

Sikh Heritage Month Podcast

Episode 5: Chardi Kala and the Arts, featuring guest Harman Kaur

Intro & Outro

Thank you for tuning in to the Sikh Heritage Month podcast presented by the Toronto District School Board. In this student led podcast series, we will explore concepts, themes and ideas prevalent in the Sikh religion and discuss how they fit in with the fabric of our learning communities. We're so happy you have joined us and we hope you take away some important nuggets to talk about within your learning space.

Student 1 (01:15)

Chardi Kala isn't just a concept, it's a way of life woven into the fabric of their daily existence from the moment they wake up to the time they rest. Sikhs strive to embody Chardi kala by embracing positivity, extending a helping hand to those in need, and confronting life's challenges with unwavering courage and determination. Whether it's offering a smile to a stranger, lending a listening ear to a friend in distress, or persevering through personal trials, Sikhs find opportunities in every moment to cultivate resilience and spread optimism. By infusing their actions with the spirit of Chardi Kala, Sikhs not only navigate their own journeys with grace, but also inspire others to approach life with renewed hope and fortitude.

Bumper (02:15)

And you're listening to the Sikh Heritage Month podcast, a TDSB production.

Student 2 (02:38)

Sikhs really love nature. They think it's super special because they see it as a way to connect with something bigger than themselves, like the divine. When they are in nature, like hanging out in forests or watching them watching the sun rays, it makes them feel calm and happy. They believe that being in nature helps them remember how strong and beautiful they are, just like the world around them. This makes them feel even more positive and hopeful, which is what Chardikala is all about. So being in nature is like a big hug from the earth that helps Sikhs feel strong and happy inside.

Samrath (03:43)

Hi, my name is Samrath Kang and I'm a grade eleven student at Thistletown Collegiate Institute.

Parijit (03:49)

Hi, I'm Parijit Kaur Chahal and I am in grade 8 at Beaumonde Heights Junior middle school and today we have Harman Kaur here with us. She is an author and writer. She was born and raised in British Columbia, Canada. She now lives in the Bay Area in California. Her work aims to reflect her identity of a Punjabi Sikh woman and the complexities that come with it. Harman's first book, Phulkari, is a collection of poetry and is currently working on her second book. Thank you for joining us here.

Harman (04:20)

Thank you for having me. Samrath and Parijit, it's an honour to be here.

Samrath (04:24)

Tell us about yourself, who you are and what are your experiences as a Sikh Canadian?

Harman (04:30)

Well, you guys introduced me very thoroughly. My name is Harman Kaur. I recently moved to the Bay Area, California, because I got married, but I was born and raised in a small town called Abbotsford in British Columbia. A lot of people are not familiar with it, but it is close to Surrey, which a lot of people are aware of. And so, basically, I lived there for 25, almost 26 years. So a lot of my experiences that I talk about through my writing and throughout my life are really informed by how I was raised and the community that was around me in Abbotsford. So, so far, I'm 27 right now. So 25 years of my life are informed by my experiences as a Sikh Canadian.

Parijit (05:27)

Well, that was very nice to hear. How do you believe the arts, particularly poetry, as expressed in your book *Phulkari* and upcoming release *Conversations with my guru*, can serve as a vehicle for cultivating *Chardi kala*, or a sense of resilience and optimism in individuals?

Harman (05:47)

Yeah, that's a really good question. So the poems in *Phulkari*, a lot of them talk about Sikhi, because I do identify first and foremost as a Sikh woman, and a lot of them talk about things such as *Chardi Kala*. But the thing that we need to remember when speaking about *Chardi Kala*, which is also, we refer to it as rising spirits in English, is that people have this misconception that *Chardi Kala*. Having *Chardi Kala* means that you always have to be positive, that you always have to think on the bright side. But I believe that *Chardi Kala* cannot come unless you fall first. Okay. So you get to that point in your life where you're going through a tough time, whether it's mentally, physically. And I think that poetry, specifically through a Sikh lens, is kind of one of those things that bring you from that place of being down and provide you that vehicle for rising spirits. And you mentioned conversations with my guru, which is a journal I released for Sikhs just recently. And in that journal, there are writing prompts that get you to kind of reflect and introspect on your Sikhi. And I'm hoping that those introspections are what help people gain that state of mind of *Chardi kala*.

Samrath (07:23)

Your poetry often explores themes of identity, spirituality and resilience. Could you share us how these elements intersect with the concept of *Chardi Kala* and how your work aims to inspire mindfulness and positivity in readers?

Harman (07:37)

Yeah. So the reason that I focus so much on identity in my writing is because I feel like for the longest time, especially when I was growing up, there wasn't a lot of, you can say, representation as a Sikh woman, a Punjabi, Sikh woman. I didn't see myself in any of the literature. I didn't see myself in media. And of course, now that has changed a little bit, especially in Canada. But I feel like being able to see yourself in things such as TV, writing, or any sort of medium of media can really help you feel confident, and it can really help you achieve this sense of *Jardikla* because you're able to see characters, you're able to see writing that you really relate to, and that can really help you reach this idea of *Chardi Kala* and also this sense of mental well being.

Samrath (08:39)

Yeah, I do agree with what you said was that when I was younger, I also didn't see that much representation of Sikh Canadians or even Sikh in media. Right. But I think now we're getting better. Like, it's step by step, but I think we are getting better now.

Harman (08:54)

Yeah, I agree.

Parijit (08:56)

I can also relate to some stuff you've said in your book, since I'm also a Sikh Canadian girl living in Canada. And it was nice to hear that somebody else can go through some stuff that I also went through.

Harman (09:09)

Exactly. And I think that's so important because once you realize you're not alone in these experiences, and once you realize that there is somebody out there who knows what you're feeling, it can really make you feel better mentally. And it can also contribute know confidence. And that's know you get things such as Chardi kala.

Parijit (09:33)

So the term Phulkari traditionally refers to the intricate embroidery art from Punjab, India. How does the metaphor of Phulkari resonate with your poetry? And how do you see art, whether visually or literally, contributing to the practice of mindfulness and maintaining Chardi kala.

Harman (09:51)

So growing up, I was obsessed with Phulkari. And I think that as soon as you see a Phulkari, you think punjab. Right. You think about your culture. And in the book itself, I followed the process of making a Phulkari. Right. So one of the theme, the first chapter is all about heartbreak, starts off really negatively, a decline in mental health. And I named it the fraying. And the fraying is basically when your tunis starts to fall apart or any basically material that starts to fray. That's how it was represented. And then the second chapter is called the Weaver. And it's all about Sikhi, and it's all about God and spirituality. And that's because in my mind, the metaphor of phulkari, the person who is sowing, is God. Right. I can go on and on, but basically the metaphor of a phulkari, the amount of patience, I mean, nowadays, phulkaris are made with it's machine work. Right. But back in the day, maybe not our moms, but our grandmas, great grandmas, they used to actually sit there and they used to actually. It's called kadai. Right.

Harman (11:25)

Right. So they would actually garden the phulkari by hand. And the patience and the basically resilience needed to sit there and create this huge phulkari that we take for granted now is something that I feel like our generation really can't relate to because we're so used to instantly getting things done. You place an order on Amazon, it comes in the mail one day later. Right. We don't really know the art of patience and of hard work. Right. So I would actually apply this idea of patience and resilience to art in general. Right. We want to be very kind to ourselves. We want to be patient with ourselves, and that can be reflected in our art or in any aspect of our lives. And I think if we come back to the concept of Chardi Kala, I think a lot of people are always in a rush. You want to feel better. You're not feeling good right now. You wish you could be in Chardi Kala, and we rush these things.

Right. But it's important. Just like the way that your grandma, your great grandma was weaving the phulkari slowly, and the end result was beautiful. That is how we should take care of ourselves, and that is how we can reach the state of Chardi Kala is through patience and giving it some time.

Parijit (13:07)

When I went to where my grandmother lives, my nanny, I remember, she was trying to make me a Phulkari, and I got so impatient since I was like around Sikhs. And I'm like, I want it now since I wanted to wear it to the weddings and I just wanted to have it with me. And it took a really long while, but the end result was amazing.

Harman (13:28)

Exactly. Right. So it's just about waiting, because the end result is going to be beautiful, but we just don't want to wait. And I think that is the most important takeaway.

Samrath (13:40)

Yeah, I really think the term Phulkari, when you actually talk about it, it's like you're actually basing it off Chardi kala and how, even though it can come slow, but it eventually comes. So that's a really beautiful metaphor that you really made out. So as an author and a poet, what strategies do you employ to infuse your work with elements of joy and resilience, especially in times of adversity? How do you hope your writing contributes to the broader conversation about mental well being and mindfulness in today's society.

Harman (14:14)

It's a really interesting question, because a lot of the time when I'm writing, I'm writing when I'm not feeling so well, right? So writing has always been kind of a coping mechanism for me. So when you're not feeling that well mentally, your writing is also pretty dark. And for me, it's kind of a release of these thoughts that I have in my head. And you mentioned how you mentioned positivity. You mentioned mental well being and resilience and joy. And I think it just comes back to that idea of being patient and being patient with your feelings. Right? So what I mean by that is, let's just say on a certain day, I'm not feeling the best or something is not going right in my life. And if I was to just take that and tell myself that this is what my life is now, right? Which is not true. Right? A bad day does not equal a bad life. Right? It's just a bad day, and the next day could be better. So it's just about being patient, right. It's just about realizing, okay, today is a bad day. I'm having really negative thoughts, and maybe I can use this time to write as a form of just outlet.

Harman (15:46)

But do I want to be using this writing and putting it out there and sharing it out there? Maybe not, right? And just being patient with yourself and just letting the bad day ride out, especially in Fogati. Like I said, the first chapter itself is all just. It's about heartbreak. It's about declining mental health. And I think it is okay to talk about those themes in your work, because at the end of the day, I said, it's nice for somebody else who's reading it to know that they're not alone. But I don't believe that. If the whole book was really negative and about dark feelings, I don't agree with that. And that's not what I want for my work. So when I'm having those days, just take a step back. You breathe, you remind yourself about what is important, right? You remind yourself that, okay, listen, this is a bad day. This does not mean I have a bad life. You reach out to the people that are your support system in your life, right?

And as a Sikh, you reach out to your guru, right? You reach out to Gurbani, you go to the Gurdwara, you do Ardaas prayer, right?

Harman (17:05)

You do all those things that you need to do to feel in a better state of mind. Then you're reminded that, listen, life has its ups and downs. Right. Today is a down, tomorrow might be an up. And that is basically how I kind of navigate my life, and that is how I'm able to bring themes of joy and resilience into my poetry. And I think if we were to live every single day outside of your art, outside of your poetry like that, I feel like that would be the best way to cultivate feelings of Chardi kala. Feelings of strong mental well being, is just realizing that, listen, things will get better. And being able to hold on to your systems of support and knowing what your systems of support are is really important. So that is how my process is and how I kind of get through those bad times.

Parijit (18:16)

That is very nice to hear, since I feel like I do that, too sometimes. I have bad days, and I just think that tomorrow, hopefully, it gets better. And I was looking through your book, and I found this very nice line that I would like, and I felt like it related to me. It was like, "I have learned to walk with my head held high, even when my circumstances have tried to push it down. My head belongs to my guru. How can I let it bow to my doubts and fears?" And I related to that, since I can't think of all the bad stuff that's going on when I trust my guru to help me out in life and always support me.

Harman (18:57)

That's beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing. Yeah, that's basically it. At the end of the day, is realizing that your guru is there no matter what. Right. No matter who's not there, your guru is there. And it's okay if sometimes that's not enough. Right. Sometimes we want our best friend or our partner or our parents to be there for us. Right. Sometimes we forget that our guru is there. Right. So just keeping that balance, right. Knowing that your guru is there no matter what, and that it's okay if you need more than that, is a good way to walk through life. So I really appreciate you sharing that with me.

Samrath (19:37)

So, that poem that you said was like, it's the true meaning of chardi kala, because it's like, even at times when you're in all this negativity, you always have your guru with you. You never bow in defeat. You always continue going, that poem is really good. So, if you could describe your relationship to Sikhism in one word, what would it be and why?

Harman (20:01)

That is an awesome question. One word, I would say, evolving. And what I mean by that is, we often have this misconception in Sikhi that for some people, they think once they've been given Amrit, that's it, they're done, right? Or once they start reading Gurbani, once they've learned Punjabi, start reading Gurbani, they're done. That's it. But the thing about Sikhi is it's not a destination, it's a journey, right? And we choose to walk this path every single day. Every single day, you wake up and you have to make a choice, right. So if you're not evolving as a Sikh, if you're not changing as a Sikh, I think that defeats the purpose of Sikhi, right. Because Sikh literally means to learn, right? So essentially, you are a student, and if as a student, like, let's say, for example, you think you've learned it all, right? Like, you think you've learned everything in the world, then you can't call yourself a student anymore, right?

Guru is teacher, and we are Sikhs of the guru, right? So Sikhi, for me, is constantly evolving. I am not the same person I was. I was introduced to Sikhi very early on in my life.

Harman (21:29)

I was very young. Right. And the beliefs that I held then are definitely not the beliefs that I hold now. They've changed a lot. Even the beliefs that I had last year compared to now have changed so much. And I think that as a Sikh, if you identify as a Sikh and if you don't feel yourself changing and evolving, then you really want to question yourself and ask yourself why. So I think the best word to describe my relationship with Sikhi would be evolving.

Samrath (22:03)

Yeah, that's a really good way to say I resonate with it, because Sikh means to learn. So you're always learning. And so can you explain to the listeners what is Gurbani and what is taking Amrit?

Harman (22:16)

Yeah, well, I'll try to basically talk about it in the simplest terms. Guru bani is basically. You can refer to it as, like, our scriptures. Right. But we believe Gurubani is, like our living guru. Right. So Sikhs have ten gurus, and our Bani is in Guru Granth Sahib Ji, which is our living guru. And it's basically the words that we have been given the Shabbad guru, that we have been given as Sikhs. And they've been compiled by different gurus. There's different bhagats that contributed to Guru grand sabji, which is 430 angas. We don't refer to them as pages, we refer to them as angas. And it's basically, we read it every single day. And it is basically the key to our Sikhi and the key to our understanding of the world that is the lens through which we are supposed to view the world. And then you had asked about Amrit. Yeah, amrit. I don't want to water it down and call it a sort of baptism, but in terms of people who are listening to this and don't speak Punjabi or don't have context, it is kind of initiation baptism ceremony where there are some Sikhs who will take the next step and they will basically pledge their life to their guru.

Harman (23:53)

And Sikhs that have taken Amrit live by a code of conduct that non Amritdhari Sikhs don't necessarily live by. And some of the things include wearing the five K's, so those Sikhs will definitely wear those. And there's a bunch of discipline involved with it. So I hope I was able to define those in a way that makes sense, but that is essentially what those are.

Parijit (24:29)

Well, that was very good to hear. Thank you so much for agreeing to do this podcast for the Sikh heritage committee.

Harman (24:36)

Thank you so much for having me. It was an honor to be here.

Samrath (24:39)

Thank you.

Bumper (24:42)

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Student 3 (24:56)

Chardi kala isn't just about having a positive mindset, it's also about cultivating physical and mental strength. By prioritizing our physical health through nutritious eating habits, regular exercise, and adequate rest, we optimize our overall wellbeing and resilience. Engaging in physical activities not only strengthens our bodies, but also releases endorphins that enhance our mood and outlook on life. Furthermore, nurturing our mental health is crucial for maintaining chardi kala. We can achieve this by challenging ourselves intellectually, pursuing hobbies and interests that stimulate our minds, and practicing mindfulness and self care techniques. By integrating physical and mental fitness into our daily routines, we equip ourselves with the strength and endurance needed to confront life's challenges head on with unwavering optimism and determination. In addition to physical and mental strength, mindfulness plays a pivotal role in nurturing chardi kala. Mindfulness involves being fully present in the moment, observing our thoughts and feelings without judgment, and cultivating a sense of inner peace and clarity. By practicing mindfulness techniques such as meditation, deep breathing exercises, and mindful movement practices like yoga, we develop greater self awareness and emotional resilience. Mindfulness empowers us to manage stress more effectively, regulate our emotions, and maintain a positive outlook even in the face of adversity.

Student 3 (26:25)

By embracing mindfulness as a core component of our well being, we deepen our connection to Chardi Kala, fostering a sense of inner strength that enables us to navigate life's challenges with grace and resilience.

Intro & Outro (26:51)

You've been listening to the Sikh Heritage Month podcast presented by the Toronto District School Board. Thank you to all the students and staff that helped to make this production possible. We'd love to hear about how students have connected with the content and discussions in these three episodes. If you're sharing on Twitter, use the hashtag #SikhHeritageTDSB and you can also tag the handle @TDSB_SHM.