State of the Panth

State of the Panth series is a report on Sikh matters presented by the Sikh Research Institute to the global Sikh community. The series reports on matters affecting either a large section of the Sikh Nation or a perspective on critical issues facing the human race at large. It surveys the self-identified Sikhs on their stances. It outlines a Sikh perspective based on Gurmat (the Guru’s Way) traditions of Bani (wisdom), Tavarikh (history), and Rahit (lifestyle). It offers recommendations for the individual Sikhs and Sikh institutions in best practice approach to strengthen the bonds within the community.

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Sexuality is a confusing and often avoided topic. It is generally relegated to being a "private" matter, and therefore not openly discussed or engaged with, even within close circles and small communities. Due to the taboo of discussing sexuality, many people struggle individually, often turning to religion for guidance or, more concretely, moral pronouncements.

The focus of this report is to understand sexuality in the context of a Sikh worldview, from a Gurmat (Guru's Way) perspective, as inferred from Bani (wisdom), Tavarikh (history), and Rahit (lifestyle).

A global survey, included in the report, was presented to 1,212 self-identified Sikhs from 31 countries. The purpose of this survey was to gain insight into Sikh thoughts and feelings surrounding sexuality today.

Overall, responses outlined a clear understanding that lust and sex are not synonymous – importantly, neither are sex and sexuality. There was also a clear consensus that Sikh institutions must play some role in providing nonjudgmental support and resources to Sikhs of all gender identities and sexual orientations.

This report presents recommendations based on the Gurmat components on both the individual and institutional levels. Bani, Tavarikh, and Rahit offer guidance to individuals on their journeys in understanding their sexuality, encouraging them to seek guidance from the Guru Granth Sahib, support from their peers, and to develop a personal relationship with IkOankar. The Gurmat framework offers guidance for institutions towards taking the lead on deeper discussions surrounding sexuality and queerness, providing resources, support, and education for teens and adults from the Gurmat perspective, rather than using fear and shame-based teaching. The report concludes that fostering these attitudes of openness, non-judgment, and support at an individual level and amongst smaller communities within the Panth will ultimately lead to larger changes in sexuality being discussed individually and institutionally.
Sexuality is a confusing and often avoided topic. Therefore people often turn to religion, seeking concrete moral pronouncements. The framing of sexuality takes extremes in various traditions, religious and non-religious, with ideas of asceticism and abstinence rooted in the belief that indulgence is worldly entanglement on one extreme and a more tantric indulgence, rooted in the belief that pleasure is a release, on the other. Such moral pronouncements typically place sexuality into this box of negative extremes. For the purpose of this report, sexuality is understood as:

1. How one experiences sexual and romantic attraction (if at all).
2. One's interest in and preferences around sexual and romantic relationships and behavior.

How does Sikhi shape human behavior, and what is its outlook on issues surrounding sex, pleasure, procreation, and sexual preferences? How does this outlook connect to our ideas about relationships, morality, spirituality, and society?

A survey of 1,212 self-identified Sikhs from 31 different countries was conducted. The purpose of this survey was to gain insight into Sikh thoughts and feelings surrounding sexuality today. Responses outlined a clear understanding that lust and sex are not synonymous – importantly, neither are sex and sexuality – and a clear belief that Sikh institutions must play some role in providing nonjudgmental support and resources to Sikhs of all gender identities and sexual orientations in order to educate and engage with a diverse community, facilitating hard conversations in safe spaces.

The Sikh & Sexuality report makes recommendations based on Gurmat (the Guru's Way) as inferred from Bani (wisdom), Tavarikh (history), and Rahit (lifestyle) that can be used by individuals and institutions to provide support to those coming to terms with their sexuality as well as those with questions about sexuality.
Often, Bani is looked to for concrete prescriptions and rules, clear indicators that measure out human behavior neatly and assign labels of "right" or "wrong." Bani can reach the inner recesses of the mind to positively affect both conscience and consciousness. It makes distinctions related to love and lust. Still, it does not offer prescriptive laws—it instead provides guidance, allowing for an informed understanding of one's sexuality, behaviors, and relationships.

Bani clarifies that no one is free from this lust, not even those who claim to have conquered it through asceticism:

A sinful lust lives in the heart, that is why a fickle mind cannot be restrained. Reflect. Yogi, hermit, and renunciate, this noose [of lust] is around all of them. All those who take-cherish 1-Light’s Nam, they cross the world ocean. Votary Nanak is in 1-Light’s sanctuary, [please] grant Nam to keep singing virtues.¹

— Guru Granth Sahib 1186

Per the above excerpt, those who identify with IkOankar (One Universal Integrative Force, or 1Force) overcome lust (land on the world ocean’s shore).

Lust steals away consciousness and causes those who fall into it to wander.

O lust, [you make people] dwell in hell and wander in multiple lives: Steal consciousness, reach three worlds, destroy recitation, penance, and behavior; [Give] little comfort, [cause] destitution, fickle; enter high and low [all people]. In divine company your fear is eliminated, Nanak is in Supreme-Force’s protection.²

— Guru Granth Sahib 1358

Again, lust affects all people, regardless of their standing, but it is within spiritual company, that fear of lust is eliminated.
Although classically religious moral pronouncements tend to fall on extreme ends of the spectrum, Bani transcends binaries and classifications of the sacred and the profane; instead, it encourages active engagement with the world while warning against indulgence:

[We are] attached to perishables-materials, fire-desires, ocean of worries, Be graceful, free [us], O Beautiful 1-Light! iii

— Guru Granth Sahib 760

The word in the Guru Granth Sahib for indulgence (Kam, or lust) is often translated in popular English translations as “love of fornication” or “attachment to sex” specifically. This translation narrows the message of Bani in favor of clear moral pronouncements and rules.

Kam is a word with etymology rooted in the Sanskrit word kama, meaning lust, sexual passion, longing, or desire. In the Guru Granth Sahib, Kam often appears with Krodh (anger, or wrath). Both of these, along with three others — Lobh, Moh, and Hankar (greed, attachment, and ego, respectively) — are considered to be the five vices.

The broader message of the line above is a plea to the Omnipresent, to help free one from all things which create negativity and destruction. Things that generate negativity or destruction are not limited to only sexual activity or behavior, but also to any indulgence or attachment. We can become attached to and imprisoned by not just material objects, or passions, but also to our worries. It then becomes less of a statement on only the things we consider to be classically indulgent behaviors or feelings.

Certainly, in the context of indulgence in desires, any sexual activity or behavior which creates indulgence will create problems, regardless of sexual orientation or preference. However, it is important to emphasize that the question here, if applied to sexuality, is not about sexual orientation or preference. It is instead about a sexual life that does not fall on one of the extreme ends of the spectrum: abstinence or indulgence.

Bani is very clear that just as overindulgence is harmful, so too is asceticism and abstinence with the goal of “salvation,” especially “salvation” in the classically religious sense of the word — as a thing one attains after leaving the earth, having done things the “right” way.
Engagement with the world is encouraged through moderate pleasures. Human beings are not required to disengage from worldly pleasures to be “liberated” in the classical Indic theological sense, nor are they required to engage in extreme indulgence. Bani tells us that the way to live, the way to become truly free, is to submit to Perfection by developing a personal relationship with IkOankar and, through that relationship, discovering freedom. Thus, one’s attitude towards sexuality is driven by their relationship with the Divine.

Sirdar Kapur Singh writes in his essay *Sex and Sikhism* that Sikhi teaches how healthy sex life is one in which sex functions are coordinated with the entire psyche of a person – their instinctual, emotional, and intellectual functions – so that they live and develop as nature has intended. He continues to say that nothing – not a person’s thoughts, emotions, instincts, aspirations, and intuitions – contradicts sex, and neither does sex contradict any normal element in the human psyche. Sex, therefore, is completely justified in the inwardness of human beings. Any contradiction arises only when such harmony and coordination is not achieved.¹

What is clearly encouraged in Bani is personal engagement with IkOankar, with whatever the Perfection means to one personally. Everything else outside of that individual relationship merely serves as points of reference, as people have infinitely varying personal relationships with divinity and their sexuality. An individual’s relationship with their sexuality grows as they grow into their relationship with divinity. Thus, while one is meant to engage with those reference points, by simply looking at the dichotomies of life and observing the marketplace of ideas on what a healthy sex life may be like for different people, unless and until one has a relationship with Perfection, one will not know what is “right” for themselves as an individual.

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*Nanak: Surrendering to the Eternal-Wisdom, the method is perfected.
Freedom is [realized] amid laughing, playing, dressing, and eating.*

— Guru Granth Sahib 522
What is Lust? What is Love? Why are they often linked?

When thinking through a Sikh perspective on sexuality, an important question that arises in community conversations is what qualifies as lust, and what, if any, expressions of sexuality are considered “lustful.” This is also rooted in questions about what sex is an expression of: if it is only for procreation or if it can be for pleasure, or whether it is immoral entirely.

Bani is clear on the latter question, as it uses the metaphor of sex to refer to an intimate connection with the Divine:

[O feminine-friend!] My virtues and non-virtues were not assessed.
[Beloved] did not see my looks, color, or cosmetics.
[I] do not have great behavior or know any [life-] method.
[But], the Beloved held my arm and brought me to bed.

— Guru Granth Sahib 372

Here, Guru Arjan Sahib reveals consummation as an intimate expression of love and an acceptance of the highest order. This kind of love and acceptance is not about submitting to someone in a classical cisgender heterosexual sense, where the wife submits to the husband as property or object, but about someone we have a loving and intimate relationship with – a personal relationship. This love is not transactional. It cannot be reduced to transactional lifestyles or relationships (sex can be transactional even in married life). This is a love where the lover’s appearance and decorations do not matter to the Beloved. This is a love that just is, without calculations or score-keeping. Such love relationships are celebrated in Bani at the highest level. This type of relationship is one to aspire towards one’s relationship with IkOankar.

Many tend to connect the word “lust” solely with sexual desire, but “lust” and “desire” are general terms that can be applied to many different facets of life. One can be lustful in their indulgences outside of sex and sexuality – in their pursuit of wealth, for example. Lust, although not equated with sex and sexuality in Bani, can be used to classify or describe sex, sexuality, and relationships, just as love can. One can have a lustful relationship motivated by that kind of visceral and often disorienting desire or a relationship driven by love, which encompasses a deeper connection (by no means devoid of desire, indulgence, and pleasure, to be clear). Lust of any kind, overindulgence of any kind, is warned against in Bani.
Lustfulness of any kind, rooted in any behavior, is harmful. Interestingly, lust and anger are paired here as two things that chip away at the body, as an indulgence in either of these things leads to distraction from IkOankar and an inability to recenter. Both of these things, in whatever manifestation they may take, consume us. Through its all-consuming nature, lustfulness erodes one’s divinity and disturbs one’s spirituality, mental makeup, and emotions. But, Guru Nanak Sahib tells us, when this weak body, consumed and eroded by lust and anger or an ocean of worry, as an earlier quote mentioned, goes through the heat of Wisdom’s lifestyle training, a transformation occurs. In the 1-Jeweler’s (IkOankar’s) eye, it is colorful-loving (colored in love) and connected with the Eternal (IkOankar).

_O ignorant!_ A momentary lustful taste causes pain for a million days;  
[Person] enjoys flavor for a short period, then regrets again and again.\(^vii\)

— Guru Granth Sahib 403

Here, Guru Arjan Sahib refers to lustful pleasures as tastes and flavors, temporary and fleeting. Again, it is important to note that lust is not a synonym for sex in Bani, although this is a recurring problem with current popular understanding and translation.

Guru Arjan Sahib says that when one is lustfully driven, one might make a decision that gives one temporary instant pleasure. But, in the long run, it might harm one’s larger relationships or knock one off-balance in a way that causes immense and long-lasting pain. The question Guru Arjan Sahib is urging us to ponder is not just about pleasure; it is about pleasure at what cost. Bani encourages individual self-reflection when it comes to relationships and behaviors.

This self-reflection occurs at all times, as we are constantly surrounded by the different flavors life has to offer, weighing and balancing as we go:

_Gold has a flavor, silver and women have flavors, smell of fragrance has a flavor,  
[Riding] horses have flavors, beds and palaces have flavors, desserts have flavors,  
meat has a flavor,  
So many flavors for the body, [then] which heart can the Nam dwell in? \(^viii\)

— Guru Granth Sahib 15
It is important to note first that contributors to the Guru Granth Sahib are men; hence, women are invoked because of the contextual, cultural gender binary of their time, but, when interpreting, this applies to individuals of any gender. The word *ras* is repeated, which can mean taste, flavor, or sentiment, depending on the context in which it is being used. Here, Guru Nanak Sahib is acknowledging the various “flavors” of life, or the flavors of things we may indulge in (recall an earlier line by Guru Nanak Sahib: *Freedom is [realized] amid laughing, playing, dressing, and eating*).

The question posed here by Guru Nanak Sahib (*So many flavors for the body, [then] which heart can the Nam dwell in?*) is important. It is not that the tastes, the flavors, or the pleasures and fragrances are bad. It is that if one engages in overindulgence at such a large opportunity cost, one does not have room left to enjoy the *Divine* flavors. *Nam* is Identification with IkOankar, the culture which helps one connect with the Divine. Anything that distracts one from that connection and Identification, anything that consumes one so much that one loses sight of 1-Ness, is classified as the overindulgence in pleasure with a large opportunity cost that Bani warns against. If any of the various pleasures of life that are manifested are taken to the extreme, one will not have room for Identification with IkOankar. If one is overly indulgent, too busy enjoying life’s pleasures, one will not have room to enjoy divinity.

*Kam* (lust) is rooted in passion, indulgence, actions, and deeds. It has a strong aspect of physical attraction and sexual love, but sexual indulgence is *not the only definition* in Bani. Love connotes affection, longing, emotional attachment, and commitment. In Bani, lust is framed as temporary, while love is everlasting:

> *Eternal love cannot be broken if one surrenders to the Eternal-Wisdom.*  
> *The material of the knowledge is received that provides insights into three-worlds.*  
> *Unblemished Nam can’t be forgotten if one becomes the buyer of virtues.*

— Guru Granth Sahib 60
Here, Guru Nanak Sahib is describing what happens as a consequence of eternal love. This kind of love is unbreakable because it is achieved by when one surrenders to eternal love, and not to a temporary entity. This is Love with a capital “L.” It is because of this eternal love that one experiences real knowledge, experiential knowledge of the three worlds. These three worlds can be interpreted to mean the past, the present, and the future, or earth, the heavens, and the netherregions. This kind of love gives one insight and wisdom, as well as unblemished Identification with IkOankar. This unblemished Identification cannot be forgotten if one trades in virtues – if one values virtues as invaluable, if one craves virtues and the inculcation of those virtues. This kind of love bestows wisdom, transforms one’s behavior, and creates an Identification with 1-Ness that cannot be forgotten. This is a love that transcends the physical and the temporary.

Lust, on the other hand, is framed as purely physical, rooted in temporary pleasure:

> A lustful and libidinous [person] may have many women, 
> [still] does not stop looking at other homes; 
> engages every day, engages and regrets, 
> withers in sorrow and greed.x

— Guru Granth Sahib 672

Guru Arjan Sahib speaks about the way that lustfulness becomes a habit. In this particular example, Guru Arjan Sahib writes of a man pursuing women, but one can extrapolate this to refer to any person who might engage with others in an all-consuming and lustful way. Guru Arjan Sahib warns that when this lust becomes a habit, a person is never satisfied – cravings for temporary pleasures become stronger, and, still, a person is not sated. When this habit forms and becomes a vicious circle, even the person with the habit recognizes that it is futile, regretting it daily but continuing to fall into it because it is comfortable and because they think they cannot live without it – because they are addicted. The lustfulness that originally became so consuming that it distracted from 1-Ness is now needed to maintain its role as a distraction from a person’s sorrow and greed.

Comparatively, love has complicated layers of emotion and deep commitment:

> My love with the Earth-Force shall not reduce; 
> essentially, I exchanged it with [my] being-life, an expensive price. Reflect.xi

— Guru Granth Sahib 694
This love did not just happen by accident. This love is costly – think about the moment a person decides not to feed an addiction anymore. That decision is difficult, and a person must make it every day. It has emotional costs that can be quite painful. Its physiological costs can be quite painful – people can go through withdrawal-like symptoms from their habitual or comfortable behaviors and ideologies when attempting to change. In the above excerpt, Bhagat Ravidas emphasizes the cost of committing to this kind of love: the exchange of one’s very own being.

There is no explicit statement in Bani on which one has to be a part of – relationships and behaviors rooted in lust, or relationships and behaviors rooted in love. Love is everlasting, and one can bring those elements into one’s relationship, or one can bring temporariness into one’s relationships. These things are not cut and dry, as one can be lustful in a marriage, just as one can be practicing deep emotional love and commitment outside of marriage. In a relationship, love is a positive force that pushes for growth, while lust is a force that causes one to obsessively fixate on temporariness. Bani encourages individuals to be introspective about what they are bringing into their relationships. Individuals ought to reflect on whether the love they are practicing is for the purpose of instant pleasure or larger life development – if the hunger for more has reduced even a relationship that may have been rooted in love to the merely lustful.
Although Bani makes room for individual introspection into one’s sexuality, and sexual behaviors and relationships, various codifications throughout Sikh history draw clear moral lines on specific issues within the broader topic of sex and sexuality. Codification or various laws are made where there is a general common issue that needs addressing. The context for most Panjabi Sikhs in Sikh history happened to be adultery and the objectification of women. Thus, these codifications largely deal with such topics.

**Adultery**

In the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (Sikh code of conduct) under Section Six: Chapter XIII, Article XXIV, the procedure of the *Amrit Sanskar* (referring to the ceremony of initiation into the Khalsa) is outlined. One key component is a mention of the four transgressions or taboo practices that must be avoided by those Sikhs initiated into the Khalsa. One of the four transgressions is translated by Kulraj Singh and published by Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhandak Committee (SGPC) as:

3. Cohabitating with a person other than one’s spouse.\(^2\)

This version of the Sikh Rahit Maryada was drafted by Sikh scholars in 1925. The final version was completed in 1936. In 1945, this Rahit was accepted and printed by the SGPC and other parties. The English translation published by the SGPC was completed by one person, Kulraj Singh, in the 1990s. A few others have done English translations as well.

The language of the SGPC-sanctioned Sikh Rahit Maryada is a product of its time and context. For that reason, this translation is not apt, as the English word “cohabiting” is meant to imply sexual intercourse, the Panjabi word being “ਗਮਨ,” meaning “sexual intercourse.” Continuing to use the word “cohabiting,” especially as norms shift and cohabitation is common across gender identities and relationships (and many couples choose not to marry at all), does not adequately communicate the meaning of this line. Thus, our translation of the original Panjabi is as follows:

Sexual intercourse with any person other than one’s spouse.

In spirit, an interpretation of this line for today’s cultural realities would be “sexual intercourse with any person other than one’s partner.” The key here is adultery as the transgression, a theme seen in other codifications as well. Bhai Gurdas (c. 1558-1637), scholar, theologian, and a contemporary of four Gurus, addresses adultery in his writings, answering the question, “What shall a Sikh do?”:
Look at other beautiful [women] as mothers, sisters, and daughters.³

Again, this line is situated in a heteronormative understanding of society and gender dynamics, but it can be interpreted to include anyone. One might read it as “look at other beautiful people as your kin,” as a reminder that those with whom one does not have a sexual relationship ought not to be looked at sexually.

Another example of statements on adultery or engaging with an “other” outside of one’s relationship comes from Bhai Daia Singh. Bhai Daia Singh was the first volunteer amongst the original Panj Piara (Five Lovers) on the Vaisakhi of 1699 to join the newly inaugurated Khalsa order. As per his 1708 Rahitnama (writing on the code of conduct or lifestyle of a Sikh):

If [a Sikh] has sex with child, fine is one and a quarter rupees. If [a Sikh] has sex with a Muslim or Brahmin woman, serious transgressor. If [a Sikh] has sex with a girl in lineage, sister, etc., unforgivable transgression. Bathe in Amritsar and other pilgrimages, offer one and a quarter rupees as fine-penance.⁴

When reading historical Rahitnama, it is essential to situate the text in the cultural milieu in which it was written and understand what dominant cultural elements are at play. What are the guiding principles behind the words, and how has the application of these principles changed according to context?

• This Rahitnama makes a statement about sexually engaging with a Muslim or Brahmin. Interfaith sex in 18th-century South Asia was considered a transgression because it meant going outside of one’s community, at a time when communities were more separated and insular. Interfaith sex was often used as a tool of oppression or vengeance – though in that case, a more appropriate word would be “rape.” Women were and still are used as pawns in the power plays of men.

• The word “Brahmin” is used instead of “Hindu.” This may be because lower caste women were already considered as lesser properties in this context and, so, not considered worth mentioning. Indian jurist, economist, politician, and social reformer Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) notes that Hinduism is a collection of castes with Brahmins at the top – in some sense, one might read this as a missive against the caste system itself.
This rahitnama seems to address the issues of engaging with the “other” outside of one’s committed relationship, sex with minors, incest-like sex, and using non-consensual intercourse, or rape, as a weapon.

Bhai Desa Singh, near contemporary of Guru Gobind Singh Sahib and Bhai Mani Singh’s nephew, also focuses on adultery in his Rahitnama, written in 1780:

A Singh who donates dasvandh (ethical sharing of possessions or wealth with the Panth, or Sikh collective) to the Guru gains great fame in this world. Considers other’s daughter as his daughter, other’s wife as his mother.
A Rahit-compliant Singh is the one who conjugates with his own woman.5

**Prostitution**

Bhai Nand Lal (c. 1613-1713), a poet in Guru Gobind Singh Sahib’s court, writes in Tankhahnama the following couplet on adultery and prostitution. This was another topic where codification or a moral statement was required due to the common practice of that time of visiting prostitutes.

Eats food without saying Vahiguru [Awe-Wisdom],
Sikh who goes to the door of the prostitute,
develops love for the other woman,
that Sikh is not liked by [Guru] Gobind Singh.6

This is not about the institution of prostitution, but about the self-acclaimed Sikh seeking indulgence through a sexual relationship with someone they are not committed to and developing love for another. This is not about stigmatizing prostitution. It is important to note that sex work is often the only work queer and trans individuals can get. Bhai Gurdas mentions prostitution and shifts the common narrative of blaming the prostitute to blaming those who visit her:

As a prostitute with many lovers, leaves husband, becomes husband-less.
If a prostitute births a son, there are no maternal or paternal names.
Donning nose ornamentations, deceptive deceives with deceiving music and colors;
She gets men’s attention like the bell of a hunter’s companion gets deer’s.
Here she dies an illegitimate-bastard death; ahead, she isn’t allowed into the Court.
Similarly, the hypocrite and cunning man remains in pain in both worlds, and is like a counterfeit currency.
He ruins himself and ruins companions.7
There are fluid boundaries in this context regarding what a prostitute encompasses. Some were courtesans or concubines, while some were merely entertainers who danced and never engaged in conjugal relations. For all variations of what this looked like in the context in which it was written, however, there is a crucial element of enticement that Bhai Gurdas emphasizes. There is a clear sense that this enticement involves using lust and sex as pawns in a power play. But the blame is not all on the prostitutes who use their attraction. Bhai Gurdas gets into both roles – the act of visiting a prostitute as an indulgent act and the effect on the sex worker – one has no names attached to them, no one wants to “own” or be associated with them. This is not a condemnation, but an acknowledgment of the reality of life for sex workers in Bhai Gurdas’s context. Indulgence has been addressed through the example of prostitution, but the statements to focus on are at the end, where those who visit sex workers are being addressed. Bhai Gurdas focuses on their hypocrisy, emphasizing that men in positions of power misuse and use sex workers for entertainment. These men are cunning hypocrites, people with bad habits who are furthering their bad habits, as the consequences spill out into their other relationships.

There is a sense of the reality that blame and societal consequences are usually only felt by sex workers and not by their patrons. There is also a deliberate shift motivated by an understanding of why sex work is a reality and where the social consequences fall, through the lens of regret. Those who participate in sexual transactions (both the sex worker and their patron) are like counterfeit currency, worn out and unusable as currency out in the world. The sex worker is treated this way by society. The patron is not, but Bhai Gurdas emphasizes that, despite their ability to move through the world without consequence, these patrons will find that they too are worn out and that their other “transactions” will also not work in the world. The effects of engaging in indulgence permeate the lives of the patrons of sex workers.

This is about transactional sexual engagement and its consequences. Although the examples are gendered, this is equally relevant to male prostitution as well. Again, it is crucial to note that these examples are not aiming to condemn sex workers. Direct evidence from Bani shows that multiple Sabads are celebrating and honoring Ganika the courtesan, who got freedom through connecting to Nam:

_Ajamal, elephant, and Ganika committed degrading acts, they landed on the shore [by crossing dreadful world-ocean] by remembering 1-Charmer-Identification._

— Guru Granth Sahib 692
In Hindu Puranic stories, Ajamal had a relationship with a prostitute. King Indrayuma was born as an elephant (considered a lustful animal) in a previous life because of his disrespect towards sage Agastya, and Ganika was a prostitute.

1-Light’s Identification is always comforting:
By remembering Whom Ajamal was liberated and Ganika too was freed. Reflect.
In the Royal Assembly, Panchali — the wife of five — became conscious of 1-Charmer-Identification,
whose pain was removed by the Compassionate, 1-Own-Self’s honor increased. 
— Guru Granth Sahib 1008

In Mahabharata, Panchali is Draupadi, who was married to five Pandava brothers; they lost her in a gamble to the Kaurava clan. In Duryudhan’s court, while being dishonored by Kaurava via forceful removal of her sari, she remembered the One and her sari kept unrolling incessantly, its length becoming unending as they tried to pull it off her.

These lines and the specific references to Ganika’s ability to attain freedom through Nam are especially important to read alongside the codifications presented regarding prostitution. Setting these in conversation with one another emphasizes that, no matter society’s judgments of one’s actions, one can always be freed through connecting with Nam, or Identifying with IkOankar. It is important to note the various coercions, systems of oppression, or other realities in society that might compel one to engage in sex work. Bani has never been about condemning an individual. It is always about how the culture of the time views or judges something. Sex work as understood by the people of the era in which this was written is considered to be irreligious. It was condemned, in many societies, with death. None of these realities are invoked in Bani as moral pronouncements. Bani tells us that those who live in Nam culture are uplifted, regardless of what society might say. Karmic theory says one’s upliftment or “salvation” is entirely determined by one’s current or previous actions. Sikhī says that it is actually about grace. Even if an action is deemed unacceptable by society, grace pervades if one enters Nam’s culture. This is the case with Ganika.

All of the above codifications mentioned touch on one primary idea – that of the “other” when it comes to committed relationships. These codifications focus on discouraging engagement in relations with someone other than the person one has committed to.
As for sexuality in regards to orientation or preference, Bani and Rahitname are mostly silent. There is no citation within Bani to condemn certain sexual orientations or preferences. What is available as a guide is historical evidence.

Sarmad was a 17th-century queer Muslim saint, as was Shah Hussain, a 17th-century Sufi poet and mystic. There are other examples of queer people who existed and expressed their sexuality without shame in the 16th and 17th centuries. Thus, the argument that homosexuality was not a reality during the Guru period is ahistorical. Even when there was awareness about the different ways sexuality and sexual orientation can manifest, there were no laws or condemnations issued by the Gurus to address them. Colonialism imposed binaries that were not present pre-colonially. For example, there is evidence of multiple genders in South Asian writing and lived experiences. Hijras or Khusras (gender non-conforming people making up a community of eunuchs, intersex people, and transgender women) have a recorded history in the Indian subcontinent from antiquity onwards, as suggested by the Kama Sutra. Hijras are officially recognized as a third gender category in the Indian subcontinent. Historically the role of Hijras in society as entertainers is well-established, and these roles continue today. Evidence of a third gender is also seen in language. For example, Sanskrit, the oldest language in the subcontinent, has three genders: masculine (pulling), feminine (stirling), and neutral (napunsakling). This existed in the analytic language considered to be the language of gods but only accessible to the priestly caste Brahmin, long before colonial forces arrived in the subcontinent. However, in post-colonial South Asia, the gender binary is widely accepted. There is evidence in pre-colonial texts, art, and architecture that sexuality was more fluid, and the binary of straight-gay is a colonial construct – this is why things like "coming out" or "accepting" sexuality are historically specific. The argument that the acceptance of queerness is somehow an inherently Western idea, or a side effect of "liberalism," is a product of western imperialism over Asia and South Asia, and also ahistorical.

Sarmad (c. 1590–1661) was a Persian-speaking Armenian mystic and saint who traveled to South Asia and settled there in the 17th-century. He was respected by Dara Shikoh, eldest son of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, who was himself a follower of Guru Harirai Sahib. Sarmad was executed by Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, not due to his sexuality, but due to accusations of atheism and religious heresy, and his influential religious leadership, which threatened Aurangzeb’s hegemony. Sarmad’s sexuality was taken simply as a reality, not as “deviance” or something to be fixated upon.
Panjabi poet Shah Hussain (c. 1538-1599) fell in love with an upper-caste Hindu named Madho Lal. The gay mystic expressed his love by adopting his beloved’s name, calling himself Madho Lal Hussain. Shah Hussain had a relationship with Madho Lal and presented his writings to Guru Arjan Sahib. They were not included in the Adi Granth (first recension of the Guru Granth Sahib), but further research is needed as to why. Many Sikhs who believe there is no place for homosexuality in the Panth read into this decision as a clear example of the Guru making a judgment on Shah Hussain’s sexuality as “sinful” or “deviant,” but there is no evidence to support this. One cannot presume to know the Guru’s reasons for making certain decisions. Shah Hussain is the only exception among the saints whose writings were not included to still be praised by the Guru.

Shah Hussain presented a composition to Guru Arjan Sahib. The Guru responded as follows:

Revered [Guru] Arjan smilingly spoke,  
full of compassionate and delightful yes:  
Speak goodness, keep the heart quiet,  
remain silent Shah Hussain!

He presented to the Guru; thus, there were no restrictions on a queer saint submitting for inclusion in Guru Granth Sahib. In fact, of the four (Chajju, Pilu, Kanha, and Shah Hussain) from Lahore who presented to the Guru as per Mahakavi Santokh Singh, Shah Hussain was different: he invoked adoration for the Guru, did not say anything anti-Gurmat, and did not argue with the Guru or curse. It speaks volumes on acceptance of varying sexualities and respectful treatment. The eventual decision not to include his writing is a separate matter (many’s writings were not included, and almost all of them were cisgender), one from which assumptions and moral pronouncements about queerness cannot be drawn.

**Same-sex Marriage**

Another argument made by those who believe the Panth has no space for LGBTQIA+ individuals is gender identification within the Anand Karaj (Sikh marriage ceremony).

Whenever there is a question or issue in front of the Sikh Panth, the Bani of Guru Granth Sahib can be referred to for guidance and explanation – the topic of marriage is not an exception.

This excerpt from the Bani of Guru Amardas Sahib is commonly associated with the marriage ceremony, becoming quite common in pop culture and advertisements on social media platforms.
Throughout Bani, the metaphor of dhan (wife) is used:

That wife-being is genuinely beautiful who
feels the presence of Husband-Being.
That wife-being is genuinely beautiful who feels the company
of the Husband-Being.
Called to the mansion by Mansion-Owner, that one enjoys
Husband-Being’s color.
That fortunate-wife-being of Eternal is good, Husband-Being
attracts her with virtues company.

– Guru Granth Sahib 56

In this context, the Husband-Being is IkOankar, and the wife is the human being. The company is the presence, and color is love. The human being is called to the mansion of the Husband-Being, and they conjugate, engaging in love. This experience of intimacy is how the human being becomes a Sohagan (a feminine content being as One’s spouse) in the company of the Husband-Being. This excerpt is about beauty and sexuality. It is evidence that Bani is not sex-negative and that these kinds of deeply loving sexual engagements are used as a metaphor for the most intimate connection with the One. This is very much an example that falls under the category of “making love” rather than just “having sex.” This metaphor between spouses, human-being, and Husband-Being is celebrated to illustrate an intimate relationship rooted in devotion and love.

Today I did not sleep with the Husband-Being, the body keeps
breaking down.
Go ask the unfortunate-wife-being, how does your night pass?

– Guru Granth Sahib 1378
In the above context, the Husband-Being is IkOankar, and the unfortunate wife is the human being. Here, the metaphor of the sensual and conjugal intimacies of human relationships is used to capture the human being’s restlessness due to a lack of a personal and intimate relationship with the Husband-Being. The restlessness that stems from this lack of intimacy results in a plea, that their entire body is suffering from only a single night without intimacy. They ask the unfortunate wife-being, who has been in separation from the Husband-Being, how the unfortunate wife-being passes the nights because the restless human being is reeling from only one night of separation, as they feel their whole body is not blooming. These are natural emotions that human beings feel in their intimate human relationships being used to describe the intimacy between the human being and IkOankar.

This metaphor of a wife longing for her husband is commonly used to illustrate the human being’s longing for IkOankar. In this way, there is a common understanding of a genderless reading of Bani, such that all individuals place themselves into the role of the bride before IkOankar. The understanding of this metaphor is commonly accepted, except in the “one light in two bodies” imagery.

Bani can be interpreted in a multidimensional fashion, in both literal and metaphorical ways, and this excerpt must be dealt with similarly. From one angle, this could be a worldly literal description of the union between a husband and wife, but metaphorically it is a genderless understanding of the human condition, which would transcend across all sexual orientations and/or genders.

Bani teaches through tangible worldly metaphors, and there is definitely a worldly aspect that can be interpreted. Ultimately, the greater meaning is with IkOankar. Many times Sabads are recited at various occasions on the premise of one line, but it is essential to look at the entirety of the Sabad to understand the full message being relayed. In the above Sabad, Bhagat Kabir ultimately discusses the union with IkOankar, and to reduce this Sabad merely to its worldly metaphor is a disservice.

The principles expressed throughout the lava (interlinks or rounds) of the Sikh marriage ceremony have a multidimensional meaning. There is a worldly literal description of the union between two beings pointing to a metaphorical, genderless understanding of the human condition which would transcend across all sexual orientations and genders. For more information on this particular topic, see SikhRI’s second State of the Panth report, Anand Karaj: The Sikh Marriage.13
**Same-sex relationships and lust**

Some argue that queer relationships are inherently lustful, rooted in the idea that intercourse must only be engaged in procreation. Bani does not offer prescriptions as to how often or for what purposes one “is allowed to” engage in sex, as these are inherently personal issues, and Sikhs are not people of the law or people of prescription. Arguing that intercourse must only be engaged in for procreation means that those who are unable to procreate or use contraception are somehow transgressing. This argument is also predicated on the belief that marriage’s sole or primary function is for the purpose of procreation. Bani encourages each person to be introspective and reflect on what their relationship with their own sexuality is. As quoted in the previous section, Guru Nanak Sahib reminds us that we can engage in the pleasures of life, but that we must find freedom by moving through our natural impulses and not allowing them to consume us. Just as a couple can be lustful within the context of marriage and outside of it, a heterosexual couple is not somehow immune to the human tendencies of engaging in lust simply because they are heterosexual. Sexual orientation is not inherently tied to lustfulness. This belief is tied to myths about same-sex attraction being a deviance and purely sexually-motivated phenomenon.

**Recent statements on homosexuality**

*Akal Takht Sahib* (Timeless Throne Sovereign) commands the worldly moral authority of the Sikhs and functions as the institutional manifestation of the *Miri-Piri* (Political-Spiritual) doctrine as envisioned by the Gurus. This institution has made various statements on queerness that are important to address.

In 2005, Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti of the Akal Takht Sahib condemned queerness when he told visiting Sikh-Canadian Members of Parliament (MPs) that they had a religious duty to oppose same-sex marriage: “The basic duty of Sikh MPs in Canada should be to support laws that stop this kind of practice [homosexuality], because there are thousands of Sikhs living in Canada, to ensure that Sikhs do not fall prey to this practice.”

In 2009, the SGPC and Akal Takht Sahib voiced disapproval of the Delhi High Court judgment, which legalized gay sex among consenting adults. Jathedar Giani Gurbachan Singh said: “This is against the law of nature and the Gurmat Sidhant (Sikh principles). We will appeal to the Sikhs not to follow this unnatural thing (gay sex).”

In 2015, Jathedar Giani Gurbachan Singh of the Akal Takht Sahib spoke out in support of the Supreme Court of India ruling that Indian Penal Code provision making gay sex an offense punishable with up to life imprisonment was constitutionally valid. It also issued a directive to all Gurduaras around the world to bar same sex marriages from occurring in the Gurduara. The SGPC also supported the court’s decision, and SGPC head Avtar Singh Makkar said there was no place for same sex marriages and that the Supreme Court ruling has put an end to the issue once and for all.
These statements are based on ignorance and bigotry, with problematic conclusions about the “laws of nature” without evidence. The phrase “this practice,” being used to refer to sexuality, reduces it to a lifestyle choice. These statements are also based on reactions to legal influences and decisions in Indian courts, echoing other organized religions without basis. In the post-Guru period, these kinds of decisions must be deliberative. They must be deliberative because the perfection is in the Guru, and the Guru is in the collective – therefore, one person cannot make a decision. A statement in response to current events is not acceptable as a policy statement or Sikhi position, as it may merely be a personally held belief solely about current affairs.

Additionally, the credibility of SGPC and Jathedars is questioned on many fronts within large sections of the Sikh community on different issues due to their allegiance and their reliance on a particular political party or legal jurisdictions within India. Such statements must be based in Bani and in the Sikh collective ethos, even if they are concerted opinions. Gurmat must inform these decisions.

Turning to Bani and Tavarikh for guidance on sexuality, lust, love, and marriage without critically thinking about how colonialism, nationalism, and other historical processes influence individual interpretations and popular interpretations do a disservice to the open and fluid application of Bani and Tavarikh to varying contexts. As stated earlier, the spirit of the Bani is unchanging, but the manifestation of its implementation is a product of time and context. What is being understood through translation via multiple interpretive lenses? What interpretations are we projecting onto Bani and Tavarikh? What biases are we reading with? And where do our understandings come from?
When it comes to questions related to individual choices regarding sexuality and relationships, the common themes arise. Some struggle with how to reconcile the ideas of sexual norms from the Panjabi or South Asian context with the oversexualized Western society. Others question what the taboos are for Sikhs, whether sex is for pleasure or only for procreation, and what is the difference between love and lust. It is important to remember that Rahit evolves through time, as do the consequences or punishments for various transgressions.

Bani establishes life priorities within a set of socio-ethical and spiritual frameworks and advises a recommended course of action by explaining the nature and effect of human urges, and providing an attitude or approach. Individuals are free to decide based on their life goals and priorities what they will do with those tools. Individuals are encouraged to think about what priorities they are establishing within relationships, whether they are divinity-oriented or temporally-oriented, and whether they are spiritually developing themselves.

**Current laws on sexuality**

It is important to look at the general statistics on sexuality in the regions of the world where the most significant percentages of the Panth reside to get a sense of the global Sikh context, illustrating the complicated and evolving terrain regarding sexuality in the legal sphere. The largest regions are India, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and Malaysia.

**India**

**Polygamy:** Section 494 and 495 of the Indian Penal Code of 1860 prohibited polygamy for the Christians. In 1955, the Hindu Marriage Act prohibited the marriage of a Hindu whose spouse was still living. Polygamy became illegal in India in 1956 for all of its citizens except Muslims, who are permitted to have four wives, and Hindus in Goa and along the western coast, where bigamy is legal.17

**Same-sex marriage:** Same-sex marriage is not explicitly prohibited under Indian law, but India does not recognize same-sex marriage or civil unions. There is no unified marriage law in India. Every Indian citizen has the right to choose which civil code will apply to them based on their community or religion. Although marriage is legislated at the federal level, the existence of various marriage laws complicates the issue.
Prostitution: Prostitution is legal in India. But several related activities, including soliciting in a public place, owning or managing a brothel, prostitution in a hotel, child prostitution, pimping, and pandering are illegal.

Polygamy: All forms of polygamy, and some informal multiple sexual relationships, are illegal under section 293 of the Criminal Code. Bigamy is banned by section 290. However, as of January 2009, no person had been successfully prosecuted (i.e. convicted) in over 60 years.

Same-sex marriage: Same-sex marriage in Canada was progressively introduced in several provinces by court decisions beginning in 2003 before being legally recognized nationwide with the enactment of the Civil Marriage Act on July 20, 2005.

Prostitution: Current laws on sex work, introduced by the Conservative government in 2014, make it illegal to purchase or advertise sexual services and illegal to live on the material benefits from sex work. Although it is legal to sell sexual services, in some cases it is illegal to solicit in public areas.

Polygamy: Foreign polygamous marriages grant some welfare benefits only, but this is being phased out with the introduction of Universal Credit. Polygamy is treated as bigamy if a second marriage (or civil partnership) is contracted in the United Kingdom. No legal recognition is extended to spouses of subsequent marriages after the first marriage is recognized even when subsequent marriages are contracted abroad.

Same-sex marriage: Same-sex marriage is legal in all parts of the United Kingdom. As marriage is a devolved legislative matter, different parts of the UK legalized same-sex marriage at different times; it has been recognized and performed in England and Wales since March 2014, in Scotland since December 2014, and in Northern Ireland since January 2020.

Prostitution: In Great Britain (England, Wales, and Scotland), prostitution itself (the exchange of sexual services for money) is legal, but several related activities, including soliciting in a public place, curb crawling, owning or managing a brothel, pimping, and pandering are crimes. In Northern Ireland, which previously had similar laws, paying for sex became illegal on June 1, 2015.
**United States**

**Polygamy:** Polygamy is illegal in all 50 states, however, in Utah, in February 2020, the law was significantly changed in the House and Senate to reduce polygamy to the status of a traffic ticket. Among American Muslims, a small minority of around 50,000 to 100,000 people are estimated to live in families with a husband maintaining an informal polygamous relationship.

**Same-sex marriage:** In the United States, the availability of legally-recognized same-sex marriage expanded from one state in 2004 to all fifty states in 2015 through various state and federal court rulings, state legislation, and direct popular votes.

**Prostitution:** Prostitution is illegal in the vast majority of the United States due to state laws. It is, however, legal in some rural counties within the state of Nevada. Prostitution nevertheless occurs elsewhere in the country. The regulation of prostitution is exclusively the domain of the states to permit, prohibit, or otherwise regulate commercial sex under the Tenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.

**Australia**

**Polygamy:** Polygamous marriages cannot be performed in Australia, but polygamous relationships are common within some indigenous Australian communities. Polygamous marriages entered into abroad are recognized for limited purposes only.

**Same-sex marriage:** Same-sex marriage in Australia has been legal since December 9, 2017.

**Prostitution:** Prostitution in Australia is governed by state and territory laws, which vary considerably. New South Wales (NSW) has the most liberal legislation on prostitution in Australia, with almost complete decriminalization. Brothels are legal in NSW under the Summary Offences Act 1988. Sex work, including the operation of brothels and street work, became legal, subject to regulation, in the Northern Territory in 2019 with the passage of the Sex Industry Act. Brothels are legal in Queensland. There are two types of sex work that are legal in Queensland: Private sex work (a single sex worker working alone) and sex work in a licensed brothel. All other forms of sex work remain illegal.
Malaysia

Polygamy: Polygamous marriages are only recognized for Muslims.39

Same-sex marriage: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons in Malaysia face legal challenges. Sodomy is a crime in the country, and social attitudes towards the LGBT community are shaped by Islam, the official state religion of Malaysia.

Prostitution: Prostitution in Malaysia is restricted in all states despite it being widespread in the country. Related activities, such as soliciting and brothels, are illegal.40

Sex and marriage

Within the topic of marriage, there are common questions regarding certain lifestyle choices. One such question is whether polygamy, in either the form of polyandry or polygyny, is acceptable in a Sikh framework. For this, Bhai Gurdas offers some guidance in “Behavior of Insightful Sikh” and “Duality and Sikh,” respectively:

[A Sikh with] one woman is like a celibate, calls other women daughters or sisters.41

[A Sikh like] the husband of two women or the wife of two men remains in pain.42

Bhai Gurdas is clear on this – one is to have only one partner, as this is a wise choice and responsible social behavior. Sexual obsession and non-commitment are discouraged, as they ultimately lead to pain.

This question comes up in Panthic discussions, often due to the confusion about whether Guru Gobind Singh Sahib had multiple wives. The purpose of this report is not to confirm or deny the aforesaid, but instead to provide context on sexuality. Thus, we will briefly present what we know, possible reasons, and what we can take away from our information. Unfortunately, there are different historical sources with no consistency on dates, names, and offspring. What we know is that three Gurus – Guru Harigobind Sahib, Guru Harirai Sahib, and Guru Gobind Singh Sahib – all had multiple wives concurrently. One Guru, Guru Arjan Sahib, had multiple wives non-concurrently. In concurrent cases, the conclusions of researchers and interpreters vary drastically, from denial to explanations. Explanations range from one woman having various names to an agreement to remain celibate in marriage, to unique circumstances. Denial seems out of place, for evidence exists.
Guru Arjan Sahib was married twice, but not at the same time. First, there was a marriage with Mata Ram Kaur: no marriage date, died in 1569 (sammat 1626 in Goindval). Then, there was a marriage with Mata Ganga Devi in 1579 (sammat 1636). She was the mother of Guru Harigobind Sahib.

Guru Harigobind Sahib was married three times, to Mata Damodari in 1604 (sammat 1661), Mata Nanaki in 1613 (sammat 1670), and Mata Mahadevi in 1615 (sammat 1672). There is mention of the birth of five sons and one daughter, but no specifics as to the offspring’s maternal lineage. Most sources agree with the fact that there were five sons (Babas Gurdita, Anirai, Surajmal, Atalrai, and Tyagmal – Guru Tegh Bahadar Sahib) and a daughter, Bibi Viro. Some ascribe the first two sons and the daughter to Mata Damodari, the next two sons to Mata Mahadevi/Marvahi, and last son to Mata Nanaki.

Guru Harirai Sahib married the daughters of Daya Ram, resident of Anup Shahir (district Buland Shahir, U.P.) in 1640 (sammat 1697). Mata Kotkalyani was the mother of Baba Ramrai, and Mata Krishan Kaur was the mother of Guru Harikrishan Sahib. Most sources, in regards to the wives of Guru Harirai Sahib, cite up to eight (all sisters or seven sisters plus another one).

Guru Gobind Singh Sahib married Mata Jito (Ajitau, or Ajit Kaur) in 1677 (sammat 1734) at Guru ka Lahaur near Anandpur Sahib. She was the mother of Sahibzade Jujhar, Zoravar and Fateh Singh. Guru Gobind Singh Sahib married Mata Sundari in 1684 (sammat 1741) at Anandpur Sahib. She was the mother of Sahibzada Ajit Singh. Guru Gobind Singh Sahib married Mata Sahib Kaur at Anandpur Sahib in 1700 (sammat 1757). There was no conjugal relationship. She is the mother of the Khalsa.
Thus, the evidence shows Guru Gobind Singh Sahib had two traditional wives and one ceremonial. This is all we know. Many others corroborate this, few dispute it. This may be because they cannot explain why there were two traditional wives.

Possible explanations are that though polygamy was not a norm, it was not an anomaly either. Seven out of ten Gurus were not polygamous. One Guru remarried. Guru is perfection, so none of these marriages were rooted in Kam-lust. Customs at the time included name changes upon marriage – a possibility, but not likely in Guru Gobind Singh Sahib’s case because there is evidence of three marriages. Customs also included presenting and offering oneself to the Guru for marriage, exceptionally accepted, but also not accepted like in the case of Guru Harigobind Sahib and Mata Kaula. The rejection of a marriage proposal was considered a great insult, like when Guru Arjan Sahib rejected Guru Harigobind Sahib’s marriage with Chandu’s daughter. The ensuing rage played a role in the torture and martyrdom of Guru Arjan Sahib. Marriage was accepted conditionally, but then stopped there onwards like in the case of Guru Gobind Singh Sahib with Mata Sahib Kaur. Not acknowledging the Gurus’ wives is problematic too, as it is a historical and status-elevation omission. The most we can do is make sure that we do not apply the laws or social norms of the present to the past, and we can try to understand the social norms of that period in history from historical evidence. We can try to understand the context and the elevated persons involved. We know that the Sikh Rahit Maryada is written as law, and Bhai Gurdas writes recommendations.

What is the status of the two individuals (regardless of gender) in such a relationship of marriage? There is a level of empowerment that is mutual between partners; there is freedom of conscience, choice, and action.

It is not as simple as getting married and using the institution of marriage as a band-aid for lack of these functioning units. Within married life, there can be abuse, there can be lust, and there can be power-plays and manipulation. Simply being married is not the solution or justification for anything.

The institution of marriage borrows its authority through interactions between two major units: the familial or conjugal (smallest unit, driven by functionality, utility, individual purpose) and the societal (structure, norms, and coherence). To be accepted, a relationship must be harmonious within these two parameters, while conforming to local culture.
Nontraditional relationships

This is a critical subject for our current global context, as norms shift. More and more young adults are waiting longer to get married, and it has become more acceptable in some societies for partners to live together before getting married, or never get married at all. For some guidance on this, Bhai Gurdas says:

As the world considers the sea to be biggest among the lakes and the rivers and the Sumer mountain among all the mountains, the sandalwood tree to be greatest among trees and the gold to be supreme among metals, the swan among the birds, the lion among the deer’s king, Srirag among the rags, the philosopher-stone among the stones, the knowledge among knowledges and the contemplation among contemplations are of the Wisdom-Guru, so consider the supreme lifestyle-principle among lifestyle-principles to be of the householder.50

Here, Bhai Gurdas recommends marital life as it was the norm as the primary mode of commitment and engagement. Social, ethical, moral, and spiritual guidelines are set within the institution of marriage in a Sikh context. It is important to remember that Rahit is a must for those who have committed to a Khalsa lifestyle. Rahit functions as a guiding document, and marriage is a recommendation, but not a requirement. As norms shift and other factors come into play, it is up to individual couples to decide for themselves what their purpose, calling, and priorities are, and whether those things need to be solidified through or rooted in marriage.

Harmony within

The ultimate goal for each individual in regards to their sexuality is to find harmony within. Guru Nanak Sahib says:

Female is in the male, and male in the female.
Understand this, O Divine-realized being! xvi

– Guru Granth Sahib 879
It is up to each individual to look into themselves and ask if the socially constructed and internalized binary of male and female harmonizes with their real purpose. Creating a union between the binaries of males and females, and the masculine and feminine within is the key. Each individual is asked to reflect on what claiming to be only male or only female does for their journey to and relationship with the Guru and IkOankar. If one becomes a realized individual, one does not look at themselves or anyone else as male or female. The female is in the male because the male is necessary for producing the female (sperm is needed to fertilize an egg). The male is in the female because the female is the vessel that holds and nurtures life before it is born (the fertilized egg develops in the womb). Thus, the male is born out of the female, and the female is born out of the male. This is the unnarratable narrative, that there is no use in this binary or trying to “figure it out.”

This is about disrupting binaries that we have created as a society and absorbed internally. One’s relationship with oneself will ultimately decide how their relationships with others will be, regardless of sexual orientation. Sexuality in Sikhi is about creating harmony by eliminating binaries, developing a relationship with oneself, and developing a relationship with someone else that is not temporary and based on fleeting pleasures but deeply rooted in commitment and love.

If the goal is to be divine-like, one must bring one’s internal sense of male and female into harmony within (achieved by removing this binary altogether). If those socially constructed internally imbibed dichotomies and binaries die out, then the socially constructed external dichotomies can die out as well.
An online survey was conducted, asking the 2020 global Sikh community to consider the issue of sexuality. A total of 1,212 self-identified Sikhs voluntary respondents from 31 different countries participated in the survey.

For the purpose of representing the Sikh community in this research, only respondents who identified as Sikhs were considered. The purpose of this survey was to gain insight into Sikh thoughts and feelings surrounding sexuality today. Sexuality was defined in the survey as encompassing both sexual preference and sexual activity.
What gender do you most identify with?

Note: No respondent opted to fill-in the option: Other. This could be due to a lack of comfort in identifying this way.

The majority of respondents self-identified as men.

What is your age group?

The majority of respondents were in the age range of 26-39, followed by the age range of 40-60. Those over the age of 60 (perhaps due to the nature of the online survey) and those under 18 (perhaps due to channels that the survey was marketed through) constituted the smallest proportion of respondents.
Respondents were then asked to select the option which personally informs their perspective on sexuality. They were given various options to rank.

The highest-ranked options were (in order from most to least):

1. Family life/Cultural norms
2. Spirituality/Religion (Sikhi, Bani, etc.)
3. Media (including pornography, television, social media, etc.)

Of those respondents that opted to fill in “Other” options, the most common themes included:

- Books/Research/Studying
- Professional insight and/or education (journalist, psychologist, gender studies, etc.)
- Inner/own perception (“my beliefs,” “my own experiences”)

Men were most likely to base their perspective on sexuality on Family life/Cultural norms and Spirituality/Religion (Sikhi, Bani, etc.). At the same time, women were most likely to base their perspective on sexuality on Family life/Cultural norms and Friends and peers (perceptions, experiences, opinions).

This may be because women and girls are less likely to be given spaces to discuss and learn about this topic openly in a Sikh setting, whereas men and boys are often given space to discuss sexuality in a Sikh setting and are often informed on “lust.” Many young women may have memories of attending Sikh youth camps or being in Sikh spaces during which the boys were separated from the girls and given a talk on “lust.” Boys may be taught more about dealing with normal feelings and desires that especially come with puberty. Girls are more likely to be framed as passive recipients of lust, not as active humans with the same experiences of desire and lust to struggle through and attempt to understand. The emphasis for young men may often be on masturbation specifically, as that seems to be the most tangible manifestation of what one might classify as “lust.” Young women may never have these conversations around sexuality and desire, masturbation and pleasure, because while they may be framed as temptresses or inherently sexualized, they often are not treated as if they have sexual agency.
**With whom is sex appropriate? (Select all that apply)**

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<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between a consenting married man and woman</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between two consenting people in a committed relationship</td>
<td>547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between a consenting married couple (regardless of gender)</td>
<td>535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between two consenting people regardless of gender or marital status (includes LGBTQIA+)</td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between a consenting man and woman</td>
<td>424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between any number of consenting people (includes polyamory, polyandry, polygamy, etc.)</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The top three most popular combinations of selections were:

1. 188 selected ONLY Between a consenting married man and woman, unselected all other options
2. 147 selected ALL available options
3. 120 selected ONLY Between two consenting people regardless of gender or marital status (includes LGBTQIA+), unselected all other options

The most significant variation in response was regarding “any number of consenting people, including polyamory, polyandry, polygamy,” most likely due to a belief that having multiple partners is more rooted in lust due to the lack of commitment to one partner.

**How do you understand the word “Kam” (lust)? What, in your understanding, does it encompass? (Select all that apply)**

<table>
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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Any sexual thoughts or desires</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Sin”</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-marital sex</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual attraction</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masturbation</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex attraction</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Variation by Selected Gender for the following Options:
Note: Greatest variation highlighted in gold.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Man</th>
<th>Woman</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All-consuming or overpowering thoughts/actions</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any sexual thoughts or desires</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Sin”</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-marital sex</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual attraction</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masturbation</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex attraction</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two most selected options for both men and women were “All-consuming or overpowering thoughts/actions” and “Any sexual thoughts or desires.” However, a larger percentage of women selected “All-consuming or overpowering thoughts/actions,” while a larger percentage of men selected “Any sexual thoughts or desires,” “Heterosexual attraction,” and “Masturbation.” The latter two selections showed almost twice the percentage of selections amongst men in comparison to women.

Again, this could be due to the way sexuality is addressed and discussed in Sikh spaces along gender lines. Fear-based teaching might be a more common tactic in trying to “reign in” the lust young men might experience with the onset of puberty, while young women might rarely have conversations around attraction and desire, and especially masturbation, as that is often framed as a uniquely male issue. Perhaps, this aspect of assigning less agency to young women also creates an expectation for even higher levels of vigilance on their part.

**For what purpose is sex “appropriate?” (Select all that apply)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Selected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For love</td>
<td>1014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For procreation</td>
<td>897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For pleasure or desire</td>
<td>856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For a sense of well-being (i.e. comfort, security)</td>
<td>694</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Respondents were then asked if, in their understanding, lust and sex are synonymous. 

85 respondents chose the Option: Other. Of those respondents that opted to fill in “Other” options, the most common themes included:

- Physical Needs/Fun
- Intimacy/Affection/Feelings
- “Whatever” partners want it to be for

The vast majority of respondents selected “No,” more than five and a half times the number of those respondents who selected “Yes.” These results were not significantly different between genders or across age categories. This is a positive sign that amongst the age groups and audiences that took part in the survey, there is a clear difference in understanding the relationship between lust and sex, and what is popularly believed and may be taught in some Sikh spaces. Lust and sex are not the same.

Respondents were then asked what, in their opinion, is a Sikh understanding of sex and its relationship to human life.

Analyzing for common words and phrases, the top phrases or ideas expressed in responses were:

- Part of human life
- Between a married man and woman
- Sex is a natural part of life/Sex is natural

Respondents were then asked two additional questions.
How open are you to discussing sexuality as a topic (in an abstract way, not as it pertains to you individually)? (Scale of 1 to 7, 1 = not open, 4 = neutral, 7 = very open)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With your family</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With your non-Sikh friends</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With your Sikh friends</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With the larger Sikh Community</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents expressed that they are most comfortable discussing sexuality as a topic in an abstract way with their non-Sikh friends and least comfortable speaking with their family and the larger Sikh Community.

How open are you to discussing sexuality (as it pertains to you individually)? (Scale of 1 to 7, 1 = not open, 4 = neutral, 7 = very open)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With your family</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With your non-Sikh friends</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With your Sikh friends</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With the larger Sikh Community</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents expressed that they are most comfortable speaking with their non-Sikh friends and least comfortable talking with their family and the larger Sikh Community. This was true for both questions and might suggest an element of trust issues and experiences of non-understanding within Sikh spaces and amongst Sikh peers, and possibly fear of judgment or lack of confidentiality when sharing in those audiences. Although many respondents expressed that they believe sex is a part of well-being, they may still be scared to communicate this to their Sikh peers due to anxiety about being judged. Finally, respondents were asked how Sikh institutions (not limited to Gurduaras) can address sexuality issues.

Some common ideas were:

- Talk about it
- Be more open/Create safe spaces
- Call for resources/Education (workshops, discussions, webinars, seminars, information)
- Seek information from Guru Granth Sahib
**Recommendations**

**Individual**

1. Reflect on your unique relationship with your sexuality as it encompasses both sexual preference and sexual activity, seeking guidance from Guru Granth Sahib and developing a personal relationship with IkOankar.

2. Those struggling with their sexuality and the often volatile responses from other Sikhs who deem queerness “sinful” might find it helpful to turn to Guru Granth Sahib and Sikh history for guidance and reassurance. Guru Granth Sahib and Sikh history emphasize that the underlying spirit of Sikh is rooted in IkOankar and radical ideas of 1-Ness, inclusion, and equality.

3. Queer Sikhs might find it helpful to seek out spaces created explicitly for queer Sikhs to speak about their struggles, get advice, find support, and discuss their sexuality in an open and non-judgmental space.

4. Individual Sikhs, no matter their backgrounds or adherence to codes, personal interpretations, or traditional interpretations, must accept queer Sikhs as they are, and the queer community at large, and encourage broader acceptance in their immediate communities. Individuals must remember the severity of possible consequences of a lack of acceptance, from bullying to homelessness to emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, to forced heterosexual marriages to avoid bringing shame on the family, to death by suicide. These consequences often occur at the hands of family members and community members.

5. Recognize that each Sikh’s journey is a unique and complicated process that cannot be under external judgment. Instead, focus on your relationship with divinity, remembering that Bani is not prescriptive or hardlined. Fostering this attitude at an individual level and amongst smaller communities within the Panth will ultimately lead to larger changes in how sexuality is discussed both individually and institutionally. This will in turn lead to increased comfort levels amongst Sikhs in discussing both sexuality as an abstract topic and as it pertains to them as individuals.
Recommendations

**Institutional**

1. Develop resources to educate teens and adults on sexuality and sexual health from a Sikh angle, refraining from fear-based teaching, and provide Sikhi-oriented psychological counseling in a professional and confidential environment for those who need it.

2. Educate girls, boys, and non-binary people on masturbation, sex, sexuality, and lust in the same way, instead of reinforcing that girls are passive receivers without their own sexuality and desires. In contrast, boys are active sexual beings, and non-binary people are not in need of sexual education.

3. Engage with the actively changing Sikh population. As more queer voices are being amplified, organizations need to take more initiative in advocating for and centering those voices, facilitating conversations, and supporting Sikh LGBTQIA+ organizations.

4. In addressing larger discontent on queerness, institutions must weigh laws or statements from the SGPC and individuals in positions of authority with 550 years of Sikhi development, primarily based in Bani, with inclusive Tavarikh and evolving Rahit.
References

We present the direct references from the Guru Granth Sahib in original Gurmukhi as follows:

i. 

ii. 

iii. 

iv. 

v. 

vi. 

vii. 

viii. 

ix. 

x. 

xi. 

xii. 

xiii. 

xiv. 

xv. 

xvi. 

All transcreations are by Harinder Singh, unless otherwise indicated.
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2. Sikh Rehat Maryada, English Translation (1993), Amritsar: SGPC. (Original in Panjabi was adopted as Sikhs code of conduct in 1945). See Chapter XIII, Article XXIV - Amrit Sanskar (Lit. Immortal Ceremony, referring to initiation via nectar)


22. Civil Marriage Act, SC 2005, c. 33


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42. Bhai Gurdas, Varan, Var 33, Pauri 7 (Amritsar: SGPC)

44. Ibid., p. 80
45. Ibid., p. 265
46. Ibid., p. 267
47. Ibid., p. 525
48. Ibid., p. 213
49. Ibid., p. 178

50. Bhai Gurdas, Kabitt, 376 (Amritsar: SGPC)

ਜੈਸੇ ਸਹਿ ਸਹੀ ਸਕਲ ਮੈ ਸਮੁੰਦ੍ ਬੋਡੇ
ਮੇਰ ਮੈ ਸੁਮੇਰ ਬੋਡੇ ਜਗਤੁ ਬਖਾਨ ਹੈ ॥
ਤਰਵੰਤ ਹੰਬਖਣ ਜੈਸੇ ਚੰਦਨ ਹਵਰਖੁ ਬੋਡੇ
ਧਾਤੁ ਮੈ ਕਹਨ ਕਾਹ ਉਤਮ ਕੈ ਮਾਹਨ ਹੈ ॥
ਪੰਛੀਗਾਨ ਮੈ ਹੰਸ ਹੰਗਰਾਜਨ ਮੈ ਸਾਰਦੂ
ਰਾਗਨ ਮੈ ਹਸਰੀ ਰਾਗੁ ਪਾਰਸ ਪਖਾਨ ਹੈ ॥
ਹਗਾਨਨ ਮੈ ਹਗਾਨ ਅਰੁ ਹਧਾਨਨ ਮੈ ਹਧਾਨ
ਗੁਰ ਸਕਲ ਧਰਮ ਮੈ ਹਗਾ ਪ੍ਧਾਨ ਹੈ ॥

ਬੈਤੀਰਾਲ ਮੈ ਬੈਤੀਰਾਲ ਬੈਤੀਰਾਲ ਮੈ ਬੈਤੀਰਾਲ
ਤਵਾਲ ਮੈ ਬੈਤੀਰਾਲ ਪਾਲਾਮ ਪਸ਼ਾਰੀ ਹੈ ॥
ਬਿਜਾਸ਼ਾਲ ਮੈ ਬਿਜਾਸ਼ਾਲ ਸਤ ਬਿਜਾਸ਼ਾਲ ਮੈ ਬਿਜਾਸ਼ਾਲ
ਤਵਾਲ ਪਾਲਾਮ ਮੈ ਬਿਜਾਸ਼ਾਲ ਪੁਰਾਤਾ ਹੈ ॥