

Sikhi and Queerness: Summary by SHER Vancouver LGBTQ Friends Society

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Abstract

Sher Vancouver¹ remains dedicated to supporting queer Sikh voices by amplifying messages of love, acceptance, equality and respect. In this essay, we highlight queer voices and their relationship to their Sikhi. As a part of this piece, personal reflections have been voluntarily submitted by individuals willing to share their thoughts and experiences at the intersection of queerness and Sikh identity.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, all personal information and identifying details have been redacted to preserve anonymity. While there is a large community that identifies as both Sikh and queer, a large majority of this population did not feel safe or comfortable coming forward to share their perspectives due to fears of retaliation and of being outed.

This collection of reflections is intended to prompt readers to look inward and consider their own positionality regarding queer identities and their intersections with the Sikh faith. Ultimately, we hope this essay encourages the Sikh community to re-examine Sikh teachings through the lived experiences of queer Sikhs, fostering a deeper understanding, compassion, and a greater sense of belonging for all.

Keywords: *Sikhi, Sikhism, Queer, South Asian, Canada*

Introduction

Sikhism is a widely practiced religion throughout the world. As the authors, who also identify as Sikh, we recognize that Sikhism's core teachings, as articulated by Guru Nanak Dev Ji and the succession of Gurus after him, emphasize equality, justice, and respect for all. In this light, Sikhi has always advocated compassion and acceptance.

In today's world, while discussions around queerness have become more common, there remains a lack of space and understanding when it comes to queer identities and the practice of Sikhi. Depending on cultural context and individual perspectives, a range of interpretations have emerged regarding queerness in relation to Sikhi. Some more conservative interpretations of Sikhism, particularly in communities that are heavily influenced by traditional or rigid cultural norms (such as the non-recognition of 2SLGBTQIA+² individuals), may not fully embrace queer identities (Peters, 2023). These perspectives are often due to long-held societal views shaped by cultural norms rather than spiritual teachings (Paul, 2020).

Despite this conservative narrative, there is an emerging and growing voice for inclusion, calling for greater acceptance of all people and advocating for the rights of those who have been historically marginalized by

¹ Sher Vancouver LGBTQ Friends Society is a Canadian charity supporting LGBTQ+ South Asians through advocacy, education, and peer support.

² 2SLGBTQIA+ (Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and other identities within the LGBTQ+ community)

the aforementioned cultural norms. Sikh advocates and community groups increasingly stand hand-in-hand with the queer community, asserting that a core tenet of Sikhi has always been to stand against discrimination (Burns, 2023). These individuals and groups argue that the Sikh faith has always centered on principles of equality, love and respect, principles not constrained by the rules or norms imposed by culture (Collie, 2019). This means that Sikh teachings are not intended solely for the so-called normative society; rather, they extend to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. From the very beginning, Sikhi has emphasized creating a safe, welcoming space for everyone, spaces where no one should be persecuted or discriminated against.

This is not to say that individuals who identify as queer feel safe or comfortable openly practicing Sikhi in every country where the faith is observed (Bower, 2023). Much of the discourse supporting individuals to accept their queer identities remains rooted in the West, in countries like the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the USA (Poushter & Kent, 2020). In contrast, queer Sikhs living in Eastern countries, such as India, Pakistan and the UAE often struggle with the negative consequences of revealing their identities, including isolation and persecution (Poushter & Kent, 2020). This lack of safe, welcoming spaces in the East has led many to seek refuge in Western countries, where they can live more openly as themselves (Poushter & Kent, 2020).

Thus, the work and discourse led by 2SLGBTQ+ Sikhs in the West is imperative in leading the conversation around navigating both a queer identity and the acceptance of practicing their faith. These efforts can create a powerful ripple effect, fostering more visibility, and in turn, greater acceptance for queer communities, especially in places where there are on-going efforts to create safe, welcoming spaces for all.

This growing dialogue around queerness within the Sikh community is opening up broader conversations about the intersection of Sikhism and LGBTQ+ rights. Even in the face of adversity, such as the recent Anti-SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) rallies across Canada, more individuals are courageously coming forward to share their experiences as both Sikh and queer (Burns, 2023). It is in these especially trying and challenging times that conversations around acceptance and shared community become even more critical. These personal narratives and stories of queer Sikhs affirm their continued identity within the faith and help amplify acceptance for those who may not have a platform, fostering unity among all voices, whether vocal or silent.

Ultimately, Sikhs today interpret Sikhism through the lens of religious texts as well as the socio-cultural frameworks created by those in leadership positions within the faith. Many of these religious leaders' regard concepts such as same-sex marriage with disapproval and often discourage their followers from engaging with or affirming queerness or queer identities (Paul, 2020). While there may be some voices calling for division, grounded in conservative values, there will always be voices advocating for equality and the acceptance of religion, faith, and one's identity. One such voice is Alex Sangha, the founder of Sher Vancouver. He has brought together many queer Sikh individuals and groups across Canada to lead a conversation about what it means to be Sikh and how that faith intersects with their identities within the Queer community.

Research Method and Demographics

This research on the intersection of Sikhism and queerness utilizes a qualitative approach, focusing on analysis of personal reflections. Sher Vancouver utilized social media platforms to send out a post requesting submissions from community members, inviting them to share their personal interpretations of Sikhism and its intersection with their queer identity. Individuals who were interested in participating and providing their perspective were given two options for submitting their reflections: through social media messaging systems (such as Instagram, Facebook, etc.) or via a general email or text to the outreach team. All submissions were received virtually.

In addition, we conducted general outreach by contacting community members directly and posting in various groups and forums to further promote our request for submissions. As these personal reflections touch on individuals lived experiences as Sikhs and members of the queer community, Sher Vancouver chose to take a cautious approach to ensure all participants' safety. All submissions were anonymized, with personal identifiers removed to preserve confidentiality and protect those who chose to share their stories.

As such, for the purposes of this essay, no demographic information or data was collected from those who chose to contribute to this article. This decision was made to ensure the safety and protection of all participants, particularly given the presence of conservative members within the larger Sikh community who may not be accepting of queer identities. Sher Vancouver is committed to ensuring that there are no negative consequences for the individuals who bravely came forward to share their stories.

A total of sixteen personal reflections were collected from members of the general public. These reflections are presented in the following section and are numbered for ease of reference only. The numbering does not indicate any particular order or ranking of importance.

As noted earlier, all personal information was redacted to protect anonymity. Submissions were lightly edited to ensure clarity and coherence. These reflections were submitted anonymously, and we cannot confirm the locations of those who contributed. The submissions were requested on a voluntary basis from anyone who wished to share their thoughts and experiences for inclusion in this essay. When we 'called-out' for personal reflections on individuals' experiences with Sikhi, we did so as members of a South Asian queer organization. As the authors of this essay, we would like to acknowledge our affiliation with Sher Vancouver and our close engagement with the queer South Asian community in British Columbia, Canada. We were in a unique position to draw on our community connections and utilize Sher Vancouver's global social media platform to promote the request for submissions.

An additional note we would like to express regarding this essay is the challenge involved in the collection of personal reflections. As mentioned above, society and culture can still be condemning toward individuals who choose to practice Sikhi while also identifying as queer. Although the topic received a lot of engagement and many individuals were pleased with this inquiry, several also expressed fear and anxiety about being 'outed' for their beliefs or views on their queer identity and Sikhi. A large majority that felt

uncomfortable coming forward for fears of retaliation. For this reason, we have made every effort to keep all entries and narratives fully anonymous.

In compiling and analyzing the narratives, we used a qualitative approach rooted in thematic analysis. This method allowed us to identify common patterns, struggles, and moments of empowerment that emerged from these stories. Through this approach, we explored how individuals in the queer community are navigating the balance between their faith and identity, as well as the cultural and religious challenges they encounter, and how they continue to show resilience. By centering the voices of those directly impacted, the essay aims to build a more nuanced understanding of the intersection of Sikhism and queerness in contemporary contexts.

Personal Reflections

The following are personal reflections submitted by individuals sharing their personal journeys in navigating their queer identities alongside their belief in and practice of Sikhism. Although personal identifiers have been redacted, these powerful, quoted-directly, narratives still offer a glimpse into the complexities of each individual's experience and the resilience they have developed through their relationship with Sikhism and the wider cultural context.

These reflections recount how individuals have navigated their journeys in reconciling with their identities as members of both the queer community and Sikh communities. Through these personal narratives, the readers are invited to glimpse into the deep self-reflection each person has undertaken in relation to their life and faith. These submissions highlight moments of both internal and external conflict but also reflect a core principle of Sikhi - harmony. The hope is that these narratives will encourage readers to reflect on their own thoughts and preconceived notions about queer identities and the intersection with the Sikh faith.

The reflections explore a range of topics and emotions that individuals experienced throughout their journeys. Some have struggled with tension and conflict within their families, societal expectations, and the cultural norms that surround them. Others have wrestled with their personal relationships to faith, the meaning of it, and how the cultural influences on religious teaching can make it difficult to embrace the concept of queerness. At the same time, these reflections reveal how each individual has grown through these struggles. They demonstrate how Sikh values—support, acceptance, unity, and equality—can guide individuals forward. These reflections invite the reader to consider how Sikh teachings can be reinterpreted in ways that foster belonging and togetherness within the community, when we stand together as one. Ultimately, these stories contribute to a deeper understanding of how Sikhism and queerness intersect in the lived experiences of individuals, underscoring the diverse ways faith, identity, and self-expression can coexist and flourish.

Narrative #1

Every day there was *paath* [Sikh prayer] in the house - whether it was *Japji Sahib* in the morning or *Rehras Sahib* in the evening. My parents were extremely religious. I was taught about Sikhi very early

on, and it was a large part of my identity growing up. I was always so proud when they were proud of me for being able to recite [prayers] by heart.

As I grew up, feeling different and wanting different things in relationships than my friends, I started to notice how my parents would say things like, "God made only two genders," or "it's not right," when referencing Pride events, they would see in videos or hear from others. It made me question if that was the truth of it. I couldn't challenge them, but I thought the main idea of Sikhi was that all people are born equal - regardless of sex, status, etc.

As I grew into my identity and understood why I felt different from the 'normal' I saw around me, I grew uncomfortable with my Sikhi and the *paath* I thought was inscribed into my soul. It's taken over a decade for me to feel comfortable that I can still be who I am, love who I want to love, and be able to believe in God and regain my faith.

I'm still not where I used to be - but like I said, the *Gurbani* is still ingrained in my soul. I'm a believer in the tenets of Equality and *Seva*. I will continue to give back to my community and practice my faith. Though my parents may never understand me, and this culture still turns its back on me, I continue to believe that the Sikhi in its purest form is accepting of all. Accepting of me.

Narrative #2

Growing up as both queer and Sikh, I often felt the weight of an intersectionality that seemed impossible to reconcile. In my youth, I struggled with the tension between the vibrant, loving traditions of my Sikh faith and the shame I felt for my queer identity, which was neither understood nor accepted in my community. This internal conflict led to feelings of isolation and self-doubt, as I navigated a world where my faith and identity were seen as incompatible.

For years, I battled with guilt, believing that to embrace one part of myself meant betraying the other. However, as I grew older and began to learn more about both my faith and myself, I realized that love, acceptance, and compassion are core tenets of Sikhism. Through this understanding, I was able to bridge the divide between my identity and my spirituality. Embracing both my queerness and my Sikh faith has been a transformative journey, allowing me to love myself fully and see the beauty in my own complexity. With time, I found peace in knowing that my faith doesn't ask me to hide who I am, but instead to live authentically, with love, humility, and compassion for myself and others.

Narrative #3

Being queer is part of my identity, just as being Sikh is. These are not conflicting parts of me, but rather are intrinsic to who I am and shape my understanding of love, faith, and selfhood. To me, being queer means connection to others, and being Sikh means connection to the Divine. In Sikhi, we believe that the Divine resides in all beings, that Waheguru's presence is within each of us, so how could loving others be wrong?

I am blessed to have grown up with Sikhi - learning *santhiya* [precise recitation and rhythm of Gurbani] and *tanti saaj kirtan* [traditional Sikh musical instrument], listening to *katha* [spiritual discourse],

absorbing the teachings of our Gurus, and being immersed in the warmth of *sangat* [community]. To me, Sikhi is not just a practice; it is the foundation of my values and has instilled in me a commitment to justice, equality, and love. While some religious traditions have been misused to justify discrimination, Sikhi does not contain scripture that condemns queerness. I take comfort knowing I'm loved and accepted by my Guru, who enlightened us with the eternal truth that love is love, and that the formless, genderless Waheguru's presence is not bound by human prejudice.

Every morning, I start my day grounding myself in the Divine *Shabad* [word/hymn] that has guided generations before me. No matter who stands at my side - regardless of their gender or identity - my Guru is always my guide. This brings me unshakable comfort. I don't need external validation to know that I am accepted and cherished by my Guru, who taught us the greatest truth: *Ik Onkar* - oneness, unity, and boundless love that transcends all barriers.

There's a lot that the *Panth* [Sikh collective] needs to work on. Colonialism, cultural shifts, and patriarchal influences have shaped our institutions in ways that do not always reflect the radical equality envisioned by Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Online spaces and comment sections can often be hostile, filled with negativity, and I have yet to see mainstream *prachaar* [preaching/propagation] embracing queerness and same-sex relationships as part of Sikhi's message of love and equality.

But change is possible, and Gurbani teaches us that transformation begins from within, urging us to challenge injustice and uphold truth even in adversity. The Sikh spirit is one of resilience: standing up for the marginalized, rejecting oppression, and embracing the infinite love of the Divine. The queer experience echoes this same resilience - choosing to exist authentically in a world that often resists us.

While there is still much work to be done, I see hope in so many queer Sikhs choosing to live in their truth and reclaiming the core values of our faith - *seva*, justice, love, and oneness. I see it in those who, like me, refuse to choose between being Sikh and being queer because we know these identities are not at odds. We do not need to reconcile them; they are already whole, already intertwined.

My journey as a queer Sikh is to embody the limitless love our Gurus taught. It is to celebrate the beauty of diversity while recognising that, at our core, we are all reflections of the same Divine Light. And that is a truth no one can take from me.

Narrative #4

Growing up in the Sikh community is not easy, there are so many restrictions and so many norms that you're told to follow in the name "God," but it's mostly just people making these norms up and imposing them on others.

Being Queer in the Sikh community is not easy. Being Queer is not accepted openly even today. Growing up, I was taught there are two genders and that there is nothing in the middle. I knew from a young age I was different, but I was always scared to talk about it or tell anyone because I feared I may be isolated or abandoned.

When I decided to go on this path, I knew I would lose many relationships, but in the end what mattered to me was what makes me happy, and not society. One thing that makes me happy is my faith in God. I get to choose every day to believe that Sikhi values truth above all else. That we are all equal, made equal, should be seen as equal and are equal. Period.

We learn that in Sikhi that it is important to stand up and fight for your and others' rights, and that everyone deserves to be true to themselves. In my heart, in my Sikhi, I choose to believe that I can be who I want to be and still be able to go to a Gurdwara without shame or guilt. I feel it is *you* who gets to choose what matters to you and who you want to be - not society, not culture.

Sikhi believes in everyone equally. It's hurtful to see people constantly make comments or say things regarding queer people. It always feels like they forgot what it means to be Sikh. I believe there is acceptance in Sikhism and people need to change their mentality and allow people to be who they want to be.

Don't spread hate. Let people be who they were meant to be. Sikhi does not judge.

Narrative #5

Being Sikh and queer has often felt like standing at the crossroads of two identities that struggle to coexist in the eyes of the community. I was born into a Sikh family on both my mother's and father's sides, but my connection to Sikh heritage was fractured early on when my parent's divorce placed us on the outskirts of the community. The stigma surrounding divorce was enough to push us away, reinforcing how rigid cultural perceptions can be.

Even as we built a life outside of those expectations, queerness became another unspoken tension. My family, though accepting in private, feared what others—especially the few Sikh people still in our lives—would say. Their concerns weren't just about me but about the weight of judgment they had already endured. This fear highlights a larger reality within the Sikh community: the stigma around queerness doesn't just make coming out difficult; it makes it feel like another form of exile.

Yet, despite these challenges, I refuse to believe that my identities are in conflict. Sikhism is built on values of love, justice, and equality, yet cultural expectations have created barriers to fully embracing queer Sikhs. My journey has shown me that acceptance isn't just about personal support but about shifting deeply ingrained narratives within the community.

For many of us who exist at this intersection, belonging is not something we are readily given—we have to carve out space for ourselves. But in doing so, we prove that queer Sikhs have always been here, and we always will be.

Narrative #6

I am a proud gay non-binary individual and a devoted Sikh. People like me often refer to themselves as "Queer Sikh" or "Queer and Sikh," signifying the coexistence of queerness and religious belief, in my

case, Sikhism. Terminology merely serves to express the intersectionality of identity, where one can be both queer and religious.

I did not choose to be queer. How could I, when prevailing Sikh authorities and leaders vehemently oppose queerness? The Sikh Gurus taught us to be humble, to embrace our natural selves, to treat everyone as equals regardless of caste, gender, religion, social standing, or wealth, and above all, to love and respect all.

I first encountered the word "gay" at the age of 20. Prior to that, I had only been exposed to heterosexuality, as queerness was criminalized in my home country [India] at the time. I never experienced attraction toward women, while my peers often objectified them as mere sexual objects. Initially, I attributed my lack of attraction to women to my deep religiosity.

As time passed, I began to recognize my distinct sexual orientation, which left me feeling isolated and distant from my faith. Although I remained somewhat religious, my devotion had waned compared to my childhood years. Upon completing my internship, I learned that homosexuality was legal in Western countries. This realization ignited a desire to leave behind everything I knew and seek a life of authenticity abroad. I immigrated to Canada with the hope of liberating myself from societal and familial expectations. My ultimate aspiration was to find love, marry, and have a family of my own.

However, in distancing myself from Sikhism, I felt a void in my soul—a lifeless existence, like a withered tree standing tall but devoid of vitality. To fill this emptiness, I immersed myself in work and social isolation, which led to depression. The only thing that kept me going was the love I had for my mother. I resolved that once she was gone, I would have no reason to live. In this darkness, I found temporary solace in material indulgence, spending money in an attempt to derive fleeting happiness from shopping.

The first time I saw an Indian individual not only featured in a queer film but central to its narrative, I was overwhelmed with surprise and curiosity. I discovered the existence of a South Asian queer community, including Punjabi queer individuals. I cautiously made my way to where the community was meeting up, anxiously looking over my shoulder to ensure that no one familiar saw me entering a queer space. It felt as though a lifeline had been extended to my soul, pulling me back from the abyss of despair.

With the unconditional love and acceptance of the community, I gained the confidence to seek mental health treatment, come out to my family, embrace my queerness with pride, and ultimately reconnect with Sikhism.

Initially, my femininity drew scrutiny, anger, and resentment from religious individuals. Their hatred and judgment often made me avert my gaze and suppress my confidence. I became the target of death threats and online abuse, particularly from closeted Sikhs who struggled with their own queerness and Sikh identity, choosing instead to live in denial. Despite this hostility, I persisted in practicing Sikhism, albeit with trepidation.

Through extensive research, I discovered that homosexuality is a natural occurrence observed in over 25,000 species. Moreover, queerness has existed throughout history, in every culture and civilization. If something is so omnipresent and inherent to nature, how can it be against God? If God is the creator of all things, then queerness, too, is part of the divine plan. As I embraced my authentic self, my devotion to Sikhism deepened.

Today, I visit Gurdwaras and pay my respects without fear. The eyes that once held hatred and contempt now reflect curiosity and, in some cases, respect. However, I still encounter stares and laughter from individuals recently arrived from other countries, who are unfamiliar with my existence. Sikhism, at its core, is a faith of acceptance, inclusivity, freedom, resistance against injustice, and support for the marginalized. We uphold the principle of *Sarbat da Bhala*, meaning the welfare of all without discrimination.

At what point did Sikhs begin to dictate how others should exist, worship, and live with dignity? Who would willingly choose to be queer in a queerphobic society? Perhaps queers are born into Sikh families as a divine reminder of the faith's fundamental values. The Sikh community's rejection and the fear of being harmed by one's own family for the sake of preserving honor have left me shattered. Yet, I am in the process of rebuilding myself. Each piece I reclaim shines with the brilliance of a diamond.

Ultimately, existence should not be a struggle. If family and community acceptance can empower individuals to thrive and contribute meaningfully to society, what is the harm? Queer individuals have existed since the dawn of time, in every culture, faith, and civilization. Whether we are called "Queer Sikh" or "Queer and Sikh" is irrelevant—we will always be here. The only question that remains is whether others will choose to accept this truth or remain consumed by hatred.

Narrative #7

I feel like since there has been no mention, or not that I have heard, of any queerness in Sikhi, that definitely sets the precedent that Sikhi does not accept me. But on the other hand, I also think, I'm not sure, but in Sikhi, during the *Anand Karaj* [wedding ceremony], I think it states the joining of two souls and does not emphasize too much on gender.

As a queer person and an immigrant in Canada, my relationship [with Sikhi] definitely has changed a lot. Back in the country where I was born and raised, I used to go to the Gurudwara with my parents a lot and did not overthink anything. It could also be because I wasn't aware of myself.

But since I moved to this country, there is way more aggression and strong feelings [from] folks from the Sikh faith, as shown by countless protests, they are part of anti-LGBTQ+. That makes me feel unsafe to be in those places, especially when there is an intersecting identity [for] Sikhs in North America without deeply understanding the potential consequences.

I know this may be off topic, but it makes me feel scared that if there are topics discussed [without compassion or awareness] about my identity as queer, I may be perceived in a way that people wouldn't want to deal with. Hence, by virtue of life situations, I moved away from Sikhi, but I practice my faith in

my own ways. Recently, I've started going to a small Gurdwara because there are fewer people and less perception.

Narrative #8

I identify as a bisexual Sikh woman, who has been a part of the community for quite some time now. Growing up wasn't easy because I wasn't allowed to be as comfortable [in my identity] as I am now. Going to the Gurudwara every day, I was constantly being told how wrong it was to like any other sex except male.

It has been a struggle seeing all my family having children and the women living the typical lifestyle this culture places us in, where the wife stays home, takes care of the kids, cooks and the husband goes out and "takes care of the family." This is what I was told was the traditional Sikh family. When I was younger, I discovered I didn't like that. I didn't want that to be my future, but I had to trick my mind, because I knew that being Sikh, and the faith being so influenced by the culture, I had to be "normal" or else I would get disowned.

Growing up, I have felt less ashamed of showing my true self because I don't want to have to hide anymore. I've started to study more, learn more about what Sikhism actually is, rather than what the culture says it is. I've learned to be more accepting of myself, as I know that Sikhism values equality, love, and truth. This religion has never had an issue with me, and I love being able to rediscover my faith and my Sikhi.

Narrative #9

Personally, I never viewed myself as different from any Sikh out there. And the closer you get to Sikhi, the less you're worried about if you're being viewed any differently. I believe when Guru Maharaj Ji said, "*Manas ki jaat sabhe eke pehchanbo*" [recognise the whole human race as one], it automatically put an end to every intellectual conflict – whether it was race, religion, caste, sex, or sexuality.

Sikhi for me had been the tool to connect with the Divine form of *Akal Purakh* [God] through the achievement of *Anand*, a state where you are beyond physical reality, and you are mere consciousness.

But unfortunately, due to racism, stereotyping and ignorance, Sikhi is always misunderstood in terms of queerness.

I believe if you're a queer Sikh, whether religious or non-religious, you should never misinterpret Sikhi for your defense. Listening to the many opinions from both hetero and homosexual Sikhs, a lot of people state how there is misinterpretation of Sikhi by queer Sikhs, and that can cause a lot of disrespect to Sikhi. It is causing so much hate for the whole queer Sikh community.

There's so much homophobia against queer Sikhs. Remember, Sikhi gave us respect and equal space in society, and we should pay it back with respect.

Narrative #10

Sikhi has been a major part of my life. While I was in my home country [India], I was enrolled in a school where religion played a big role in many of the activities that took place. Naturally, I would take part in those. My devotion was getting stronger and stronger.

I used to do *Sehaj Paath*, go to the Gurudwara and do *Rehraas Sahib* and *Chaur Sahib Sewa*.

On the other hand, I was bullied in high school for acting like a girl and was called gay (as a slur). But that has always been separate from my religious side. After truly finding out that I was gay, I had come to an acceptance of God making me the way I am.

When I came to Canada, I started using gay dating apps. For some time, I was really comfortable with having uncut hair, my beard being long. After some time, I felt insecure as I [didn't feel] attractive enough with my beard. I also felt people were being racist towards me and making funny jokes where they would bring up my religion.

I was literally so young at this point.

I felt discriminated [against] by gay men, and also [felt] not attractive. To fit in, I chopped my beard. I felt that I was betraying my parents because they are really deep into religion, and I had fear of them questioning me about that. But they accepted me and did not have any issues.

Also, I used to go to the Gurudwara nearby daily and after chopping my beard I felt really uncomfortable going there. All the *sewadaars* [volunteers at the Gurdwara] were commenting about that. Some comments were like, "You have betrayed the Guru," or "You have stained Sikhi with this".

That hurt me for a bit, but honestly, I wasn't sure if this was the right decision. Nobody said in the Gurudwara that I might come around and grow my beard again. Everybody there was just making negative and shaming comments. That was disappointing.

Then after some time, I had to move to another city, which was a hub for the Queer community. I explored myself by going to different queer events. Nobody there was judgmental.

I have done some things like drinking, smoking and recreational drugs (like marijuana). I used to think these were bad activities to do because it's against Sikh *rehat maryaada* [Sikh code of conduct]. But then, [I thought] I'm not doing all of these and harming anybody or anything. I started thinking I'm doing it for my personal fulfillment. I don't get over drunk or get really high on weed—just on special occasions I would have them.

It has become a regular part of my life, to the point where I don't see anything wrong with it. I feel [these things] are totally different from my religious side. I had so many questions about these things in the past.

Then again, I remembered my past, when I first accepted being gay, and said to myself that God made me this way.

After many thoughts, it came to me that my God will accept me the way that I am. I don't really care about other views.

I do my *Paath* in the morning, do *Ardaas* after that, and pray for everyone's well-being and other personal stuff.

I started envisioning God as a loving being [one] which will love me in any way. I have learnt I'm on my own Sikhi journey.

I would say my inner self has stayed the same regardless of how I look from the outside now. I pray to *Parmatma* [God]. I ask for forgiveness, for blessings, for well-being, and for protection.

Narrative #11

Sat Shri Akal,

I am a trans man who recently settled in Canada. This community has been incredibly supportive, providing me with acceptance and a sense of community. I deeply appreciate Canada and wish to visit Gurdwaras regularly.

However, I face significant challenges when using washrooms at Gurdwaras. If I enter the women's washroom, I receive uncomfortable stares, as if I am doing something wrong. If I attempt to use the men's washroom, I am often told to go to the women's facility instead. Due to these experiences, I feel anxious about visiting Gurdwaras, fearing potential verbal harassment or even physical harm.

I hope to find a solution that allows me to practice my faith without fear.

Narrative #12

As [a] Queer Brown Sikh individual, I've often felt torn between parts of my identity, believing that they couldn't coexist. However, as I've grown, I've come to understand that nothing is outside of God's Will (*Hukam*), including my soul and identity.

Therefore, I embarked on a journey of self-acceptance, choosing to let go of others' expectations and discomfort. Though the path is not easy and there is much resistance, I have faith in God —that they will guide me through it.

Narrative #13

It is really hard to be Sikh and an openly proud queer person. I tried to balance my pride for my religion and my queerness for a while, but time and time again, the so-called protectors of the religion kept bringing me down. I am [a person] a male assigned at birth, and being a male Sikh, I used to tie a turban. But I also used to go out wearing high heels just [because] I liked how empowered I used to feel, as I carried both my religious belief and my queer identity together with pride.

But one day someone recorded me walking down [by] a traffic light and posted it online. The video got almost a million views on TikTok and Instagram combined. Though there were a lot of positive

comments on the video, there was a lot of hate as well, mainly [focused] on the fact that I was disrespectful towards the turban and Sikhi.

As far as my knowledge of the Sikh religion, there is no mention of God not accepting of queer people or even any mention of how a man should or shouldn't style his turban with the rest of the outfit. All that Sikhi says is that one shouldn't cut [their] hair and [should] maintain a Sikhi *suroop* [external identity] with the 5 *Kakars* [articles of faith]. But people were just talking about my heels being disrespectful. I even saw those people commenting, who got all their hair cut, and were commenting on how I should carry myself as a Sikh, as if their version of Sikhi is acceptable. They can go to Gurdwaras with those chopped hair, but I cannot even walk a street in my heels.

It all happened in Canada, where I thought I could be myself openly without having to come out to my parents, [because] I wasn't ready yet. But after that video went viral, it scared me a lot. I feared my parents discovering the video online, which luckily never happened. But I stopped wearing my heels with my turban together after that incident. Slowly, I just started going out with heels and a bun on my head or a ponytail [because] it wasn't safe for me to be a Sikh while being queer.

Sikhi just teaches acceptance and equality

"Aval alah noor upaia, kudrat ke sabh bande.

Ek noor te sabh jag upjia, kaun bhale kaun mande."

First, Allah created the Light; then, by his creative power, He made all mortal beings.

From the One Light, the entire universe welled up. So, who is good, and who is bad?

I wish people actually understood what it meant and didn't hate us based on something we can't control.

Narrative #14

I'm Sikh and LGBTQ+, by the way. Regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, I believe it is critical that people understand that Sikhism is a faith that promotes equality and justice for everyone. All humans are equal in God's eyes, according to Sikh doctrine, therefore compassion and love are fundamental virtues. Sikh texts include no explicit reference to homosexuality, and many Sikhs consider it to be a private matter that should be treated with dignity.

Narrative #15

Being queer and Sikh comes with a lot of challenges, especially when you have grown up in the "traditional" land [India], which is undergoing a gradual but yet very far-from-inclusive approach. Since my childhood, I've always kept my gay identity hidden because of the stigma I saw around me. I always kept the door around my sexuality shut close, until recently, when I came to Canada, where the environment is much more inclusive than India. I've learnt, and still learn, to love myself more each day.

If I have to talk about my queerness and how I feel cohesive with my queer and Sikh identity, this is how I would put my journey: In my home country, I always felt different. Although I'm a very social

person, there was a deep inkling of being not like the others. I felt my values being incongruous to my surroundings and values of my country's folks, which to me felt quite constricted and narrow-minded. I later realized it was the never the religion, but the culture which harbored outdated, rigid beliefs.

Sikh belief is one of the purest, and the philosophy of "*Nirbhau Nirvair*" (without fear, without hate) is etched into the heart of Sikhism. Why should we be afraid to express how God chose us to be? That's our highest truth. God wants us to live in truth without any fear. Why would there be hate around queer folks when God unconditionally showers His blessings on everyone?

Furthermore, marriage is seen as a union of two souls in Sikhism, which is a revered bond and a spiritual milestone to merge with the One. Since the inception of Sikhi, it was never mentioned the union of man and woman. Furthermore, Sikh *Anand Karaj* clauses, which say marriage is between men and women and should only be solemnized between two Sikhs, were changed in 1940s and 1950s by older, so-called "cultural" Sikh men. Times during those [decades] ran with structured and rigid customs of cultures.

However, the pure philosophy of Sikhi is beyond the duality of this world, and the message they give us clearly translates to that. It understands the nuances of gender and orientation, which are also reflective in other Indian religions.

I, as a queer Sikh gay man, feel so proud of my religion, which is inclusive and tells us to spread love. At the same time, I feel disappointment at the narrow binary mindset of this culture. The culture itself is rigged, possesses bigotry, is toxic and ignorant. Our Gurus asked for *Sarbat da bhala* —the upliftment of all.

My message to my fellow queer brethren is to always believe in yourself and your higher power. They [others] let us never see that, but it's [within] us, when we turn inward, that we realize how much potential we hold for growth, for love, and for healing.

To others, I want to say that gay people have persevered here since the dawn of humanity. They are, and will always be, here. Let this message reverberate in every nook and corner so people, especially non-queer Punjabi and Sikh people and youth, know that we exist, we existed, and will continue to exist. We have the right to thrive and love whoever we want, without judgement, just like they have.

Narrative #16

Growing up in a rural Sikh household, I never really heard anything about homosexuality or what it meant to be gay. The closest I got to hearing about anything related to the LGBTQIA+ community were references to "eunuchs" or "hermaphrodites," who were often called *Khusra* or *Khawaja Sira* [terms commonly used in South Asia to refer to transgender or third-gender individuals]. There was no hate toward them, but it was more out of ignorance and lack of understanding—our community simply didn't talk about it.

As a child, I was a bit effeminate, which led to bullying. But what I didn't realize at the time was that it wasn't because being gay was openly hated—it was because it was a taboo subject, and no one knew how to talk about it. I never heard about homosexuality, and so, there was no space for it in my world.

When I moved to Canada and started living with my extended family, that's when I first began to understand what it meant to be gay. It was in this new environment that I began to see gay characters and movies. But it was also the first time I heard homophobic language in my extended family, things like "fg**t" and "Gn*u," words used to express disgust. My uncle, cousins—people I looked up to—spoke about it with such hate, and in those moments, I felt the sting of their words deep inside. It brought me to tears, not because I feared being bullied, but because it felt like a rejection of something that was part of who I was.

That's when I began to distance myself from Sikhi. I thought of my culture and religion as being homophobic. At that time, my worldview was largely shaped by the narratives I saw online, which mostly focused on larger religions and their views on homosexuality. What I didn't realize was that, in focusing so much on the larger, more mainstream religions, I was losing sight of the wisdom and understanding that exists within my own Sikh faith.

As I started to explore Sikhism more deeply, I realized that Sikhism doesn't oppose homosexuality. In fact, I found so many lines in the *Bani* [hymns/teachings] that can be interpreted as supportive of love in all its forms. I remember reading the *Twa Prasad Swavey* and particularly the last line of the final stanza: "*jin prem kiyo, tin hi prab payeo*" which roughly translates to "Those who love will attain God." Guru Gobind Singh Ji himself questioned the value of rituals, pilgrimages, and external acts, asking why we think these things bring us closer to God. The true connection with the divine, he reminds us, is through love. So why should two people who love each other be judged or rejected?

This realization was life-changing for me. I could be gay and still be Sikh. The two could coexist. So much of the hate I witnessed, both in my family and in society, was rooted in misunderstanding. People often confuse culture with religion. While parts of our culture may reflect homophobia, Sikhism—at its core—does not.

My family was reading the *Bani*, but they weren't truly understanding it. If they had, they wouldn't have said the things they did. Sikhism teaches us that love transcends all boundaries, and that's what I found when I reconnected with my faith.

To anyone who might be going through a similar journey, feeling lost or torn between their sexuality and their faith, I encourage you to read and understand *Bani* for yourself. It will provide clarity and peace. Sikhism doesn't ask us to change who we love—it asks us to love deeply, and to love all. That love is the true path to God.

You don't need to be ashamed of who you love. Embrace your love and embrace your faith. You are worthy of both.

Reflections on Community, Identity and Challenges

In reviewing the reflections submitted by individuals who identify as queer and Sikh, one cannot overlook the courage it must have taken to share these deeply personal experiences. These reflections reveal the intricate path that many queer Sikhs navigate as they reconcile their faith with their sexual and gender identities. In reading and analyzing their stories, one can gather that many individuals faced similar challenges and experienced similar emotions. These included feelings of incompatibility between their faith and identity, feeling 'othered' by the community, and of experiencing isolation and guilt for embracing their authentic self. For many, early childhood memories of faith-based activities, cemented in pride and joy, later on became marked by angst and confusion, deepening the emotional toll of becoming disconnected from their faith.

However, as many of the individuals have in this essay have pointed out, Sikhism is interpreted not only through religious texts but also through the socio-cultural context in which it is practiced. In this case, the cultural norms have had a large influence on the practice of Sikhism and how queer identities are perceived within the community. These individuals speak to their personal experiences, highlighting how historical factors, such as patriarchal societal systems, have contributed to feelings of discrimination and non-acceptance. Much of this stems from the societal and cultural interpretation of Sikhism as being non-inclusive or discriminatory toward anyone outside of the normative identities. As previously indicated, and several personal reflections have alluded to, older male figures as leaders in positions of religious leadership have had significant influence over how Sikhi is practiced and regulated within the community.

Despite these hurdles, these individuals find peace in their faith and have reclaimed what Sikhi means to them. They identify strongly with several of the core tenets of Sikhi: love, equality, humility, oneness and *seva* (selfless service). These values are reinforced through their everyday practices, whether it is going to the Gurudwara or immersing themselves with Sikh teachings among other practices. Their reflections highlight the importance of remaining present within the community and being an ally to those who may identify as Sikh and queer but are not yet able to come out. Above all, these individuals remind the reader that they are embodying their faith by honoring the right to equality and creating safe spaces for themselves and for others.

One of the main themes that we noted is the feeling and experience of self-acceptance and healing. Each individual has critically reflected on their relationship with God and their Sikhi. Many have found a space where they can be unapologetically themselves and practice their faith without feelings of shame or guilt. In fact, they express peace in their relationship with God and hold hope that the future for all queer Sikhs will be similar. While many recognize that there are still challenges to overcome, not only within society but also within culture, they hold the hope that interpretations of the Sikh religion will continue to evolve in a more inclusive direction. Further, there is hope that one day, all Sikhs, regardless of gender or orientation, will feel a true sense of belonging in both the community and the culture.

Overall, Sikhi and queer identities have always existed, but only now are these voices and the stories beginning to be shared and acknowledged. There are still many societal and cultural challenges that impede

the belonging of all Sikhs. Nonetheless, there remains a strong hope that one day we will see true inclusion, just as Sikhi teaches.

Author Note

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