

Sikh Heritage Month Podcast

Episode 3: Oneness: Chardi Kala: Eternal Resilience, Optimism & Joy
featuring guest Pam Kaur

Introduction

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

Interlude 1 [00:01:11.410]

My name is Angad and I'm in grade six at Smithfield Middle School. Chardi kala is a central concept in Sikhism that refers to a state of eternal optimism and resilience even in the face of adversity. It is a mindset that encourages individuals to maintain a positive attitude and unwavering spirit regardless of the challenge they may face. The term Chardi kala is made of two words *Chardi* meaning rising or ascending, and *kala* meaning spirit or soul. Together they signify a spirit that is constantly rising and ascending even in the face of difficult circumstances. This concept of *Chardi kala* is deeply ingrained in Sikh culture and is often used as a source of inspiration and motivation to overcome obstacles and maintain a positive outlook on life.

The three pillars of Sikhism are *Naam japo*: meditating on the Name of God. This pillar emphasizes the importance of constantly meditating on the name of God and focusing on one's mind on divine remembrance. This

practice helps individuals develop a deeper connection with the divine and align their actions with the divine will. *Kirit karu* honest Living and Earning this pillar emphasizes the importance of honest living and earning one's livelihood through hard work and honest means. Sikhs are encouraged to engage in honest work and share their wealth with those in need as a way of serving and helping others. *Vand Chakna*: sharing with others. This pillar emphasizes the importance of sharing one's resources with others and practicing selfless service. Sikhs are encouraged to share their blessings with others and engage in acts of charity and kindness as a way of serving the community and promoting social harmony.

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

Interview with Pam Kaur [00:03:40.400]

Samrath

Hi, my name is Samrath Singh. I go to the TDSB and I'm in currently Thistletown Collegiate Institute.

Gursimran

Hi, my name is Gursimran Chera, I'm in grade eight and I study at Beaumonde Heights Junior Middle School.

Samrath

And we're really excited to interview Ms. Pam Kaur on the topic Chardi Kala: eternal resilience, optimism and joy. So Ms. Kaur, can you tell us about yourself, who you are and what are your experiences as a Sikh Canadian?

Pam

Thank you so much, Gursimran and Samrath. It's my pleasure to be here. My name is Paramjit Kaur, I go by Pam, and I came to Canada in 1991 as an immigrant and I was most fortunate to be able to teach just a couple of years after arriving in Canada and even more fortunate to have been an employee of TDSB for 16 years. Starting out as a teacher, curriculum chair, going on to become a vice principal, actually at Beaumonde Heights and then at Smithfield School, and then I became a principal. I stayed with TDSB for 16 years before I relocated to Waterloo region. And I have been serving here since 2009, 1st as a principal and now as a Superintendent of student achievement and well-being.

Gursimran

Thank you for that great introduction. Please tell us the meaning of the concept of Chardi kala for our listeners who do not know, what does that mean? And historically, why do you think there was a need for its development in the Sikh faith?

Pam

That's a great question Gursimran. Chardi Kala, if one were to literally translate Chardi Kala, it translates into perennial optimism or ascendant spirits. Those seem like big words, but in a nutshell, it really exemplifies the victory of good over evil and the ability, our ability as human beings, to remain positive or to have a positive attitude even in the midst of the most adverse and calamitous circumstances that we sometimes find ourselves in. It originates from scripture, actually. And I would say that it also speaks in a related sense to the spirit of service. And it is best exemplified by Guru Gobind Singh Ji, when his four sons were being martyred and he said, "*Char muay to kya hua, Jivat kay hazaar,*" that is the ultimate essence of

service and Chardi Kala, that even when he was sacrificing his four sons, that's easier said. We can all say that, but it is hard to even imagine that, that you can sacrifice your four sons and still see good that will come out for the rest of mankind and humankind, right? So that's the other side of Chardi kala. And I think that the one thing that I personally also see in Chardi kala is that concept of self-agency, that we are not to accept adversity and say, okay, this is my lot, there's nothing I can do about it. It exemplifies for me that there is something I can do about it, about my circumstance. I can change my circumstance. I am not just to accept the circumstance as it is and do the best I can to ameliorate the condition created by that circumstance, but that does not fly against the Sikh belief of *bhaana mananaa*, which is to accept the circumstance. I do want to make a distinction here that it's not a blind acceptance. It is recognizing that you have a circumstance. And then how do you traverse through that circumstance and make the conditions better, not just for yourself, but also for your fellow human beings? So it is essentially that whole notion of staying positive, perennially, perennially positive and optimistic and trying to help yourself and help others.

Samrath

I watched the movie *Char Sahibzaade* and I was speechless after knowing the sacrifice of the four sons of Guru Gobind Singh Ji and how they were all under 18 years of age. And that goes again to the concept of Chardi kala; pure optimism. And I don't think a lot of people know that even though Chardi kala is in, we see that in Sikh faith. But Chardi Kala happens everywhere. Right? When people were in war, they use Chardi Kala. Right. So it's a beautiful way of how you said Chardi Kala. Pure optimism. I love that, how you said that. Moving to the next question, in the TDSB, there is a system priority that states we will aim to foster joy and a sense of belonging

in our classrooms as a foundation for academic achievement. Do you feel that this priority aligns with the idea of Chardi kala? And if so, why?

Pam

Absolutely. This priority about finding joy and improving student achievement are not actually watertight compartments. They are intertwined and interdependent on each other. And they align perfectly with Chardi Kala also because Chardi Kala speaks to that perennial joy and optimism. And when you have perennial joy and optimism, you are going to be your best self. It is difficult for a human being to take risks and be their best self when they are not joyous. You have a child in a classroom who is not happy, a child who has something on their mind, whether it is something has been said with the peer in the classroom or they're having difficulty understanding a subject area, but something is weighing them down. They are not going to be able to truly engage at their highest level and take risks in their learning. So the two things of when you have adversity and keeping your high spirits and trying and finding ways go perfectly with not just with the TDSB priority of having that joy piece and the achievement piece, but I would say it applies to the broader education sector. It speaks to creating the conditions for learning for students and conditions for working at their optimal for staff with the same end in mind so that student achievement is high.

Gursimran

So Chardi Kala is sort of related to bullying and our well-being. And you've greatly related this to mental health in school systems and besides classrooms as well.

Pam

Absolutely. I would agree with you that sometimes for the ease of organizing conversations or assignments, one asks these questions as categories. But truly they flow into each other, and they depend on each other and they affect each other. Joy and achievement are not separate. Joy and achievement go together. And how one thinks of oneself, the concept of oneself as whether you are a victim, as a person who's being bullied or you're a bystander who's watched someone else being bullied, or you have intervened as a Sikh person is expected to do. Because we are the folks who used to believe and exemplify what I would call speaking for the rights of others, fighting for the rights of others long before the phrase human rights was coined. We were doing that already, way back when, centuries ago. Right.

Samrath

I agree. One of the things that we know brings us joy and a sense of belonging is when we are helping and serving others. We had a conversation with Principal Buall about Seva in episode one of this podcast series. Do you feel that it is true for you to in your role of a superintendent of a big school board? Can teachers and students have the same experiences also?

Pam

Absolutely. If anything, more so than ever before. As a teacher, I was helping my students in the classroom. As a vice principal and principal, I was helping the staff in my respective school sites. And now, as a superintendent, I see my role even further critical in terms of helping the principals lead their respective staff at their school sites with that ultimate goal of students doing better than ever before. So whether I am helping, let's say, for example, a principal with a hiring standards, there is my

service. Or I am helping a vice principal in preparing for an interview to become a principal in a system that is service. Whether an immigrant who reaches out to me, someone who's trained in Africa, a foreign trained immigrant, but they're qualified and they don't know how to break into our system and they reach out, what do I do? And I'm helping them navigate a new system to which they are not with which they're not familiar, that is seva. So everybody can do seva at every level. A student can do seva. They can do seva in the classroom, they can do it outside in the yard, they can do it in the community. A teacher can do it, a principal can do it. And absolutely, a superintendent can do it as well, always with humility. To help. The essence is to help and serve others. It is not with an end to gain anything for yourself. That is the spirit of the Sikh term Seva. That is, there is no expectation of any kind.

Samrath

Yeah, I totally agree. And you bring it back to the topic of Seva itself, selfless service. And I know in the Sikh communities, especially in Sikh gurdwaras, the temples, there's a lot of seva being done, right? Whether it be providing langar - free food, you're making food for the people, right? And I also think that TDSB and other curriculums also bring in Seva by. In high school, you have to do your 40 hours of volunteer hours. So you're also studying in school, but you're helping back your community. So I really loved how you put school and Sikh beliefs into one.

Gursimran

I agree with what you said, and you've talked about seva. And we should do it without expecting to get something back from it. We should do it to help others, which will bring peace to us.

Samrath

So, moving to the next question, what are some ways that we as students can work towards a feeling of Chardi kala?

Pam

That's a great question there, Samrath. I would say to stay positive would be the first step, and to as a student, to stay open minded and observe positively and receive positively, whether it is a question or it's a problem or it's an observation or a comment, observe and receive positively in order to make the best of that particular situation. So if you have a situation where you have a misunderstanding, hear the problem out and then respond to it. So staying positive would be number one as a student, and then the second would be that, yes, you have a problem. How can we resolve it? And collaborating to resolve that problem. But always with that ascendant spirit. Always with that Chardi kala that we've talked about, one part that I was remiss in not mentioning in terms of how a student can personify Chardi kala in the classroom is that spirit of service that you also have to look after your own needs, but you also have to speak up if you see injustice being done. And you have to recognize, you have to learn to recognize the signs of injustice that is part of the Sikh DNA. You have to recognize what's going on about you and be a critical thinker and a critical viewer and not be a bystander if someone is being harmed while you're present.

Gursimran

So Chadi Kala teaches us to be an upstander and not a bystander. Students can stand up against bullying. We should emphasize how to feel happy when we're doing work. We should feel positive. And this all comes

back to Chardi Kala. So how is it possible to be in a state of eternal optimism when there are so many negative things that are happening around us or maybe even to us?

Pam

That's a fabulous question and not an easy question to answer. It's very easy for human beings to look around the world and see the adversity, whether it is this massive earthquake in Turkey, or it is wars around us, or it's poverty or it's natural disasters. It's a lot and it can easily overwhelm us. I think that one has to remember that every drop matters and believe in one's own agency, that whatever little you can do is enough, is important and contributes to the whole. And not to minimize or look less of or think less of how little you can do. Instead to look positively, that this drop, this small piece that you're going to be able to do is going to contribute to something beautiful and big that's going to bring about good in the world. So I do believe that that's one way and to draw some boundaries and to recognize, for example, you are students, and if we as Sikhs, we do fundraising, we do seva, we raise monies for various charities and so on and so forth. But as a student, you can't be expected to donate \$20,000. We know that that's unreasonable. It's foolhardy actually to expect. But what you could do is you could do a small fundraising drive. You could contribute from your pocket money. You could run a car wash or something and donate your earnings. So on and so forth, right? You could contribute, but that amount will add to the big amount.

Samrath

So, moving on to the next question. We have seen over the past few years, especially during the Pandemic, that the conditions involving mental health have skyrocketed in schools with students and staff. How can having an

understanding and an appreciation for resilience and eternal optimism be helpful for our mental health?

Pam

This is such a critical topic right now. The pandemic took quite a toll on mental health for students as well as staff in schools. It was a difficult time because we were all forced to change our lifestyle in order to be physically safe. While we were physically safe, those of us that survived and those of us that either we got it or someone in our families got it, we were physically safe. There was a price to pay. We all paid the price for not being able to see our family members, for not being able to see our cousins growing up, the little babies that were being born, or people who were getting married without a celebration that you could be a participant in. Students missed out on trips, students were forced to go into virtual learning spaces and that whole opportunity, the joy of human interaction was depriving, right? It's very hard. And when you have an event that happens once in a century, there is no playbook. So it's not easy for us to just adapt. And I would personally say it's too soon to tell because we are just coming out of the pandemic and how long it will take for us to recover.

But I would certainly say on a personal level, I believe that some of the ways that help us to stay in that positive spirit, or Chadikala, is to engage in meditation, to engage in deep breathing, to engage in spiritual exercises at our own individual levels. That is the spirit of Sikhism, actually, and also to engage in creative endeavors and find the joy in the smallest things. But it will take time. I don't believe that the mental health challenges that we are experiencing are going to be able to be addressed in a month. Or I don't believe that I can give you a timeline. It is going to take time and it's going to take a collective effort on parts of students, on part of parents, on part of

caregivers staffs, at schools, agencies, the medical profession and society as a whole. We are all going to have to work together in order to get out of this and get back to the way of life that we knew before the pandemic.

Gursimran

Those are all great points and it all relates to Chardi kala. If we have a great mental health, we will have a boost in our life and we will be able to do things that we enjoyed before the pandemic as well. So what are some ways that you exhibit and embrace Chardi kala in your own personal life.

Pam

I try to stay positive and optimistic in all situations, even when I'm facing adversity. A lot of aspects of my work involve problem solving and being called to address situations. I try to stay observant. I try to stay objective and listen carefully, listen with my heart as well as my mind and try to collaboratively contribute to solution finding and without judgment and without an expectation of any kind of gain for myself whether it is with a family member or with any of my colleagues at work. That has always been my driving factor and looking to get everybody to succeed because their success is my success. I believe that if they're not successful, then I am not successful. So I really try to practice looking at it situation to situation and not looking at it from the perspective of, oh, this happened because this person is like that, or this happened this because this person is like that. Because that's a rabbit hole that you will never come out of if you start thinking about people like that.

Gursimran

What you've said is very inspiring in some of those ways we should also use in our personal life and try to bring and embrace Chardi Kala in our life. So what are some mean mindfulness practices that we can utilize when we feel ourselves getting overwhelmed with negative thoughts?

Pam

Great question. Again, I would say first take a few deep breaths. If you feel overwhelmed by, let's say, an academic question your teacher has posed as a math problem that you don't even know where to begin. Just take a few deep breaths. That would be a great start so that you actually have oxygen and you feel like you can read the question and you can actually maybe highlight some parts of the question that make sense to you and then you read it again. But if you're not even able to breathe, you're not going to read. You're having a physical reaction at that point. So you need to get that into check so that your brain kicks in and you're actually able to process and understand the question. So I would recommend slowing down, backing up a little bit in order to go faster later.

Samrath

Wow, those are some really good techniques. And I think these techniques can also not only help students, but it can help staff, community members, it can help everyone. Right? So last question of the interview. If you could describe your relationship to Sikhism in one word, what would it be and why?

Pam

Learner. Sikh means a learner. I'm a learner, a humble learner, a perennial learner. Every single day is new learning. Every single day brings new

opportunities to learn and serve. And to me, that is the essence of being a Sikh. And today is a perfect example of that because this is the first time I have recorded a podcast with students. So I learned something and I'm proud of you and I'm proud of me, all of us together.

Samrath

Wow. That's such a beautiful way to explain Sikhism a learner. We're all learners in many ways. Either if we're out of school, we learn every single day. We learn from our mistakes, which makes us better persons. So this interview was a really deep and thoughtful interview. It's such a beautiful concept that we were talking about. Chardi kala always pure optimism, always hope. And the main message that I got from this interview was that there's always hope in the darkest of times. Always hope. And on behalf of me and Gursimran, I just want to say thank you so much for agreeing to do this podcast for the Sikh Heritage Month.

Pam

It is my pleasure. Thank you so much for thinking of me. I am humbled and honored that you would think of me, and I wish you all the best in your series.

Gursimran and Samrath

Thank you. Thank you.

Bumper: And you are listening to the Sikh Heritage Month podcast. The TDSB Production.

[00:27:25.150] - Interlude 2

The Festival of Vaisakhi honors the formation of Khalsa in 1699 by the 10th Guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji. Kalsa, or Khalis, means pure. According to the legend, he stood at the festival holding a sword, inviting any Sikh willing to offer their life in service of the faith to enter the tent. After five men entered within, Guru Gobind Singh Ji emerged alone from the tent with blood on his sword. Crowds were alarmed by this, that is, until the five men reappeared from the tent unharmed and were wearing the *dastaraan* or turbans. They were referred to as the *Panj Piyare*, or the Beloved Five, and were the first members of Khalsa. The Guru baptized them with Amrit, the Sikh term for holy water, as well as prayed. The Sikh baptism ceremony, being Amrit Shak, was built on the foundation of this tradition. The Khalsa was distinguished by the Five K's: Kesh - uncut hair, Kirpan - a small sword or knife, Kara - an iron bracelet, Kanga - a wooden comb, Kashera - shorts worn as undergarments. Five volunteers who were willing to sacrifice their life for Waheguru and Guru Gobind Singh Ji are honored by the Khalsa. Their dedication is a perfect illustration of Seva, which is the determination to help others without considering your own needs.

[00:29:01.870] - Outro

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