

Trump DOJ attorney fights Harvard in court, fellow knitter on social media

By **Hilary Burns** Globe Staff, Updated March 27, 2026, 1 hour ago



Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Harmeet Dhillon arrives for a news conference at the Justice Department on Sept. 29, 2025 in Washington, DC. ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY IMAGES

[She is a Dartmouth grad](#) and tenacious lawyer who's maybe as well known for the colorful beanies she knits as she is for her blistering performances on Fox News.

As head of civil rights enforcement in the Justice Department, Harmeet Dhillon [is the force behind](#) the Trump administration's [latest attacks on Harvard](#) and point person for a controversial effort that is upending decades of legal orthodoxy.

Her critics say she and the administration are hellbent on undoing years of progress for marginalized groups by focusing on alleged discrimination against white people.

Dhillon, a Sikh immigrant from India, and allies say they are merely representing the interests of all Americans, giving literal meaning to Martin Luther King's grand aspiration of not being judged "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

In her current role, Dhillon, 57, has sued Harvard twice [in the last six weeks](#), most recently accusing the school of tolerating antisemitism on campus. In February, she sued Harvard for not handing over student data to determine whether the university is still using race in its admissions decisions.

She is dragging Harvard and other universities "kicking and screaming" to comply with the US Supreme Court's 2023 ban on affirmative action, said Roger Severino, vice president of domestic policy at the Heritage Foundation. Severino, like many Trump allies, believes that schools are finding backdoor ways to take race into account in admitting students.

Dhillon's critics say she is a culture warrior who has abandoned the 70-year-old division's traditional priority of protecting the constitutional rights of groups that historically faced discrimination in elections, housing, employment, and schools.

Dhillon declined an interview request through a DOJ spokesperson for this story, but responded to several questions from the Globe via email.

Long before she ascended to the top civil rights position in the government last year, Dhillon was involved in several different incidents that demonstrated her determination and combative personality.



Harvard University buildings are reflected in a shop across the street in Cambridge, on Sept. 5, 2025. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Her criticism of a liberal slant in academia dates to her undergraduate days at Dartmouth College in the late 1980s. She was on the staff of the conservative campus publication, the Dartmouth Review, when it ran an article that questioned the academic rigor of an African-American music professor's course. Several other

members of the Review staff were suspended, but a judge later directed Dartmouth to reinstate two of them.

When she was editor in chief, the Review published a satire piece about Dartmouth's Jewish president that compared him to Hitler, which many viewed as antisemitic. Dhillon [told The New York Times](#) at the time in 1988 that she was "very disturbed" by the reaction to the column and denied it was antisemitic.

Dhillon told the Globe in an email she had an interest in both law and medicine before attending college, but after experiencing what she viewed as discrimination against the Review by college officials, she decided to pursue free speech and civil rights law.

"That's really what lit a fire in her," added Mark Geragos, an attorney who has represented activist and former NFL player Colin Kaepernick.

After law school, her rise in the Republican Party was at times fraught. In 2013, when Dhillon was aiming to become the first female vice chair of the California GOP, some Republicans in the state suggested she was "loyal to Muslim terrorists" and was "not a real Republican," according to the San Francisco Chronicle. Conservative activists campaigned against her, noting her work with the ACLU representing Sikhs who faced discrimination for wearing turbans after 9/11. They also disapproved of her donation to Kamala Harris when she was running for district attorney in San Francisco.

Dhillon, a devout Sikh whose father wore a turban, told the Globe in an email she never considered leaving the party despite the bigoted comments.

At the Justice Department, Dhillon has more influence over campuses than her predecessors, as the Trump administration has moved many of the Department of Education's civil rights responsibilities to her agency ahead of winding down the

Education Department.

That's brought her in direct contact with a number of high-profile colleges and universities. Last year, she met with Sian Beilock, president of Dartmouth, her alma mater, and praised the school's shutting down of a pro-Palestinian protest that ended with the arrests of about 90 people.

"I was so impressed to learn how Dartmouth (my alma mater) is getting it right, after all these years," Dhillon wrote on X.

Dartmouth declined to comment.

Dhillon also pressured the University of Virginia, where she attended law school, by opening several civil rights investigations. James E. Ryan, the president at the time, [resigned last June](#) under intense pressure, later writing that he was warned the DOJ could "rain hell on UVA" if he did not step down.

Trump has spoken admiringly of Dhillon's hardline tactics in her negotiations with universities.

"She sues the ass off of anybody that is antisemitic," Trump said at a White House Hanukkah reception in December. "Harvard wished they never heard her name, right? They're gonna pay a lot of money, right, Harmeet? They're gonna pay a lot of money."

In the months since the president made those remarks, talks between the Trump administration and Harvard have broken down.

Dhillon's supporters say university leaders have a formidable foe in Dhillon. For Edward Blum, the founder of Students for Fair Admissions, the group that sued

Harvard for discrimination against Asian-American students, Dhillon's performance so far is a dream come true. He said her work has so far been "very impactful in enforcing the Supreme Court's opinion" to ban affirmative action in college admissions.

Dhillon has expressed disapproval of affirmative action since her Dartmouth days.

"It's illegal, to put it bluntly," Dhillon said on Fox News in 2018. "Unfortunately, in today's America, discrimination against Asian Americans is kind of the last frontier, and the justification for that is Asian American [students], on average, ... overperform. If we allow people based on merit, you have more than 50 percent of the Harvard community being Asian-Americans, and we can't have that, because the left believes in racial gerrymandering that way."

But Dhillon's efforts, and more broadly the Trump administration's use of the Justice Department to target political figures and ideologies it doesn't like, have unnerved many in the legal community. [Thousands of lawyers have left](#) the Justice Department under Trump, and last year more [than 100 signed a letter](#) warning the agency is "under attack."

"The repercussions will be felt for decades and decades," said Nina Beattie, a lawyer and senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, a think tank for progressive policies. "All of the advances that we've made in civil rights and equality over the years, they've just now been pushed back decades."

By coincidence Beattie was a classmate of Dhillon's, the two graduating the same year. Recalling Dhillon's work on the conservative school paper, Beattie said, "I'm not surprised, given who she was at Dartmouth, that she has made it her mission to

dismantle and destroy this really storied division of the Department of Justice.”

Dhillon grew up in Smithfield, N.C., and graduated high school at age 16. Raised in a traditional Sikh household with strict rules, she spent summers with family in India. She was “not a happy little camper at all” in her hometown, where peers made fun of her name and intellect, she told the San Francisco Chronicle.

As an undergraduate at Dartmouth, Dhillon studied classics and published pieces against feminism and affirmative action in the Dartmouth Review.

After college Dhillon worked for the Heritage Foundation and entered into an arranged marriage that she has said became abusive, so she ended it.

Harmeet Dhillon speaks during a news conference at the Justice Department on Sept. 29, 2025 in Washington, DC. ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY

At the University of Virginia School of Law, Dhillon was a leader in the conservative Federalist Society and served on the editorial board of the Virginia Law Review.

In 2006, Dhillon founded a law firm in San Francisco, which has expanded nationally in recent years. She sold it to her brother before joining the Trump administration last year. She also became chair of the San Francisco Republican Party’s Central Committee in 2011.

Dhillon hasn’t always aligned with the loudest Republican voices. She has said she doesn’t think the government should intervene in gay marriage or abortion; and in 2012 Dhillon called Rush Limbaugh’s comments about birth control “despicable.”

“He doesn’t speak for the GOP,” she told the San Francisco Chronicle at the time. “I’ve never heard my colleagues talk disrespectfully about women that way.”

During the pandemic, she built a reputation for suing California Governor Gavin Newsom over closures of beaches and houses of worship that she argued were unconstitutional.

Geragos, who describes himself as a “leftie,” said he bonded with Dhillon during COVID “much to many people’s surprise” because of a shared outrage at what was going on in California, he said. The two teamed up on numerous lawsuits, and although Geragos “vehemently” disagrees with her on many positions, he admires her intellect and legal acumen.

He added that Dhillon is known for her “intellectual firepower and her legal chops,” more so than other “right-wing fire brands.”

After a series of painful election losses for the GOP in 2020 and 2022, Dhillon in her position as a Republican National Committeewoman challenged incumbent chair Ronna McDaniel, Mitt Romney’s niece. She argued Republicans were losing too many elections under McDaniel’s leadership, which she said was lacking in transparency.

“Harmeet spoke to that directly, and that’s why I supported her,” said Bill Palatucci, a Republican National Committeeman for NJ.

Dhillon lost that contest, but her profile as a hardline conservative unafraid of a fight grew. She was stationed in Arizona to help oversee the party’s election integrity program before the 2024 presidential election; and also briefly joined Trump’s legal team after the Jan. 6, 2021 insurrection.

She has repeatedly expressed concern about voter fraud but, departing from many Trump allies, stopped short of saying the issues contributed to the outcome of the 2020 election.

But the ACLU, where Dhillon served on the board of its affiliate in Northern California some two decades ago, said her claims of voting fraud sow “distrust in free and fair elections.”

“I have made frequent reference to election irregularities and testified in Congress about my concerns,” Dhillon said in response to the Globe. “We do not know the extent to which these irregularities in multiple states affected the outcome of 2020 and other elections.”

In striking contrast to her hardball professional pursuits, her ‘grandmacore’ hobbies — cooking, gardening, and knitting — are what friends bring up most.

“She’s like your typical girlfriend,” said Sigal Chattah, whom Trump appointed as interim US attorney for the District of Nevada and is a self-described Republican culture warrior from Israel. “She’s got a wicked sense of humor – wicked smart, funny [in a way] that a lot of people don’t get. She’s a very tender person.”

Having grown up in a conservative Sikh family, Dhillon has said she draws strength from her religion. Her third husband died in 2024, and she lost her father shortly after. Asked how Dhillon bounced back from a difficult period, Chattah pointed to her hobbies, daily walks, and “workaholic” tendencies.

Her penchant for knitting figures prominently in her public persona and is a constant in her social media posts. She expresses her devotion to friends by knitting them beanies, Chattah added. Geragos said he has a “number” of them, and he has seen Pam Bondi and Jeanine Pirro post about them on social media.

“I personally think Harmeet’s beanie shows that you’re in the club,” Geragos said.

KC Crosbie, co-chair of the Republican National Committee, said she remembers Dhillon knitting in meetings while having “high-level conversations and answering questions.”

“She works at a level so much higher than 99 percent of the people I interact with,” Crosbie said.

And, as with Harvard, she is not afraid to pick a fight — even with a fellow knitter.

Perhaps it’s not surprising the issue involved divisions over the murder of conservative activist Charlie Kirk. Autumn Eden-Goodman, a prominent member of the online knitting community and a Democrat, posted she was disappointed other knitters were expressing their grief over Kirk while they “had nothing to say about school shootings the same day.”

Dhillon took note and blasted her on Instagram and X, writing: “The hatred has reached the knitting community.”

Several months later, Dhillon again caused a stir on social media when she used a slur about people with intellectual disabilities.

“This hat is an hour behind schedule thanks to influencer r*****,” she wrote on X above a [photo of a beanie in progress](#).

Chattah, her friend, waved off criticism of Dhillon’s post.

“Harmeet is funny,” Chattah said. “What people see is this tough civil rights attorney that has argued in front of SCOTUS. People like that are entitled to have a sense of humor, just like everybody else. And she has an amazing sense of humor. I mean, she’s

a crack-up. She really is.”

Mike Damiano of the Globe Staff contributed to this report.

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