

## OPENING & KEYNOTE SPEECH

CHAIR: Habiba Zaman, Simon Fraser University

### **Keynote Speech by Harsha Walia**

“Beyond Mangoes and Coconuts: Thinking Critically about South Asian Representations, Responsibilities, and Relations”



HARSHA WALIA

## **BEYOND MANGOES AND COCONUTS: THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT SOUTH ASIAN REPRESENTATIONS, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND RELATIONS**

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSCRIPTION BY SANZIDA HABIB

What does it really mean by “South Asians”? Harsha Walia dissects this category to critically examine a few relevant intersecting issues – from multiculturalism and race relations in Canada to the anti-black and anti-indigenous racisms/discriminations and cruel caste systems within South Asian communities, and the oppressive class hierarchies created by global capitalist market based economy. The crux of the matter is that such blanket categories hide not only the internal diversity, but more importantly, the unequal power relations and violence emitted from such power. Harsha persuasively elaborated how, despite the celebratory Canadian multicultural policy, racialized immigrants and their children, even if locally born, are cast as eternal outsider with the odd line of questioning around ‘where are you from’ and tagged with hyphenated identities. On the other hand, whiteness is normalized and equated with being native and Canadian irrespective of the history of colonization and dispossession of Indigenous peoples by European settlers.

However, not all South Asian people encounter the same levels of oppression or racialization and the lived material realities experienced by other marginalized communities such as, black and indigenous populations. In fact, the hierarchical notion and practices of white supremacy are infiltrated into other kinds of discriminations including anti-black and anti-indigenous racisms, the inhumane treatment of low-caste and Dalit minorities, the ever spreading Islamophobia, xenophobia, transphobia, misogyny, heteronormativity and all kinds of violence within our communities. Again, many South Asians and other privileged groups of immigrants often become as successful and powerful as the white people, by practicing the neoliberal capitalist standards; and they turn out to be actively complicit in perpetuating such violence and discriminations against indigenous, black, and Dalit peoples. The examples and stories shared by Harsha are eye-opening, flabbergasting, and some are even awe-inspiring! She started the captivating speech with a tribute to Pritam Kaur, an unsung hero in the South Asian community, and she closed it with another extraordinary story of organized community resistance against Laiber Singh’s forced deportation. We present full transcription of the oral speech followed by questions from the audience Harsha addressed equally robustly!

### **THE SPEECH**

Good morning! I was just thinking this is the most legit South Asian Conference where someone is told to eat so many times – “do it well!” And also perhaps not, because we’re starting on time! Thank you everyone for being here and thank you organizers for convening all of us together. It is an honor to be here particularly to be able to speak in the context of South Asians organizing and we’re really thinking what it means to be a South Asian youth knowing that it

means different things to us. How can we build something together to think it through south Asian organizing and politics? This is one of the things for organizers to think – for having me here, and to bring all of us here. And I also want to echo the acknowledgement about the unceded Coast Salish territory.

These are the lands of the Musqueam, the Tsleil-Waututh and the Squamish people. And I think one of things is thinking through South Asian presence on these lands are so vital for us; to recognize that it's not enough to think about South Asia, the colonialism that took place in south Asia, but to think how we're implicated in the ongoing dispossession of the Indigenous peoples on these territories and what our roles and responsibilities are here.

I want to start with the story of Pritam Kaur. She is 90 years old right now. She lives here in the lower mainland. She was a key organizer in the 1970s and 1980s. She was really active in the farm workers' movement in British Columbia. And we know that farm workers in general across Canada are Canada's forgotten workers; they toil in the fields to feed us food, to put food on our tables every single day, and often endure the most horrific conditions. It's one of the most dangerous industries in Canada. Most people think that the kinds of jobs that are hard are being police officers who fend off crime! But in reality, it's the hard work low paid and low wage jobs, mostly done by racialized women, farm workers being one of them working with pesticides. Almost until recently, farm workers were not even fully covered by health and labour and safety standards in BC, and continue to be exempted from a number of health and safety codes under the labor legislation. Particularly immigrant workers are working 12 to 14 hours a day, in some cases often making a dollar an hour, especially back in the 70s and 80s, living in converted chicken coops and suffering from chronic health problems.

So Pritam worked as a farm worker under these conditions. She also worked 14 hours a day, seven days a week. She started organizing in the farm when young Punjabi women complained about sexual violence by the farmer that they worked for. She went to see the farmer with a stretcher and a gun. She said I'm here and I'm not going away. And she didn't. She helped organize farm boycott across farms in the lower mainland. She led court battles for unpaid wages and she was one of the few women that held executive positions in the Canadian farmworkers' union which was initiated here in BC with mostly Punjabi women with very close international and transnational relationships, for example, California ...

She fought for minimum wage and workers' rights including farm working women's rights to use bathrooms, because at that time, farm workers were going to the bathroom in the fields, basically; and for daycare in the farm so that children could have access to day care while they could also work in the farm.

So to me she is one of the many unsung heroes, especially in the South Asian and Punjabi community. She fought for feminist rights, she fought for workers' rights, but you know, she was rarely understood or acknowledged within this movement or even within our own community. Very few people know about women like Pritam Kaur. The Canadian Farm Workers' Association includes hundreds of women like Pritam Kaur and they won an important victory after 15 months strike at a lower mainland mushroom farm which was also initiated by five women and effectively shut down the entire industry sales and distribution of mushroom across BC with the support of other unions. They rallied around the slogan – "united we stand and divided we fall". The farm workers' union captured the imagination of all working class people in BC. To me it continues to be the beacon of hope in face of unsurmountable odds for

not only second class workers but also second class citizens, especially immigrant workers. And I bring up this example not only to honor her but also often time when we think about “success” as South Asians, and I’m going to come back to this category of South Asians because they are fairly awkward and problematic categories. So people like Pritam Kaur are often overshadowed at the expense of glorifying doctors, engineers, lawyers, elected officials because we are told these are the real south Asian success stories. So what I’m going to focus on today is troubling the idea of south Asian representation and by extension, success in few ways.

I want to first think through this discourse of multiculturalism that South Asians get subsumed under than challenge it. I will also problematize, as I mentioned earlier, the category of “South Asians” and how it actively hides violence, by thinking through transnational relationships as well as caste supremacy and race and class relations. And finally I want to try to imagine a different way of what it means to be a South Asian politically organized person or youth and think about our social position and responsibilities to affect change in this current moment. And I say this knowing that this is me, just 1% talking, to the very effect that I’m speaking under the umbrella of South Asian youth, and again, it is a problematic and awkward kind of positioning.

So the first thing I want to talk about is multiculturalism and how we think about it – what it means in the Canadian state context, and how to challenge it. Canadian multiculturalism is seen as Canada’s gift to the world. We talk about it all the time. And what it is understood as, is the framework of how non-white people are welcomed to Canada as immigrants and refugees, how different cultures integrate without actually being assimilated, and still retain parts of ourselves, our language, our culture. Still we are asked if we are Canadian! This is how Canadian multiculturalism is imagined; it is juxtaposed to the US model of the melting pot. Multiculturalism means that we celebrate difference, and that we don’t celebrate racism and discrimination, and that we can celebrate ethnic festivals, we can eat and dance and celebrate together. But what multiculturalism ignores is that we can’t celebrate difference in the context of men’s power and violence; that those differences are constructed as hierarchies and relations of power. The most salient example of this is the idea of eternally hyphenated citizens. How many people here get asked – where are you from? “I’m from Abbotsford, Surrey, Burnaby, Toronto, Scarborough, Mississauga...” “No, where you’re really-really from?” “I’m really-really from there! Well, my mom’s womb is where I’m really-really from! What are you trying to ask me?”

And this line of questioning, even though we all know that it is just the tip of the iceberg; this line of questioning is often harmless, it’s innocuous, someone just trying to find out about where you are really from – this is kind of multicultural questioning. But we know that this is a form of racism because it largely only operates against racialized immigrants. This is a double standard that operates very rarely to white people, or white passing people rarely get asked where are you from – Surrey, Vancouver, Abbotsford, Burnaby ... no, where are you really-really from, like what part of colonizing world are you from! Why are you asking me – I’m not responsible for any of those things, right ...

This double standard, to me, is the epitome, even though it is just the tip of the iceberg; but it is the way in which it is played out in our interpersonal relationships – that shows us how racism operates because it shows us multiple things. Actually I can show three things: one,

white people are somehow inherently from here, and even if you actually are a white immigrant, like American or Australian; you don't get asked this type of question because whiteness is normalized as somehow you're from here. If you're white, or white passing, it's assumed that you're from Canada. And what it does – two subsequent things – one is that it completely erases the reality of settler colonialism in this land – that actually white people are not originally from Turtle Island; white people are colonizers that came from other places and settled down here, and they are responsible for the dispossession and displacement of Indigenous people which continues till today. You know this is not just a relic of the past; residential school is not only a relic of the past. Indigenous people continue to endure theft of land. There are more and more indigenous people in the child welfare system than they ever were in residential schools; indigenous kids continue to be stolen from their families and endure theft of land and culture. The third thing it does is that it continually cast people of color as from somewhere regardless of how long you've been here. In case of South Asian – there's over a century of their presence now – and it's similar for other communities, no matter how long you've lived here, and in some cases even longer than certain European communities, we're always cast as eternal outsider. So that kind of experience of being an eternal outsider, an eternal hyphenated citizen, is a lived experience of many racialized communities. It is not actually a legal matter – it doesn't matter if you're a citizen or not – South Asian Canadian, Punjabi Canadian, Tamil Canadian, Bengali-Canadian, Bangladeshi-Canadian, Pakistani-Canadian – it goes on and on and on. And it is a case of being cast out as an eternal outsider. And also this lends itself to all kinds of things that stem from it. It completely justifies the hate crime of white supremacy which is this kind of double standard. So we see the use of these kinds of words like terrorists and criminals selectively deployed in racialized context. We're living in a context where white people, white crimes, hate crimes are never called a terrorist attack, for example. And the use of words like terrorism is very selectively used specifically against Muslim people. This kind of selective deployment means that all kinds of stereotypes stem from that, and all kinds of violence stem from that.

And of course today we see this multicultural tolerance completely unravelled in the face of escalating white supremacy hate crimes. In Canada right now, the reported hate crime against Muslim increased 253% over the past four years. Canada's own spy agency CISC which is no friend to me, actually list white supremacists as Canada's number one domestic threat. Think about that! None of us ever hear about that! If you ask people who they think is Canada's number one domestic threat – we know all the stereotypes – I'm not going to go into it! We all know what most people would imagine that to be. But there are at least 110 white supremacist groups operating here in Canada today. And those are over-ground overt white supremacist groups. We have to understand this is not just a post-Trump phenomenon because 110 groups don't emerge in two years. They have been operating for years. The Ku-Klux-Klan were openly organizing in Vancouver, and there are so many incredible stories about how the South Asian community members in particular have resisted KKK on the streets. Our people took up arms to fight against the KKK in many instances, particularly in isolated areas like Abbotsford and Chilliwack, we have people that took up arms to resist KKK because they were shooting people in malls, and in people's windows. So there's this legacy of resistance that we should not forget especially when we're thinking what makes "South Asian" community's success stories. Our people fought to show resistance.

And if those polls in Canada shortly after Trump's nomination asked people if they would vote for Donald Trump – as you can expect a lot of polite Canadians would say no, we'd never vote for Donald Trump! But then they asked a follow up question where they didn't say if you'd vote for Trump but basically laid out Donald Trump's platform, for example, if you'd vote for less immigration, if you'd vote for less crime – the things that were basically in his platform without naming him – 76% Canadians said that they'd likely to vote for Canadian candidate with a platform similar to Donald Trump's that focuses is on stricter immigration and being tough on crime.

To me this is the epitome of Canadian BS – they say, oh, we can't stand the racists down the South of the border, but it's couched in another way! We say, we're anti-immigrants but we're not racist! We just don't like a certain kinds of illegal immigrants; we like the legal immigrants, but we don't like the so called illegal immigrants. We like some immigrants who are closer to proximity with whiteness. We're vehemently anti-black – we just don't like black migration into Canada. So this is the way that it plays out. Even thinking through immigration, to me, the way in which the double standard around which this whiteness operates – immigration is a key example to that, because until recently, the single largest demographics of so called “illegals” in BC were white Australians! And again, that is something that most people would never imagine. Most people think that it's the Latinos due to all types of stereotypes that we hear, operating in the United States. But until recently, because now we have a growing, especially since the conservative era, we have a large documented community of people who are refused asylum or refugee status, and also temporary migrant workers who're losing their status – that's has shifted now, but until the 1990s, for example, early 2000, the largest single demographic of undocumented people in BC that was accounted for, were white Australians, because when you go up to Whistler and ski countries – they're all working there. A lot of white Australians are working without visitors' visas or expired visas – so technically working illegally. Whenever media reported a story about undocumented person was a white Australian, there will be like, oh the Canadian bureaucracies, it's so unfair! Look at this young person, he's working hard, look they're contributing to this Whistler economy, and this bureaucracy is so unfair to them! And of course, that was never the media treatment that undocumented Latino, for example, working in the construction industry, would have received. So, there're so many examples that we could think of, about how racism operates. I'm sure people here have their own experiences of how that's operating in their lives. I think that's an experience we all can relate to and understand. So I don't want to talk too much about that.

But what I want to think through now is that we understand how we're living under white supremacy to some degree, we understand that we experience racism, we understand our families have faced that. So now I want to think about how we can trouble that, how we can we nuance that more. For me, one of the ways we need to think through that, is to problematize two things. One is this catch-all category of “people of color” and “racialized”, because we've used this to kind of category to simplify this; and also we need to problematize this category of South Asians. To me, there're some fundamental problems with this catch-all identity of people of color or being racialized. Of course, it works in some ways – the way we can construct ourselves in opposition to white supremacy, for people who have experienced the impact of white supremacy. But what it also does is it subsumes whole different groups of people under a category. And specifically I think it's hurtful not only because it subsumes us

under one catchall category as South Asian, and I'll come back to this South Asian category, but for now I'll use it; it also assumes that we South Asians share the same experience as black communities or indigenous communities, which very clearly we do not. I think in thinking about race, it's important to think about how white supremacy impacts all these racialized people, but how some of its pivotal points are actually anti-black racism and anti-indigenous racism – the things that stem from that. We need to think about what it means in concrete material ways. What concrete material conditions in general South Asian communities absolutely do not face the same lived reality, they do not face the same levels of police violence and incarceration; we absolutely do not face the realities of child apprehension. The most violent thing that you can do to a family is tear-apart children from the family. There's nothing else that brings more clear definition of genocide under the UN convention – it is tearing apart children from their families and culture. And we don't experience that as South Asians, again a very broad category. We don't face the same levels of systemic poverty and unemployment rates.

Also, I want to think through the ways in which we South Asian communities, not only do we not experience the same kind of material conditions, but we are actively often complicit in those racisms. There are a lot of personal examples we can all probably give – the ways our families have reproduced stereotypes of indigenous peoples, the kinds of slurs used against black people. But I want to think about it in some structural ways as well. The examples I want to give are both from BC. The first example I want to give is the Cyra case which went to the Human Rights Tribunal in British Columbia, about five or six years ago. It was a case of a South Asian farm owner who was systemically racist against a number of tree planters that were working and staying in his property. They were identified as black migrants from the Caribbean's and various parts of Africa. And the human rights issue was specifically about not only the treatment of them as laborers, but also the anti-black racism that they suffered under the employer. I won't go into the details of that legal case, but to me what was troubling was that when this case came forward, most South Asians, specifically the Punjabi community rallied in support of the farm owner and in support of the Cyra family saying that this was a set up incident against this minority. When the human rights case went ahead, it was set back human rights standards by focusing not on white violence against people of color but rather focusing on so called "minority on minority" violence. So, you see how this umbrella rhetoric and being racialized works to assume that there're no other hierarchies operating as if though South Asian violence against black people – it's not lateral violence, it's an active form of oppressive violence. It's a hard form of hierarchical violence. And a number of people rallied around the Cyra family, it was also seen as a case of shame, a case of 'we need to rally against our own. I was not active on it, but when there were rallies and other things, we'd go out and support the tree planters when there were rallies at the BC Human Rights Tribunal. And at that time I'd get tons of calls about why I was doing this, that I was giving a bad name to the South Asian community. For me, I had to defend myself about why I thought that other people were at the wrong side of this, not only from the basic perspectives of human rights. There was not a shadow of doubt that they were exploited; there was not a shadow of doubt that they were extorted against. One person died, and that was what launched the investigation. But it was the whole philosophy that somehow we have to defend our own no matter what, even if it's an oppressive violence [that was very disturbing].

Another case is out of the Sahotas in downtown east side. The Sahotas are one of the worst slum lords in Canada. They operate a housing – the worst housing in this neighborhood, predominantly the residents are indigenous people. They were found in violation of at least 400 safety infractions, the bylaw infractions; it takes a lot for the City to go and inspect a building. They extorted sex and money from the residents, paid their workers one to two dollars an hour. So these other residents, poor people desperate for money would get paid one/two dollars per hour to clean in the building, to run the front desk. By any standards, they are slum-lords; it is well known that the Sahotas are slum lords. And there's been complete silence in the South Asian, specifically the Punjabi community about the Sahotas. Under any provincial crime laws, under any possible code of the Residential Tenancy Act – they were breaking [laws]. It was covered up by the South Asian, again, by the Punjabi community to save face.

And also, stereotypes about indigenous, we're very anti-indigenous. I'm not going to repeat those BS, but you can imagine, the kind of anti-indigenous racisms that are used to justify why they are exploited by white people. To me, these are just the two examples of the ways in which the category like "people of color" masks violence that we're complicit in. It masks violence that we're responsible for, and the idea that we have a shared experience with other people of color under white supremacy means that we aren't able to see ourselves also as oppressors. It means we only see ourselves as people with shared victimhood, with other racialized communities. That to me is also often the problem with, even the category of South Asians. What South Asian masks is the fact that we are not just diverse people under multiculturalism, that we are from different countries; but that there are active systems of power that are operating within the South Asian community itself. One of those of course, is the Islamophobia; and it's not just something that is happening to Muslim people by white supremacists; it's something that is on the rise amongst specifically non-Muslims of South Asian descents, most obviously by Hindu people and upper caste Hindus. Of course, I am Sikh, I know also that it's on the rise in Sikh community despite the fact that as Sikhs we've suffered at the hands of Hindutwa and Hindtwa forces. We've suffered a genocide. But increasingly there's an alignment amongst the Sikh politicians, Sikh organizations and Narendra Modi and the RSS. So everyone's is, I'm sure aware of the rise of Hindtwa in India itself. The fact that Modi is able to be the prime minister of India despite the fact – it is well known that he committed crime against Muslims in Gujrat, that he continues to openly call for violence against Muslims and Christians, minorities and Dalits in India. These are the things that are of particular importance to diasporic folks because most of funding for the RSS comes from the Indian diaspora – predominantly from the United States and England, but it comes at large, from the Indian diaspora. I think for diasporic Indians, specifically diasporic upper caste Hindus to refrain themselves as victims of white supremacy in North America without acknowledging the linkage between the diaspora and the ascend of authoritarianism and Hindu fascism in the subcontinent – it's a completely hypocritical politics and positioning to have. And it's not only hypocritical because it's happening over there; these politics are transnational. We know that the same people that are supporting Modi are the same people that are supporting Trump in the United States. They are the same kinds, even there's Hindus for Trump in the US ... although I know that there're these networks in the lower mainland. But we know that there are Hindu organizations that are anti-immigrants, for example, in the same way that Trump is.



So I think that it's so important to challenge the broad category of "South Asian" because of the rise of Islamophobia in our communities. What's happening in India and Pakistan – we've so much Indian nationalism in the diaspora, including by people who are so called minorities in the Indian subcontinent, specifically for me, from the perspectives of Sikh Punjabis, the fact that our community is aligning with Indian nationalism and jingoism calling for a war in Pakistan using the framework of Islamophobia as the main rallying calls – it's completely offensive. It's something we have to take up. It's something that's complicating our relations and our processes here. The other thing that I think is completely unacceptable is the silence we maintain in our community around caste. Equality Labs, for example is an organization in the US, and one thing that they write about, and they work specifically around ending caste supremacy and caste apartheid; the organization is led by Dalit folks in the US, and they write, "while we are homogenized through the process of racialization into the category of South Asian, and therefore share many challenges of racism, the reality is that this label renders invisible the history of the caste and religion oppressed immigrants have faced in our home countries and continue to face here because of the structures of Hindu fundamentalism. We believe that all progressive South Asians must work towards the goals of ending white supremacy, but crucially also our internal hegemony such as that exemplified by caste." And I think, again, by talking about caste we see as airing dirty laundry as if though caste and white supremacy aren't completely interlinked experiences. I have refused to accept that caste is somehow an internal taboo. Caste is completely connected to force of white supremacy, to Islamophobia, to Zionism, anti-black racism – to all structures of racial apartheid in the global context. Caste based violence is not only an internal taboo, but also one of the most violent forms of racism that continues to exist. Again, if you're taking it from the interpersonal caste based jokes and slurs, the fact that there continues to be prohibitions on inter-marriages between casts, it continues to happen here, in the lower mainland, they are not over there. There are Gurdwaras in our communities that Dalits can't enter. The Ravi Das Gurdwara is a separate temple, specifically because of the caste based apartheid that continues to operate. And I have a tenuous relationship with "Jatt pride" in the lower mainland. The pride often reinforces very clearly caste violence. What is the relationship between non-land owning people in the Punjab – what is the relationship of the Jatts to immigrants from Bihar and Bengal? And that's a whole other thing and perhaps people are talking about it. But Jatt pride is one of the ways we need to rethink what it means to have so called South Asian pride without thinking through what it reinforces and what violence it makes invisible, specifically by trying to appropriate a social justice anti-oppression based language. There are so many examples of caste based violence! If you're from the lower mainland, I encourage you to check out Dalit Chetna Association, which works on raising Dalit issues here in the lower mainland. They have an Annual Ambedkar Memorial Lecture to raise the issue of caste based violence.

One example that I can give you though, in terms of my personal experience of organizing, is that of Laibar Singh. When I was organizing No One is Illegal – it's a migrant justice based organization, we work a lot with different communities who are facing deportation. And this is a quick side note on one of the ways in which the so called South Asian model minority is reproduced is very much being against refugees, or the idea of people being queue-jumpers. So Laibar Singh is a Punjabi Dalit refugee facing deportation – from Dalit class, and also working class person facing deportation back in 2007-8. It was a really incredible campaign – I

encourage you to check it out. One of the things that we got to do is organizing people to support him and we mobilized a very public campaign in support of him. Well there are three things – why are we supporting someone who is a failed refugee claimant? They were not legal immigrants. Second, that he is a Dalit. “Dalits should go and continue to remain in ...” I’m not going to repeat those [racist ideas] – you can imagine ... And third, he was this so called illiterate poor person. He is not one of those success stories – he’s not a doctor, not a lawyer or engineer. He’s not a land owning farmer. So, when we worked on this campaign, there was so much vehement backlash for us that we were organizing that campaign; there was an active smear campaign I remember – on Punjabi radios, people were trying to say that I was on Canada’s terrorist list, and they were reading out of this false list of names. And they were like ‘Harsha Walia’ is on this list. And I was like, are people really going to believe this! But people did. It was hard. There were people on this radio saying these things, and it was personal too, right! And you’re hearing it in Punjabi and this is really weird. I’m used to hear it from Jason Kenny in the parliament, but it was really weird to hear it on Punjabi radio by people who are fighting against the listing of Sikh organizations on the terrorist list – calling me a terrorist! And they were also calling really offensive rave culture stuff that people need to keep track of me ... One person actually said she wants to be raped, then her mind will be set straight – it’s really offensive stuff. And I don’t bring this up to bring up this horrific-ness of it, but to say how deeply invested were these people who are making sure this man cannot stay here because of what he represented. The flip side of that, I’ll say on a happy note, is that when Laibar Singh was about to be deported on December 10, 2008 – we’ve been organizing for one year at that time, over 1000 mostly Punjabi elders, mostly women showed up at the Vancouver International Airport to physically prevent his deportation. And they surrounded the cab that he was brought in, he was also paralyzed, so he also had all kinds of stuff around disability and ability and the fact that he couldn’t contribute – you know how they work together, right, all these things; so they surrounded the cab that the Canada Border Services Agency was about to deport him from, and he was not able to be deported. It was the first time in recent North American history that the deportation was physically prevented. And it actually inspired a lot of ...Ducupass movement that was happening in the US where they were physically blocking buses, it was actually inspired by here, a very localized example of people rising up. So I say that also that there are many people in our community that resist. They refuse the imposition of what it means to be a so called good immigrant and all the attendant violence that it brings up on other people who stand in solidarity with a paralyzed Dalit Punjabi man who’s a working class and poor, who refuse to buy into the model minority that this is somebody that we don’t accept into our community. So I don’t want to say everything is messed up because we can choose a different way of acting our politics all the time.

Also Kashmir is rarely talked about. You know, as progressives we talk about US imperialism, Canadian imperialism, we talk about the Israeli occupation of Palestine; but we don’t want to talk about Kashmir which is the world’s most militarized zones. It’s not an internal conflict – it’s the world’s largest militarized zone and the largest region occupied by security forces. Again there’s so much work from Kashmiri people, Kashmiri feminists that people can turn to. And we know; we don’t need to turn to statistics about the number of people that are tortured, the number of people killed, the enforced disappearances, the mass blinding, the use of pallet guns to deliberately blind hundreds of people in past few years in Kashmir; the sexual

violence, the everyday harassment, what it means to be in an occupied zone in Kashmir. And yet we continue to talk about it as an internal conflict, not as a form of imperialism even though India is actually a global super power in the region. And the fetishization of India in the context of multiculturalism masks violence, masks occupation. So, for me, taken together, this immigrant experience of being South Asian needs to be troubled, and I want to say specifically as an immigrant as opposed to say refugee experience or the experience of a temporary migrant worker – I wasn't to talk about specifically about immigrant experience. To me the experience of immigrant hardship is often problematic because hardship means that a middle class immigrant family no longer has domestic workers. You know some people say, it's so hard here because I don't have my driver here anymore! Or, it's so hard here because someone doesn't do my laundry here, right! So we need to critically rethink what it means when people talk about this universalist "self-orientalising" of experiencing hardships. And often time the experience is – the quintessential doctor become a cab driver – I'm not trying to say that it's not a hard experience, but we need to see that it's not someone who has always had a hard life; often time it's hard because people who always have had upward mobility, has a brief experience of downward mobility that then continues to be upward mobility through the next generations which also reinforces the bootstraps. We know as immigrants we have always weaponized against particularly black and indigenous peoples. Well, look at those immigrants – they managed to go from taxi driver back to having their kids to be doctor! What we lose in that is the transnational experience, to have always been upper class or middle class, to have one generation to become working class and then go back to be that middle class – is not a story of bootstrap. So we need to think of this immigrant experience in its transnational locations – not only when the experience begins here. We need to think about it in its transnational context, which is not again to minimize the real experience that people have, we're just saying to locate it accurately. Also, to say the immigrant experience again is not the same as refugee experience – it's not the same for a Punjabi refugee or someone like Laibar Singh I talked about – that's not the universal South Asian experience, or Tamil refugees fleeing civil war or genocide in Sri Lanka that came on the MV Sun Sea or the Ocean Lady in 2011 and faced mass incarceration. The Komagata Maru cannot be our only talking point; it cannot be the only way in which we understand South Asian, specifically Punjabi history. There are histories like the MV San Sea and the Ocean Lady where people faced mass incarceration too.

So, what I want to conclude with, again, is thinking about how we share experiences as South Asians, but more importantly, how our alliances are often tenuous. They are tenuous until we actively practice a different kind of politics. And also those alliances somehow assumes that South Asians have more in common with each other than the fact that, for example, the Dalit actors, who organize, build alliances not among South Asians, but because of caste violence, but with the Black Panther Party. So I want to rethink the assumption that somehow all South Asians have more things common with each other while in fact there are South Asians who face oppression specifically from other South Asians. Do I assume that a Pakistani or Kashmiri has an alliance with an Indian upper caste Hindu from North India? No, they have more in common with people under occupation. So we need to think through how we assume our alliances are somehow natural because we come from the same geography. There is a quote which isn't about South Asian experience, but I think when I say you'll see how it resonates. It is a quote from Aurora Levin Morales speaking in the 80s or 90s in American

context when people started using the frame “women of color”. She said, “This tribe called women of color is not an ethnicity. It is one of the inventions of solidarity, an alliance of political necessity that is not the given name of any female with dark skin and a colonized tongue; it is rather a choice about how to resist and with whom.” And I say that because I would echo these, some of the same things I’d like to raise in relation to how we talk about South Asians. Thinking about a South Asian progressive politics as an active practice, it’s an intentional ethical orientation. It means that we are always breaking the idea that somehow there are silences that are taboo in relationship to caste. I didn’t get in to it that much, but we know the way in which misogyny, homophobia and trans-misogyny operates within our communities as well. The fact that there are religious organizations that are willing to defend very clear cases of domestic violence and perpetrators in the Gurdwara committees under the name of upholding community honor – that is shameful and unacceptable. The space that is reduced for South Asian feminists to speak when we speak about violence in our communities that somehow we have to choose between competing loyalties and places where we are welcome, and especially so for trans-women.

One thing that I get asked a lot about is why I do more for “other people” than my community. I work a lot with indigenous families, urban indigenous women in the downtown eastside, the worst neighborhood in the country; I work a lot with refugees from different communities. So I get asked that a lot. And my answer is always – I don’t work on the basis of simply South Asian people. I refuse to support South Asian landlords like the Sahotas. I have nothing in common with them, or the bosses like the Kyra tree planters that I talked about, or the conservative South Asian politicians, of which there are many! I’d never defend them. I don’t feel any shame of publicly denouncing them. For me as a progressive South Asian specifically as a Punjabi person, my commitment is to ending violence, justice to all people. If there’s anything that I’ve experienced under white supremacy or under misogyny is that I’m not going to protect you people simply because we’ve the shared experience of being South Asians. I am much more interested in supporting people who are the victims of any form of violence, caste supremacy, all forms of racism, trans-misogyny, and especially workers. The reality is that we have farm owners across the lower mainland who are exploiting workers, South Asians and other workers, every single days. And we don’t talk about it because either that’s a South Asian success story, someone that owns 60 farms, or because again, we see it as story of shame – we can’t talk about violence because that would bring the community shame. So I want us to think about what a progressive politics means – to never pledge allegiance simply because of the idea that we have shared community. I encourage us to build community based on principle of values. That’s what to me is what a progressive community is based on. The only kind of the ‘other’ that there is – to me the indigenous women in downtown eastside is not an ‘other’ – they are political home for me because the idea of home is a place where everyone is safe. And especially for those of us who are survivors of violence in our homes, we know that home is a tenuous place; that we have to seek home wherever we find safety. So I’d encourage us to rethink what it means to be an alliance, and to think of progressive South Asian politics not as a politics of having a shared geographical connection, but as one that is an ethical orientation about who to struggle with and in what way. Thank you!

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

*Question: we got the message from you in the last part about what we should do. Can you say very specifically what the youth should do? It was a very general statement about how we South Asians should identify ourselves based on principles not on geography. This is a South Asian forum and these are our future generations who'll lead the issues you raised here. So do you have any specific piece of advice to them?*

Answer: I hesitate to be prescriptive partly because I don't know and I don't want to assume what people's different locations are. As I said even South Asian itself can mean very different experiences so I hesitate to be more prescriptive other than again to reinforce that we always think about power. I'm not intending to suggest that we don't face any real experiences of oppression, but I think sometimes what that does is that it doesn't allow us to see the ways in which we might also be reproducing it. So I think, [we should] always tie this to the nuances. Whatever work we're doing, to always try to be as honest as possible. And I don't want to mean that we try to go out and do everything because there's also the question of capacity, but it does mean, for example, for experiencing the form of oppression in our workplace, in our schools or in our departments, but then we also need to think about how can I reach out to other people who are experiencing it perhaps even worse. Are there other communities that are even more under-represented than I am in my department? You know in the context of universities, we know that the indigenous students are the most under-represented, for example. So not only lift up Asian experience but what does it mean to them to be in solidarity, in alliance with other students as well. Also, do something beyond the multicultural framework that the system wants us to do.

*Question: You've done a lot of work in the downtown eastside and having experience of growing up with South Asian families too – do you see that there are parallels or there are distances between how South Asian immigrant might relate or reflect upon their commonalities with indigenous people or do you think that there's a gap of knowledge? I do hear that there's a lot of shared cultural genocide ...*

Answer: thanks for that question! I think, I used to think I'd say that there's a lot more shared experience; I no longer have that opinion personally ... it's a subjective kind of thing, but I think the most general way the shared experience is – British colonization for example, what it means to be colonized people. But for me there's many ways in which that it falls short. And one is the overwhelming reality that – I'd specifically say this Punjabi, I don't know where it ... but in this context, the lower mainland experience of being Punjabis including those of Sikh refugees and also of immigrants – so there's a very specific class and caste migration dynamics. So South Asians, and also the state selects who it wants. A lot of people who are coming are those so called subaltern, right! So I say the distances are huge because people imagine themselves as upwardly mobile, and are upwardly mobile. People often imagine themselves as beneficiaries of colonialism. A lot of people were educated in British school systems, and also there's very straight up colonialism that I used to think/justify as mediated by white supremacy, like that we'll learn the Canadian stereotypes of indigenous people. But I think in many ways it makes the same racism that, again, Punjabi upper caste people have about Dalits and Adivasis. It's not

simply mediated by white supremacy. These are forms of racism that are, again, transnational, again the kinds of racism that exist against the Bihari migrants, for example, in Punjab. So these are different forms of racism but I don't think that shared experience of colonization is enough. I think it requires specific attention to thinking through the relationship to indigenous people as transnational. It's also the Adivasi community for example, in the subcontinent. And also white supremacy plays into it. But I'm saying that we can't just let ourselves off the hook – the forms of racism that cross the ocean with us. Also I think the reality now, of where communities are, the very specific different class relations – it's a very concrete example, I've worked in the downtown eastside, there's a bad date cheat – women who are sex workers inform other women about bad dates, about clients, about johns who commit violence against them. And this is not something I often share with people, so I have to figure out how to talk about it. I worked in the neighborhood for sixteen years; I see the bad date cheat every week – eight out of 10 clients who's being described is South Asian. You know, these are bad dates, this isn't people who are clients of sex workers; this is violence, people are reporting violence – horrific forms of violence. when we hear about missing and murdered indigenous women and girls – from my experience, in the Vancouver downtown eastside, eight out of 10 experiences that are negative that indigenous women face on the streets, are from South Asians – that are reported. So I think we can't talk about shared relationship until and unless we unearth some of these very real dynamics and relations – beyond any kind of theoretical shared experiences of colonization; that's the material grounded reality. Sadhu Binning who's a wonderful writer; he has a collection of short stories. One of them, I can't remember the name of that one story; it's a beautiful story, a fictional story about this reality about a relationship between a Punjabi man and an indigenous woman, and you see, I think he just beautifully explored the possibility of a relationship but everything that makes it impossible, because of the structural racism that exists.

*Question: I'm from Vietnam, so, not South Asia. What are the main ways that South Asians are different from other parts of South Asia, like South East Asia? I'm new here and I'm just curious.*

Answer: One thing that strikes me is even the Asian representation is very much dominated by the Hun Chinese in Canada. South East Asians are very much left out of that similar to the different relations in South Asian communities and the imperial relations there are very much obscured within this very much multicultural kind of dominant Hun Chinese experience of what it means to be Asians. I have been having trouble coming up with what South Asian representation in the west is frankly because even in the Canadian context, this very specific criminalization of Sikhs and Sikh people is very different in other parts of Canada. So the legacy of 1984 of Air India, of Sikh organizations being placed under Canada's terrorist list, it's very different across Canada. Similarly the representation of Tamil people with the genocide in Sri Lanka post LTTE being listed, MV San Sea and Ocean Lady – that's very different than the Gujrati Muslims, and even the representation there. So I struggle with what even is a South Asian Australian construction. You know I'd say in the west coast it's probably mostly Bhangra, I don't know, partly because it's such a huge category that even Canadians can't figure out what the subtle differences are. And then also, you have the overt criminalization of Muslims, Bangladeshi Muslims, Pakistani Muslims, Indian Muslims. So there's such diverse experience

which is why even South Asian as a category is so problematic. You have the western construction of communities that are actively celebrated and at the same time actively criminalized.

*Question: I think there's a really interesting dynamic in the South Asian community in the last year and half and I don't think it's been addressed when we talk about issues. And it's about the thousands of Punjabi students who are arriving to study at places like Douglas, Capilano, Langara and Kwantlen, and they are really struggling in the most profound ways. But I haven't heard a lot of people in Vancouver talking about it. Douglas Todd writes about it in Vancouver Sun occasionally. I teach at Capilano and my classes have recently become 100% students from Punjab. And they work very long hours for very low pays, they cannot study, and work, and commute. My entire class at Capilano comes from Surrey or Abbotsford, and every month there's hundred and hundred more, I think there's five or six thousands of them, and sexual assault is now being recognized as a lot of women have been facing that. Also, one student of mine got pepper sprayed. She works at McDonald's on Hastings and comes to the class in the morning. She couldn't be there because she was pepper sprayed the night before. So stories like this I'm hearing every day, it's been about a year and a half.*

*Answer: It's a good question. To me the core issue with international students and what they experience – my partner works at the Graduate Student Services Society at SFU; a lot of their advocacy now is around the relationship to grad students who are international students. And I have a ... that works with the Douglas College international students, so I hear a lot about it. I think the fundamental issue – I think the problem here is that either it's managed as a cultural issue so there's work for that specifically with Indian or Punjabi international students, or it gets managed as a situation of international students whereas to me the fundamental issue is that education is increasingly being commodified and international students are cash cows for universities. So the issue is about the commodification of education. I actually have a lot of problem with the way Douglas Todd has written about it because often time it's framed as a culture clash, right! The Culture clash of international students trying to integrate – and I'm not saying that that's not real, but to me that's not the foundational issue. It's the fact that Canadian institutions and the Canadian government are making a profit off peoples' need for education. That to me is the root issue. And the reason that people have to work so hard is because the tuition is so high. And then you have students needing to work three or four times because they are not able to get bursary or loans. So to me it's fundamentally about citizenship – who gets the right to have education, who doesn't have the right to education; the fact that we justify different treatment. The fact that international students are charged so much and still the tuition is so freaking high in general, so the commodification of education to me is the core issue there. And the fact that international students are being exploited at the workforce is also an issue fundamentally of a lack of labor protection under the capitalist system. International students are generally not covered by labor standards or industry standards because they are not unionized workers. So to me that is a core issue and it gets – not to say that it's not the issue, but to me it's not the primary issue, but it's not a surprise that in the Canadian context that is a dominant frame – that people are struggling and not integrating. If there's a movement around it I'm less invested in a movement to help international students to*

integrate better; I'm more invested in how people are not exploited as students and how are people not exploited as worker, how do we de-commodify education. So to me these are more important issues around that because we know that the kind of clash of civilization and the clash of cultures stuff is imperialist and it evades racial and class relationships that are operating. But I think it's such a huge issue and the number of people that are coming to make money for the universities – is a mess and I'm so glad that you brought it up.

Thank you!