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Caste, Sikhi, and Undelivered Promises: Sikh Research Journal's Interview of the Poetic Justice Foundation

Abstract

This is the edited transcription of an interview with Anita Lal, Meena Hira, Dr. Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra, and manmit singh by Drs. Harleen Kaur and prabhdeep singh kehal (Co-Lead Editors of SRJ) that took place on September 20, 2023. In this conversation, they reflect on caste and caste violence in Punjabi and Sikh spaces by exploring their collective journey towards advocating for caste abolition within the framework of Sikhi. The panelists map out the current movements against caste violence in the diaspora and offer insights based on their current and ongoing organizing efforts to confront the silence of caste in Sikh spaces. The panelists discuss how this issue is crucial because it addresses the persistent yet frequently unacknowledged problem of caste and caste violence within Punjabi and Sikh communities. The panelists believe it is vital to actively challenge and advocate for the abolition of caste discrimination, aligning with the principles of equality and justice in Sikhi. They emphasize the urgency of this discussion in the current context, recognizing a growing awareness and movement against caste violence, particularly in the diaspora. This moment offers a pivotal opportunity to confront these deep-rooted issues and foster a more inclusive and equitable community. The full recording of the interview is accessible through the following [link](#).

Keywords: *caste, oppression, discrimination, diaspora, equality, brahmanism, Dalit, Jatt, Chamar*

Interview

prabhdeep singh kehal: Thank you for joining us today and I'm very excited to have this conversation. For the sake of everyone's time and energy here, I'm going to go ahead and get started. As you think about casteism or try to explain it to people who do not have the language to name it, how do you understand it within the specific context of Sikhi?

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra: When we talk about caste system, we do have to understand first and foremost that it's a centuries old system of hierarchy based off of oppression and violence that comes out of the Hindu Brahminical system. I say brahminical because within the labor stratified categories that fall within the caste system, Brahmins are seen as being at the top of the system. The reason why is because they have the privilege to be educated and are seen as the holders of intelligence. They have access to and control the Hindu religion. And how it connects back to Sikhi is when Baba Nanak fortified the founding of what would become Sikhi, he came out of this system that was centuries old. At that time, there were Hindus engaging with Muslims, engaging with who would later become Sikhs, in this fluid conversation taking place during the time of Baba Nanak. He was born into a system of casteism, and his family was a part of a system of caste. However, he realized that this system is perhaps one of the most harmful and

violent in shaping what is taking place around him. His vision of what would become Sikhi, and what Sikhi should believe in, was the exact opposite of caste-based oppression and harm. So, when we think about Sikhi being against casteism and caste-based discrimination, he made it very clear from the beginning upon witnessing its violence. With the *jot* [divine light] within him, he witnessed the oppression of caste and its harm, and witnessed the violence of the privileges that Brahmins carried. He witnessed the sheer terror that they adhered to other caste oppressed bodies and he said “No!” At its heart, and at the foundation of Sikhi, what Baba Nanak envisioned was everything opposite of that caste-based system. And I think this is really important. When we talk about Sikhi, there's so many layers, so many histories, and so many Gurus who each mobilized different strategies, but at the heart of it, Baba Nanak saw something that had existed around him for centuries and refused. When we talk about even the foundation of *langar* [“communal meal”], for example, it was fortified and became systemized and structured by Guru Angad and Guru Amardas, but he is one of the first to create this idea of food for all. And if we talk about food, it subverts those lines of pollution. Casteism based on caste privileged people's perceptions of who was polluted, who was not polluted. If you think about that in the 15th century, Baba Nanak said, “we are going to eat together,” he did something so radical and so inconsistent with something that had existed for centuries. So, when I talk about Sikhi and relationship to caste, I begin with Baba Nanak. And then we can, of course, talk about many other different stories that intersect with Sikhi and casteism. But for me, that’s where I begin.

manmit singh: Thank you so much, Sharn, for that. I appreciate you bringing us back to the foundations. I'm just sitting with some of those stories—with one of the earliest examples being Guru Nanak Sahib at the age of 11 rejecting the *janeu* [“sacred thread”]. I’m sitting with how so much of their politicization was happening through rejecting brahminical patriarchy—in terms of thinking about how caste and gender was impacting them and their sister—Bebe Nanaki.¹ So I’m just sitting with the violence of brahminical patriarchy and the questions against it that they were asking, and by doing so, cementing the principle that one can’t understand Sikhi without engaging with both the political and the spiritual together.

But in terms of thinking about *miri-piri*, it was revealed and institutionalized in a formal capacity by the Sixth Sovereign but in reality, the foundation was there by Guru Nanak Sahib in those moments from the very beginning.² And there is a need to position it as such in the very beginning as Guru Nanak Sahib is protesting caste, gender, and brahmanism. They’re raising questions to these ideas of purity and pollution, and flipping them on their heads, whether that is

¹ Sophia Kaur, "Femme-inist Futures: Examples from Sikh Praxis," *Begumpura Collective Zine*, <https://www.qtsikharchive.org/begumpura-collective-zine>.

² Harleen Kaur and prabhdeep singh kehal, "Sikhs as Implicated Subjects in the United States: A Reflective Essay on Gurnat-Based Interventions in the Movement for Black Lives," *Sikh Research Journal* 5, no. 2 (2020).

through starting—as Sharanjit brought up—langar. Or whether that is—with Guru Nanak Sahib’s jot continuing on through the Gurus—we have the institutionalization of the *Sarovar* [“sacred pool”], as that is also challenging these ideas of purity and pollution. Or the Khalsa itself, as committing to the Guru and pledging allegiance to the Guru meant also leaving behind your allegiance to your caste. So, with these various institutions set up by the Guru, the Guru Sahibs aren’t just challenging caste through merely critique, but actually thinking creatively about institutions, and how do we build our capacity to challenge and build towards a world beyond caste oppression. We have these models across Sikhi, whether that is through Kartarpur or through Halemi Raaj, Khalsa Raaj, or whether that is through Begumpura, but all these visions that Guru Sahib gifts to us that are pushing us to think about worlds beyond brahmanism, beyond caste oppression.

Another point I wanted to uplift—there is a foundational role that caste oppressed folks have played in shaping Sikhi and bringing Sikhi to where we are at. A lot of these histories are sidelined though. For example, in the dominant Sikh narratives, we celebrate and romanticize Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the Sikh Empire, but much of the foundations of even building towards that was through the labor of Dalit and caste oppressed folks. One of the really powerful *misls* was led by and consisted of Mazhabi Sikhs. And to even think about the tradition of Mazhabi Sikhs and the various stories that are sidelined or erased. Here, I’m thinking about the stories of Bhai or Sahibzaada Jiwan Singh, known also as Bhai Jaita.³ When Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib was beheaded in Delhi, with their head left on display as a spectacle to further fear, under the watch of guards. Under the instruction of Bhai Jaita’s father, who said his own face as a Gurmukh resembled the head of Guru Sahib, Bhai Jaita beheaded his own father to replace with the Guru’s head. Because of this huge sacrifice—the literal beheading of their own father—they were able to take back the *sheesh* [head] of Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib back to Guru Govind Sahib. And with that, Guru Sahib adopting them through their famously saying “Rangreta Guru ka Beta,” because of which we have the tradition of Mazhabi Sikhs who converted afterwards. And Bhai Jaita was renamed Jiwan Singh too, with this standing of Guru Sahib’s own son.

So, I’m just sitting with these sacrifices, and the immense work that has gone into building and bringing our *panth* to where we’re at, with so much of that attributed to Dalit and caste oppressed folks. And I’ll just finish with the *hukam* that Guru Nanak Sahib gives us of identifying and struggling alongside the most oppressed, work that the Guru Sahib themselves modeled and continuously upheld. We have their *bani* [“sacred text within the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji”] that reveals:

³ Raj Kumar Hans, "Making Sense of Dalit Sikh History," in *Dalit Studies*, ed. Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana, Durham: Duke University Press (2016).

*Neechaa Andhar Neech Jaath Neechee Hoo Ath Neech || Naanak Thin Kai Sang Saathh
Vaddiaa Sio Kiaa Rees || Jithhai Neech Samaaleean Thithhai Nadhar Thaeree Bakhasees
||4||3||*

Nanak seeks the company of those considered the lowest of the low, the most oppressed of the oppressed. It is with them where Nanak resides, as why emulate and compete with those considered high? It is in that place where those considered lowly are cared for where the Blessings of the Divine Glance of Grace resides. (Raag Siree Raag, Ang 15)

Guru Sahib made it clear that Waheguru’s grace is where the most oppressed of the oppressed are taken care of, because *vaddiaa sio kiaa rees*—why mimic and compete with those deemed high. That competition is never ending, and the levels to each deeming oneself higher keeps going, which is parallel with the type of violence that caste upholds as a system of graded inequality itself where there are thousands of castes stratified and each slightly above the others. How far can you get under this graded system of inequality, as each claims a status of being above each other? Instead, Guru Sahib is turning us towards a different orientation, that isn’t seeking to engage in this hopeless competition but instead thinking about what we achieve when we think about “lowering” ourselves. I say that as someone from an oppressor caste positionality too. As I end, this just made me think about another example, where we often talk about how Sikhi is anti-caste because our bani includes the bani of the *bhagats* [“devotee, saint, holy person”] and various caste oppressed figures. And we like to say that the Guru Sahibs were trying to uplift caste oppressed peoples by including their bani, but a beautiful reorientation I really appreciated from Naindeep Singh, Executive Director of Jakara Movement—was when he shared that the inclusion of the bani of Dalit and caste oppressed folks is not necessarily Guru Sahib “uplifting” them, but Guru Sahib “lowering” us, similar to how we don’t read Black and Indigenous literature to “uplift” Black and Indigenous folks, but the need for us to “lower” ourselves, to fully understand our own, and each other’s experiences.⁴ And this reorientation is consistent with Guru Sahib’s own re-envisioning of how we build from and work towards caste abolition, which comes through orienting to the most oppressed.

prabhdeep singh kehal: Thank you both for sharing such deep, thoughtful responses. I think having a shared grammar is very helpful when having these types of conversations because so many people's experiences with casteism and with Sikhi are what help them understand what Sikhi and casteism are. So, by giving us a little bit of insight into how the two of you have come to understand these things and how it shapes your work is very helpful. And this is a follow up to what you all were saying around the necessary humility required to do abolition-oriented, anti-

⁴ Dr. Naindeep Singh, Building Begumpura Conference, Davis, California, April 2023.

caste, caste abolition work: Given these understandings, how did each of you, or those of you who are willing to share, commit yourself to anti-caste work in Sikh spaces specifically?

Anita Lal: Thanks for that. For me, my background is that I'm Dalit. I grew up in a household that identified as Sikh, went to the Gurdwara, and all that. But I think a lot of it was very much as a kid growing up in the Gurdwara, in the diaspora, where we went to the Gurdwara, *matha tek* [prostrate], getting yelled at for making noise. But we weren't taught a lot of the bani or about the stories or anything like that. But I know one thing that my grandma always taught, which was that under Sikhi, everybody is equal.

There're a couple things. For one, in Sikhi, there is very much a social justice lens that she instilled in me, and the whole concept of *sewa* ["selfless service"]. My Biji would, even in her late eighties, go to the gurdwara every day to do her *sewa*, even if it was just peeling onions, there was the whole sense of serving the community for her. And as I came into doing more social justice work, and as I started to understand where my drive came from, it really did come from those early years, from seeing my grandma and her concept of what she taught me when it came down to equality, social justice, *sewa*, and that everybody is equal. Those principles were what she told me Sikhi is about and showed me what it looks like in practice. For me, doing this social justice work today in our community is *sewa*. That's where the drive for this anti-caste work comes from for me.

Meena Hira: Thank you. And for me, I also grew up in the same family as Anita, but I grew up on the island in Victoria, BC. I'm from a Sikh family, but half my family is Radha Soami. I didn't really understand either belief very well, but I did always feel like an equal when I went to the gurdwara and connected with the Punjabi community. We have a small Punjabi community in Victoria, and I never felt like I was any different from anybody else, until I realized the community does see me as the "Other" – but I will talk more about that when I tell my personal stories. But at that point, my shift of Sikhi and the Punjabi community—the community I thought I was a part of—completely changed. That's when I started having conversations with my parents about equality, caste, and some of the issues that are still very prevalent that fueled me to want to learn more about Sikhi and learn more about what it means to be Sikh. Through a lot of my own research, and then getting involved with the Poetic Justice Foundation via Anita, and some of the work she is doing, has now led me here. Now, I'm studying to become a counselor, I also plan on putting in my profile that I'm anti-caste, and I work with caste trauma. I'm starting that and providing that space for people because that's something I've never seen on any Punjabi counselors' profile. I want to provide a space for people to talk about caste issues and discrimination.

Harleen Kaur: Thank you so much. We can transition to a related but different conversation. Meena, I think even in your comment talking about your orientation towards caste-based trauma,

you highlight this importance to think about lived experience and one's orientation towards lived experience. And I think Sharn and manmit set us up beautifully with thinking about intellectually, or theoretically, how does Sikhi orient us towards anti-casteism work? But I think another important part is that Guru Sahib introduced this concept of *Sangat* because the embodied, the lived experience, and the collective experience is also such a crucial element to Sikhi, and to living *Gurmat* ["teachings of the Gurus"] in our everyday life. For those of you who are willing to share, perhaps we can start by laying the groundwork a little bit for those who are engaging in this conversation for the first time or it's something new to them. Sharing some examples around how casteism has showed up in your life in different ways, both perhaps expected and unexpected. And here again, to the extent comfortable, it'd be important to talk about our different identities in relation to caste and how that's also colored that experience within the *Sangat* and with casteism.

Meena Hira: For me, I grew up in Victoria with a small Punjabi community. Caste wasn't something we really talked about growing up. I'm sure I heard the word "*Chamar*" here and there in my family, but I didn't really know what that was. The first time I faced any type of discrimination was when I was a child and I was about 11 or 12. Another child who was actually a couple of years younger than me approached me and said, "Haha, you're a *Chamar*" and then laughed in my face. I didn't know what this was and why I was being made fun of. So, I asked my parents and they were very, very upset and explained to me that we're actually all equal, but other people who are in Sikhi actually follow the system called caste and they discriminate against other people and think you're lower because we did jobs back in India, like cleaning and leatherwork—jobs that were considered low jobs. So that's what was explained to me. And from then on, there were so many instances where I did hear people talking down to *Chamars*. For example, if I'm at a family's home and they're a *Jatt* family and I hear their parents make comments, I started hearing it more and more. I was hearing of more issues with people trying to be in relationships and they couldn't because they're of different castes. I also heard people talking about my family and making comments such as, "Your family drives a red van, that's *Chamar* colors" and making fun of that. Apparently, there were colors associated with being *Chamar*. There were jobs associated with being *Chamar*. There were all these things, even facial features. I heard comments like "*Chamars* have huge jaws," or "*Chamars* have large, certain body parts" that were sexualizing. There were a lot of things that I heard. And I started to get really, really angry, and just really confused why my community thinks like this. But the worst of it was when I started dating somebody who was *Jatt*, and he grew up in Victoria too. His dad was born and raised in Victoria. His grandpa was even born and raised in Victoria, so it was multiple generations of them living here, educated. But the big issue was that I was *Chamar* and his family didn't actually know my family very well. They never actually met me, and I never had a conversation with anybody in his family, but there was a lot of backlash and pushback that we can't be together. We can't even date, we can't even think about it, we can't even consider this, because we're of different castes.

I even faced discrimination from peers that I went to school with from my generation, who started making comments about me being Chamar, making fun of my ex-partner because I'm Chamar, saying, "Oh, look, you're dating a Chamar." I also got comments about my body—my body also came into question as people commented, "Her body is a certain way because she's a Chamar," or that "this is bigger" and "this is smaller because she's a Chamar." So, it got pretty bad to the point where I actually left Victoria and I moved to Vancouver because I was like, this isn't my community. These aren't the people I want to be around. There's a lot that happened there, a lot that was said, and that's just a little touch of what I have faced. But there's a lot of issues there, even in my generation. Not just the older generation, even in my generation, or even in younger generations, I still see it.

Anita Lal: Thanks for sharing, Meena. With me, I grew up in a small town up north. Similar to Meena, I think a lot of families that come from caste oppressed backgrounds don't really teach their kids about the caste system. So, a lot of kids who are young that come from caste privilege, openly say and identify as Jatt. They are taught from a young age that they're Jatt and that there's some privilege there. That it is something to be proud of. Our families don't talk about it. But being raised by my grandma, and in the community I was raised in, I didn't directly experience the trauma of caste discrimination. But when I moved to Abbotsford, which is like hyper-Jatt, my experience changed. I started seeing people who would wear necklaces that said "*Jatti*" or would just be very pro-Jatt. That's when I started asking my grandma, and my grandma's response was, "you're Canadian, you're born in Canada, this doesn't affect you". So that was her and those were her tools—you just be good, you don't need to get into these conversations or care about that. Also, all my friends were Jatt, and I didn't feel any negative discrimination from them around caste. To me, Jatt and Punjabi just became very interchangeable. There was such a normalization of casteism. It was also a bit of, "Oh, well, you're not Jatt, but that's okay". Now that I think about it, I understand how problematic that is, but at a young age in a space like that, it didn't faze me as I was just feeling accepted.

But as I started doing more anti-racism work or started working within the Punjabi community and promoting Punjabi culture, and then having the younger generation like Meena and my nieces who were about 10 or 15 years younger than me, most of them growing up in predominantly white spaces, telling me their experiences around caste changed things for me. I'm in my mid-thirties, and I'm hearing from the younger twenty-year-olds that they, or other relatives of ours, are experiencing caste discrimination. And that upset me because then I was just like, "it's not okay". And I actually had a nephew who had a broken engagement a month before his wedding, and ended up getting into really bad depression, alcohol use, and ended up losing his life at the age of 38, due to the lost love because of his caste. At this point, I looked at the community and I thought, something needs to be done. And I think when it comes down to tying in my Sikhi with the work that I did, Sikhi is one of the biggest tools we have to fight casteism. What is stronger than your faith? What is stronger than your Gurus, and what Gurbani

says? So, we base so much on it. When I started looking in our community, I started seeing the lack of movements, especially in empowerment for the next generations. We see the younger people being empowered when it comes down to anti-racism work. There is this whole, “stop ‘othering’ me”, “I am not lesser than the next person”, “we're all settlers on this land”, and “we all come to this fight for equity”. I can tell you that my own family has been here since 1906, so it comes with a lot of privileges. And they still couldn't openly say the word, Chamar. My sisters wouldn't say it, my cousins wouldn't say it, and if it was said, there was a cringe. Other people who mention their caste don't cringe and I felt I needed to take that cringe out. I need to be able to say I'm Chamar. I need to be able to say my great grandfather was a Chamar and my kids are going to be either Chamar or half Chamar, or something. There should be no cringe. That's where I started getting involved in creating spaces for this discussion.

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra: I can go next. I just want to pause and take a moment to take in Anita and Meena's stories because I come from a caste privileged space. So, the stories that Meena and Anita share come from a totally different kind of growing up, understanding, questioning, and moments in life. I come from a Jatt privileged family and have been my whole life. But there are these pocketed moments, I think we all have when we begin to question things around us. And for me, that was in high school. So, Anita and I grew up in the same city, went to the same high school, but graduated in different years. And it was a very hyper-Jatt community. My best friend in high school was not Jatt. Whenever my family would host parties, there would be the typical Jatt bravado music playing, and she was very uncomfortable. And she's actually the one who taught me about caste-based oppression. Through her, I realized what it's like to be on the receiving end of this language, of this bravado, and of this machismo that comes out of Jatt culture. Essentially, I learned so much from her and I'm grateful to her. That's why I started being more aware of that language.

Then soon after high school, my story is a positive love story, which is nice. I always try to boldly declare the word “love stories” when we talk about Sikhi because we can. We make it into such a taboo to talk about love or sexuality or gender or such related concepts. So, I like to proudly declare that my coming into understanding caste-based oppressive work and being like an anti-caste advocate is because I fell in love with somebody who wasn't Jatt. I just actually found out and discovered that my husband is Dalit. I had no idea because we create this spectrum. I'm going to go on a little bit of a tangent. It's interesting that we create the spectrum of just Dalits and Jatts. What we don't realize is that within the umbrella of this category that we call Dalits, there are so many different caste names that perhaps we colloquially hear in conversational spaces in our homes. So, my husband comes from a *Nai* family. The *Nai* caste is traditionally the barber caste in the Punjabi and Sikh context, and that falls within the larger category of Dalit. I just always have known him as being *Nai*. The typical story that many of us have heard in our circles again and again and again, is that I wanted to marry him, but I wasn't allowed to marry him. Then I ended up eloping and running away and marrying him. And we've

been married for 16 years, and we have two boys, who are 12 and 14. In hearing Anita's cousin's story, Anita's stories and others, it just breaks my heart to no end because it's such a sad reminder of the love stories and relationships that fail. They tragically fail when caste comes into that conversation when people hinge everything on caste-based perceptions. I was able to subvert that and run away and marry and that's my story. And since that moment onwards, every perspective I carry with me going forward, including how I teach my children, is to be specifically anti-caste. They go about in their schools having friends who use Jatt names in their gaming videos or whatever they're doing, asking each other questions about Jattism. My son will proudly say, "Do you know that's problematic?" Do you know that this is not—he won't say "problematic". He's 12. He's not going to say, "that's problematic", but he'll say, "do you know that's kind of messed up? Do you realize what Jatt means? I don't really care about stuff like that." To have a 12- and 14-year-old in this climate, in this society, and in this cultural context where Jattism is so powerful, and to push back against that to me is such a threshold of success. And it's not just me. There are other parents who are changing and teaching. So that's my story, but it doesn't end there. The story will continue, and it will continue again through my nieces and other relatives who will themselves do things differently. It's an everyday lived conversation for sure.

Anita Lal: Sharn, you also wanted to share your experience that you had...

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra: Thank you for reminding me of that! Another fascinating, tragic, horrible thing that I've noticed, and others in this room will acknowledge this, is that because the language of "Jatt" has become so prolific, it's actually entering other communities' conversations. For example, we had a plumber come to our house. He was a white guy—*gora*—so a white guy from our community, Abbotsford. He sees my husband, and because we own a small acreage, he starts talking about being Jatt. And he's like, "you must be Jatt." And my husband's just looking at him like, "you're literally a white guy asking me this question, I don't understand what's happening." Basically, he started saying problematic things about Jattism, and my husband just cut him off and said, "well, no, I'm not Jatt, and actually I don't follow the caste system in that way." But all of this is to say that we now carry that casteist language into other communities. There're rappers who call themselves *Kala-Jatt*. And we've seen this once Moose Wala passed away, we've seen rappers openly declare themselves as being *Kala-Jatt*. We really have to question how we even begin this conversation when anti-Blackness runs rampant in our community. These are the ways that we need to be aware of the way Jatt is being utilized and weaponized.

Harleen Kaur: Thank you all for everyone who shared so far. Just the intersection of experiences you've shared shows how deeply casteism is embedded at interpersonal, communal, societal, structural levels. It's unfortunate that we have to bear this trauma, but hopefully, those who are reading and listening honor these experiences as they are going on their own learning journeys.

manmit, if I can ask, please do share whatever you would like to generally about what we were discussing. But I know you have similar experiences to Sharn of coming from a caste oppressor background and how you came into the work. Perhaps if you can also start to speak to the dynamics around that and navigating that—if folks are listening in or reading and wondering, “if I grew up with maybe the experience in a family that's very violently casteist, is there anything that I can do or how can I be part of this work?”

manmit singh: Thank you for the question. For me, reflecting on my relationship to caste as also someone who is from a dominating caste background, I'm sitting with what Anita was referring to, in thinking about Jatt culture and Punjabi culture being almost synonymous because of how much Jatt supremacy and hegemony runs through Punjabi spaces. As someone who is queer, trans non-binary, I've really struggled with feeling safe and in community in Punjabi spaces. Whether it was in high school or all these different spaces onwards, for a large part of my life, I've avoided Punjabi spaces particularly because those spaces that would uphold a casteist Jatt supremacy would also be the ones that would be extremely queerphobic, extremely transphobic, extremely misogynistic. So for me, I think I was able to find the language to be able to understand a lot of my experiences through finding the language of caste where caste helped explain so much of the queerphobia and the transphobia, which is so consistent with so many folks who've talked about, for example, understanding, queerphobia and transphobia as forms of brahmanism and brahminical violence.⁵ This is not to discount, though, my own caste privilege and the ways that even being queer and trans, that doesn't take away from benefiting from caste privilege, but more so moving towards the need to understand caste abolition as linked with queer and trans liberation. So, for me, that then also informs the work that I do, where I strive to think of those together and accordingly have been supporting with different spaces that are holding together the interconnection of caste, gender, and sexuality, whether that be through having worked with Equality Labs and supporting with the anti-caste movement there. Currently, the work is ongoing as well through working with Poetic Justice Foundation, as Poetic Justice Foundation is working to further caste protection, while also extending the conversation beyond caste protections. We're thinking about what caste abolition looks like, through these different spaces, whether in Poetic Justice Foundation, or the UC Collective for Caste Abolition, that has been really thinking about what a thorough infrastructure focused on caste abolition can be beyond just a demand for a policy change—which is powerful as well, but also thinking so much about what kind of institutions and infrastructures we design. There is also the Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral History Project that prabh is leading, or whether that is through the Begumpura Collective Zine that we've been working on as well. So many of these different resources, so many of these different spaces that are being built out are holding together the need to understand Dalit liberation, caste abolition, queer trans liberation as interconnected, while also tending to the complexities, complicities, and layers that are, while holding together the struggle against

⁵ Gee Imaan Semmalar, "Transphobia as a form of Brahmanism: A conversation between Gee Imaan Semmalar and Living Smile Vidya in Gender, Caste, and the Imagination of Equality," 2019.

brahmanism and towards a world beyond these systems of oppression. That was also to briefly touch into the different types of work that is happening.

Anita Lal: The great thing, as we look at it, is how we've all come to this work and how we all come from different backgrounds. I think under Sikhi, it also gives us a platform to do this work together, because with anti-caste work, you can enter from any different space when you're from the Sikhi platform, because it's about social justice. It's about equality. It's about living the principles that our Gurus teach and left for us to follow. That's the beauty of it. This anti-caste work—when we look at Dalit liberation or Dalit work, that was also something when I started doing my work, I was very like, “am I a Dalit activist or am I an anti-caste activist?” And the reason anti-caste work resonated more strongly with me is because I think it was more based on my Sikh principles. Where my movement comes from, and the core of it wasn't from my Dalit identity. And so that's why I think that anti-caste work is a space where all of us can come together and work and it's not one person's narrative that pushes it forward. That's also with our collective, the Poetic Justice Foundation. As we do this work, we honor all those different identities and all the different intersectionalities that bring everybody to this work, because at the end of the day, it's about human rights, social justice, and really giving everybody the right to live an equal and free life.

Harleen Kaur: Absolutely. Before we move on to thinking more about the work that Poetic Justice Foundation has done, I just wanted to see if anyone wanted to add any more context or histories around anything that hasn't been mentioned about different intersections or ways folks can think about histories of casteism or different ways to participate in this movement that have yet to be mentioned.

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra: One thing I would mention as a historian of BC Sikh history in particular is that every aspect of Sikh Canadian history or British Columbia Sikh history has an element of caste within it. We tend to tell these stories as Jatt dominant narratives, so it was all Jatts who came, or it was all Jatts who worked in the sawmills, and look at these amazing stories, nostalgic stories—we hyper-nostalgize these stories. Not to minimize the fact that, yes, of course, they faced racism, there was a lot of trauma, but within those stories, there are subsets of caste-based oppression. One prominent example, and I want to thank Anita for actually bringing this historical story to light, is the story of Paldi. Paldi's story is a powerful heritage minute—it's a Canadian Heritage Minute that you can find online talks about this mill town named after the village in Punjab. Mayo Singh and Kapoor Singh founded this, and it was a multi-religious multicultural community with Japanese, Chinese, Punjabi Sikh, and white workers, and Indigenous workers living there and in harmony. In retrospect, given the time, it was pretty harmonious. But what we don't know is that there was caste-based discrimination. There were, I believe, Dalit mill workers who wanted to cook food or be a part of the bunkhouses, but Jatt men didn't want food cooked by them, or Jatt men didn't want to sit with them and eat. So, again,

there are moments where we need to intersect these stories rather than just making it a monolith. My only interjection in terms of BC Sikh History is to please open our eyes a little bit more to these fascinating, multifaceted histories that bring us back to caste.

prabhdeep singh kehal: Thank you everyone who has shared. Something that's coming across really clearly of the stories you've shared and the experiences you've shared is that the casteism shows up in so many different ways, in so many different areas of our lives, because it's pervasive, and because it's historic, and because it's been institutionalized through our culture in very different ways, whether it's through marriage practices, through our cultural and media consumption, whether it's how we take up space, share space together with others, or how we take up space to exclude others. I just wanted to also recognize that and also thank you all for sharing your stories because I know it takes a lot of work and energy to actually bring those stories up. I have my own stories around different kinds of things that I've told so many times that they have scarred over, but I just want to recognize that telling the story of a scar can still be painful because we all have the somatic memory within the body. So, I just wanted to honor that for the stories that you've shared as we move into this next conversation, which is that so many of you here are united together and bring your work together around the Poetic Justice Foundation, but also under other umbrellas, other institutions, organizations, initiatives that many of you have mentioned. Giving people who are reading this and listening to this a sense of how they can enter as well, what kinds of work do you know of that are going on to tackle these issues? If those of you who are more focused or in working more closely with Poetic Justice Foundation, if you would tell us a little bit about that as well and what led you there.

Anita Lal: It's really nice to see that there are movements that are happening, especially in the last year. We have different organizations looking to create change at the policy level in BC. They're trying to bring caste into the BC Human Rights Tribunal, with caste as a protected category. Universities and labor unions within, throughout BC are looking to bring caste and learn more about caste, so we are actually getting a lot of interest and a lot of people. Unfortunately, I still feel that organizations do work in silo. And I think once again, it's not a homogenous space. You have different generations who have different experiences and who do their work differently. But just yesterday, I was at the University of the Fraser Valley at the South Asian Studies Institute, which has dedicated anti-caste work as one of their goals. They're working on caste-related issues and creating more space for conversations. They have book groups, they have educational spaces, and yesterday, they had a photo of Dr. Ambedkar dedicated to them that they put in the library. And this is creating space, this is taking up space.

With the Poetic Justice Foundation, which is an organization I co-founded three years ago, one of the reasons we created this organization was, so we had a place to do anti-caste work. There were organizations that were doing it, but we felt that there weren't any that were actually working from a diasporic lens of the kids or generations that were born out here, who were from

the Punjabi background. And we needed some space to build on. We do anti-caste, and we do anti-racism work because really, it's all interconnected. Once again, from our understanding of Sikhi or Sikh foundations, you have to fight for the right for everybody. That's what social justice is. It's not just about Sikh rights. It's not just about anti-caste, or Dalit rights. It's actually anybody who is oppressed, anybody, you fight for justice across the board. And that's the Poetic Justice lens. We are really trying to work in community, across movements and break out of the silos. So, we don't have to be 100 percent on board with everything that somebody else is doing or the organization. But when it comes to a mutual goal and working together to attain it, supporting other organizations—and once again, we can't fight everybody's fight, but we can stand beside you or be there and try to create space for education. So, a lot of our work is really based on Dr. Ambedkar's “educate, agitate, organize.” The first step is to educate. We have conversations a lot of the time where we're very frustrated with people we meet, whether they're casteist, racist, homophobic, etc., and they don't realize it even half the time, because they're just ignorant. We take a moment to breathe and then, start doing that heavy lifting. We've stepped into this place to do some of that heavy lifting, and we have such a great team. If one person is too affected by this, we have somebody else who can step in and be like, “here, let me take this for you.” But it is to educate and once you're educating people and creating an understanding, agitation should naturally happen. So, when they hear somebody say “*Chooria Chamar*” in a negative way as a derogatory term, they should be able to step in and say, “well, that's not right.” The same way that we have now—for example, I grew up using the N word because we thought it was cool, we grew up to 90s hip hop and rap. But now we know, that's not cool at all. So that agitation was created, and we don't use that word and definitely speak up against it, when it is used. And for us the next step of organizing is building community and mobilizing together.

Meena Hira: I just wanted to touch on what Anita said with educating. I'm teaching workshops to Punjabi youth at the Royal Academy of Punjab. They go there for Bhangra, and I go there once a month and I do workshops with them on wellness and mental health, and Anita asked me if I was comfortable talking about caste when we talk about things like identity and discrimination. I was like, “yes, of course”, and I've talked to these youth about caste. We've talked about, “is this a part of your identity? Is this something that your parents have taught you as a part of who you are?” And some of them have said yes. They wrote it in a worksheet, “I'm Jatt”, and a lot of them didn't. So, there's been some shifts there with younger generations, but just starting with talking about it, opening up the conversation, talking about what caste discrimination is with kids, and having them question it, telling them to question what the beliefs are, if you're Sikh, what actually is Sikhi, and if you believe in caste, what does that actually mean? What are your parents telling you? What is actually right? What is actually wrong? That's started with Anita, and I've been incorporating that in the workshops and then I will continue to incorporate that into my work as a counselor as well.

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra: So, I'll be very brief because I feel like I've spoken a lot, but one thing that I'm really proud of is that I get to work with manmit, Meena, and Anita as part of the Poetic Justice Foundation to co-curate an exhibit looking at caste in the Punjabi diaspora here in British Columbia. It's been a fascinating experience getting to interview different Dalit community members, Chamar community members with Anita, most of which are her family and Meena's family. But as far as my understanding, it's an exhibit, first of its kind, funded federally. So, what we're seeing here is a federal Canadian government recognition that this conversation is really important, first and foremost. Second, we are intercepting cultural spaces. We're intercepting museum spaces, public museum spaces that are visited by everybody. We are intercepting academic spaces, hopefully traveling to different parts of the lower mainland—Alberta, all the way to eastern Canada. This is huge. This is a first-time exhibit of its kind where we are collecting stories of Dalit Chamar community members, but also looking at the Guru Ravidas Gurdwara, which we never got a chance to talk about today, but we will definitely provide footnotes and context for the viewers and the readers. Why does the Guru Ravidas Gurdwara matter? What does it mean in terms of Gurbani? What did Guru Ravidas say? We're going to talk about the love stories. We're going to talk about Gurbani, we're going to create a space for people to walk in and reflect a mirror to themselves as Sikhs to say, “what is it that we are actually doing in our own Sangat, in our own communities, and what can we do to do better?” I know that this exhibit is going to rile people up. I know that there will be people who will resist and will be angry, but I loved Anita's words about agitate, agitate, agitate. And yikes, is this going to agitate. And I'm so pumped for this exhibit to agitate, so I just wanted to throw that in there. Please look out for the exhibit and if your listeners and readers want to bring it to you, holler at us. We'll create a timeline and hopefully bring it to your institutions and spaces, including in the US.

Harleen Kaur: This has been really inspiring. And just to wrap up, the four of you in your conversation have taken us through a beautiful journey of your own entry into this work through both lived and intellectual experience, and how that's merged into this organization. And also, now this incredible exhibit you're doing. It would be great to wrap up through thinking about when folks are coming from these different experiences and different approaches, when it comes to anti-casteism work, what can they do? What can be done? So first, we can take a current state of affairs. How much anti-casteism mobilization is actually happening in Sikh spaces right now? Poetic Justice Foundation obviously comes from a sort of Sikh identifying lens, but when we think about the gurdwara or more traditional Sikh spaces, what kind of mobilization is happening there, if any? What can folks think about doing in those spaces?

Anita Lal: I can speak a bit to this. I know recently, when we've done some anti-casteism work, and had a caste dialogue, we've had Sikh organizations support the work. Gurdwara spaces are hard to engage, but I feel they're hard to engage in general. We don't always have the capacity to go and actually mobilize. But I know there's organizations in the States that have been doing

great work, especially Jakara. Even in California, with the work that was happening with the anti-caste bill, our Sikh community was leading that fight alongside Dalit activists, and they were mobilizing, and they were educating so much of the Sangat in how important it is to create policy that could protect. Organizations like SALDEF, Jakara Movement, Sikh Coalition—I'm on the newsletter emailing list and I'm friends with some of them— I see them activating. I know they've always thought that these were important conversations. And now that the time is here to put your power behind these movements, they are working on educating and it's a slow beast, because as a community, especially in the last three, four years, we've really been dealing with a lot.

Anti-caste movement is very important, and we see that organizations doing this work through a Sikh organization may not be reaching out into mainstream Punjabi spaces, which means a lot of youth are not being educated or engaging in it. That's where then we need to go into the community. And as Meena had said, Poetic Justice Foundation is doing anti-discrimination and social justice workshops within the community through partners such as Royal Academy of Punjab, a Punjabi arts school. We've created these workshops where it's anti-racism and anti-casteism. So, it's through creating these programs and taking them into these community spaces and saying, “look, we don't believe in caste, but we actually need to teach these kids what that means, and what they need to do when they see casteist behaviors.” There's these structures of oppression that you need to challenge and disrupt. It's not just enough to be like, “we don't believe in caste,” yet 90 percent of the music our kids listen to has Jatt in it. Or that their older cousin has “Jatt” tattooed on their shoulder and the car says “Jatt” on the license plate and their social media handle is Jatt4U or something. So when that's what they're being infiltrated with, we need to do more than just the words “we don't believe in caste”. As a community, there are some people who are in these spaces who are creating these opportunities to educate. Sharn had talked about our exhibit. We really are focusing on youth. A lot of the time, you create these projects, but nobody engages. That's where that community engagement part comes in and mobilizing. You need to engage these arts organizations, the sports organizations, the schools, the gurdwaras that work with youth and families. And a lot of them will sit there and talk about their Sikh principles and that “we're teaching our kids their heritage and their religion,” but in that, we also need to teach them how to be anti-caste, and here's one another way you can do that.

So, there are movements that are happening, and the connection needs to be made and there needs to be more on-the-ground-work where we're actually delivering something to the community instead of just doing a tweet. There has to be some actionable stuff, and this is where we can also get involved. Also, I think a big thing, like Sharn has talked about with her kids, and my family has done it too, “we don't believe in caste”. That's like that white person saying, “I don't see color”. And it's like, hold on, you're just erasing everything. This isn't just about what you see. These are power structures. This is something that is beyond just “we love everybody”.

You will need to teach your kids how to be anti-caste so that they go out there and when they see it, they will question it and they will stop it. There's always different levels to engage in.

Harleen Kaur: To bring it full circle, as Sharn and manmit especially shared so much at the beginning that as Sikhs and Sikhi, we have this foundation for anti-casteism work. I know a lot of folks who have grown up Hindu as well, and I think for them, it's an uphill battle because they're coming from a tradition that is rooted in these ideologies whereas Guru Sahib so beautifully rooted us in working against them. So, if we really get back to the root, get back to the core of what Sikhi was meant to do, it is a tradition, and a way of life about caste abolition. That is its foundation, you all have really made that point clear. As we close up today, the question I have is, why now? What's the urgency? This is something that's been going on for centuries, some might say that a lot of work has been done. What is the importance of doing it now? And if I can also add, doing it in Sikh specific spaces?

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra: The answer to both questions is the same answer, and that is we are living in the most fast-paced, information-filled world that we have ever seen ever. I mean social media, essentially, and on the one side, we have social media feeding misinformation, feeding harm, feeding violence, feeding trauma. And then on the other side, we have social media also challenging harm, challenging violence, creating space. So social media is this fascinating moment we are living in where caste in particular is being seen. Meena showed us clips on Instagram—I think it was a TikTok video or Instagram—where all these people are either challenging the casteist language in the video or post, but also on the other hand, feeding the casteist language in the TikTok video in the post. And it's going back to the youth question as they are utilizing this platform. The urgency of the work is, this is what we are infiltrated with on a daily basis, no matter how much we try to avoid it. So, the urgency of the work is to be anti-casteist means to understand what anti-Blackness means, it means to understand what gender-based discrimination is or gender-based violence. It is to understand what transphobia is and homophobia and brahmanical-based perceptions of masculinity are. All of these things and so much more are tied together. So, to be anti-caste intersects with all of this and the urgency for me is absolutely there.

And then we have my Sikh identity being harmed in that process because Sikhi is being utilized as a weapon to almost propagate. I was watching a video of a speaker, and he said something really hard to hear but kind of truthful and he said, “Jatts are the brahmins of Sikhi.” It was actually Suraj Yengde who said that. I was watching a video of Suraj's and I was just like, “oh, that hurts to hear that.” Jatts are the Brahmins of Sikhi. And we have to understand what he means when he says that and what it means to disaggregate ourselves from that perception and the way we live and the way we continue to perpetuate these hierarchical structures within our gurdwara spaces. Look at the committees, look at the power structures. The urgency is in all our

voices for sure, but that is to say we can still utilize social media and all those tools to continue to challenge it and do the good work as well.

Anita Lal: If there's anybody who's questioning the urgency or who says, "be patient" or "a lot of change has come", these are people who come from a point of privilege. Because there's nobody who comes from an oppressed background, whose child, once you're born and raised here in Canada, whose child goes to a playground and is called a Chooria Chamar having their caste weaponized against them, who's discriminated against by their peers, who loses a loved one - saying those words. There is no parent who's going to sit there and be like, "Oh, yeah, lots has happened, that's okay, my next generations can continue to be discriminated against and can face this violence". So, the urgency is because I don't want my nieces and my nephews to ever face any sort of situation where they are made to feel lesser than based on their caste. That's not fair. The same way as anybody else's child who has the right to have this free, loving, safe childhood and grow up and be equal, our children have the same right. So, my urgency actually comes from my nieces and nephews. Within our community, we have to start making change. Because this just can't keep going. That's where my urgency comes from.

manmit singh: For me, something I was sitting with was a couple of things that I'll go through really fast. For one, I'm thinking about how interconnected caste is with so many issues within our *kaum* ["community"] that are threatening Sikhi, because of how radical Sikhi is and the world that it envisions and it's moving us towards. There's these constant attempts at trying to erase Sikhi. So much of these threats are based in trying to erase and co-opt its radical anti-caste history, so the need to bring us back to that in order to preserve our Sikhi. There's all these ongoing attempts that we're also feeding into as well, that are to erase that and to erase what Sikhi is and what it was. Also, for me personally, the pain of so many folks who are in the panth with so many hopes and are also leaving the panth. At least someone who has stepped away from the panth for a long period of time, there's that pain and it's really isolating. It's a pain that no one should have to experience and it's a pain that we need to really sit with and tend to. Hence, I feel that urgency. I was just reading one of the transcripts yesterday from the Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral History Project—prabh's transcript actually, their interview—and there was something really beautiful at the end about thinking about this vision that everybody has a home that was shared in the transcript.⁶ This vision that everybody should have a home and in our *Ardaas*, we literally ask for the *gurdwara jo ki panth toh vichore gayne* [the gurdwaras that have become separated from the panth]. What does it mean to think about all the people, and the pain of each and every single person, especially because the panth is supposed to be the Guru. The pain of literally the Guru. How do we understand that pain? That when folks are—whether that is caste oppressed folks, queer trans folks, Black folks, disabled folks, femmes, so many folks in our panth who are,

⁶ "Interview of prabhdeep singh kehal," *Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral History Project*, <https://www.qtsikharchive.org/archive>.

because of these systems of brahmanism, literally leaving our panth, and the pain of that when it comes when we understand the panth as the Guru. Lastly, I'm also just sitting with the place of hope, at least because it was echoed through so much of these other oral history interviews I was sitting in. The one interview I was sitting in that Anita and Sharn were facilitating for the purposes of building towards our exhibit, where folks were literally sharing their painful stories of caste discrimination and still ending with, "But things are getting better" or "Oh no, not everyone's casteist". And I was just sitting with awed, in terms of the hope still that folks continue to have that, "no, we can do it". And I think that is ties in with what Sikhi is. In the midst of ongoing disappointments and despair, and yet Guru Sahib still had hope. I just come back to something that Jasleen Kaur from the Sikh Research Institute said, which is that the *Asa Di Vaar* is full of so many political critiques, talking about caste, gender, purity, ritualism, and yet at the end of the day, it's still called "Asa di Vaar"—the "Ballad of Hope". To sit with the Gurus that still had hope, and we still continue to say, "*RaaJ Karega Khalsa*" ["The Khalsa shall rule"]. As Dr. Naindeep Singh has said, there is this forward-thrust. We continue to have hope in the face of disappointment and despair. And I think that's literally what Sikhi is. We have to hold on to the hope. I'll pass it over to Meena.

Meena Hira: Everyone else has already mentioned what I was going to share. But all I'm going to say is that with this type of work, this isn't something that's new. I feel this is just something that needed to be continued that was just ignored by Sikhi, and by the Sikh people. And now this is work that we're doing that we're like, "Hey, let's pick up where we left off, and maybe we should talk about caste discrimination because it's still happening with second and third generation immigrant born people outside of India, it's very much in India." Why is it something that I went through, which I shouldn't have gone through? So, it's just that reminder that this isn't something new. This is just something that we're continuing, and that was put on the back burner.

prabhdeep singh kehal: With everything everyone has been sharing so far, we have urgency coming up because of the generation that's already here, the generations to come, the source of our Sikhi and the ongoing harm that people are experiencing that they should not be experiencing, and the already occurred harm that has occurred that should not have occurred. These are all just a few of the things that you've all mentioned that lead to your urgency around this work, and I can only hope that folks who are listening, reading, watching this are taken to heart, spirit, and mind what it is that has been shared. Thank you again for taking the time today to talk with all of us in this space, taking the energy in your busy schedules and sharing from the very important and hard work that you're doing in your individual personal and professional lives. If there's anything that you would like to add as a final short one, feel free to.

Anita Lal: I just want to say, thank you, prabh and Harleen, for reaching out, for giving us this platform to really bring the lens of Sikhi to the work that we're doing, and to be part of the work that we are doing. Thank you.

prabhdeep singh kehal: Thank you so much, everyone. That's a good place to end it.

Panelists

Dr. Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra (Sharn) is a Historian, exhibit curator, storyteller, and founder of Belonging Matters Consulting. She is a passionate activist, building bridges between community and academia through museum work and has been featured in the Knowledge Network series "B.C: An Untold History," as well as been featured on local, and international podcasts and media.

Meena Hira is a fourth-generation settler in Canada, she was born and raised in Victoria, B.C. Meena is a future Clinical Counsellor upon completing her Master's in Counselling Psychology at Adler University. Meena has many years of experience working as a social worker, mental health support worker, and a mental health advocate. Meena is passionate about mental health, social justice, and healing generational trauma.

manmit singh (they/them) is a student in the Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice PhD program at the University of British Columbia. As a Sikh, their investments are in their Guru Sahib's directive to be a sant sipahi, translating to "saint-soldier" or "sage-warrior," and are also a community organizer committed to both spiritual and political liberation.

Anita Lal is a fourth-generation settler, born and raised in British Columbia. She is the co-founder of Poetic Justice Foundation, a social justice organization, where she creates impactful and transformative programming to inspire and engage the South Asian community in change-making. Her approach is always inclusive, intersectional and critical; she draws attention to biases, inequalities and oppressive systems of casteism, racism and discrimination.