

Interview with Armaan Singh

00:00:01 **SPEAKER_MM**

Right, so it's recording. Yeah, successfully. Great. So today is June 20th, 2023. And this is Armaan Singh. I am interviewing for the first time. My name is Manu Multani and I use she/her/they pronouns. This interview is taking place in our respective homes I believe— I'm in Los Angeles currently. And this interview is sponsored by Jakara and is part of the storytelling and settlement through Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral Histories project. The purpose of the research is to document the lived experiences of Sikh in the United States who are from LGBTQIA+ backgrounds. We want to provide a more complete history of Sikhs through interviews that ask LGBTQIA+ Sikhs about their different experiences, how LGBTQIA+ Sikhs understand themselves and their communities and how LGBTQIA+ Sikhs make homes in the US. So, unlike a job interview or survey an oral history interview is all about you and your life. Uhm, so, we can talk about anything you want in whatever order you want. And so, yeah, so we're going to start off with a little bit of a like, a broader question. So when you think about like your experiences growing up, what sort of comes to mind to you? To you, are there common stories, relationships, maybe even smells or dreams that come to mind that help you describe growing up?

00:01:47 **SPEAKER_AS**

I think growing up was, like, a confusing childhood, I guess. You know? Yeah, I think I grew up back and forth a lot between Panjab and U.S. So I felt always disconnected from all parts of my identities. I was born in the U.S. but I don't really connect with the folks who grew up here and never went to India. And vice-versa when I went to India. I think my queerness was probably the disconnect with people growing up. Yeah, it was a, it was a hard childhood I would say. Like I think most queer, Sikh, Panjabis have to navigate a community that does not make space or dialogue for anything, you know? Alt, gender, abuse, all that, so. Yeah, it was a very lonely childhood.

00:02:49 **SPEAKER_MM**

I'm sorry to hear that. But it seems like, you know, you had questions of your sexuality, and concerns, and curiosities when you were growing up? What were some of those?

00:03:06 **SPEAKER_AS**

Uhm, I think I just always felt different, and you know, since I was like a kid— I don't know, like I was questioning or pushing back against the binary without knowing I was doing that. That didn't really fly well with my parents and this was like, when I was like one or two not wanting to wear, you know, traditionally femme clothes and you know that was like, "Oh no that's not okay, you have to wear this," kind of thing. So that always existed. I think more than curiosity, I was maybe searching for language to describe why— why I did not relate at all to, you know, conversations that would go around me, like girls around my age. I never really fit into any of those circles. So it was, I guess, I was curious of like where the language exists, you know? Yeah.

00:04:16 **SPEAKER_MM**

Like language around sexuality and sort of gender and things like that, because like your environment wasn't allowing you to kind of articulate it?

00:04:24 **SPEAKER_AS**

Yeah, yeah. And Panjabi, like, we don't really work, like, I guess now we have just used the word trans and then made it up into a Panjabi-like thing, where you kind of, you know— like, we do that. But yeah, growing up, but now like there's actually no language to be like, "Oh, I'm queer," in Panjabi, you know. You still have to kind of rely on an English word. And a lot gets lost in that lack of language, you know, when you're trying to connect with your parents or grandparents, you know. So yeah, I guess it's a mixture of both. I grew up around a lot of adults who, you know, have a traumatized life story of their own. Like, you know, like Panjab is literally the political landscape, the landscape of Panjab is messed up. A lot of parents, I think, come here with a lot of trauma. So I think I just grew up around people who had no language or awareness of their bodies and the trauma they're holding in it. So I just grew up around people who are just silent about their own experiences, and

hence I had no space to name what I was feeling or going through. Yeah.

00:05:37**SPEAKER_MM**

Sure. And I think that's kind of somewhat maybe, something we can share because I think that's the impetus behind a project like this too, right? Is that we all sort of felt like either we were silenced or have been silenced and how to articulate that and bring that back. Yeah, yeah. Thanks for sharing that. I know it's like, it's really vulnerable and something that I'm also sort of grappling with is like, what does even coming out like mean, you know? And so it's such a like Western narrative that there is like this moment, you know? And so how did you handle that, you know, considering that you were growing up there and here, like how did you navigate that or did you navigate that? Or did you think you need to navigate that?

00:06:32**SPEAKER_AS**

I honestly wish, I think that was like, in that time we were not having discourse around that coming out is not essential. You don't have to come out to people, it's your choice. I think I was in a time of life and society where coming out was this thing that you do for sure, you know? And, you know, things work out. I believe things happen for a reason. And I think if I had to come out today, I probably wouldn't have come out to my parents the way I did, or when I did. But I definitely tried explaining as much as I could with the little language I had, the little understanding I had because I know way more about my queerness and the evolution of it than I did back then. But because there's a language difference and my parents are very, they practice the colonial version of Sikhi. So, there were just a lot when I came out.

00:07:44**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah. Yeah. Tell me like, what is that like in terms of your relationship then with Sikhi, how has that sort of changed or evolved, or how do you think about it now? And what is this, what do you think is this version of colonial Sikhi too that you're navigating?

00:08:03**SPEAKER_AS**

Yeah, I think my relationship with Sikhi has definitely evolved and been different at different times of my life. Before I came out around that pre-transition and social trend— anything— uhm, I relied heavily on Sikhi in terms of, I was Amrit-chhak, or was baptized, so I prayed a lot, you know, and there was just a strength I got from being in that community of people who were— you know, regularly, okay, sorry, you know, doing keertan or, you know, translating Gurbaani. So there was definitely that time. And it also allowed me to, uhm, dress very, in what word, androgynously, I guess. You know, I wore a keyski. I never had a chunni on because I wore a hoodie. But it allowed me to like, have that space. I think then when, after my parents used religion as a— to, to navigate [jumbled audio] —

00:09:22**SPEAKER_MM**

—to what?

00:09:23**SPEAKER_AS**

To dismiss, I guess, my identity and that kind of like really pushed me away from religion, and there was a lot of anger and resentment. And I think it's still taking me time to reconnect with Sikhi the way I did. And it's because most of— I think— most of our community practice a colonial version of Sikhi, which is very based in like militant rules, looking Sikh versus practicing Sikhi, you know. And yeah, that's, I think we all are navigating because that's a Sikhi that tells you you can't be queer and Sikh. So I'm trying to, in my daily life, just you know connect with Sikhi on an individual level, you know, have my own relation with the Guru and not be told by other cis het Panjabi men how my relationship should look or how I should look as a Sikh, you know. And there's no answer. And I think colonial militant version of Sikhism doesn't allow for those— that humanity to exist in how we keep Sikhi in this modern world, because Sikhi was centuries ago, it will look different. And they don't want it to look different now, you know. Yeah.

00:10:52**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, that's really interesting and yeah, I mean, side note also— like if you want to speak Panjabi or whatever and it's like helpful for you, totally game to like, yeah, do that. So I appreciate that too, because yeah, and you're right, you know, we don't have, while we don't have the language to talk about sexuality and gender in Panjabi, I think it's also like vice-versa, right? Is that English can't really capture our emotions and our feelings sometimes too. And Panjabi, it just feels a little bit more connected to who we are. So just offering that if— yeah, you want to do that. So, what are some stories that you've heard in your family or like communities that help you understand yourself better? Were there any, what were your experiences like? If you can sort of dive into the childhood experiences from that angle.

00:11:48 **SPEAKER_AS**

Stories around?

00:11:51 **SPEAKER_MM**

Anything specific maybe to understanding Sikh history or Sikh Gurus, or like how your relationship to the Guru is. You know, and how you come into practicing Sikhi, yeah.

00:12:09 **SPEAKER_AS**

Yeah. Growing up, I definitely heard a lot of Sakhis. And it's very clear that the way Sikhi is talked about is exactly how Sikhi is, you know, we are—. It's a religion that is anti-capitalist. So the Guru Nanak, sharing his 20 rupees, that one, all these different small stories that showed how the Gurus lived their life. You know, anti-bigotry, anti-hate, anti-Islamophobia, and especially the criticism around the practices of Brahmanism from Guru Nanak Dev Ji, all the way from there, you know. So I definitely feel like I carry that with me somewhere, you know, the concept of Miri and Piri, you know, oftentimes I think I grew up not wanting to ever fight, but the Miri and Piri concept really teaches me that there are times when you have to fight, when you have to pick up weapons. And that's a new concept that I'm still kind of like figuring out. But in this world, I think that really— I don't know, relates to my queerness and because I have to fight for my queerness every single day. So those stories that I could run [with] definitely helped me. Have stayed with me. I think now I'm more-so like, you know, people talk to the universe, people meditate sometimes. And I just do that. I feel like my Sikhi or my practice is very going within. So, even when I'm like writing or some kind of affirmation, I feel like I'm literally talking to the Guru because at the end of the day, the Guru is within you. And really just like befriending the Guru, rather than looking at the Guru as an authority figure that you have to please. Because I think that's where father issues come through, in my understanding. So yeah, this past, since the pandemic I would say, it's been really about, how do I learn to see the Guru as my best friend? Since I came out, it took a while to see Guru on my side because the world tells us that Guru is against queerness. So now I'm having to like re-travel that journey in a way, you know? Be like, no, how can I actually see how Guru has supported me and my being throughout this world and life that I've been given? And I— I truly believe that is how I am put on this world to practice my Sikhi, and it will look different.

00:15:06 **SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, that's beautiful, because I think there's something about, you know, like, I'm not that familiar with like Sikh history. I'm starting to become a little bit more familiar because of my dissertation sort of work. But this whole story of Guru Nanak Dev Ji practicing queerness in a different way, right? And so it's like, as trying to be anti-capitalist, trying to be anti like— structured, or institution, you know, is a form of queerness, if we want to, like, think about sort of what the embodiment and the experience of queerness is supposed to indicate, you know, for some.

00:15:52 **SPEAKER_AS**

—Yeah

00:15:53 **SPEAKER_MM**

—So, yeah, it's really interesting how we like sort of talk about that contradiction. And I feel like I'm hearing some of that from you, you know, is that I'm now— I'm now in a place where now I've understood that and now I'm like, okay, let's think about friendship, let's think about relationship, let's think about, you know, how that

sort of makes me grow.

00:16:16SPEAKER_AS

Yeah, and I appreciate you bringing that up because that is a form of queerness, you know, push back against institutions. And the other thing that I've been, I guess, really just having in my mind and still kind of like unpacking is that in Sikhi we're not supposed to pray to pictures, but we do have pictures, but nobody ever questions that— like if the Gurus look that masculine. Like nobody really knows that. What if Gurus didn't look that masculine, they were femme. But the people who drew them were operating in the sense of binary. And then we grew up— you know, putting those two things together, that Guru Nanak Dev Ji— this picture— that's how he looks. But nobody really knows how he looked. And I think that has really helped me like, expand. Like I still have a picture at home, that's like the oldest thing I have from when I moved out from home. But I really like, try to remind myself that we don't know if they had nail polish, maybe they had makeup, I don't know, you know. And that really helped disconnect that binary from the Gurus that have been placed on them, that I guess that's how I feel.

00:17:35SPEAKER_MM

Yeah, sure. Yeah, I'm like reading this book, *Royals and Rebels*, and so they're talking about, like, I haven't finished it yet, but they're talking about how like a lot of the Sikh Gurus were like royalty, you know, the idea was to establish sovereignty. And so they also were really tied to bejeweling themselves and dressing up and all of that. So yeah, and then going back to how you talked about not wanting it to be an authoritative relationship, because that also then allows patriarchy, right, to also then continue. And so it's like all of these things are sort of said in our in our sort of social circles and in our societies that we're like, this is not making sense, you know? Yeah, Yeah. So what's your relationship with the larger Sikh community?

00:18:37SPEAKER_AS

Um, I think it's— I, I'm trying to build community with queer Sikhs [rather] than the larger Sikh community. I think for a very long time I tried getting the approval, maybe validation and trying to fit in. But, unfortunately I think the larger Sikh community is very casteist and very homophobic and transphobic. And it— it now feels like it's— you know, da— like you grow up and you're like, oh my god, I was breathing this air. How was I breathing? And I feel that when I'm in very like cishet, Panjabi, Sikh spaces, I'm like, oh my god, this is why it was so hard because they're very dysregulated bodies and practicing a whole different, almost like a hypocrite version of Sikhi you know like going to Gurdwara and you know doing paath or something and keertan karaliya [*having taken part in keertan*] like that kind of stuff is known as— that is what they know, you know? In the US especially like when you get a house, they do this Keertan thing or Akand Paath, tin din chalda [*three-day event*], right? And it's about showing your house, how big the house is. And so like I grew up with these people.

00:20:04SPEAKER_AS

And I'm like, hmmm. The person who really like inspired me to get Amrit— I had this moment, it was five years after I had taken Amrit and I was talking to her and she legit said, “You will marry somebody. She cannot marry somebody who's not a Jatt.” And this person was Amrit-shak from like I think four or five years, when she was that young and I remember [jumbled] something in my head, you know. So yeah, I think the mainstream community, it's all about looking Sikh rather than practicing Sikhi, you know. And it's hard because you'll feel disconnected. And you come to fight for them, especially when farmers' protests happen. I remember like a lot of us in the U.S. were, you know, posting like trying to like just spread the word and there was this one video of this Babu [*uncle*] who was trying to explain a situation and you feel the pain, but he uses a transphobic slur in it and I remember feeling like, “Oh my god, I'm fighting for these people and they don't see us.” But I would rather take that pain than try to fit into these circles and hurt myself more.

00:21:32SPEAKER_MM

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, and you also talk about how like by extension what and how you not only belong then into a community, but also then what your activism is, how it's shaped by these sorts of conversations and stuff.

00:21:53SPEAKER_AS

-Yeah

00:21:054SPEAKER_MM

Yeah— so, what influences your relationship to Sikhi?

00:22:03SPEAKER_AS

Influences, hmm.

00:22:09SPEAKER_MM

Or maybe like, how would you describe your experiences maintaining your relationship with Sikhi?

00:22:17SPEAKER_AS

I think it's, there's no blueprint. So there's a lot of, umm— and— it's human. Like, I don't know. Like, I don't know what is right, how to do this— but I think I'm trying, you know? And I think that to me counts, you know for something. I'm like, okay, if I'm trying to unlearn what was taught to me and reconnect, and not be so angry at the source— you know, of Sikhi. Umm, so it looks different every day. I think it's been a while that I've been angry, but also being okay with that. Like, “No, I'm angry at you today.” And that is a valid feeling. Like we're told not to be that, you know, we're always supposed to be just grateful, which is yes— you should be grateful for things you have but I think I'm really starting to look at my Gurus as my mom and dad to be honest. Like that's a little growing up ek oh shaabd hunda si jo *[there was this one shabad that]* cause I grew up in India a lot so they used to do this in assembly where the shabad was “Tu meraa pitaa tu meraa maataa” which is like “God is my father, god is my mother.” And at the time like it's like at the time you know, ratta la lai *[habitualized the practice/committed it to memory]* kind of thing. Now, it's like I truly believe I wouldn't be here if I hadn't had the support, if the Gurus and my ancestors were not caring, there was no way, the things I've survived, the community that I was part of and how I got out of it and the knowledge and awareness and community I'm finding now in order to break the generational habits— I don't think it was possible without them and their blessings. And so that's kind of like, okay, I deserve to have a relationship with them, however that looks.

00:24:15SPEAKER_MM

Yeah, you sure do. Yeah, And you know, one of the questions we have too is sort of like, you know, how do you define a Sikh? And I kind of feel like you answered that earlier, but I don't know if you want to add to that, based on the conversation so far.

00:24:40SPEAKER_AS

I think like Sikhi means to learn. And a lot of people are saying, cause we're so rigid in our systems and our habits, you know, and trauma. So I really think it's about learning, and it's about learning from other communities too, you know. The black community, the Dalit community, sort of like forming this large circle of community and friends and people you care about and who you stand for. I think also if you're open to learning, and I think that is, I don't think looking like a Sikh makes you a Sikh. Like if you have a beard, a turban, but you don't have the learning process of it, I don't see you as a Sikh. If you have both, that's amazing. But to put one emphasis on this thing, I think that's the far opposite of being a Sikh.

00:25:41SPEAKER_MM

Did you see some of those performances and stuff like that, not just in the U.S., but also in Panjab? And then, were you kind of like comparing the two as you were like growing up and, and sort of what were your questions and sort of responses to what you were experiencing? Because it's also like, I think, being in the homeland, right? Like, there's also, there is a rigid sense of how things, you know, like, I guess, maryaada de vich *[within the institutionalized guiding practice]*, like you kind of have to maintain yourself and what you present as, right, is one thing. But then that also then gets implicated in our home, right? What does that look like in the structure of our home and our families? And so I'm curious, like, you know, as you were traveling between both worlds, like what did that, how did that change sort of your relationship with Sikhi? And then how did that sort of make you understand your own home and sort of where you felt like you belonged?

00:26:43SPEAKER_AS

I think, I mean, there were definitely weird things that were like, oh, okay that's interesting. In India, I think I remember, cause I was in a boarding school, girls who were on their periods were not allowed to touch the gutkha saahib or sit where the Guru Granth Saahib Ji is. Yeah, so we would like have Saturday, we would do like shaam daa paath hundaa sigaa [*we used to do evening prayer*] as a routine thing. And whoever will go, there were people who were not touching the gutkha. That's how we knew, okay, this person is on their period. And I remember feeling like, you know, but you don't have an authority in school so you can't question that but internally I just knew that that felt wrong, you know? Uhm I didn't like heard that in the U.S. I think in the U.S. is very, from at least in the community I grew up in, it's a lot about attending Sangat, going to the Gurdwaara, reciting bani as much as you can. There's pride in children who have memorized paath, who can do Ardaas, and there's like the social— like almost like a competition, you know, like my kids doing this, is your kid doing that? Kinda like that kind of thing, you know, like Keertan is also like very “Oh, my daughter learned another shabad” or stuff like that, right? Uhm, so it was a very [audio jumbled]

00:28:25SPEAKER_MM

—Very what?

00:28:26SPEAKER_AS

Very confusing. Because when I closed my eyes and had moments of like, just, spiritual, I don't know— experiences [with] Gurbaani and the white noise was not there. It was a beautiful place to be. But the moment I opened my eyes, it was just a bunch of people trying to find all the answers, all the answers is one source, you know. And it was very confusing because if we could see the love that we are reciting, then the spaces will look different. You know?

00:29:11SPEAKER_MM

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, and embody the love, you know, that we're supposed to be, you know. Yeah. This is what definitely looks different. The reason I'm asking for clarifications is like your voice goes in and out. So I don't know if it's on my end. Like on my end, I feel pretty stable, but does it go out for you, for me, or?

00:29:40SPEAKER_AS

No, well, not hearing my own voice, so. Let me maybe try headphones.

00:29:48SPEAKER_MM

Okay, yeah. I won't stop the recording just because it makes another file. Yeah.

[Armaan leaves the frame to grab headphones, and puts them on.]

00:30:17SPEAKER_AS

I'm still getting my voice in the background.

00:30:23SPEAKER_MM

Your voice does sound the same as it was in the room. So I don't know if it's connected to the headphones yet. Can you hear me in the headphones?

00:30:36SPEAKER_AS

Yeah.

00:30:50SPEAKER_MM

I think there's like a setting wheel.

00:30:54SPEAKER_AS

Okay, how about now? I still hear my voice though.

00:31:00**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah because I don't, I don't, if you can hear me through the headphones, it's fine, but I don't think your mic is on on your headphones.

00:31:10**SPEAKER_AS**

It's not?

00:31:12**SPEAKER_MM**

Say that again. Can you hear me? No. I'm reading your lips. I mean, if it's too much, I'm no. Can you say something? Because I think I can't hear you now either.

00:32:05**SPEAKER_MM**

I can't hear you.

00:32:06**SPEAKER_MM**

One more time. I can hear you, but it's delayed.

00:32:14**SPEAKER_AS**

Yeah.

00:32:20**SPEAKER_MM**

Now it's echoing. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything we were on a roll. So there's a reconnect on top. Do you want to try the reconnect?

00:32:39**SPEAKER_4**

Yeah. Okay.

00:33:00**SPEAKER_MM**

Yes.

00:33:00**SPEAKER_AS**

Okay.

00:33:01**SPEAKER_MM**

Is it echoing though?

00:33:03**SPEAKER_AS**

Am I hearing? No, I'm not hearing myself anymore.

00:33:06**SPEAKER_MM**

Okay, good. And you can hear me clearly?

00:33:10**SPEAKER_AS**

Yes.

00:33:14**SPEAKER_MM**

Awesome. Awesome. All right, cool. Yeah, so we were talking about living in both places, and I think you had mentioned feeling confused because of your relationship and sort of how you were understanding Sikhi as you were sort of embodying it as it was different than how it was practiced around you. So in sort of, in all of this, like how does sort of your queerness or your identity, you know, sort of fit into this for you today? I know you mentioned a little bit about navigating it and kind of holding space, but what else does it mean to you?

00:34:02**SPEAKER_AS**

I think it's the core of my life.

00:34:06**SPEAKER_MM**

[asking for clarification] It's the what part of your life?

00:34:07**SPEAKER_AS**

Core part of my life. I think I don't see the world as a Sikh man. I see queer Sikh men. My queerness is the main lens to how I navigate this world. So I think it enriches the relationship with Sikhi if anything. But it's taking time, it's taking to be able to embody my truth and unapologetically be myself. But yeah, I definitely think it enriches my relationship with Sikhi.

00:34:46**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, yeah. And so what sort of resources and support do you think you've had that helped you reach to this point? Right? Because like one of the other hopes and aspirations we have for the project, right, is like people can tap into that, you know, if they're hearing your story. So what are some of those examples, if you have any, or if you can remember and recall?

00:35:11**SPEAKER_AS**

I mean, there are-

00:35:13**SPEAKER_MM**

There are what?

00:35:14**SPEAKER_AS**

A lot of therapy, you know? Honestly, community work, a lot of social media healers and therapists and community, I don't know, supporters. I think the more you learn about yourself, the more you can sit with yourself, that's been the most beneficial. And connecting with other queer Sikhs, you know, just knowing they exist, knowing they're visible, knowing, you know, they share these different aspects of my identity, you know, or know what I'm talking about. I think that's very essential. Finding that community is very, honestly, that was the main problem. Because I think there was a time when I was like, I'm the only queer Sikh and that's why I'm wrong. But I'm connected with so many people like prabh, you know, sahiba, and I'm like "These people exist!" Yeah being able to do that— life-changing.

00:36:30**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah that sounds like it. Yeah um Do you have any historical or personal events that were formative for you based on where you grew up or live now? Like local social movements, activism, working with different types of organizations or communities. I know you mentioned the farmers protests.

00:36:56**SPEAKER_AS**

Yeah, I think over the years, performing comedy in spaces, especially in Oakland, California. There was a mic that was particularly for South Asian queer and trans people. So I think that was my first space to kind of see both of those identities come together. And that really— that really shaped my artistic, kind of like network, and ability to be on stage a little more. These days I'm doing comedy and forming a lot of community love with a Black production house here. They organize a lot of open mics, they do a lot of like— festivals, and it's nice to feel safe, you know, when you're doing performative-arts. It's easy to walk into rooms and not be like, oh, I can't make this joke here. I'm not safe. Especially I live in Portland. It's very, it's very white. So yeah, I'm very much grateful for the community I'm trying to build right now here. I think I did a panel with the Jakara Movement that was very, it was shifting, it shifted something in me and that was an interesting experience for sure.

00:38:36**SPEAKER_MM**

I wanna know now, what was that shifting experience?

00:38:41**SPEAKER_AS**

I mean, it was just...

00:38:44**SPEAKER_MM**

If you wanna share, yeah.

00:38:46**SPEAKER_AS**

I mean, I think it was very public— you know, it was an event that was a Zoom event, so we were just asking questions, we were answering, and you know, I think someone recorded sahiba saying something and edited it to make it look like that's the only thing they said with no context and posted it on Twitter, and yeah I mean to see them go through that and kind of like sit with this grief of like— we were just creating space for ourselves. We were not doing anything and someone felt the need to go out of their way. And then this whole group of people on Twitter, big police that we call them, just jumped to judgment when Sikhs are not supposed to judge. The last thing you're supposed to do is threaten somebody. And it was very like, disheartening. And I think that was kind of like, really eye-opening. Like, okay, no, this is the reality I'm living in. You know, this is how this community is actually thinks about me, feels about me, my people. And I think that's when, you know what, I don't need their approval. Like— but yeah, that was definitely, it also kind of like, I have to like think about, I used to be very open about my personal life on social media. And that really just made me feel like, no, I need to hold things to myself a little more. And because the world is a cruel place and not everyone deserves all the information you have to give. Yeah, That was an interesting experience.

00:40:34**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, you have to protect yourself and you also have to protect your story, you know, because you wanna be writing it.

00:40:44**SPEAKER_AS**

Yeah, For sure.

00:40:47**SPEAKER_MM**

So did I hear correctly? You're a comedian?

00:40:50**SPEAKER_AS**

Yeah.

00:40:51**SPEAKER_MM**

That's cool. How do you get inspiration for your comedy?

00:40:57**SPEAKER_AS**

Uhh— I don't know. I was asked this question like two days ago.

00:41:01SPEAKER_MM

[Laughing] Oh really?

00:41:02SPEAKER_AS

Yeah, I was doing a podcast. I don't know what it is. I think when I started doing comedy, I did a set in 2020, February and then March happened. And I was like, oh my god, this is amazing. Like I had done poetry and spoken word before, but comedy was, it was different. It felt like, oh, this is really something I want to learn more and more. So now I guess, you know, I just, one, I think one way of inspiration is definitely being— or pushing your, not pushing, I don't know what the right word is like seeing if you can look at a traumatic experience and find something funny in it or you if you could tell it in a way that's funny. And I've been able to do that with my coming out story particularly, and it's been very empowering and kind of like reclaiming that part of my past. So I think that's mostly what inspiration, but it's just, it's fun. It's really fun. Yeah.

00:42:15SPEAKER_MM

Yeah, that's awesome. I'm so happy you have that and I would love to listen to you someday. Definitely will, like yeah, keep tabs.

00:42:25SPEAKER_AS

Yes.

00:42:27SPEAKER_MM

I used to live in Oakland and so we used to like, yeah, peruse some of the clubs and like the cafes and things like that, looking for stuff like that. So yeah. Yeah. So it seems like you've made meaningful connections through comedy. Yeah, with your life. Yeah, what a blessing. So I'm gonna shift it a little bit, but it's kind of not so much of a shift. We're gonna talk about dreaming, which I think, you know, with comedy, we can kind of go there. But yeah, you know, how do you think about your hopes and aspirations for yourself? What are those? And how does like sort of not only just this desire to have this friendship with Sikhi and with the Guru— how do like, sort of your desires and your intimacy kind of shape?

00:43:30SPEAKER_AS

Like desire with the dreams I have or with Sikhi in particular?

00:43:34SPEAKER_MM

With your dreams that you have, with your aspirations, with your sexuality, with anything really.

00:43:42SPEAKER_AS

I mean I think there's a lot of dreams you know. But I truly believe that in all the stuff I have to tell and my story in general, but like, things I've not faced yet, named yet in the past that I aspire to, you know. And I really just want to tell stories. I want to make people laugh and think at the same time. And I think there's so many ways to do that. So, I'm excited to learn more about myself as an artist, you know, or where my comedy takes me, but yeah, I'm really grateful and excited for— to build and learn more skills and be able to tell more stories, yeah.

00:44:42SPEAKER_MM

Are there storytellers or comedians that you get inspiration that do that humor plus teaching?

00:44:50SPEAKER_AS

Uhm— yeah, I think there's an up and coming comedian from India. His name is Manjeet Sarkar, a Dalit comedian, taught himself English to be able to do comedy, and does a lot of storytelling about how he navigates the caste system and the casteist environment, and does it in a hilarious way. Yeah, I think he's very, very inspiring. I think he's only, to be honest.

00:45:28SPEAKER_MM

He's only what?

00:45:29SPEAKER_AS

Getting started. I think, I mean, people I hang out with here, I would say. There's a comedian, Real Hijinks, that's his name. He's been doing comedy for a while and he's really good at it. And I also think he's been doing it for a while, but he's only getting started.

00:45:58SPEAKER_MM

Yeah. Yeah. It's awesome. You're also using comedy as a way to build alliances, it seems like.

00:46:04SPEAKER_AS

Yeah, I think it's just happening. So I'm guessing that's the point.

00:46:14SPEAKER_MM

So What are your hopes and aspirations for the different communities that you identify with?

00:46:26SPEAKER_AS

I want to make queer people laugh. I just want to make them like, roll over kind of thing. I want to just create a lot of joy for them and I would love to perform in a venue full of queer people and I think that'd be amazing. And with other forms of art, like I make music, I hope to publish a book sometime. Uhm— again, to just maybe have queer people see themselves in those things that I do, whether that's like a poem or a song. Yeah, I think that's probably my aspiration for my queer community for sure. For Sikh mainstream community, I think I'm gonna offend them before they come on my side.

00:47:19SPEAKER_MM

That's also hopes and aspirations.

00:47:24SPEAKER_AS

Yeah, I think, yeah, you're right. And I'm kind of like sitting with that and be like, okay, maybe that's just how it's supposed to be. And if in order for me to say my truth, some people get offended, that's okay.

00:47:42SPEAKER_MM

So you also make music, wow, you're so multi-talented.

00:47:46SPEAKER_AS

I appreciate that. Yeah, when George Floyd happened, when George Floyd died— was murdered it was very eye-opening. You know, Panjabi cis-men make a lot of rap music, but there was no actionable solidarity, you know. So it kind of looked really— I could not listen to the music. I couldn't listen to it before entirely because of the casteism in it and the misogyny and all of it. But yeah, it was like, because I've been writing poetry since eighth grade. So I was like, let's see. And I found a queer black rapper who coached me and yeah, I made some music last year. I haven't done anything this year because of finances, but yeah, I'm gonna make more music.

00:48:40SPEAKER_MM

Yeah, that's pretty cool. Yeah, that's also— It's so refreshing for me to hear that a fellow Panjabi queer is doing art, and navigating that way, because I just, myself, just got into filmmaking and all of that too, and I'm like, why haven't I been doing this earlier? It's like, oh yeah, because everybody was telling me that I shouldn't, because I'm not gonna make money and I'm not gonna be that person that should be accomplished or whatever, and so I've like, internalized all of that messaging too. So yeah, it definitely limits not only our activism and our pursuits, but it also limits our art and our creativity and our imagination, you know? So I love that you're like bringing that to the floor and you're like imagining and creating and dreaming, you know, through poetry and music and stuff. That's super cool.

00:49:40**SPEAKER_AS**

Appreciate that, yeah.

00:49:42**SPEAKER_MM**

And also like making the connection and broadly, like, you know, what's sort of happening around us, you know, and like, it seems like you're also very, not self aware, I think you're definitely self aware, but the you're very, like, vibing with like, sort of what's happening around you, and you feel like you have some sort of stake in it— do you know where that comes from?

00:50:08**SPEAKER_4**

I think I'm just, you know— I think— I, I'm blessed, you know? I'm a cancer so I'm a water sign. You are too? Okay. There we go. Yeah. I think I feel the pain of the world very deeply. And that kind of informs the kind of person I am and the kind of art I make. I think it sucks sometimes because there are too many feelings, but.

00:50:41**SPEAKER_MM**

Oh my god.

00:50:44**SPEAKER_AS**

You're like, I know.

00:50:45**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, you're totally like hitting the string, like on point.

00:50:50**SPEAKER_AS**

Yeah, but it's also like I feel like a gift too, because I see a lot of people who don't feel anything for other people and that's, that's not— I wouldn't want to be that person.

00:51:02**SPEAKER_MM**

And like, it's June, like, can we just say like, this is like feeling really strange now for a second.

00:51:09**SPEAKER_AS**

Yeah. Yeah.

00:51:12**SPEAKER_MM**

But yeah, I'm glad to, to share that with you. And I couldn't agree more. Oh, yeah. Yeah. So in a more sort of individual sort of way, what does desire mean to you? What does intimacy mean to you?

00:51:33**SPEAKER_AS**

I think safe— like intimacy would be safe for me. Yeah, also like, someone you can be comfortable with in silence. And be very two different individuals, two different, no none of that ik jaan [*one existence/life*] shit,

like none of that, like two bodies one soul or something like that, in Panjabi [they] just say that a lot. But really just be two very different individuals who choose safety and choose intimacy. I think love is a choice, to be honest. Desire, I think, I don't know. I've never really thought about that, to be honest. Yeah.

00:52:27**SPEAKER_MM**

I think you kind of alluded to it, right? Uhm, the desire to make people laugh— make queer people laugh.

00:52:35**SPEAKER_AS**

I guess, yeah.

00:52:37**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, and sort of the desire to kind of write poetry and be motivated to do that kind of stuff.

00:52:45**SPEAKER_AS**

Yeah.

00:52:47**SPEAKER_MM**

It's a different way of thinking about desiring, but I think there's something about your story that resonates along the lines of how to spread love and how to feel that. Yeah, that's what I'm taking away.

00:53:07**SPEAKER_AS**

Yeah.

00:53:11**SPEAKER_MM**

So, I think you've like hit a lot of the questions that I already had and sort of the way you've responded. But one question maybe we can go back to kind of the narratives and the like sort of stereotypes of storytelling that we were talking about earlier in sort of Sikh history and Sikh communities. How have they influenced you and how do you take that by extension towards how you understand your sexuality?

00:53:49**SPEAKER_AS**

The stories that I was taught from other people? I think it makes your ideology very rigid and set in stone in what we're taught [about] gender norms and almost like [being] told exactly how your life is gonna look from the moment you're born kind of thing. I think I've— I stepped— I've walked away from those notions and I'm still kind of like walking away and I'm learning. But I think now, I would say because I've lived that life of [being] constrained by gender and the notion that that gender carries, then now it's very much like queer life. Like I think queerness is literally no blueprint, no box, no line and seeing your humanity and humanity can— it's a spectrum, it can be fluid. I do definitely identify as a trans-masc man but man is a term I don't really understand. Men are weird. So I'm like, I don't know. I'm definitely trans and queer. So not fully subscribing to labels, but I'll maybe finding some stability in them sometimes, but not being chained to them, you know? And I think that's just a messy human process, and I think that's just how I see it. And I'm loving that process. What I know about myself today will not be the same [as] what I know about myself in 10 years.

00:55:40**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah. Truly living this, sort of, trying to be the disciple, right? And trying to be the Sikh in sort of a way where you're constantly learning, evolving, growing. So Armaan, you also mentioned, I recognize sort of points in which you brought up trauma and mental health and sort of navigating that with therapy, and things like that, which— thank you for being so brave and sharing that too. I think some of us are just so hesitant about those sorts of realities and don't know how to confront them, especially if we're living with this overwhelming sense of trying to make sense of everything, you know? So how did you sort of build that for yourself? And how would you like, sort of wish for others to build that for themselves?

00:56:41**SPEAKER_AS**

I think for me it was [jumbled audio] space.

00:56:44**SPEAKER_MM**

[asking for clarification] It was what?

00:56:45**SPEAKER_AS**

There was no other space. Or I didn't even, I think I had initial feelings of starting to be like, "Oh, I think I'm trans." And a lot of shame and guilt for that. But also just like feeling very lonely and sad. So I think that is what really drove me to talk to somebody on like, and also as a student. So my therapy was covered in the tuition I gave. So I was like, okay, whatever kind of thing. And I kept going. You know, like I said, I could talk, I could express, even if it's like— just me crying. It was not something I grew up having. But I definitely resonate with what you said. I think it's hard to make that decision because I think once you go to therapy, things change. You can't unknow once you know. And I think, I guess for our community or people who are wanting to make that choices, that they— their desire to know more about themselves and feel less pain overweighs their fear of what they will learn. And I think I would like to tell them that they will not learn anything they already don't know.

00:58:15**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, that's super powerful. Yeah. I think it's also the debilitating fear of other people perceiving, right, getting therapy. Yeah. Especially in a community not wanting to acknowledge that.

00:58:32**SPEAKER_AS**

Mm-hmm.

00:58:33**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah. That's sort of all I have in terms of the questions. Do you have anything else you'd like to add or what your hopes and dreams are with this archive?

00:58:46**SPEAKER_AS**

Oh, this archive. I think I'm really excited for this to exist. And, uh- from now on, our story is being documented. You know, 50 years from now, nobody can say queer trans people didn't exist. Well we did. You know right now we don't have that in our history in terms of having actual physical evidence of like they existed. So I'm really excited. I think this is historical, literally. It's history so it's historical And I'm really grateful for the work our queer trans fellow friends are doing. It's sad that's why we have to do that, but I'm grateful to be part of this generation of queers where we're putting our foot down. I'm seeing that and I'm so happy to see that.

00:59:45**SPEAKER_MM**

And putting [in] the emotional labor, right? It's also acknowledging that, that we're not only dissenting in our own sort of circles and stuff, but we're also broadly dissenting and putting in that emotional work to visibilize ourselves, you know, and be vulnerable. So yeah, thanks for contributing. Yeah, it's been lovely to get to know you. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it's interesting to get right into a vulnerable conversation after we just literally met, but I hope that that was okay, and sat okay with you.

01:00:28**SPEAKER_AS**

No, yeah, I appreciate that. Yeah, I think, yeah, I appreciate you asking. Those are thoughtful questions and, you know, important questions, so I appreciate that. I do have a lot of comedy content on my Instagram, so if you do wanna check it out and laugh, that'd be the place. Yeah. My music is on Spotify. It's bilingual, Panjabi and English, but if you find time to engage.

01:00:53**SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, do you want to share it on record?

01:00:56 **SPEAKER_AS**

Yeah, so my Instagram is, “Armaan underscore the poet.” (armaan_the poet). And that's the same for Spotify.

01:01:03 **SPEAKER_MM**

And it's A-R-M-A-A-N, right?

01:01:06 **SPEAKER_AS**

Yes. Cool, awesome.

01:01:08 **SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah, awesome, I'm so glad you shared.

01:01:11 **SPEAKER_AS**

Of course.

01:01:12 **SPEAKER_MM**

Yeah. All right, I'm gonna stop the recording.