

## Interview with prabhdeep singh kehal

00:00:03**SPEAKER\_MM**

Hi, how are you?

00:00:07**SPEAKER\_PSK**

I'm doing well. Just enjoying a sunny day here today. So thankful for that.

00:00:11**SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah, awesome. So this is my Manu Multani. Today is February 6th 2023. I'm interviewing for the first time dr. prabhdeep kehal. This interview is taking place online, but I'm currently in Los Angeles, California. And this interview is sponsored by Jakara and is part of the "Storytelling and Settlement through Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral Histories Project." Thank you so much prabhdeep for your time today.

00:00:46**SPEAKER\_PSK**

Happy to be here.

00:00:49**SPEAKER\_MM**

So I'm just going to share a little bit of a purpose and as a lead researcher, you're definitely aware of what the purpose and stuff is. But I thought, or whoever's listening, they could connect to it. So the purpose of the research is to document the lived experiences of Sikhs in the United States who are from LGBTQIA+ backgrounds. We wanted 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. Unlike like a job interview or survey, an oral history interview is all about you and your life so we can talk about anything you want in any order. In an effort to try to honor and respect our narrators, which is you, I want to share a little bit about myself. Hopefully you can learn a little bit more about me and the project and my role. This way we can better respect and honor you and what you share with us. This will help us understand your story on your terms and how you choose to share it.

So, my name is Manu Multani. I was born and raised in San Jose, California. My folks are from Panjab. So, I was raised in the Sikh faith but my relationship with Sikhi has kind of been— is ever evolving. So, it's intimate at times and at times it's distant. And I think my— I'm just kind of reconnecting to what I think is a queer identity but I still don't know what that means for me. And my role in this project is to be a research assistant. And so I will be doing some of these interviews. And I've been working on the sort of back-end to create a more intentional way of how we can approach this conversation within our community because it's also something that's not very publicly talked about. So yeah. So thank you so much for being here today and being open to having this discussion. I can relate to how difficult that decision must have been, too.

**SPEAKER\_PSK**

Thank you.

**SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah. So is there anything that's unclear or any questions that you may have? Are you comfortable?

00:03:20**SPEAKER\_PSK**

I think you touched all the major things. So yeah, more or less comfortable ready to get started.

00:03:28**SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah, that's great. That's great. Okay, so we're going to start a little bit broad with the conversation. When you think back to your experiences of like growing up, tell me a little bit about what comes to your mind. Are there common stories, are there smells, are their relationships that kind of describe growing up for you? What was

growing up like for you? And what are some of the sort of snapshots that you revisit as you think about growing up?

00:04:03 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

Well, I think about childhood, growing up. I mean, I think one, just to put it out there and aside: a lot of it, I don't remember. I feel like there's a good chunk of it that I'm like, slowly over time learning to remember. Re-accessing as, you know, as I choose to go back there. You know see things with new eyes, with new ways of understanding. And also just few things. But what I do remember, so far as of today, I think a lot about the family in my household, the shifting nature of that family. We had a lot of, you know, my parents migrated here from Panjab as well, and I was born and raised here. So my parents are like, my immediate, my direct— my household family was one that had a lot of extended family coming through it before I was born. And after I was born. So that's a big part of what I think about when I think about childhood. Think about, you know, the occasional Gurdwaara. Going there. And then growing up in Los Angeles, really, it was going to a lot of different Gurdwaaras. Like every weekend would be a different Bhog here or something like that. This Gurdwaara, or that Gurdwaara. So I think a lot about the travel in the commute of being in LA. I think about the freeways. Of course, how could I not? I grew up in California, but in LA on top of that.

I think about my grandparents, and they were some of the first ones in— as, we, extended family who came here. So I think a lot about, you know, I didn't have, my family didn't, we didn't have babysitters. We had our grandparents who were there with us or with some of their other children throughout the years. And you know, think about school. School's a big *big*, big part of my childhood. Childhood just in terms of like its importance in the family by my parents who have time and energy it took to do the work that was required. I didn't necessarily— I was one of those kids that always had to work really hard. It wasn't something that so-called came naturally to me, the school work. So I was always, something that, yeah it was something that I always had to like think about, was a major part of my life.

And then I think about going to all these uncles and aunties' houses on the weekends. You know, that changed as I got older. But during my childhood it was very much like you don't have a choice. It was going to do this or that uncle's house. This social gathering, whether it was a party or something else, and we're getting married. And a lot of travel. I don't know, for whatever reason. It was, you know, even if we were based in LA and LA is so huge, a lot of my childhood ended up and down the Central Valley. So I feel like a big part of my, my childhood was there. Living there. Learning what it meant to have sort of— I don't want, I don't want to say fragmented because I don't think that I was conscious of the gaps between these different parts of my life. But to have like a mosaic of sorts. Unsure, what was binding this together. You know, you, just kind of traveling from one side, the mosaic to the other. Occasionally, if you feel a bump, sometimes you fall backwards, sometimes you cut yourself. But like you're, you're a kid so you don't really know what's what you're coming up against. You're kind of just pulled or pushed or sometimes you're leading yourself. So there are some of the things that come to mind when I think about childhood. Yeah.

00:07:38 **SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah. And so when you think about your relationship to Sikhi. I mean, you know obviously family is a big part of that. The sort of translation of their experience and how they are sort of connecting to Sikhism, or Sikhi. How is that relationship you think, evolved for you over your phases of your life, you know? Because yeah, family is so central to us and that is how we sort of just of like oral histories are oral traditions, that's sort of how we observe and collect sort of our own pieces of our identity. And so, how is that sort of evolved for you?

00:08:21 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

I mean, it's funny in some sense. Like I never really thought of Sikhi as my religion. It was just sort of a part of life. And I guess, you know, now I have more fancy language, or with more precise language, to describe that sort of relationship. But the way that I often—, you know, heard other people talk about religion, it never felt like Sikhi was that. For instance, like my grandparents would wake up and they would do, you know, Nitneym daa paath (*daily prayers*) in the morning. And it was never explained to me as like you do— and this might be different from other people's experiences— but it was never like you do Nitneym every single day and you accrue points, and then you translate those points to go into a heaven. It was just like, you're supposed to do. Like, there's almost, it provided a stability. A source of meaning-making for folks, in my family. Which in some ways, it's great. In another way, it means that a lot of questions that I had never had answers, because they were not questions that were asked when they are growing up, when they were being taught this. But so I think I

learned about the intimacy of it as being really close to your life. And I was younger, I think that felt very violative. I felt very violated by it because you're, you're being pulled into it. You know, you're being told that this is what you should do. It was never this sense of, "This is why we do it. Does this make sense to you? Why doesn't it make sense to you?" And having that sort of organic conversation. And I feel like that's more-so, in some sense what made it [Sikhi], both a religion and not a religion. It [the intimacy and practices] made it [Sikhi] a religion in the way that it was enforced. But in the way that you observed, it is just sort of an experience and part of life, made it feel not so much like a religion, or like a doctrine so to speak.

So that was one source of how the family. You know, you saw them do, my grandparents doing paath (recitation of prayers). And my parents weren't particularly active with their Nitneym or, just with their Sikhi in general when we were younger. That was something definitely that happened later in life when my sister and I went off to college and she started getting more connected with other Sikh youth, other Sikhs in college. Even though we went to Gurdwaara but as we weren't really part of the crowd that was doing keertan, or Gurbaani, or Khaalsa school, or things like that. Don't know why. And you know, but that also was just—it was what it was. But when we went to college, that when my sister became very active and that sort of pulled the family back in after a period of, a sort of just you know. We, within the community, derogatorily use the phrase Sunday Sikhs. But like that was very much what we were when we were growing up. Or like if not that, then for some celebratory occasion like it. In like all the good ways of, it's the central part of your life, you would show up at these events. So it was sort of like a cultural practice in that sense. But in all the cultural practice that uses religious force and power. So you start to get the best and worse and sometimes in some instances it was definitely the worst of both of those. But yeah you go to Gurdwaara. I remember [there] being sort of, like these camps or like Sikh children's days or camps or things like that. I didn't do a ton of those camps. But I remember, as my parents they tried to, "Oh no, you should do this. You should do that." As I got older, it got very, very hard. I remember one time I just, at that point, I learned how to drive, I knew how drive, I had my permit. So I went to the event in the morning and then I couldn't stand to be there anymore. And I just drove away. And I don't remember what it was but I remember getting calls from some uncles and being like, "No, come back, come back." And it was around the time where everyone's like, "If you change your outside and, the inside will just change too," and I'm like, "What about the reverse relationship? What if I wanted to change my inside so that I can respect what this thing that you say I need to do on the outside is?" And they're like, "Oh no, no, no, no. Just do both or, you know, both are fine but do this one now." And I was like, it, just felt. As I got older, I very sort of it. Felt sort of entrapment-y.

So when I got more in touch with my Sikhi was during late of college. So that's when I started. And at that point, my sister was trying to like— she had forged a relationship, so she was trying to understand why I didn't have a relationship or like what were the bases of that? I was already out by that point. I came out in high school. And like I remember telling her, I was like, "Well, the, literally the elders and the spokespeople at the Gurdwaara—." At that time in California, were saying that we should've, we should vote against marriage equality. So I was like— what, you know, like I didn't know what to question. Because that was part of the upbringing. You don't question the faith. "Well if they're saying it's [LGBTQ+ people] not part of it and that means I'm not part of the faith." So I sort of took those terms as the terms for conversation as entry. And it was when my sister was like, well, "That's not everyone. Those are the people who stand on the speakers. They're the one, you know, and they get there in certain ways." And I think that is, she was trying to get me part of the community of friends that she thought I would get along with that were more active in their Sikhi. That's when these shift started happening. So, I think that was like also when I went off to college, but didn't really like come to fruition until late in college.

And then over my lifetime, then I went to grad school in Michigan and that's, you know. I tell this to some other folks from time to time. But that's, [when] I started keeping my hair and tying a dastar (*turban*) senior year of college in undergrad. So going to Michigan was like, when I had to actually confront, what it meant to make friends with a different sort of roop [*form/appearance*], a different sort of like image to the outside world. And like, I mean, I could tell as soon as I started to, keeping my own hair, like a longer beard, the way the look started changing. And this was in California. So like I had lived in California my entire life. Me moving to Michigan of all places, I was like, you know, I was a little bit more prepared for it but it was definitely the sort of, different sort of jarring experience, of the like, you just stare. You just look at me? And like that, and that in some way they are more brash in how they ask questions. They don't really care, always, about how you feel. So they asked questions. And I started learning that, "Oh, I need to, I need to revisit and refine that spiel I used to have when I went to go to school and people ask, "What is Sikhi? I've never heard of this. What is Seekhism?" And I'm like, "No you say it this way." So, sort of like, redeveloping the spiel of what Sikhi was and why I look the way I do, and why I do what I do.

So I think a lot of that, over the course of my development or like over my time, to answer your question in relation to Sikhi and queerness: as the formal institutions of Gurdwara pushed me out and the Sangat did little to nothing to actually bring me back in, it was really, you know, the people who loved me and loved Sikhi and did not see an incompatibility that were trying to make connections. That's when I made one of my really good friends to this day, was in Michigan. And it was her being, an Amritdhari, Keshdhari Sikh, she was like, "There's no problem here. I don't know who told you there's a problem here." And I was like, "Literally everyone. But okay, let's look, let's go with this."

And then grad school. After, after I left Michigan and I went to get my PhD, I started using my own free time to start researching our own Sikh histories. And I was like, "If I trust my friend..." I also at that point was much more in tune with Sikhi, reading it on my own, having a practice with my mother of doing Seyhaj Paath and things like that. We sent daily Hukams [*daily excerpts of Gurbaani*] from back at home because we have Maharaaj [*Sikh holy text*] at home. So like there was a— you know we're back to that place of like in childhood, where it was just a part of life. Even though sometimes I forget to tell people that, "Yeah, I get Hukam every single day," because I don't think of it as like a thing to share. I mean, it's just like, is. Either my dad or my mom are sending it because they're doing Parkaash at home. It is what it is. Yeah, I think it was a PhD when I actually started making, not to the academic connection, but the historical connections between the queerness part of my life and the trans part of my life and the Sikh part of my life. And then I started figuring out my own story, as part of those and trying to figure out how to create different stories. Or not create different, different stories, but create space for different stories to exist at the same time. Because I'm like, "This is what we used to be like." And, maybe that is actually what tradition is and not this narrowed thing that we've decided to call tradition because the people at the podium say it is tradition.

00:16:57**SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah. Yeah. I mean you talked a lot about like this common experience of holding tension. Of also like wanting to fit into the Sangat that seems to be already prescribed for us. But not knowing. It seems like you came to this, like revelation that there was there was a Sangat, right? Like you had your own sort of, like, a Sangat that was defined for you and we get to decide who that Sangat is for us, right? How it like fits?

00:17:26**SPEAKER\_PSK**

I remember I told my mom the first time I was like, you know, your Sangat is all these Panjabi Sikh migrants and people who live in this area. And you take that, and that the extent of your knowledge. So that's the extent of what you want. I was like my Sangat is actually made up of people predominantly, non. Literally the opposite of who your people are. I have the number of Sikhs who are in my Sangat I can count on one hand. And I was like because, if Sangat are the people who bring me closer to my Sikhi, these people bring me closer to my Sikhi. These other folks that you think are my Sangat, actually pushed me away. So I don't know what to make of that for you, but for me, if this is like a concept to hold tension and my goal is to practice my Sikhi and be you know, return our spirits to Guru Saahib, like, that's the role of Sangat. And the constrained way that we sort of define who can and can't be part of it was, that was a tension for me. And I just decided at some point that like, it wasn't going to work.

00:18:24**SPEAKER\_MM**

And also, right, to be. Acknowledgement also of like sort of their journeys, right? It's that our folks are sort of trying to fit in themselves. And so, being immigrants, being in a new space and stuff, that that struggle is also there for them constantly too. So that tension is something they hold onto frequently and find themselves at an intersection to kind of resettle, right? Not to understate your experience but also to kind of hold that value that it's also a challenge for them too.

00:18:58**SPEAKER\_PSK**

If they would name it, I feel it would be a challenge for them.

**SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah, exactly.

**SPEAKER\_PSK**

But, they won't name it. So in some senses, like if you're not going to name it, I'm not gonna. Why should I give you the grace?

00:19:07**SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah, I agree.

00:19:09**SPEAKER\_PSK**

And like it's there, but they have to name it, you know. It sort of like people are like, if you want to heal, you have to acknowledge that there, the arm is bleeding. And if I see your arm bleeding, I can only tell you what the bleeding. If you can't feel that it's bleeding, but

00:19:25**SPEAKER\_MM**

I lost your audio. There there's something.

00:19:29**SPEAKER\_PSK**

I'm sorry. —tell you that your arm is bleeding for so long, until you can feel it yourself. And if you can't feel it, then there's something else going on.

00:19:37**SPEAKER\_MM**

Right right right. Yeah. Yeah, thanks for sharing. You know, the tensions and the valid, like frustrations that come with trying to, trying to fit in. And to try to also like your own sort of like formulating your own identity for your own self. You know, you had shared that you came out in high school.

00:20:08**SPEAKER\_PSK**

Mmm. Mhmm.

00:20:10**SPEAKER\_MM**

And so what did, what does that mean to you? What does coming out mean to you? What does being out mean to you?

00:20:18**SPEAKER\_PSK**

Yeah. I mean today I say that, I'm very much [inaudible]— we're not, sorry not that we have to come out, is that coming out is a continuous constant process in every single space. So I didn't really have that refined sense of what coming out meant. It just meant sort of like, telling people that you're not a heterosexual. I mean, I would say coming out means telling people I'm gay or something like that, or bisexual or queer or whatever, you know, like whatever identity. But really, what it was, it was coming out and saying that, I'm not like you. So for me, yeah, that happened in high school. Moreso with my close friends in high school, than it did with like other folks. I came out to my sister later in high school too. And then to my parents in early college. But then I had to come out again, when I had to have conversations with them about my gender. And unlike when I was younger and there was a lot of silence around it and when I came out. Instead, when I came out with my gender, there was a lot more confusion. A lot more like question-asking. And I don't know if that was because I was older. I don't know if that was because they felt more confident, you know, desensitized by one coming out already. Or because there was something about gender in particular that demands or requires a little bit more policing. I don't know.

You know, you can probably, we can sit here and like talk back and forth about whether we think that, the fact that they think that they can secretly marry you off in one way or the other makes one of those less scary to them. Whereas, you know, outwardly being someone who's supposed to be quote unquote, a boy or a quote unquote a man who walks around more feminine, and wears feminine clothing, you know, air quotes and all those things and could be perceived, you know, at times more, like, a woman than a man. Like maybe there. They probably is a lot of more policing and concern in that regard because that's a lot harder to hide. So I feel like coming out to me is this continuous constant process. Even today, if I meet someone one day, it's not like

I'm out here wearing dresses every single day of my life. Most people are not, I imagine. So like people read your gender differently in any interaction you have with them. So on one day I may feel particularly femme and that may be how they meet me. And then the next time they meet me, I may look completely different. And that has its own, you know implications. Or vice versa. They meet me one day where I look more conforming to them so they don't raise questions or things like that. And the next time they meet me, I do look more non-conforming to them and therefore that raises questions. So yeah, I feel like it's been a, coming out to me is really. It's become more about making yourself legible to other people or it's about making yourself or acknowledging the fact that you are illegible to other folks.

00:23:26SPEAKER\_MM

Yeah and then how that legibility perhaps is tailored to the circumstances that you're in.

00:23:36SPEAKER\_PSK

Yeah. No definitely. I think you know living in California, Michigan, Rhode Island and now in Wisconsin. What legibility means in these different spaces is so different. What you know. And there's a sort of, when I talk about racism outside of California, the black-white binary is still very much a thing, you know. But everyone, whether it's an academic or like some news article or whatever-whatever wants to talk about beyond the binary because they're looking at national statistics. And it just ignores the fact that like so much of our identity is placed-based. If you're living in this city. If you're living in LA, you, you may not love all the centers or things like that. But even like all LA to Bakersfield or LA to Fresno, like it's not that just that the cultural context and conversations may be different, but it's literally the things that you have available to you to help name you, help make you legible, are different. Like where my parents live— not that I'm saying everyone needs to have an LGBT Center— but does not have an LGBT Center. And that makes schools, particularly important in some way. But also makes them particularly targeted in other ways because I live in a pretty conservative, my parents live in a pretty conservative town. So yeah, I think exactly what you're saying, that like legibility is not this like big broad box I've learned in my life. It's very much like constantly negotiated, constantly coming out in every single space. And I mean, I don't think it's that different than when folks sort of like, if a woman enters a space and sees as a room full of cishet men, and then she or they will have to figure out like, “Oh, what, what's about to happen here?” You know, how do I navigate this? I don't think they're the same exact experiences. Because in different contexts, someone like me violating norms of masculinity may actually be very, very harmful. And make me more of a target in certain ways, in certain spaces, than for other folks being conforming. Or me being conforming in the way I look, then being a Sikh, read as a man in certain spaces, could expose me more violence than being non-conforming and outwardly queer in other spaces. So yeah, your question is about coming out, and I feel like, you know, which coming out?

00:25:58SPEAKER\_MM

Yeah. Yeah, there's just so much of a connection to how that sort of plays in your life and how that sort of then reinforces or detaches your relationship to queerness right, and to Sikhi simultaneously? And so were there sort of any historical or personal events that were very formative? I know you shared some. But you know something maybe along the lines of social movements that may have been sort of informative? Or at your personal activism? Or working with different types of communities and organizations?

00:26:49SPEAKER\_PSK

Yeah, I mean, definitely, just because it was California like the marriage equality movement, was something that put everything, put it on the table as something. Whatever your feelings may have been towards whether that should have been with the movement focus, it was there. That was something that at least broke one part of the ice, so to speak, you know. But I think, I think as for many people in my sort of generation of like BLM— Black Lives Matter. Not as like a concerted organized movement, but the conversations around it. The very high-profile murders and just like, I feel like this happens, every generation, it just, you know, comes under a different name. I feel like *that*, because of like, who were my friends at that time, was something that very much was like, obviously important. But I think it was more present in my life because I wasn't in California. Because I was finally outside of the very insular communities that I had been growing up in, and was socialized to believe were like my communities and things of that. I was in very different communities. And that meant that the conversations were different. So I feel like that was an obvious one that really was very formative.

I also feel like, you know, everything that came after that. I grew up, I went to college in a time where Occupy—I forget what year it actually began, but it was just something that either had wrapped up or was bubbling up. But at least it's like, it's experience, its implications are being experienced. Like when I was at college, [they] tried to increase the tuition by almost 30% for one semester to the next. So like, you know, it's not a good movement in any way, but like the neoliberalization of higher education is a big part or just education, of society in general, in the 2000s, was a big one that sort of was part of me, not understanding my identity like in. I mean in some ways, it made me really question the obsession that folks had with identity labels as some sort of destination. And I was like, well this just feels like we're all marketing ourselves to be one thing or the other, the other, or the other, or the other. And it was just confusing to me.

So I think for me, all those sets of movements happening at the same time, raised a lot of questions. And the fact that, in everyone in Sikh-California was thinking about Panjab. Which isn't that a bad thing. But that also meant that like, I was very confused. I was like, this is happening in your backyard and like that, not that we should be disconnected from our homeland but I'm not I'm not seeing a synergy here. I'm not seeing like a dual—I'm not seeing, I'm seeing like one being prioritized. One being deprioritized. Whereas I was sitting there trying to figure out, like, how do I spend my energies across these things? Or, you know, how to identify the things that I can do? And who can I do them for, sort of thing. How can I contribute?

And then those are sort of constant questions that were in my mind. So, yeah, I think like more recently, I mean, wasn't more recently. But around the same time, like I think it was in the mid 2000's. The Sarbat Khalsa happened. I remember that was a big one. That folks, you know, back home, were talking about. And then became something that I had to translate to the people who are not Sikh in my circle, which is like, at that point the vast majority of folks in my circle. Because other folks who were Sikh were sitting back at home. So yeah, I think that was another one that played a factor.

More recently, just the more greater visibility around transness has been a big one. It's one that I have been more engaged with, in some ways but like that's an impacting one. And it all came down to sort of like, as I started thinking about—as I was questioning who I was, as everyone is asking me—like, you know, they're basically asking you to out yourself—are you gay? Or like are you this or that? The only people who asked if I was Sikh or not, were the people who knew I was gay and was very Sikh and wanted me to like take a stance. And I was like, “Wait, I'm sorry. That's not a question that you need to ask me, or you get to ask me. I just am or am not based off of, like, what I do and that's just how this works. I'm sorry.”

00:31:05 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

And I remember movement wise, as I started learning more about like the sexual liberation movement in the U.S., just like the histories of it and how it tied, or didn't, with civil rights. All those kinds of things. I really started focusing in, on the fact that a lot of this came out from the police targeting sex workers. So, when I was in my PhD program, I tried to focus my energies on how do I support anti-policing or anti-incarceration efforts? And, you know, I was busy. Wasn't like I able to do a whole ton of things. But that's sort of where I started thinking about, how do I use these resources? The skills that I've learned in the academy, to help, you know, contribute, volunteer, create resources for communities, that activists said that they needed resources for, they needed support for. So I think that SESTA-FOSTA was another big one that happened. It wasn't really a movement but it was sort of like. It was a push against this huge power grab that was happening to rein in sexuality in its various forms but under, the under the umbrella of sex trafficking so to speak and targeting sex workers and things of that sort. So yeah, I guess that's “sex work is work” movement. Yeah, all those things. I feel, I do, I did answer your question but it's, it's all over the place because that's sort of like the world I live in, inhabit in is like, popping into all these places.

00:32:35 **SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah. And it's also sort of the, the social awareness that we have also. Maybe perhaps as academics and also being in California, right? Is that we realize a lot of these things are intersectional and they impact one another. So—.

00:32:50 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

Forces questions. And I like asking questions and trying to find answers. So like, I find that that's not as common of a trait.

00:32:59SPEAKER\_MM

Yeah, well it's, it's the premise of Sikhi right? Is to, is to is to be a student. It also seems, and, you know, if you don't want to sort of dive into this, I can completely understand. It also seems like, people are— I don't know what their intentions are or whatever, but it also seems like the burden kind of falls on you to kind of help people reconcile, the identity of being, you know attached to queerness and Sikhi. And do you feel that way? Is there something that you think that is there? Or the commonality of people questioning that indicates that there is something that still needs to be sort of understood?

00:33:53SPEAKER\_PSK

I mean, yes. In this I think most of the questions you ask, “Yes” is probably the simple answer. I don't think at least. I mean, I hate speaking about like, quote, unquote Sikh community or “the Sikh community” or you know, as a homogeneous or as a unified whole. I think in my experiences is what I find is that there's, and I actually do think it's generational, partly diasporic but really generational because I'm seeing folks like in Panjab also asking similar questions. But the context being that, here, there's the systems are different. So asking questions, may or may not result in the same types of harm. Whereas in Panjab, we do very much still have patriarchy mixed with feudalism. And that means that if you ask certain questions, it results in certain types of violences. Which, you know, we do not have a feudal system in California in certain ways. You know, so when you raise questions, we get, we navigate different tensions, different exposures to violence.

So *that* to say, yes. I feel like the younger generation is doing a lot more pre-work when they ask questions, in my experience. Whereas the folks in my generation, maybe a few years younger than me— like, I'm what? It's 2023. I'm 32 later this year— so like people who are maybe in their mid to late 20s, I don't really see them doing this work a little bit. But I, definitely not people who are older than me. I feel like that, that's, what, the majority of people in our community? So a very small slice in my experience are coming asking questions — having asked questions and coming to me personally in my experiences and having dialogue with me, right? They're coming to me to not only need to resolve their identity, but to actually have conversations with me about their identity and try to learn from what I've learned. I've seen that a lot more among the young, younger folks. Folks, who are a little bit younger, the age group that I said [mid-to late 20s and older folks], it's still not so much doing that. I feel they do expect me to resolve, if they come to me that is like I'm not saying the world expects me to resolve, but in my experience, people come to me. They do expect me to resolve the tensions. Which means that they haven't actually done anything to rethink. They just want another, they want an explanation that they can pull up in case anyone asks them.

You know, I remember when I told my parents that I wasn't going to go meet their extended families unless they finally told them about me. And I was like it's not my job to tell them. That's your family. I don't need them in my life. You want them in my life and you maybe need them in your life, but I don't need them in my life. So if you want them, you need to tell them. And I remember one of them [my parents] telling when they went to go talk to one of my relatives, they were like, you know, I asked, what was their response? And they said, “Well—,” one of them was just like, “We're in America. What can we do now? The kids are gonna say, what they're gonna say. They're gonna do what they're going to do.” In my mind, I'm like, “That's not even acceptance. That's not even tolerance, that's a— for anyone who knows Panjabi— and especially Panjabi men, that's a, “These kids are lucky they're here. Because if they were over there, this would never have happened.”

So I feel like, yeah I still feel sort of— or they come to the—. And I prefer something like this, which my dad does which is like, “We all have our own lives and we were all made in our own unique way. What you do is your business and what I do is my business. But that doesn't have to change how I love you or that you're my child”, you know? And like, think, not that I would say everyone needs to like adopt that precise framework because my dad has much more nuanced approach to it. I'm just being very like simplistic. But his— I would describe his approach to life and to this question of like resolving tensions is to be pluralistic. And that took a lot of work. I can say like yeah he no longer asks me to resolve these issues for him but that's because me and my sister have been working to resolve these issues for him so that he's actually gotten to a point where he no longer needs us to resolve them for him if that makes sense.

And then broadly in the community, I think partly the issue is that like we still have a very strong elder culture, and a respect to culture. So all these people who are now in positions of power, who grew up or went to college, or whatever, with folks, who are more openly like me, out. Whether they're, you know, whatever quote unquote category of sexuality they fall in that's non-heterosexual. They [these people in positions of power] realize that, “Oh we need to do something. Like my friend is so-and-so so, like I can't not do anything.” So like they asked



you to come give talks, or like workshops, or just you know be a poster in their corporate setting or work business and then, “Come talk to us. Tell us about your life, struggle or whatever.” You know. So I feel, in that sense, there's still a lot of like asking folks like me to resolve or like folks in my generation to resolve those tensions. As if we aren't trying to resolve them for ourselves!

00:39:14**SPEAKER\_MM**

And then that's a testament to this project right? Is that we're trying to use it as sort of the platform, which we can sort of figure those things out based on our stories and our own individual experiences.

00:39:33**SPEAKER\_PSK**

Yeah, I hope so. I really hope so.

00:39:36**SPEAKER\_PSK**

Yeah, it's our umeed [*hope*] right?

00:39:39**SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah. And it's like incredible that you and your sister have such a bond that you're kind of like a united sort of like front to tackle this and have the sort of shared understanding and energy. And that probably makes it a little bit more tangible to your folks, right? Is that, both of you guys, you're bringing this about and there's something to be acknowledged and respected and honored.

00:40:13**SPEAKER\_PSK**

I mean if you think about the household as a union. If your siblings aren't with you, they are class traitors.

00:40:19**SPEAKER\_MM**

yeah

00:40:20**SPEAKER\_PSK**

And not in a good way!

00:40:24**SPEAKER\_MM**

And, you know, kinship structures in our family are very rigid— in our societies, right? And so, just talking about respecting your elders. And if it's an older brother and older sister and you know they kind of have pushed it away, or didn't even consider it, or don't understand it, you know, and are not willing. That it really forecloses a lot of opportunities for people.

00:40:48**SPEAKER\_PSK**

Yeah, oh for sure. I have a cousin who's like, been having a lot of these conversations with her parents and her parents actually, one of them said it to her of, they're very open now, to sort of learning/unlearning, as we like, to say, things like that. But like he put it so clearly of, like, “People in my generation, we were not taught to question those older than us. And we did not expect them to learn new things from us. Or, things for us. Or on our behalf. In order to make our lives easier.” And he's like, “Your generation and the one below it, does expect that change because they're not willing to put up with this shit anymore, right?” And that's not to say that other people of older generations were willing to put up with shit. They were probably quieted out, excluded, forced out, you know, all these sorts of things— murdered, you know.

So yeah, I think that you're completely right. Not only is there now a willingness or acceptance, but it also a necessity. I think. Especially for folks who come into like migrate, like, are in the diaspora, and, you know. before— for better or worse, elders could take their kids and their grandkids for granted, because what else are they going to do? You know, they can't get rid of us. Whereas now, like the precarity is a little different. Like, you know, the children are investments that are, that the parents need actual return on, because they don't have

the land or the wealth, or the family, or the extended network to fall back on, should something happen. Which for some people, in my case, turns into, in my family's case, eventually turned into, "We need to respect our children and figure out how to be with them." Or my cousin's case, or some other cases. But I think for a lot of other folks it's turning into a need to double down and be harmful and try to restrict and control which will be more, the way that you would try to make sure that you can get the most oil out of the seed as possible.

00:42:39 **SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah. Yeah. And you know, there's just so much about that, that then can kind of go back into like finding healing and nourishment. And, you know how that exists or doesn't exist? Or where do you go? And, and all of that. How have you found healing and nourishment, with respect to your identity?

00:43:13 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

Yeah. How have I found healing? What a wonderful question. Someone asked me that, someone I am dating asked me that last week. And I was like, I have an answer but also it doesn't—.

00:43:25 **SPEAKER\_MM**

That's a great question for a date to ask

00:43:27 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

And I was like. I don't, like my old practices don't work anywhere. I've been talking to my best friend about this and I was like, I'm in such a new context, stage of life wise. That the old tools don't necessarily translate to this new context. So that's why I'm like, I have an answer to your question. But in some sense, it's like the answer that worked a year ago and I'm still figuring out healing practices for this new phase of my life. So I'm not lying. These are just like the things that they don't necessarily work for me anymore.

Like, in the past, talk therapy was really nice and it was helpful. And I think it was formative for my twenties. It was rough, not just bringing things up, but it was hard to find a therapist you trusted. One who was willing to like work with you, which I feel is just such a frustrating, ubiquitous, common experience. And it isn't even, doesn't always have to do with identity. Some are just terrible therapists and do not know how to actually hold space for the mess that is existence, you know. Yeah. So I feel like that was one.

I broke my back two years ago, coming on three, and that sort of shifted my care practices and the healing practices to a lot more of focusing on my body. And you know, I'm sitting in this interview with a heating pad on my back even though I'm almost three years out of my injury coming up soon. And I'm just— first I resented it and then I was like, what a waste of energy to resent this. I can be angry, but I can be upset from time to time. But, to hold on to this anger, that I can't do the things that I used to do anymore, like. Let it be fleeting because I can't have this be my hobby. It just it was too much.

So I think for me a care practice became, you know, partly I'm an academic, partly because I'm an ethnographer, I think a lot. And partly because of my upbringing, you know, there are issues of anxiety and preoccupation and avoidance and all that stuff that they talk. The one benefit of this is that I learned how to be hyper aware of my emotions. And I try to stay in them as long as I need to, instead of like pushing them under the rug because I know how harmful it can be to ignore the emotions. And surrounding myself, I said this earlier, like my Sangat that was predominantly non-Sikhs. I have a very strong network. And I consider that as part of my healing practices is knowing when to reach out to them, to be supportive of me. And it took a while to learn how to have that vulnerability with them without it feeling like I'm a burden to them. And that's still something I struggle with today. Is like healing practices mean that you will, there's work and work is not without weight. So like you either you carry it alone or you carry it with people. The best you can do is like if you're having other people help you, is that you have their consent and their love to do so. Do you know what I mean? So I feel like having a strong, I mean kinship network I guess is the best way to put it. You know, other people call it chosen family which now just feels so cliché because it's become so taken up. So like I still use Sangat in that sense. But yeah no, just like learning, learning more about myself and actually not running away from myself has been an incredibly important healing practice. Grounding myself in the morning through listening to Nitneym or doing Nitneym myself. My, whether it's lighting a candle in the evening or lighting incense in the morning. Waking up to do exercises and stretches. Like, you know. I think back to like— if our physical body is meant to be the vessel through which our spirit is meant to go through. Learning how to respect it and honor it and the

relationship between it and my spirit is part of my care practice. And I'm not 100% all the time of course. But it's like sort of working, getting to a place where it— you're, if something happens, you're, you have the tools to heal, begin the healing process, you know?

So all of that is a lot of abstract stuff to say is that some of the talk therapy was something that worked in the past and I'm still trying to figure out how, or what, if, it'll fit into my present. But all the other things I mentioned are key parts of how I like take care of myself. I turn off work at a certain time. That was something I had to learn after my, after my bodily injury, after I broke my back, was that I need, I cannot work past a certain time. Taking up cooking. So I've learned up a lot. Spend more time with my mom when I'm back at home, learning recipes and that's sort of my care practice. I was having a really, really shitty day last week, and I was literally making the roti, and I just zoned out. And it was like healing. I don't know what it was but I was just like, there's something about making it for someone, something about making— thinking about the joy that they'll have when they eat it, knowing that *I made this*. Then just seeing it go from like zero to 100. And then, there's something so meditatively healing about that. Yeah. Those are just a handful of things that come to mind.

00:48:49SPEAKER\_MM

Yeah. Yeah. I think it's also sort of, as your relationship to whatever sort of identity that you're trying to develop for yourself or formulate— as that sort of evolved, your healing practices are going to move all of your relationship to your body's going to evolve, you know,

00:49:08SPEAKER\_PSK

They don't tell you this!

00:49:09SPEAKER\_MM

Yeah, they totally do not tell you this. Yeah. And you know, it makes me think about like sort of intimacy. And like, not just the individual sense. But you also mentioned sort of our physical sense, holding our spirit, and the vessel that holding our spirit. How do you think about intimacy? How do you think about desire then by extension? What does it intimacy mean to you? And how does this sort of relate to your relationships?

00:49:47SPEAKER\_PSK

What a beautiful, big question. And I know this question exists because I'm part of the research team and still it just pops up and you're like, "Ahhh."

00:49:58SPEAKER\_MM

I think it's also sort of where you're at, what your frame of mind is and when the question comes up, you know?

00:50:06SPEAKER\_PSK

What is intimacy? It's so yeah, having this question at this current stage of my life, which is February 2023 is such a—. I was with some of my best friends this past week and we were talking about this. And all the things that we were talking about in relation to this. What a funny time for this to happen. But also, you know, Hukam is beautiful in that way. What is intimacy? Gosh. I mean I hate to be overly abstract, but intimacy at its core is who can I trust my spirit with? And I desire finding those people who do so.

SPEAKER\_MM

Who you trust with your spirit, you mean?

00:50:58SPEAKER\_PSK

I desire finding people who I can trust with my spirit, yes. And so much of what I think about is life, from my life experiences, is learning how to find those people or those other spirits. I mean at its core I feel like, that's what intimacy is. Because it's *so hard* Manu, it's *so* hard. Like you try letting someone new into your life. I'm gonna laugh so much when I listen to this interview a year from now. You try letting someone new into your life and like all the stability, you had, it it just like, everything gets unsettled. You know, and that doesn't mean like you re-question all your existing relationships. But you start questioning like, where does this new piece fit in?

And does that then call for a change of some other thing? You know? And the thing is that if you've already found people that you trust your spirit with, you don't fear losing them. But now you're trying to figure out this new spirit that's come into your life. And you're like, "What do I do with it? Can I trust it?" Not only with mine but also mine is being held by these other ones. "Can I trust it with them? Can they trust this spirit too?" You know what I mean? And I feel like, for whatever reason my desire, like I don't think it's a bad desire— and I mean, me, of course, immediately trying to jump to a normative framing of my actions. Like I think partly I look for, I try to develop practices to identify other spirits I can trust my spirit with and whose spirit I can trust. And partly I do that because I want to find these people, you know. And I want to for myself and for them. Because that means I, hopefully, I can also be there for them. I mean, I would hope, I'm there for them. But at the same time I can't disassociate that, or distance that, from like how I was raised to feel so un— be around people who I did not trust with my spirit.

00:53:01 **SPEAKER\_MM**

Mhmm

00:53:05 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

And who maybe I did trust and then was hurt for it.

00:53:10 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

Or who trusted in me. And I just didn't recognize that that's what is happening. And then I broke your trust and hurt them. You know? So I'm not saying that, that makes it a trauma response. But I'm saying that like my desire can't be distanced or separated from the joy that I hope to seek, but also— going back to your other question— heal from and heal the harm I can cause other.

Yeah, that that's my abstract answer but I also feel like it informs so much of what I do, is like an ethical practice that like it's not—.

00:53:47 **SPEAKER\_MM**

I don't think it's abstract.

00:53:50 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

Oh good. good.

00:53:50 **SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah, go ahead.

00:53:53 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

*[this portion of the interview had interconnectivity issues]*

You know I think it's my own personal rehat *[guidelines]* that I developed over life. And I can only hope that so many Shabads and Gurbaani in Guru Saahib are about about, like, "You need to find your Saadh-Sangat *[truth-oriented community]*, the people that you can build the path to reunion with the Guru." And I'm just like, "I feel like this [approach to desire and healing] is a version, or my attempt of doing that. But within the plurality of this world, or in the dubidha *[binaries]* of this world, you know, all those kinds of things. And I'm trying to develop— some work and some don't— new one comes in and the old ones don't work. And you're like, "Oh shoot, I need a whole other, need a whole other set of practices for this one."

00:54:40 **SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah, I mean, I think—. Yeah. The relationships we build or we wish to build are all informed from our experiences and our stories. And yeah. What about I mean, what a blessing to have, to know what kind of, what kind of spirits you're looking for? You know, can feel comfortable with. I think there's something about knowing your comfort and knowing yourself and being grounded. You know, that's such a blessing to be able

to, then extend that in relations to others, in relationships to others. And, you know, I really, I really hope that for everybody. In these sorts of contexts, it's really hard to. And that is something that's— I'm hoping that these stories will sort of help reconcile.

00:55:40 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

I hope so. I hope so. Or at least give people an extra possibility of how to approach things.

00:55:51 **SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah. And you sort of mentioned how you were sort of falling back into trying to describe things in the normative sense. So I'm going to tap back into that question— that piece that you shared. So yeah, how have common narratives or stereotypes in storytelling or in Sikh history, or LGBTQIA+ histories influenced you? Do they affect the types of people, futures, or desires you can imagine? Yeah, I was just going to say these can be narratives around resilience, nonconformity, survival. You touched on a lot of these things and sort of different experiences that you had.

00:56:41 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

Yeah, I mean it's— I didn't really actively get into rethinking Sikh history or like engaging with what were the common narrative of Sikh history really until like my PhD. It's not like I didn't hear them when I was younger. I heard them all the time. But it's not like I— I mean partly to go back to the very beginning of our interview. I just don't remember. They're just part of my childhood and my life that I was just at the current moment, I do not have the key to access, you know. So like, you hear about the stories about the Shaheed's [*martyrs*], of our you know, our Gurus and the people who fought for and with them. And I remember like going on camp. Sitting in at a Gurdwara when a camp was going on. And they were talking about these— certain Gurus were like this way and other Gurus were like this way. This Guru's life marked a shift in Sikh philosophy and things that, you know. Those kinds of things. And in my mind I was just like, this is so confusing. Like why? Why? And I mean, at the time I was a child, it seems irrelevant. Because like people weren't really doing the work to help *ground* these stories. So, when I think about the common narratives. So all of that to say, when I think about the common narratives and around Sikh history, specifically, I just don't think we engage them. I feel like we just sort of like— I've written about this in other places, but we sort of engage with like valorization. Which not to discredit or say that there isn't valor there and things of that sort. But it becomes the only thing we're allowed to do. Or we're only allowed to grieve our harm. And again, that's not to at all put down any of the harm we went through. It's just that like you want me to only look at *that* from our history. You want me to *only* learn from that from our history? Why don't we have more stories about all the garden, or the trees that our Gurus planted? All the relationships with new people that up, until that time were considered unworthy, that our Guru said, “No, you are [worthy] of course. The Guru sits within you. How could you be unworthy?” You know? And like you hear them, bits and pieces and they're instrumentalized sometimes to serve whatever agenda or whatever argument is being made at the time. So I feel like I don't have a lot of access or engagement with those common Sikh narratives because they've always been so dissociated from the actual way that I live. Or the, what has been part of my living and my life up to date.

But lately, you know, I hear about, people love to talk about Banda Singh Bahadur and like the destruction of the mandi system or the feudal land system. That came up a lot during the farmers' protests. You hear a lot about Bhagat Singh and then whether or not, what faith he was and things of that sort. You hear about Gandhi and you hear about like his terribleness and like his, the way that he sold out Sikhs and things like that. Again, I'm not disagreeing or agreeing with any of these. I'm just like a naming about, they're like, these are the ones that always seem to pop up from time to time. You also hear about common narratives about Khalistan.

And things of that sort. And you try to find yourself in these histories, and you start seeing that there is immense harm. You know to go to your earlier question about healing practices. It's almost like, to use the metaphor I was using earlier: If, you know, some of our parents aren't willing or able to recognize the cut on their arm and their bleeding, so much of the rest of the Kaum or the Sangat, only looks at the arm and only looks at the bleeding and refuses to acknowledge anything else of the body except as a source for more blood.

And so, I had just it, I have to find, I have to be very critical of our Sikh histories. Not to denounce them, or challenge them or anything like that. But to think about like, “Oh, I'm an academic, but I'm also like queer. So I like to, deconstruct things. I like to question why certain things are certain ways because my existence was supposed to be quote, unquote, a certain way and I ran said, ‘No.’” And I feel like that's what makes me queer.

Not the person I sleep with or the people I pursue, it's the fact that I refuse to be pulled into this way of life that is so harmful and destructive. Which you would think would be so consistent with what would be common narratives of Sikhi. But the way that we tell our common stories or our tropes, is not that—we don't tell them as deconstructing the social world in order to find spiritual emancipation. And we use certain practices as a way to remind us, or guide us, on certain paths or whatever. We don't do that. I see it happening *more* lately. But it hasn't really, it happens in the form of, like, speakers or influencers or like people trying to carve out like, “No, you can look like x y z and be this,” you know? And I'm not saying that that is not a good way, or I'm not saying that there's a better way or that there is a best way. It's just it makes it very hard for me to engage given my life experiences, these common narratives.

And with queers history and their trans histories is like I feel like I relate way more with trans histories than even like the LGB movement histories because so much of LGB movement history as mainstream or normative or common is about actually you know, discourses around human rights. We are indeed humans and we do indeed deserve rights, but I think, *I* get to decide what my rights are to a certain extent. You know, we live in a collective, or collectives, or set of collectives, so there's like things to be debated and things to figure out how we relate to each other. But it is you know. So much of LGB movements is about like having someone else affirm our rights and it's always then becomes a problem of: which rights and who gets to define which rights and who gets to define who gets to legitimate and give us those rights? So it's always been a bit hard because that reminds me so much of like my experiences with like harmful versions of Sikhi or not even Sikhi, just Sikhs. Whereas with trans histories, even though there's so much harm and so much constant destruction and constant exclusion, for as long as we have had people who have been gender variant or gender non-normative, or gender expansive, they've always found joy. Or they've made joy. And to me, I'm like *that's* Chharhdi-kala. Chharhdi-kala is not ignorance or avoidance or destruction of the pain that you're having. It's moving through the pain because it exists, into something else. And then moving from that, sometimes back into the pain because you exist as a body, and bodies experience pain.

So yeah, I think in terms of the common narrative and stories, I think that's sort of how I approach each of them. And I think a lot for me early on in my, in my mid to early twenties, I think I focus a lot on U.S.-based like trans histories. You know, revolutionary histories in that sense. Which is how I came across the stories of sex workers and how their advocacy for themselves was tied so much to liberation in other ways. But then I started thinking about global movements. Like the biggest sex workers movement, coincidentally, happens in India. And I'm just sitting here, I'm like, “What is, like, how did I find myself in this movement or in connection to this movement?” And then I look out and over and I'm like, “Whoa! My people over there too!”

01:04:43 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

So yeah, I haven't lately, [I have started] especially thinking less about myself in terms of U.S.-based understandings of queerness or transness. But like, just being southern, of the southern Asian continent, not south asian, but southern Asian continent. Of the numerous cultures there. And of all the immense, immense plurality and diversity and types of beauty that exists in the types of relationships that can exist. That's where I've been finding a lot of home. Like my sister says, she's like, “You don't, you're not the flamboyant and gay. You don't do these things of like U.S.-based people of color, Black culture, gay stuff.” She's like, “You're just doing Panjabi kurhi nakkhra [*feminine flirty mannerisms*].”

01:05:25 **SPEAKER\_MM**

[chuckles]

01:05:28 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

And I'm like, “Yeah, actually, that's right.”

01:05:33 **SPEAKER\_MM**

That ada [*way of being/expressing*] is very different too. I would just say, right?

01:05:35 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

And that's the thing. It's once you now have that label to name it, you all the other parts of you start aligning. You're like, “Oh this part that I thought wasn't here—.” That, it's like. Like I was talking to someone, the person

I'm dating last week, and I was like, you know, "People think I'm loud and rambunctious and colorful. And they're like, 'Oh, it's because they're queer.'" And I'm like, "No, it's because I'm Panjabi!" [mutual chuckles] And it's just like, you know, having these other ways of thinking about myself, I'm just like it— it's not that it's more freeing. It just feels like less needs to be done to legiblize myself.

01:06:20**SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah, I mean, you know let's talk about, we've talked about like plurality and everything. And I have, I kind of feel like you indirectly responded to how you may sort of formulate your identity and sort of categorize it— or not wanting to categorize it— or depending on the experience in context, right becoming legible or illegible in the moment. But what do you— like, if you were to sort of say that you identify with the LGBTQIA+ like sort of label. What does that mean to you? To yourself? And how would you define queerness? You kind of jumped into, a little bit about how you think about it or what you sort of experience and how you came to that. But if you were to sort of share your definition or sort of what you hold onto or what your hopes and aspirations around queerness are?

01:07:31**SPEAKER\_PSK**

I mean the labels I use now, in this present stage of my life are queer and trans and non-binary. Yeah, but those labels for me are less—. The language I use with others who, you know, other trans folks, other queer folks I talk with it, is that these are just these are not destinations. These are things that we're using in this time, in this place, to help others understand maybe who we are, what we need, what they can do to support us, those kinds of things, right? So in that case, like these labels— the way I approach LGBTQIA+ or just any sort of those labels is a way, is a doorway. And I don't think of it as like, an all-encompassing doorway, so to speak. But I think of it as like one entry point into the complexity of that spirit. And there are so many other doorways. So many. Some of them are more linked than others. Some of them are the same doorway with just like shifting labels. Some of them lead from one into the other. So for me, yeah, those are those are ones I use.

And you know, I have— if I define Panjabi in a particular way then I identify with that as a label like. I do— I was born and raised here. So I can't say I have a connection to the land over there or anything like that. But like my family ties and there are cultural ties. And I think back to the history of Panjab, there are definitely sort of like emotional linkages passed down through stories. And emotions and value systems that are passed down through there that are hard to make sense through other wise. Like how do I describe the fact that I have a phulkari jewelry box sitting next to my bed? No, it's not because it's pretty colors. I mean it is pretty colors but that's not why I have it. There's some tie there that I'm projecting onto this.

Sikh. Obviously if I didn't say that. Yeah.

I mean those are, those are some of the ones that come to mind. And I know that not all of those are in the LGBTQIA+ category. But I feel like if we're talking about doorways, then yeah, you know some of those are doorways that lead into other ones, and some of them are overlapping and things like that. And I use them as ways yeah to help others understand me. But also for me sometimes to step out of myself, literally in some cases. And just to like maybe let the pressure cooker off. Sometimes it seems like pressure building inside those doors. Sometimes it's nice to just open them and air things out so to speak. But that's how I approach those labels. I think I might have forgotten the rest of your questions. That's how I think about and approach those categories for me.

01:10:31**SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean yeah. I was just more broadly asking how you would define queerness but, I think—

01:10:39**SPEAKER\_PSK**

Yeah. I think I mentioned a little while ago. That way at least. I understand queerness is it's a political identity. And it is, it's not, I hate saying commitment. Because that makes it sound like there's a gatekeeping practice. But it's really a self-commitment to not like—. It's a self-commitment to enabling others to honor the vast diversity of life that we have in this world. I used to, way back when, when I had a conversation with someone like on a panel or something. I can't remember. Maybe we're just emailing who knows. But I was like, "Your community is not the people who you share an identity with. Your community is the home in which your shared identities

with other people feel safe.”

So for me, queerness is the label that people take on who want to build that home. So it's open to others but at the same time, you worry about people. People, instrumentalize identities, they appropriate identities, in order to better, you know, for whatever material gain, social, political gain. People will do that. People have been, have always done that. That's not a new phenomenon. So I feel like, for me, at least I would rather create that shared space of safety and then be prepared for harm and healing than to live constantly behind a border in fear that requires security.

That's queerness to me.

01:12:31 **SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah, and that was the other part of the question to sort of what are your aspirations and hopes and umeedan.

01:12:39 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

Yeah. My umeedan is that how we have so many of these homes that people are able to just hop from one to the other. You know sounds idealistic, but, like, homelessness is a, it's a policy decision. So, like, quite literally, I wish people were housed. That's my umeedan. I literally. Like maybe it's my— just like queerness. And like the fear of— when I was coming out to my parents, my biggest fear was I would get kicked out of the house. So maybe this ties back to like the fact that I can never take my housefulness, housedness for granted, that makes it such an important thing to me. I was like, “How can you do anything in this world unless you have a place to go back to that is home and safe?” I just. I. I can't. And like in the US and so many other parts of this world, we just decide that it's okay. That it is other people's problems or someone else's. Who knows, whose problem or fault it is. But like, my umeed, like at the very basic level. Like it begins there. Begins materially, you know. Like spiritually, Guru Saahib and Baani talk about like the body being home for our spirit. So like I mentioned earlier in conversation about like trying to do healing practices to care for that body, that vessel for this spirit.

Materially a house is a very great, a home, something, is a very great way, a care practice, so to speak for that body. But if I'm trying to build that home spiritually within myself, it requires— *maybe*, maybe that's my own bias just given the current world that we live in— it requires some sort of stability, some sort of house, some sort of safety in order to do that building. And yeah, I feel like sometimes the most spiritual people you'll find the most connected to the Guru will probably be, you know folks who are the most precarious in this world. Is there any surprise that our Gurus said to center them and put them forth and uplift them? (long pause). I think not.

01:14:51 **SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah. Yeah. I mean we've touched on most of the questions. We've talked about. It's really interesting how you started with that there's a mosaic but that you haven't found sort of the binding glue to your mosaic. But I feel like everything you've shared, like so far, prabh, like it just, it feels like— it's there, you know. Yeah, on the receiving end and I feel like it's there.

**SPEAKER\_PSK**

Thank you.

**SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah and there's just so many more like pieces that are just going to come into it and you're just going to be continuously building. So I kind of have this image— as you were speaking like— I was like putting a mosaic together. So it was like really beautiful for you to like share that in the beginning and I kind of got that imagery.

01:15:52 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

Thank you! None of this was planned! I promise I have been free, just saying things.

01:16:06 **SPEAKER\_MM**



Well I'm glad I'm glad it's been organic! You know one of the things that we worry on the other end is sort of like whether it feels forced or not, but I'm glad it was organic. Yeah. So what are some hopes and aspirations for yourself?

01:16:19 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

A friend asked me this last year and I just stared at him. And he was like, "Nope you have to answer." And I was like, "I don't know, I can't think of." And he was like, "Nope. You have to think of it now." I was like, "How dare you? This is not okay." [said in a joking tone]

Gosh. Safety. I always come back to that. Like if I could just take the safety, I feel amongst like my loved ones and close close peoples, and just cherish, let it grow. I feel like that's what's made the biggest difference in these past few years of my life. Is that I've had that. And it's enabled me to dream. Think. Heal. And I would. My dream, I hope my umeedan is that more people get that.

So what are, what, I want to do, things that help make that possible. You know. This project, this conversation any, conversation I have with others is part of that. On a deep intrinsic level. I don't know where it comes from, but that, it does fulfill me. It provides me, maybe purpose is the right word, maybe not fulfilled. But it gives me a purpose and orientation. That, and if nothing else that is, what desire is. That's like on the macro level— or like the micro micro and the macro macro level.

On the basic of I just like I just want more moments. I want more moments to love and be loved. Learn what love is in all the different ways that it can be. You know? In Baani, there are so many different ways that love is expressed. To think that we as humans, as spirits in human bodies, limit ourselves or are told to limit ourselves from all the different types of love that we could have. So sad. And I just feel like there, there's emancipation there for our spirits, in being able to experience so many different kinds of love: sibling love, familial love, platonic love, romantic love, whatever it is, you know. It just reminds me of bell hooks's book *All About Love*, you know. That's what's coming to mind. I'm just like, it's transformative. You know, we were talking earlier about something new entering your life and how it's so destabilizing. But if that new thing is entering your life and it's giving love and you're able to love it in some form, or that spirit that is there— what a beautiful exchange you know. That doesn't just change you or the other person, it changes everyone in that network. I feel like on a very— yeah. That like on a literal level. I just love, I'd love. That Is something, that, that's something I would want as well. As like desire, umeed.

And of course, anything that I have for myself, I want others to be able to have access to it. I don't know. Yeah, maybe that's just like the kid in me who's, just like there's no reason that I'm any specialer than the person next to me. Like, you deserve this too. It maybe whatever you think of that I can't think of, I deserve that too. Maybe? Who knows? Yeah, I would love our Sangat to actually learn what it means to live and breathe in that kind of love. Instead of just live and breathe in like the fear that we surround ourselves with. You know that I'm not being dense or naïve. But it's hard work. It requires risk. Baani. Sikhi is literally all about abandoning this [easier] road to a certain extent. So yeah.

01:20:05 **SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah. Yeah, there's also something that that is also binding. I think, in sort of the conversation we've had thus far. Is that you you've taken sort of your experience with, like, Sikhi and you have this understanding, this in-depth, understanding of these things called intimacy and desire and love. And you know, talk about like common narratives that we were talking about, "Oh, we're always talk about valorization or ego" or, "Defending ourselves" or "defending our honor," right? And those are the sort of the stories that we hear. But what you have found and sort of the work that you've done, emotional work that you've done, the spiritual work that you've done, like you you kind of found those bits and pieces. And I like, I love that because I think that's sort of really helpful for us to kind of engage with Sikhi in such a different way, right? What does it mean to be loved? What does it mean to love? What does it mean to love yourself? What does it mean to love others? You know and I really appreciate that. I think there's just so much richness that sort of almost kept away from us, you know. Yeah, but you're like, been able to tap into that and stuff and yeah, you give me hope.

01:21:28 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

Oh, my gosh. Thank you. You give me hope, how dare you throw that at me?

01:21:36SPEAKER\_MM

(mutual laughter) No I mean. It's also I like feel like the umeed gets translated into, “Yeah, there's things that you know, that we kind of have to do on our individual level, also to engage”, you know, and that, “There is a path.” Which kind of wants me to talk about also about emancipation and liberation. And sort of how that sits with, at this intersection, right? Like, how does that sit with you? With Sikhi, and with queerness?

01:22:11SPEAKER\_PSK

Thank you. Thank you. I can— you know, going back to the earlier part of our conversation. It's, it's the desire, right? It's what, as much as it's informed by the harm that I've experienced or been— been, been the harmer. So to speak it's also about trying to imagine something better. And thankfully we have Sikhi that gave us ideas that like— what is it actually— gave us ideas and also asked us, “What does it mean for the Guru to be in each of us?” Some of us act terrible, Yes. The Guru still there. What does that mean? And in us. Those that we hate. The Guru is there. What does that mean? In the existence around us. What does that mean? The nature of the land, the water, the air, the birds, the sound? It's just. I mean I feel bad every time I get in the car. (laughter) I'm like, oh my gosh, did I destroy something? And then I love driving. And then I love road trips. And I'm like, it also zones me out and take you somewhere else. Like this is also, everything is destructive and constructive at the same time. I have no— I have no good answer for this. But yeah, thank you. Thank you for sharing space and opening up space for that.

01:23:49SPEAKER\_MM

Yeah yeah. I mean it's just like, you know, as much as I didn't want to give my own reflection and stuff like that, too. Because I want this time to be about you and sort of your story. I think it's also human to kind of share the emotional impact that this story is having already. And there's something to be said about also sharing similar experiences or questioning the same sort of way and seeking answers. Yeah so it's comforting.

01:24:30SPEAKER\_PSK

I appreciate that, thank you. My spirit feels whole-er than it did before.

01:24:34SPEAKER\_MM

Good. Yeah, and so I just have one last question. What do you hope comes out of sharing this story with us, your life history with us?

01:24:51SPEAKER\_PSK

Surprisingly, I do have an answer for this question. Because I'm one of the researchers on this project. No, I think one of the big formative things in my life in the past few years was and, I tell this to like whoever I can reach. I fell in love with Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* series. This is very Sikhi. It's very other revolutionary frameworks. That's just, the example that when I read it, it just clicked something that up until that point hadn't been clicked before: but you can't change other people's minds. All you can do is practice what you preach and hope that you become the seed that pollinates the next person to then do similar. And in theory, that can sort of, like, if you live by certain principles, if you live by a certain way of ethics. Whether that's love. Whether that's honoring the Guru in all of us. Whether those are the same thing. Whatever that looks like. All I can do is show you how that practice has changed my life. And the answer the questions that you have, as honestly as I can based off of that. Without this a desire to constantly try to bamboozle or turn you into some, into one of me. So, I think one of my big, big hopes for this project is that these stories will serve in that sort of model. That people will, you know, maybe they'll have time to listen to one, maybe they have time to listen to two, maybe they'll listen to one every month, or one every week, or who knows? Maybe they'll listen to half of one. Maybe you think, hoping that they listen to a whole interview is too much, too much hoping.

But I think there's real transformative power, even just like what you were saying that you felt the need to share just in listening to this in response to me. I can only, like I'm going to listen to every single one of these interviews before they're posted. I can't imagine what's going to happen to me. So I can only hope that like, my big hope for this project is that it changes people. Not, and I had no direction which way it goes. I mean, I hope it changes them for the better. But, you know. Just like with any sort of acne cream— things get worse before they get better because you have to cleanse and then it starts working, you know. So I hope, I want this project

to not— to be cleansing for our own spirits. I want people to listen to this and learn something. I want people to listen to these stories and create something. I want them to dream differently. I want them to dream things that they haven't given themselves permission to dream before. And I want them to dream even further than that as a result. I want them to come back to these interviews and be like, "Ha. Ha. prabh's ideas were so limited and so non-imaginative and so un-creative, look at this because like, they could have thought of it this way." And I will say, thank you. That's beautiful. I'm so happy that you have now been able to move beyond what even what I was restricted by. That's beautiful to me. You know? So yeah I think that's my, that's what I hope comes out of this project, is that people create their own things, they create lives, they create materials, they create resources, create connections. They create beauty. They create love. Yeah, love, cherish, find yourself. Or let yourself find you. That's what I hope.

01:28:13 **SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah, and talked about the true sense of liberation.

01:28:21 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

Hmm. I sure hope so. May we. It's a big. That would be a big outcome for this project. But you know if it happens? Thank you. Or should I say, you're welcome? (mutual laughter)

01:28:41 **SPEAKER\_MM**

Yeah. Anything else you'd like to share?

01:28:45 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

Thank you for. I mean, I said this a little while ago, but thank you for like, you know, this is, as someone who does conversations like this so often, I know it's not easy to sit through it and engage. So thank *you*. Yeah. Thank you for giving me a chance to also, to dream, which is not something I let myself do very often. Even though people have more recently been poking and prodding me to do so. Yeah, so, just— thanks is what I want to add to you, to rest of the team that made this possible. Without sounding egotistical, thank you to me, for forcing this through to this point. Where we can actually do this. Like it would be, who made this possible and supported it. In the texts that I had. Yeah. Like this is as much, is such a creative, creative collective endeavor. That's why I just want to add. And I feel like that's part of my story with this. It's not me trying to advertise this or anything. But like this is something, this project has been something that has been a dream of mine for so long. I think I've told you all this as part of our trainings. But for it to finally be at a stage with the ethics, that I could like the best ethics that I could imagine and I'm sure we'll make even more as we go along, but like. From the text messages to the brainstorm and the people who emailed me and being like, "Hey, can I help you with something? Do you have anything going on?" At a time when I was ready to abandon it. To the people who are like, "Hey, can we write you into this grant?" to the people were like, "Hey, that's a great idea, Keep on going." To the people who are, like, I mean I don't want to thank the people who like bullied and abused me. But also like, I hope you're happy. Look what you made me do (laughter). So yeah, that's all.

01:30:37 **SPEAKER\_MM**

Well, thank you so much for sharing your vulnerability or thought process. Your work. Your emotional labor. It's not easy. This is not easy, these are not easy conversations. And yeah, I hope that there's more to come and that we continue learning together.

01:31:03 **SPEAKER\_PSK**

Thank you. I hope so too. I'm going to stop the recording.