panjabi person. And she was like, she connected me with her so I could support her or we could support each other. And, but she was like earlier on in her journey than I was. And I feel like almost supporting her through that was healing in a way for me, because it was like all of these things that I was telling her are things I could also tell myself, right? So it's funny how that works.

01:32:51SPEAKER\_KM

Yeah, like you're younger self.

01:32:55SPEAKER\_HN

Right, exactly. Like someone who needed to hear this a minute, like years ago or whatever.

01:33:07SPEAKER\_KM

That's a good point about how like, how you know, there's really so many ways the pandemic facilitated like creating relationships, like, regardless of geography. And like creating community regardless of geography.

01:33:24**SPEAKER\_HN**

Right, which I mean, it's like, I hope that we do still stay, like certain things do stay with Zoom, right? Like, cause it was, it was impactful. And I don't like that— oh, it's hard. It's really hard when things are just in person now, just meeting people, I mean.

01:33:46**SPEAKER\_KM**

Just what challenges do you experience with that, like where— you said that, you know, you feel more like diversity around you, but I guess how has the experience with like meeting people where you live work?

01:34:13**SPEAKER\_HN**

I'm actually, I think I'm looking for community right now. I think, like I'm looking for community more where I'm at, people that, where I can show up with all of my identities. And I don't know that I found that yet in person like that. So I'm kind of in the process of looking for that right now.

01:34:44**SPEAKER\_KM**

I see. But even in a place where there's so much of it [diversity], it's still hard to feel, you can show up as your authentic self.

01:34:52**SPEAKER\_HN**

Yeah. Oh, for sure.

01:34:57**SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah, thanks for sharing about that. So now we— moving into the last section, um, some questions about desire, intimacy, and dreaming? So what does desire and intimacy mean to you? And how do these and other related concepts influence relationship making?

01:35:24**SPEAKER\_HN**

What is desire and what was the other word?

01:35:27**SPEAKER\_KM**

Intimacy.

01:35:28**SPEAKER\_HN**

Intimacy, mean to me? In other, in all relationships, right?

01:35:35**SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah, like how do these concepts influence relationship making in your opinion?

01:35:44**SPEAKER\_HN**

Oh, I mean, I think desire to me is similar to attraction, which is basically your sexuality. So I feel like that would determine a lot, right? Like that would change how you feel and look at anyone or show up in any space or how you flirt with anyone, how someone approaches you, how you respond. I think that has to do with everything. Intimacy though, is more special to me in a way because I feel like intimacy has historically been reserved for romantic relationships. And I think intimacy is beautiful. And I think intimacy is beautiful to have with your friends and with just in general, like to have it in your life, to feel like you are intimate with people. And to me, intimacy doesn't mean sex. To me, intimacy means like being close, like feeling vulnerable and

feeling like, you know, I've actually put myself out there and you're open to it, you're receiving me and I'm receiving you in that same way. Intimacy to me actually has very little to do with sex, unless you want it to do with sex. And it has a lot to do with sex, but that's up to you. Like that has— you know what I mean? I don't know, intimacy— I look for intimacy in a lot of relationships. And I think when I find people that I can be intimate with it's like, that's very, very special to me. Desire to me just is like attraction, which ties into sexuality. That ties into who you desire, who you're attracted to, how you may identify.

01:37:30 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Like you mentioned, like your understanding intimacy expands beyond [romantic relationships]. What do you think would be the circumstances required for creating intimacy?

01:37:46 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Like safety, for sure safety is a big one. Someone has to feel safe with you to open up on any level, but especially, you know, a very vulnerable level, they have to feel safe with you. And that means that there's no judgment. There's a lot of questions, a lot of like— no judgment questions, right? Like it's a lot of trust, but it's also just like you build— There's a word for it, but it just takes time. You build that with someone. I mean, actually, I don't wanna say that. It's just, I think, because I have friends that I've been friends with forever and I don't know that I would be vulnerable or be super vulnerable. But then there's people who I met in the last year who I'm like, “Let me tell you everything. Let me tell you everything that there is to know about me.” But I think it's just cause they've made me feel very safe and they've made me feel very like comfortable and open and, like, and seen in that way. I think that's what's necessary and those things aren't exclusive at all to relationships. I think if your friendships don't have some level of that stuff then like— you know what I mean? I feel like that's a shallow friendship. Which is okay, like shallow friendships are okay too.

01:39:19 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah, that's very well said. I guess like challenging the idea that the length of time you know someone automatically implies intimacy. Thanks for sharing that. [So we talked a bit about intimacy and desire. So next question is about] what you desire from your life or your hopes and aspirations, or in Panjabi, *umeedan* [*hopes*]. So, next question, are your *umeedan* for yourself?

01:40:12 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Okay, that's interesting. I actually connect that word more with like the word ‘goals’. But I guess I could— okay, okay. Wow, okay. My, I mean, I, so again, I mean like in general in life, do you mean, or do you mean as it relates to my queerness?

01:40:40 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Any of the above.

01:40:43 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Okay, okay. So in general, I mean, I'm going to school for therapy. And so I would love to, I'd love to be a therapist. I'd love to learn how to do therapy in Panjabi. I'd love to be a resource or like a space, a comfortable space for Panjabi speakers to discover more about themselves through therapy. I also want to go to Gurdwaaras. I mean, I would love to go to Gurdwaaras and, you know, educate or have little like, educate, like, you know, educational things about sex and gender and sexuality and alcohol and just like all these things that are— impact us and that's like more and more broad thing. But I would love to do something like that. Something like that. Like I want to, I would love to make a difference in how people, how Indian people see queer people and trans people and all of that, like everyone. I would love to do that on a general term, on a general level. I guess like that kind of relates to how— yeah, I guess that relates to both general and my own identities, my *umeedan*, right?

01:42:15 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Thank you for sharing, that's awesome. And it seems like a lot of your *umeedan* connect with your identities, which makes a lot of sense. So, like a follow up is, what are your *umeedan* for the communities that you identify

with?

01:42:45 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Hmm. I wish for them to be more open minded and more understanding. I wish for more like love in these communities. I think love and loving someone is becoming so uncomfortable and awkward. Like we don't really go and love on people. We don't go and cuddle and say I love you or whatever that looks like. And so I wish for more people to feel more love and have more understanding, empathy, and openness for other people. I feel like that's my goals for them. Yeah, is that what you meant?

01:43:33 **SPEAKER\_KM**

*[this portion of the interview had interconnectivity issues]* I was just wondering what would be your hopes for the Sikh community and the LGBT community?

01:44:04 **SPEAKER\_HN**

I don't— I mean, like in an ideal world, my hopes is that we can all, like that queer people and that trans people, like that people who are not stereotypical, you know, cis, heterosexual, whatever, has a, have a place, have a space in this community, have a place to like, and not only have a place to feel represented and to be comfortable to be in, but have a place of leadership, have a place of authority, have, I mean, this is like, this is like a *dream*, right? But it's like, the dream is that we all actually coexist and actually follow the word, like follow Waheguru's knowledge and word and all of that, like without getting into all the other stuff. Or like, I don't know. I feel like these are like— I always feel like an idealist or you know what I mean? When dreams are that big, when dreams are that like— they feel like dreams, it doesn't feel realistic. But that would be the dream, is that we can all live together and we're accepted. And, but I mean, that sucks. Like, why do we have to be accepted? I don't know. I go back and forth because it's like, well, "I don't want to sit here and have to wait for you to accept me." I don't want to do that. I don't have to do that. So maybe like, honestly, I wish for them to just become more open in general, because I feel like just not even for me, for us, for to be accepted, because no, it's more for the fact that there are so many people who are Sikh and still face so much violence for other identities that they have, whether that is class or caste, or your sexuality or your gender, whatever that is, like that's not what actual Sikhi teaches. You know, so I feel like in an ideal world that wouldn't happen. People would like follow Sikhi for the for the love of Sikhi, for the love of like meeting Waheguru, getting closer to Waheguru, not this fear of like— I don't know. I feel like Western— Western mindset has put a lot of fear of God, and a fear of hell in people. And I think that's the perspective that people, I guess, like are working in. And it's hard. It's hard. It's really hard. I don't know. I don't know. I, I— there's big dreams. There's so many big dreams, but they feel like dreams. I don't know.

01:47:11 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Thank you for sharing your dreams. I feel like when you talk about the Western mindset, it almost seems like those, like there's that rigidity and the rules and like things are keeping people from being open, you know, it's like related to that. People are clinging to those things to achieve something, which is my getting in the way of accomplishing these aspirations.

01:48:19 **SPEAKER\_HN**

Yeah, I think people are just like— yeah, I think people aren't reading for themselves anymore. And it's a lot of like, what they're just reading online, especially as it relates to Sikhi. And a lot of what is now— like a lot of it has now been— a lot of people's viewpoints and what people are putting out there have been shaped through a Western lens and that makes it hard because it doesn't connect all the time. Like we don't have a version of hell or whatever, you know? So it's like it doesn't always connect. So you can't be teaching fear in a religion that doesn't need that or should have that. When you're teaching people to function off of fear, it just feels very inauthentic. Yeah. Yeah.

01:49:25 **SPEAKER\_KM**

Yeah. *[this portion of the interview had interconnectivity issues]* I want to ask you a little bit about healing and ask how have you found healing with respect to your identities?

01:49:44**SPEAKER\_HN**

My partner— one second. So yeah, my partner, my sisters, like my sisters, a couple of my cousins, I feel a lot of love and acceptance from them. And so that helps, you know, it feels good. And then just like the other communities I've built, again like I said I'm looking for a community that speaks to me, to you know me being queer and Sikh, but there are other communities that I have outside of that, that do provide me support and love. And I always, you know, so yeah, that's, those are rejuvenating pieces. People— I feel like I get really rejuvenated by people. Um, yeah.

01:51:10**SPEAKER\_KM**

Thank you for sharing that. And lastly, what do you hope comes out of sharing your life history with us?

01:51:18**SPEAKER\_HN**

I hope that like someone in a hundred years or something is going online and finds these stories and reads them and is just like shocked at these people all the way in 2023 talking about this stuff or putting this out there or all of that. Yeah [laughs]. I hope people can connect to it. I hope people can connect to it for years and years to come and like, you know, relate to it and feel a sense of community even though we'll be long gone at that point. But the fact that we existed, like I hope, you know what I mean, I hope that's helpful for people.

01:52:06**SPEAKER\_KM**

Thank you so much for your time. Thank you so much.

01:52:15**SPEAKER\_HN**

Thank you. I had so much fun. I mean, this was nice. I had fun getting to know you too, even though I felt like I didn't get to get to know you, but I would like to. I don't know. It was fun. I had a good— this was— it was nice. It was, there's not often that you get to really go this deep into these things. And so it's always a nice space to be able to do that. So thank you for actually providing that.

01:52:38**SPEAKER\_KM**

Do you have any questions for us before we end the recording?

01:52:47**SPEAKER\_HN**

Oh, no, I'm okay.

01:52:49**SPEAKER\_KM**

Okay great. I'll stop the recording, and we can talk more after.