Transcript

Episode 5: The Politics of (Back) Home

[00:00:00] **Sabreena Delhon:** Hi, I'm Sabreena Delhon. Welcome to Group Chat, where we make sense of what's happening in our democracy with a few friends.

[00:00:12] Jaskaran Sandhu and Anita Li are into politics. They care about shaping our democracy and they want as many people involved as possible.

[00:00:23] **Anita Li:** It's actually quite interesting and to me quite exciting. And of course there's gonna be conflict and competing interests, but I think it's like a really good opportunity to start establishing what does a country of the future look like?

[00:00:36] **Sabreena Delhon:** Anita's the publisher and CEO of The Green Line, an award-winning, community-driven news outlet in Toronto. And Jaskaran, a lawyer and co-founder of Baaz, a digital news outlet for the global Sikh and Punjabi diaspora.

[00:00:51] **Jaskaran Sandhu:** You know, it's not enough for us even to succeed politically by electing MPs or whatever. If you're missing from the media discourse and from the storytelling, you're in big trouble.

[00:01:03] **Sabreena Delhon:** They were both part of a panel on diaspora politics hosted by the Samara Centre for Democracy and The Green Line. At the event, we talked about the role diasporic communities play in the health of Canada's democracy and how global ties affect local politics.

[00:01:22] That event inspired the conversation you are about to hear. The three of us get into some of the distinct civic engagement challenges diaspora communities face, including a hot topic right now: foreign interference in Canadian elections. I can't help but bring up Samara Centre's SAMbot project that measures online abuse received by candidates in Canadian elections.

[00:01:49] Conversations about election interference typically focus on federal politics, but our analysis also points to the vulnerability of local democracies. But first, Anita, and Jaskaran chat about how they became active citizens. Here's Anita.

[00:02:07] **Anita Li:** So my political awakening was probably like, it was actually very much through American film that

talked a lot about racial justice. So things like Spike Lee, like Do the Right Thing, woke something in me. And then in later high school I took this international studies course that was very much, it's classic IR that I wouldn't necessarily approve of today, but it was like, you know, look at the poverty elsewhere. And over time I kinda shifted my focus from the international sphere to more local and hyper-local because I realized I could do much more being part of a place that I know very well in terms of problems and solutions at a local level than trying to solve other people's problems that they're much better suited to solve on their own accord. So that's really like, I guess, the short version of it.

[00:02:53] **Sabreena Delhon:** Jaskaran, you established Baaz News, which is specifically geared towards a diaspora population and has broken some major political stories. What motivated you to get that going and how has the evolution of Baaz kind of, has it surprised you? Is it what you expected?

[00:03:13] **Jaskaran Sandhu:** I guess for context sake, currently I'm 38 years old. Okay, so this was probably about 20ish years ago, the CBC broadcasted a documentary on national TV, now 20 odd years ago, that was, you know, everyone watched TV, and they broadcasted a documentary on the Sikh community, particularly on its influence in the political sphere.

[00:03:36] Long story short, a terrible documentary. And it really irked me, like really just really bothered me. I wrote an email to the ombudsman–and this was the first time I think I heard the word ombudsman, I didn't even know what that meant–but other than that, I was just like, there's nothing I can do. There's nothing, absolutely nothing in my power to change the narrative, to challenge false stories or empty or haphazard or shallow stories about my community, told by folks that sit outside of it. And so ever since then, it's always bothered me that if you're missing from the media discourse and from the storytelling, you're in big trouble. And then the final kind of step to really launching Baaz was a little outside the Canadian context, but it was the farmers' protest that happened in India, which was primarily led by, at least, you know, the visible public face, was the Punjabi Sikh community. And it was, I don't know empirically where it stands, but it was quoted as, you know, the largest protest in human history.

[00:04:39] **Sabreena Delhon:** To chime in here, Jaskaran is talking about the year-long protests that started in 2020 in India. Farmers, many of them Sikh, took to the streets to challenge Prime Minister Modi's new agriculture laws around the sale, pricing, and storage of produce. Farmers said Modi's new laws eroded protections from the free market that were in place for decades.

[00:05:05] They also argued the new laws left them vulnerable to big companies taking over. Some estimate about 250 million people protested. Even Rihanna tweeted her support for the farmers.

[00:05:20] **Jaskaran Sandhu:** And it was one of the few protests that actually forced the Modi government to backtrack on policy. And a lot of the coverage about that movement coming out of India was very anti-Sikh. And there's a long history as to why that is and how that's done. But also sitting in the diaspora, there was a real urge for folks here to get an insight on what's going on on the ground there, and do it in a way that follows journalistic integrity and speaks to sources that are kind of ignored by legacy media within India.

[00:05:53] And, you know, India ranks, I think at this current junction, 160th out of 180 odd countries in press freedom, by the Reporters Without Borders. And so Baaz finally launched, a little over three years ago. And it's for the Sikh diaspora, which number is about 2 to 3 million in the world, and the largest cohort of that being in Canada.

[00:06:15] So we are knocking off two birds with one stone. One is being able to share diasporic stories that were not being covered appropriately by local Canadian media, but also the UK, America, Australia, that's probably the four markets we work in now. But then also to provide insights into stories coming out of Punjab not told appropriately because of the different pressures on press freedom there. So a long answer, but that's kind of how it came about.

[00:06:39] **Sabreena Delhon:** Mm-hmm. Anita, so there's no monolith to diasporic community groups in Canada. There's a huge range of engagement from community to community. Can you talk to me about that range and, you know, what makes one community more politically active over another?

[00:07:00] **Anita Li:** Absolutely. So actually when Jaskaran was talking, it made me realize that a lot of my political awakening also had to do, it was actually diasporically driven, and I totally forgot to mention that, and this will segue into answering your question. But when I was like 16 years old, I joined the Chinese Canadian National Council as a volunteer and I eventually joined the board there when I was 19 and it was kind of the earliest days of activism. And when I joined initially it was like "I'm a Canadian-born person of Hong Kong descent." My parents were born in Hong Kong. Like the staff there as well as other board members were actually similar in that they were like Canadian-born Chinese.

[00:07:39] So I'm part of like this wave of, or my parents were part of this wave of immigration that was like post-Trudeau senior when he opened up the doors to a lot of people from East Asia. And so my parents came in the seventies. But then there's this new wave of immigrants as well who are not from the Hong Kong diaspora. They're actually from mainland China, for example. And so that's like shifted. And their needs are really different and people are well aware of a lot of the news around, just a lot of the barriers that newcomers face, especially newcomer students to Canada and that, like you mentioned, diasporic communities are not a monolith and there's actually conflict also within diaspora groups. For example, Hong Kong has historically been a democratic stronghold, was handed over back to China from the British in

1997, and that's really quite at odds with how folks who grew up in mainland China, like their own sense of politics, right? As like, obviously the Chinese Communist Party is a communist party and they're not a democratic country. So it's really quite interesting 'cause you sometimes–like the desires and the needs are quite at odds with each other and that's something definitely that we need to take into account.

[00:08:47] **Sabreena Delhon:** And you've had, you know, kind of a multi-pronged approach to this in creating The Green Line, which is in part entrepreneurial as well, and, and filling a gap in a, you know, changing landscape for journalism. Can you talk to us about, you know, The Green Line's place in all of this? It's described as a hyper-local news outlet. So what does that mean within the context that you've just outlined?

[00:09:12] **Anita Li**: Yeah, so we, the way I describe The Green Line is it investigates the way we live to help young and other underserved Torontonians survive and thrive in a rapidly changing city.

[00:09:22] Eighty percent of our audience is Gen Z and millennials. And it was really meant to fill in gaps in coverage that we were identifying not only from a geographic perspective, so we're talking about news deserts or news donuts. News donuts are places that have highly saturated media like Toronto but are just undercovered. So places like Scarborough, which is my hometown, or places like, maybe like Rexdale in the West End, for example. But there's also identity-based groups that are underserved and historically that's also included diaspora communities, especially those that are racialized, for example. Although coverage has improved in the last definitely 20 years since I've started becoming a journalist. It's not like–I remember when I was growing up, diversity was talked about as like big D diversity or multiculturalism was like big M multiculturalism as in like, it was almost like you were very hyper aware of it. There's a new kind of Canada emerging, a new kind of Toronto emerging that is not even hyphenated. I feel like hyphenation implies something that's like two distinct portions. I feel like it's a lot more amorphous, a lot more nuanced and it's just like I even talk about the way I put together my team.

[00:10:30] I have a team of 12 now and people are like," oh, your team is really diverse." But it wasn't like, I was like, "I'm gonna get an Asian person and a Brown person." It wasn't like that at all. To me it was like, okay, if people have shared values and they have a shared understanding of the city and we're working towards those values together organically, the team's gonna be made up of all sorts of people, and it's not like, "oh yes, diversity." Of course we care about that, but it's like a function of just running a place that is a true reflection of the city.

[00:11:01] **Sabreena Delhon:** Mm-hmm. Well Jaskaran, I wanna go to you because the Sikh community is considered very politically active in Canada. Also, not in a monolithic way, also not as just like Anita's comment about

multiculturalism that feels, you know, a little bit dated now that being part of something meant explaining how you weren't part of something, that's kind of like what the hyphenation was, that was the paradox there. But, you know, just for the Sikh community's political presence and participation, can you reflect on that and how that influenced your eventual candidacy and local politics?

[00:11:40] **Jaskaran Sandhu:** Yeah, look, the Sikh community has been, you know, very active in politics. And when I was growing up the representative was Gurbux Saini of the Liberal party,

[00:11:49] it was a guy from the Sikh community in the early days. And it was seen as a pride that, you know, a man with the turban and as a young person, that is pretty oppressive. Now, as you get older, you get a little more cynical about politics in general and what can you do in that space, especially party politics, the system we have in Canada, where you're kinda getting whipped on a lot of issues. And, and I think that that brings about a lot of frustration with elected officials sometimes. And that, you know, there's issues that impact their community, why can't you take a stronger position on it?

[00:12:21] Or why can't you raise this issue as someone from the community? Like isn't the whole purpose of having diversity in politics, having diversity amongst MPs, so that they can better reflect constituencies? Reality is I think our system, as it is designed, it feels like MPs are there to speak to you about Ottawa, right? Not necessarily speak for you inOttawa. And again, this is not me criticizing Sikh MPs. I think this is an issue across all diasporic communities, and a frustration that exists amongst all diasporic communities. And I think a frustration felt by MPs themselves when you talk to them in private. It's like, well, we can't go and raise issues that, you know, touch upon the community we come from 'cause it'll seem like favoritism, even when it's not. But you know, I think it's really cool and interesting to have members of your community be part of a government because it does make it accessible in many ways. You know, for myself, you know, because I always had an interest in politics growing up,

[00:13:16] it was something that intrigued me from a very young age. It was very easy for me to walk into the offices of my local MPs when I was a little older and as a teenager. And at that time it would've been you know, the two MPs that were pretty well known locally was MP Ruby Dhalla and MP Navdeep Bains.

[00:13:38] And so these were, you know, very accessible folks. I actually could just walk in the office. You can knock on doors, you get to meet them, you get to meet the team, you get to meet campaign managers and et cetera, et cetera. You get to meet so many people from within the community that are involved in civil organizations or, you know, gurdwaras. It becomes like a meeting point for a lot of folks because I think everyone does see that there's value in having elected members of Parliament, irrespective of the frustrations that may arise as part of their representation.

[00:14:07] **Sabreena Delhon:** But I just, I actually, Jaskaran, just kind of wanna get into like that local context and how recent reports have showed that when it comes to foreign interference, it's diaspora communities that are key targets, and can be targeted and receive the most harm.

[00:14:24] You ran for city counselor in 2022 in Brampton, so you took, you know, a local path into politics there. And you know that our research found that two thirds of the tweets you received on the digital campaign trail were abusive. The only candidate to receive more abuse than you there was incumbent Mayor Patrick Brown.

[00:14:45] And you know, you've discussed the connection about potential foreign interference in your campaign. Can you reflect on, you know, on one hand there's this broad representation, great community connections. You felt like this was a really supportive ecosystem from which to step forward from into the political arena. Then there was this foreign interference context happening, you know, across our country. Can you kind of take us into how you experienced that personally?

[00:15:16] **Jaskaran Sandhu:** Yeah. And I'll transition here from the answer I was giving. And that is why municipal politics? And one of the reasons was because of that frustration of seeing MPs and partisan party politics and like how limited they are in their ability to raise issues that are actually near and dear to them,

[00:15:32] you know, municipal issues touch us so directly, so locally. To your point about the foreign interference, now, the negativity was something we definitely noticed on social media. The negativity was on Twitter. The abuse, the volume of abuse, and the ratio of the abuse, and how personal the abuse was. And I think one of the differences between, let's say Mayor Patrick Brown and myself was that Mayor Patrick Brown was getting abusive tweets, like directed in many different directions under his content. Whereas I think a lot of the abuse that I faced was very direct, it was at me. The target of that abuse was me personally.

[00:16:05] And it wasn't because they're angry that I was suggesting that the speed limit on residential streets should probably be lower than it is. Or we need to install, you know, speed bumps in residential streets so kids aren’t being run over. They weren't angry about that. They were mad because of my advocacy on Sikh issues because I am currently still a board member of the World Sikh Organization. I acted as their executive director. I launched Baaz News. I've been involved with a whole host of different Sikh issues, some very public, and some more local, and that's what I was being targeted for. And it's my belief, I know it's not necessarily something Samara went into, kind of where these tweets are coming from, but from my experience before, during, and after, is that they're coming from India. The visceral kind of, often outlandish kind of tweets I was facing was primarily coming from India, and it was a form of foreign interference,

and I think it's a recognized form of foreign interference, as we've heard over the inquiry, the whole commission and everything else.

[00:17:05] **Sabreena Delhon:** Okay. The commission and inquiry Jaskaran's talking about here started in 2023 to look into foreign interference in federal elections. Various diasporic communities testified sharing stories of harassment and intimidation on Canadian soil from foreign actors. Jaskaran was one of the witnesses.

[00:17:28] **Jaskaran Sandhu:** I had stories of people reaching out to me that, you know, "we expressed support for you, you know, on social media. And then we started getting DMs saying, 'well, you know, this guy's a terrorist. He's an extremist'". All outlandlish, like absolutely baseless accusations. And so that was a real thing that we face at a very local level. I think it's missed by law. We have the national conversations on foreign interference and toxicity on political campaigns.

[00:17:55] **Sabreena Delhon:** I wanna play a clip from Cheuk Kwan from the Toronto Association for Democracy in China. As you know, he was one of the panelists at The Green Line and Samara Centre event on diaspora politics. We caught up with him right after the panel discussion. Here's one of the reasons why he thinks foreign interference hasn't been taken seriously in the past.

[00:18:16] **Cheuk Kwan:** You know, basically we're not mainstream enough to think, you know, make the government think, "oh, we have to do something about it". And it's always put as a Sikh problem or a Chinese problem, and that's the community's business. There's nothing much we can do.

[00:18:34] **Sabreena Delhon:** Anita, can you reflect on that clip and unpack that? You know, does it kinda speak to an issue of belonging and what do you think of that?

[00:18:42] **Anita Li:** Yeah, absolutely, that resonates a lot. I think that's definitely something that I felt much more acutely when I was growing up. I think it has shifted to some degree. I don't wanna be pollyannaish about it, like, "oh yes, so much progress." But I do think because of like, you know, experiences that Jaskaran and I had when we were much younger and I definitely was like somebody, even though I grew up in Scarborough, which was very diverse, experienced racism. I remember, you know, being at a Price Chopper with my mom and like her speaking Cantonese to me and having one of the stock boys tell us to go back to China.

[00:19:17] So I think in some ways, like when I was a kid, you certainly thought that, you know, the perspectives and

desires of folks who look like you or you know, people like your parents and your grandparents were not represented by the mainstream. I think because, you know, people like Jaskaran and I went through a Canadian education system, we understand how to navigate politics and understand the culture much more than our forebears. So I think as a result, by nature of the fact that we're able to better advocate for ourselves, these kinds of issues have become more mainstream. And it's kind of silly to say, what is mainstream these days?

[00:19:59] I think Canada is in a way, is a kind of a trail or should be a trail blazing nation when it comes to establishing what a cooperative, pluralistic, multicultural nation looks like. Like we're seeing a lot more places experience, you know, mass immigration, refugees because of climate, for example. And so I was just having a conversation earlier with a friend where I said that I feel very strongly that we can set that example because we've been doing it for longer than others. And it's, I think, you know, people of my generation and younger are starting to establish what Canada really is because I think as a country that's so young, like 150 some odd years, in some ways there's some level of arrogance to say like, this is exactly what it is, and we're really just taking a template from like two European countries and just kind of placing them on this land.

[00:20:49] I think it's a lot more complex and I think all of us are part of it. I'm not trying to discount like the, of course, English or French, not discounting Indigenous communities. I actually think there's something that we're forming here that is far more complex. It's actually quite interesting and to me quite exciting. And of course there's gonna be conflict because there's a confluence of interest and competing interests. But I think it's like a really good opportunity to start establishing what does a country of the future look like and act like?

[00:21:17] **Sabreena Delhon:** So Anita, you know, at the event the panelists brought up these conceptual big idea issues, concerns about who and what we are in Canada. But there were also some very practical operational suggestions for how to improve the sense of belonging and connection in civic life. Like, don't schedule an election on Diwali, a major holiday for many South Asian communities.

[00:21:43] What's one key action you would like to see our institutions take so more people can feel equipped and enabled to participate in civic life in Canada?

[00:21:54] **Anita Li:** I think like, and this is a tenet of The Green Line, but meet your audience where they are. Like not only just in terms of like fundamentals or basic things like not scheduling an election day on Diwali, just like you wouldn't on Christmas day, but also I mean, when I think about like kind of the civic literature that is disseminated by our governments, it's so dry, it's like so boring. It's like hidden in layers of your - like a website, a government website that'

s hard to navigate. Like why do you not just do Civics 101 on a TikTok, like a City of Toronto TikTok or something like, you know, if somebody's a newcomer, just introduce them to community institutions that will be able to introduce them to fundamentals of how to function in society. Like it's just, it's kind of like you throw them out to sea and then of course, like how are they going to wanna buy into the country, or buy into the city, if they don't feel like they're part of it, or there's no care taken into like introducing them to settle here in a way that's really livable?

[00:22:50] And livability isn't just like, of course it's all the things that are fundamental around food and housing and transit, but it's also like community, it's about joy, it's about a sense of connection to others. And not just like to your own diaspora community, but to also like broader Canadian society, right?

[00:23:07] So it's really like the simple things. It's like accessible information that's not dry or boring that makes you excited to be part of Canada or part of Ontario. Yeah, that's what I'd say.

[00:23:20] **Sabreena Delhon:** Jaskaran, you testified at the public inquiry looking into alleged foreign interference in Canada's last two federal elections. What do you want government to do so more people feel safe to participate in public life?

[00:23:34] **Jaskaran Sandhu:** I think I wasn't frustrated at the fact that I was getting these, you know, abusive messages, evidence of foreign interference. What always disappointed me was how it felt as the Sikh community, specifically in my example, how it felt that we were alone in pushing back against foreign interference, that no one else took it seriously. No one else would recognize this as like an actual crisis and issue that impacts the ability of our democracy and institutions to function freely. But also has this quiet impact on folks that may consider participating in politics as a candidate or as a part of a campaign. Or as just a vocal citizen out of a fear of retribution from foreign actors or foreign-led actors or their proxies and agents in Canada.

[00:24:29] And to have that reality be recognized by things like the Hogue commission and that report. Because, you know, beforehand when we used to talk to media or even, you know, other kinds of actors or stakeholders in these spaces, about the issue of foreign interference and how it's done and kinda like proxy groups and just agents and the consulates, it kind of sounds crazy. Like it sounds kind of like we're engaging in conspiracy theories. Like, “oh, you know, these guys, you know, they're afraid of their shadow,” but we were right. We were right all along. And so that I think is really important. And I think the government's doing a decent job of addressing it now. You know, they've put forward some legislation and some ideas.

[00:25:10] My only thing to the government is like now that you've done the work of exposing it and talking about it and obviously it's a sensitive topic so you can't put too much out in public, don't rush the solution. And I think that's kind of been some suggestions from like the World Sikh Organization and other like civil liberty organizations and other kinds of disaporic groups is don't rush the solutions. Let's really think through the implications of everything we're suggesting 'cause you know, you don't wanna do something that has the unintended consequence of actually harming groups here that are doing good work, and trying to strengthen democratic functions of our country in an attempt to stop foreign interference, kind of throwing the baby out with the bath water type of situation.

[00:25:58] **Sabreena Delhon:** Thank you to Jaskaran Sandhu and Anita Lee. And thank you for listening to Group Chat. I'm Sabreena Delhon, CEO of the Samara Centre for Democracy. Group Chat is executive produced by Debbie Pacheco. The Group Chat team also includes Farha Akhtar, Andrea Mariko Grant, and Beatrice Wayne. Theme music is by Projectwhatever. The Samara Centre for Democracy is a non-partisan charity that produces groundbreaking research, dynamic events, and educational resources that advance a vibrant culture of civic engagement across Canada. Donate to support our work and check out our other podcasts @samaracentre.ca. If you like us, help spread the word about our show. Subscribe, rate, and review this podcast. If you teach, share it with your class. A special thanks to the Flanagan Foundation and the Rideau Hall Foundation for their support.