

Subaltern Speaks Episode 1 Transcript

Manvinder (00:05):

Hi, everyone. Thanks for tuning into subaltern speaks. I'm Manvinder Gill, the host for this episode. In this episode, I'm joined by Navi Gill, an Ayurvedic practitioner, yoga teacher, and holistic wellness educator. We chat about everything from Ayurvedic and yoga practice in the West, Sikh spiritual identity immigrant complicity in settler colonialism, and how we engage with the emotions of rage and anger. We hope you enjoy...Hi Navi, thanks so much for joining us for being our first guest on the Subaltern speaks. Thanks for spending your afternoon with us.

Navi (00:48):

Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited for this conversation today.

Manvinder (00:53):

Awesome. I'm glad. Um, yeah, before we get into your work, getting into that a little bit. Would you mind sharing a bit about who you are, where you're coming in from today and a bit about the work you do?

Navi (01:07):

Hm. So, um, first I'm speaking to you from the unceded land of the Coast Salish, Semiahmoo, Katzie, Tsawwassen, Sto:lo, and Kwantlen people. Um, and that is known as Vancouver. Um, more specifically Surrey BC. And, um, my name is Navdeep Kaur Gill Um, most people call me Navi and I am an Ayurveda practitioner, a holistic wellness educator. Um, I'm also a therapist and consultant and my work really focuses on, decolonizing and reclaiming of wellness and specifically Ayurveda, yoga, pranayama, more ancestral knowledge and creating accessibility to that for, uh, BIPOC folks, um, and really bringing that ancient wisdom and taking up space in wellness, which has predominantly been more governed by whiteness for a very long time, and then reintroducing those ancestral practices to people from India or who identify as South Asian.

Manvinder (02:21):

Amazing. Thank you so much for sharing all of that. And also I'm super excited for this conversation, um, before we get into kind of the decolonization...Um, well, I guess this would also count in the narrative around decolonization, um, but there's the popular narrative around what gets counted in like the global world view/ideology, um, around legitimate scientific knowledge. Sometimes I feel like certain things get counted, certain things get left out. Uh, and one of the things that get left out is conversations around wellness, around Ayurveda around yoga. So why are these practices left out of this conversation?

Navi (03:11):

Um, well I would say like the root of it all for me always is it comes down to colonialism and patriarchy and when it comes to wellness, it's, um, the idea that it needs to be proven in some fact takes away from the fact that so many, if not all indigenous cultures stemmed their wellness from spiritual living. And a lot of the times spirituality is seen as something that is like, woo woo, it's not real. And the, the academic world and like, um, in order to, I guess, like make something more legitimate or real, like they always need a proof that is suitable to the people that it's catering to. So in this case, like the, who decides what's legitimate or not in academia has always been white men and then white women. And the way, if you look at the history of colonialism and like the first things, when ever they would go to a land to either annex a place or colonize, it is they would start with, um, dismantling the spiritual practices of those people and the language. And slowly, slowly, slowly, and those spiritual practices is, is the richness is the essence of, of all indigenous cultures. That's what gives life and structure. And even to this day, like it's what holds communities together. So if you disband that and de-legitimize that, that's how you get in and that's how you start breaking down the internal structures of community and family.

Manvinder (05:08):

So kind of building off of that, this like dismantling of the spiritual, I sometimes feel like in the West, so like in North America, um, there's this like more of a sinister type of dismantling that occurs this, like the colonizer going to India, taking those practices, but then making them very palatable for like a Western palette, I guess. Um, and then like those colonized people, so people who now live in the diaspora, like they consume that, that like reinvented spirituality and either it's like been Christianized or it's like sold back to us like, Oh, like we discovered meditation or we discovered like ayurvedic practices or yoga. So it kind of like it functions as us also feeding into that colonial narrative. So I guess my question in all of this is, do you sometimes feel like in your own practice that you're participating unknowingly in like the grand colonial project and like perpetuating colonialism?

Navi (06:29):

I think that when I first started on the path and the only community in wellness or the work that I wanted to do was always white people, white people running the spaces, white people running the programming, white people deciding on the trainings, white people deciding on your certifications, white people making the rules. There is nothing else. So the like more when I was, when I was younger or maybe I didn't have as much competence in, in my own path, um, I'm, I might've had to feed into that system because that was the only choice in order for me to get my trainings or get my education or, or create opportunity for myself. I had to work within those confines. And now that I have a little bit of experience, like I've been practicing and learning Ayurveda for, um, 10 years now. And before that been on a spiritual path with my teacher for 14 years. So, you know, that is, is still very little amount of time in the grand scheme of life. But it's enough for me where I know that this knowledge, my ancestral wisdom is not something someone externally is going to affirm for me. It's in my bones, it's in my DNA. So when I started to really tap into that and go into the spiritual side of things, like my practices,

that's what gave me that faith to be like, no, I don't need to feed into the system at all because this system needs me. It needs this wisdom in order to feed itself and survive. And if you cut that source off and all BIPOC people reclaim their own ancestral wisdom, then we're harnessing that power. We are the ones then can put ourselves in the position of being the carriers of this wisdom but so as long as we keep looking for the, um, whiteness to give us, um, some sort of confirmation, affirmation that we're doing the right thing, um, we'll never break out of that system. And I see it happening all the time still now, even despite the fact that in 2020, this dialogue has blown up and everyone in the world is talking about decolonization and reclamation work. It's still happening because it depends on the community you're also surrounded by and how much, um, you know, Black, Indigenous, People of Color are you surrounded by? How many of them are forging their own path? How many of them are creating communities with other BIPOC in order to create that support system? Because in order to be sovereign and free, like you have to feel like you have that inner power and it's not going to come from the white man giving you that job or that opportunity to practice what you want to practice like that inner knowing. So that's a long-winded answer, but I will say every, I think everyone goes through that process, especially being born and brought up in the West. Um, I had to go through, and I think it's a lifelong process of bridging, like my Punjabi-Sikh roots to being born and brought up in Canada and like, how do I navigate the two? And then here I am also practicing something that traditionally people would associate with Hinduism, which in fact it belongs to the Vedic tradition, which is different from Hinduism the religion, but, um, or the way of life, you know, um, I'm not an expert on religious studies, so I can go into that, but there's so many layers to that process of reclamation and all that being said and done. I also think like, when it's your purpose, you it's like, there's no denying it. You, you do it and you do it fiercely and you do it boldly and anything that's outside of that. If I was going about it in the way that colonialism has created these structures of like capitalism and extracting knowledge and not having reverence for teachers. And I see a lot of BIPOC doing that still. Um, my work for me, wouldn't be as rich and as meaningful as it is. And I think everyone has to go through their individual journey to, to figure out how they're gonna, how they're going to reclaim.

Manvinder (11:17):

I think I really resonated with the, the lifelong, with the lifelong work that has to continuously be engaged with, I think that's so overlooked. And I think even when I do like my work, my research, whatever that might entail, I feel like I also feel like decolonization is this like, it's just going to be an instant, an event and then it'll have occurred. But I think similar to the process of colonization, the decolonization or the anti-colonial process has to be ongoing and always consistent, no matter how exhausting that might get, it's just always to be engaged with.

Navi (12:02):

Of course it's affected generations and generations of, you know, people and our people as well. So to expect that we do one zoom seminar on diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism, and think that we're going to resolve it in, in a weekend is, is not that again, to me is like the, uh, colonial mindset of like instant results. And, um, it's going to happen just because we want it to happen. And this is as much it is, as it is work in the world, it's also very, I think, personal and

deeply spiritual work to do your own healing and to do your own family lineage healing, to look at all the trauma that we have experienced through colonization. Um, you know, so it's, it's definitely a lifelong journey, but at least we have a lot more tools now to have the conversations like you and I are having today. Um, you know, the online world as much as sometimes it's so polluted and toxic, it's also full of rich resources where, um, we're able to start the work because if we don't do it, then that's how we're passing on these values to the future generations.

Manvinder (13:22):

I think you perfectly summarized exactly what I wanted to say so I won't even add to that. Um, but before we get into a little bit more about your comment around your Sikh background, um, just like a personal curiosity of mine, um, how has the community both like the Punjabi-Sikh community and like the wider Indian or South Asian community reacted to your work?

Navi (13:53):

Well, when I first started, I had to kind of figure out, well, I knew my work was going to be around healing, but I just didn't know how, um, and it's still evolving every day, but like, I know that my like roots are always going to be an ancestral medicine. I started with like the easiest thing that was available, which was yoga. And I remember like, you know, that was always, and it always mostly happened to be men like older men who thought that they had the authority to kind of give me unsolicited feedback or criticism. Um, and, and it was always like, you know, in Punjabi to be like, Oh, like you being like a daughter of Sikhs, like, how are you going to, like, you're going to go do yoga now? And I remember feeling a lot of hurt and a lot of shame, um, during that process and even if I think back to it now, it makes me like really emotional because when your spirit knows something as truth in the outside world, people who you think would be your community and especially elders, um, are not supporting that. It's, soul crushing because you doubt yourself, you think you're doing something wrong. You think that you're doing something harmful or shameful. And here I was I'm like, people are acting like I'm out here you know, selling heroin, whatnot I'm trying to do is get people to breathe and like, be, be more in touch with themselves. And it took me years, you know, of just being in my own practice. And then I saw very clearly it's, it's always the people who are very, um, adverse to change. They're very rigid in their mindset. They're very stuck in their ways. They're not expanded and they have this fear of what's the unknown, and it's not even their fault. You know, a lot of the times it's, it's, it's how they're conditioned. And I really came to a place that if someone wants to argue with me, it's like, okay, you win. Like, I don't need to convince you what's good for you if you think that you are living your best life, your highest truth, who am I to deny that or contest that by telling you a, you need to practice Ayurveda or you need to do yoga, or you need to breathe. I'm just minding my own business. And you know, is, my Mom used to say, this is you, you, that idea you practice and you become that living example. And when you are embodying your truth, there's still going to be people who are going to hate on you and deny it. But at least I'm not touched by it. I'm not stained by it as much. So that was one aspect of it. And then there's a lot of people that, um, you know, the legitimacy, even within South Asians about this medicine is, Oh, it's just desi which means it's just like folk

remedies, you know, because even in their mindset that colonial mindset and conditioning and brainwashing is so deep that our own people have denied this medicine for so long. And it's like, the Western way is the right way. The white way is the right way. The allopathic medicine is the right way. And I think myself and like other people in this generation who are doing this work, we're able to have the languaging to create that bridge because we need that allopathic medicine for emergency intervention. But the point of Ayurveda and these holistic medicine traditions is to do prevention work before you get to that point. So I feel really blessed also that like, I have been able to teach, um, lots of communities of Punjabi people and especially older, older Punjabi-Sikh people. I've done classes at the Gurdwara and like shared, and there's women are more receptive, um, to, to this wisdom and just tapping into that innately because I feel like it's more deeply connected to that divine, feminine energy. Um, but again, the, I stopped trying to, um, be like the saviour for, um, the people that I thought were my community. And I've really, I always say, this is, I work with people who are ready, willing, and able to do the work. So you come find me when you're ready to take that step, because I'm not going to convince you about the value of your wellness and the value of your sovereignty.

Manvinder (19:13):

That I need to adopt that more into my, into my work because I have lots of conversations with people in the Sikh community around problems with alcohol and addiction and I think that piece that you spoke of the moment when someone tells you that there's a quote unquote like correct way to practice. So like an interesting conversation that we kind of had before this, or like via email was on reconciliation and decolonization within our current context. So I'm also in Canada. So thinking about Sikhs or South Asians more general, um, who are settlers on turtle Island, I think you said you had like a great point around decolonization and I think about the term decolonization all the time and like terms in general cause they just get co-opted so often it's I think even like predates, like this Instagram marketing, like, Oh, look at this, what are they like flips? Like they have people have like everything you need to know about decolonization and it's like 10 slides on what decolonization is. So even I think like prior to that, um, all of these terms have been, or are always in the process of being co-opted. So I feel like people within those realms are always having to shift their vernacular, which is, it seems unnecessary, but it's super necessary. But all of that is just a long-winded way of asking about what role reconciliation and decolonization plays in the role of Sikhs and Indigenous communities in Canada.

Navi (21:09):

That was something I definitely wanted to add to this conversation because even when I started, um, you know, saying that my work was about decolonizing wellness, I had a very limited understanding of what decolonization was like a few years ago. And now the more that I know, the more that I understand, like it's, you cannot decolonize without being an ally and like doing real work with the Indigenous communities of where you live. As Sikhs and people who come from Punjab, you know, Sikhs are all over the world, we know the value of our sovereignty. So for us to be colonial settlers on this land, on Turtle Island and thrive and work, many of us have built generations of family, of wealth, of our businesses. Um, you know,

created so many opportunities for our families, for ourselves, without really thinking about whose land is this that we are on that has provided us with that opportunity? It wasn't Justin Trudeau that stamped the VISA, it wasn't like Jean Chretien or whoever, like at my parents' time, that was PM. That was like, here you go. It's the Indigenous people that paid the price. And if we are not taking the wealth that we've acquired, whether that's financial, whether that's education, whatever type of wealth that is. And somehow what's missing, I believe is like the internal conversations within our communities. And then also finding ways where we can connect with the indigenous communities.

Manvinder (23:04):

I think a lot about terminology and even when you were like, I don't know if reconciliation is possible and I feel like even reconciliation and everyone I'm sure is like familiar with this conversation, but like the term reconciliation has honestly lost a lot of its meaning. So it's, again, this like pivoting that you have to do, because it's like, well, we need to change this dialogue again because reconciliation has been co-opted, um, to serve like, you know, different agendas. Um, so yeah, I feel it like a very active engagement or endeavour that the community has to engage with. And I don't think it can just be the younger generation. This is also another selfish question of mine and I'm not sure. Yeah. Please feel free. Not if you don't want to answer it. That's totally cool. Um, yeah, like to me, you seem very grounded, um, very, yeah, just grounded in your practice in your day-to-day life. And this is just from our, like one interaction that we've had now, but maybe previously rage and anger and maybe contemporarily, rage and anger have played some sort of role in your life. Um, as someone who sometimes has these, trying to quell her rage and anger, I'd love to know a little bit about your journey or your relationship with those emotions.

Navi (24:35):

Well, definitely don't quell your anger. That's one thing that I would say, um, thank you for thinking that I'm very grounded. I feel like I have found, um, ways, especially when I'm having important conversations that are very meaningful to me, um, to be able to articulate those, but at the, in the underbelly and what drives me to somehow sometimes do things that are outside of the box or unexpected, um, or haven't been seen or done in our community with my work is, is the anger and the rage. Uh, sometimes it comes in the form of rebellion. So that's something I've experienced lots, especially when someone who, um, like an uncle tells me something I should or shouldn't be doing. Um, I, that comes out in me that like forceful, like Cundi Ma comes out for me. And I think that this need, or this idea that as women, we need to quell that rage is patriarchy really, uh, trying to keep us small because within the rage, when it's directed correctly, um, that's the outmost power. Like I always think of this when Guru Gobind Sahib ji said that like, sometimes there's you use your words and then there's a time that you have to pick up the sword. And I always, I always remember that, like, because there's time, there's a time for everything. And, um, I use my rage as fuel, but there's many, many times, especially when it comes to something that I really care about or is really close to my heart. And I'm very sensitive about like, there's that other side of me, that's like very, very soft, very sensitive. And the people close to me experience that often, and, and I'll get very hurt by something. And my

first reaction will be to like lash out and have that rage, but it's because there's so much love there and care there. So for me, the rage is that way or that anger is that way to like protect myself. Given like this year and like the circumstances that we've seen around the world, especially with Black lives matters and all the loss that we've seen in the communities and the suffering that's happened. I had a lot of rage. I had a lot of rage, which made me feel very helpless and I feel that's the cycle that a lot of us get stuck in. Some people stay in that cycle and some people it's like that, like springboard that launches you into action. And for me, it's really important to notice what's happening when if my rage is making me feel helpless and it's draining me that it's not being directed or channelled in the way that it has to. When it's making me springboard and I'm inspired to create something, I'm inspired to be in action, whether that's through my activism, whether that's through creating resources for my community, whether that's being out on the streets, like whatever the need of the time is and if I can serve in some way, um, then like I love my rage. It reminds me that I'm alive and I still freaking care about things. But it's knowing when the rage is burning me only on the inside and that's where the practices come in and I have to go back and have to cry it out. I have to talk it out. I have to just sit in meditation and completely surrender that. Um, and that's a process, you know, it's, yeah, it's a process, but I'm learning as I get older. And as I get more in touch with like my divine feminine essence, and I have a lot of amazing women that I look up to as mentors and friends and sisters who, who really encourage that, that expression of rage and that embodiment along with our softness, along with our sensitivity, along with that creativity, and that flow is that's the beauty of being in the divine feminine form is that we can straddle between both.

Manvinder ([30:01](#)):

Thanks so much for tuning in, we hope you enjoyed our first episode. Tune in to our next podcast where host, Yasamin will be joined by a special guest to discuss a Venezuelan cult that combines Indigenous, African, and Catholic beliefs called Maria Lionza.