

The welcome of Ukrainian refugees has been uniquely compassionate. Discuss.

By Kirit Potiwal

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Before addressing the substantive question which is being posed, it is useful for the purposes of this analysis to breakdown the question in order to provide a rationale for the answer and to frame the parameters of the answer.

Ostensibly, the UK's response to the sudden migration of Ukrainian refugees appears uniquely compassionate in light of the harshness of former and current UK immigration policy. Yet, when examined under greater scrutiny the reception of Ukrainian refugees may not be as compassionate a policy as it seems, but rather an empty gesture designed to demonstrate Western solidarity and isolate a common enemy or perhaps it is a convenient distraction from failures of the current UK government. Indeed, we may draw comparisons with the UK's response to the Afghanistan refugee crisis which was significantly less compassionate. Moreover, the assertion that UK policy was uniquely compassionate is further undermined when considering the reactive and munificent response of relative European countries. However, the appropriate measure for this analysis is to consider whether the UK's response was compassionate in view of Sikh jurisprudence. In this analysis, Sikh jurisprudence refers to a system which is based on Sikh values and principles. In achieving this end, the latter comparisons will be called on and examined. The author therefore intends to prove that whilst the welcome of Ukrainian refugees may be unique as a matter of policy, it was not a genuine act of compassion.

Compassion is a fundamental principle in the Sikh faith. So important is its influence in the Sikh faith, that it is mentioned in the first prayer recited by Sikhs daily. The line reads 'without the quality of compassion it is impossible to exercise righteousness.'¹ In other words, it is only from a position of humility and love that Sikhs can execute the mission of their faith- to bring righteousness and truth upon the world. It is through righteous and compassionate deeds that one achieves the ultimate purpose of the human life which is connection with God. The Sikh Gurus not only preached the virtues that a Sikh should have, but they personified these virtues during their Guruship. A poignant example from Sikh history is the martyrdom of the ninth Sikh Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji, who sacrificed their life for the freedom of Hindus to practice their faith freely without fear of retribution from the Mughal state. The ninth Sikh Guru sacrificed their life for the principle of religious freedom and religious equality. Whilst these principles are not directly the subject of this essay they serve to demonstrate the significance of compassion in the Sikh faith and its relationship with righteousness.

It is impossible for the UK government to introduce compassionate policy if they refuse to execute their duties in a righteous and moral way. Contextually, the invasion of Ukraine came at a time when there was mounting pressure on the government to be transparent about lockdown gatherings and flagrant breaches of lockdown rules inside the Prime Ministers office. Rather than admit that parties had taken place government ministers set out on a campaign of denial and deceit. It transpired that '20 gatherings' had taken place, and an inquiry headed by Sue Gray was carried out, where she subsequently referred some of these gatherings to the police to investigate.² The reason this backdrop to the Ukraine refugee crisis is relevant is because the UK government attempted to use the war in Ukraine to disillusion the public into thinking lockdown rule-breaking was insignificant.³ In Sikh philosophy, the ruler (government) 'should be representative of God on earth [and seek] to deliver justice to the people.'⁴ It is clear from this government's conduct that they lack honesty and the credibility to run a just democratic system or create compassionate policy. Thus, in order to maintain this unscrupulous position, the UK government had to appear to be taking significant action against Russia and supporting the Ukrainian people. The UK governments' response even before introducing policy was insincere and lacking in empathy for the loss of Ukrainian lives. Instead, the government exploited the Ukrainian suffering to prevent further criticism for lockdown rule breaking.

¹ 'Dhol Dharam Daya Ka Poot,' Jap Ji Sahib, Page 3, Verse 16, Guru Granth Sahib Ji by the First Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak Dev Ji

² 'Lockdown parties and events: 20 gathering we about so far', The Guardian, Peter Walker, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jan/31/lockdown-parties-and-events-20-gatherings-we-know-about-so-far>

³ 'There is a war on': Tory MPs using Ukraine invasion to defend law-breaking prime minister', The Independent, Aisha Rimi, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-ukraine-war-partygate-b2056791.html>

⁴ Political Philosophy of the Sikh Gurus: Concept of Justice, Kanwarjit Singh, <https://www.allaboutsikhs.com/sikh-literature/books-kjs/political-philosophy-of-the-sikh-gurus-concept-of-justice/#:~:text=The%20Sikh%20Gurus%20also%20advised%20to%20believe%20the,Hegel%20calls%20obedience%20to%20state%20laws%20as%20justice>

In contrast, the righteous vision of the Sikh faith is captured in the supplication prayer which is a composition of lines which appear in a separate body of text. In this petition, the Sikh prays for the ability to feed and protect all ('deg teg fateh') and calls for the betterment of humanity ('sarbat da bhalla').⁵ Accordingly, a legal system with underlying Sikh values would guarantee fundamental human rights to security, equality, and protection, with the entitlement to basic needs such as food and shelter. Whilst the argument may be a reductive one it is wholly pertinent to the subject. The UK has already recognised a responsibility to protect fundamental human rights and freedoms through the adoption and incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) which led to the enactment of the Human Rights Act (HRA) 1998.⁶ However, the UK has struggled to balance the aims of this piece of devolved legislation with its own immigration policy. The UK government has long been of the view, that immigration is spiralling out of control and that there needs to be tougher rules in place to deter migrants.⁷ Of course, there is a need for countries to maintain control of their borders and it is true that no economy has infinite resources therefore it would be unfeasible to support all asylum seekers. It should be pointed out, however, that the UK only ranks 17th among EU countries in terms of the asylum applications which it receives, with the most applications received by Germany (122,015).⁸

The UK introduced the Rwanda Asylum Plan on 14th April 2022 whereby the government sought to resolve the issue of asylum seekers crossing the English Channel by permanently relocating them to Rwanda. This is in spite of the fact that the 'majority of those who cross the channel... having a well-founded fear of persecution in their country of origin.'⁹ It is for this very reason that the ECHR and Refugee Convention 1951 were created and UK case law dictates that even a '10% chance of being shot, tortured or otherwise persecuted could be enough of a risk of fear to be considered well founded.'¹⁰ The policy has been widely condemned and serves to demonstrate the lack of humanity of the UK government as it reneges on the promise 'it signed up to more than 70 years ago' in the form of the Refugee Convention.¹¹ Notwithstanding these objections, since leaving the EU the UK has made proposals to scrap the HRA 1998 completely and threatened to replace it with a new UK bill of rights which seeks to exclude the jurisdiction of the EU courts such as the European Court of Human Rights and may further water down the rights of asylum seekers and refugees.¹² It is evident that the UK is not committed to upholding the spirit of legislation which seeks to protect fundamental human rights; instead they wish to make it harder for asylum seekers to enter the UK and weaken the protection afforded by Article 8 of the ECHR. The UK therefore intends to relinquish its responsibility to protect those in need and weaken the rights of those fleeing persecution demonstrating an inherent lack of compassion towards asylum seekers.

Shockingly, the Rwanda Asylum Plan is not the only controversial policy which the UK government has put forward as a solution to the increasing arrival of migrants from Calais. In 2021, the UK put forward proposals to push back boats in the English Channel into French territorial waters. This policy would not only breach the UK's duty of non-refoulement under international refugee law but it

⁵ Chandi di Vaar, Chapter 5 of Dasam Granth by Tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji. Also see The Sikh Prayer PDF, Page 21 and 31 by Baljit Singh and Inderjeet Singh, https://www.vidhia.com/Ardas_%28English%29.pdf

⁶ Human Rights Act 1998, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/contents>

⁷ Reality Check: Conservative manifesto on immigration, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2017-39975187>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/nov/27/asylum-in-the-uk-the-key-numbers>

⁹ Asylum in the UK: the key numbers, The Guardian, Sonia Sodha, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-61114542>

¹⁰ *R v SSHD exp Sivakumaran [1988] AC 958*

¹¹ Ibid. Refugee Convention (1951). Also see Nationality and Borders Act 2022

¹² 'UK must curb influence of European human rights rules, says Braverman', The Guardian, Peter Walker, <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2022/aug/10/uk-must-curb-influence-of-european-human-rights-rules-says-suella-braverman>

indicates the blatant disregard of the UK for the lives of migrants.¹³ Without diverging into political ideology it suffices to say that the UK's extreme immigration proposals coincide with their Brexit promises 'to take back control of UK laws' and 'introduce an Australian style points based immigration system'.¹⁴ In order to prove to the British public that Brexit has created advantages for the UK they must demonstrate that they can stem the issue of migration. In contrast, Sikh philosophy advocates for an inclusive libertarian society; this is evident from the Sikh Empire which existed in Northern India from 1799-1849 under the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. In an article on the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh the maharaja is honoured for his 'reign of love, equality and justice for all religions and cultures.'¹⁵ The UK government is pursuing a divisive agenda which has created hostility between people of different cultures and religions. The Sikh concepts of selfless service ('Seva') and giving back to the community ('vand ke chako') are ways to inspire compassion and create unity by recognising humanity as part of God. These concepts can be extrapolated at a state level and form the basis of policy to improve our attitudes towards migrants escaping persecution and fleeing to the UK under the worst of circumstances. Such policy would place greater focus on the redistribution of wealth and investment in government programmes to help migrants contribute to the economy. It follows that policy can be compassionate if it looks to integrate migrants into society; however, this government chooses to pursue controversial policy to further their own political agenda.

Now that current and former UK immigration policy has been analysed, it can be compared with the stance taken by the UK government in response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. On 24th February 2022, Russian forces that had been positioned on the border invaded Ukrainian territory and declared their intention to seize Ukraine to reunify it with Russia. In its initial response the UK condemned the invasion, but was reluctant to take any decisive action, although it did introduce a package of economic sanctions. The UK introduced the 'Homes for Ukraine Scheme' on 18th March 2022 which allowed UK citizens, businesses, and organisations to sponsor fleeing Ukrainians by offering them safe accommodation in return for thank you payments of £350.' Whilst the inventive policy may seem to be a good way to generate safe accommodation quickly, the Scheme was not fit for purpose and failed to provide the necessary expedience required for Ukrainian refugees to enter the UK, despite the generosity of the UK public and 100,000 Britons offering space in their homes to Ukrainian refugees.¹⁶ The policy was undermined further by burdensome and complex visa and immigration checks on the asylum application forms.¹⁷ In contrast the EU offered 'three year residency without the requirement of a visa' and relocated thousands to neighbouring Poland with the appropriate immediacy.¹⁸ Although, in the interest of balance there may be fewer Ukrainians relocating to the UK perhaps because they did not anticipate the war to last very long and they expected to return to their normal way of life. Be that as it may, there is a common thread which runs through this policy and the Rwanda Asylum Plan which is the disposal of government responsibility and offloading onto the UK public. When applying a Sikh lens, one may determine that the UK government failed to uphold its moral duty to fleeing Ukrainians and its policy was far from selfless rather it looked to shift its humanitarian obligations to UK citizens.

For immigration policy to be truly compassionate it must be applied fairly and equally to all people from all countries. Equality is an established universal principle; however, it holds deeper significance in the Sikh faith because God is deemed to exist within Creation and therefore we should recognise the divinity in the human life. Sikh scripture points out that rather than uniting humanity, society

¹³ Refugee Convention 1951, Chapter V, Article 33 and see 'Turning Back Migrant Boats – Always Illegal?', City, University of London, City Press Office, Professor Jason Chuah,

<https://www.city.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2021/09/turning-back-migrant-boats-always-illegal#>

¹⁴ Conservative Party Manifesto 2019, <https://www.conservatives.com/our-plan/conservative-party-manifesto-2019>

¹⁵ Maharaja Ranjit Singh: A reign still remembered, The Tribune, Harjeet Singh Gill, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/features/maharaja-ranjit-singh-a-reign-still-remembered-54388>

¹⁶ More than 100,000 Britons offer to take in Ukrainian refugees, The Guardian, Jessica Elgot, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/15/homes-for-ukraine-website-crashes-refugees>

¹⁷ Ukraine war: People can welcome refugees into their homes – PM, BBC News, Mary O'Connor & Joseph Lee, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-60701941?at_medium=RSS&at_campaign=KARANGA

¹⁸ Ibid

creates divisions.¹⁹ Ironically, it is the people that are supposed to be responsible for harmonising the UK that are maintaining a system of divide and rule by introducing inconsistent asylum policy. Even though the Homes for Ukraine Scheme is flawed it did eventually provide sanctuary to Ukrainian migrants. In contrast the response to the Afghan Refugee Crisis was slow despite the UK knowing that when they pulled out of Afghanistan there would almost certainly be Afghans who would be persecuted or killed by the Taliban for helping the West. Yet, the UK chose to abandon Afghans and allowed them to fend for themselves. There is a clear preferential treatment shown towards Ukrainian refugees over Afghan refugees with no safe routes to enter the UK or claim asylum after the evacuation of troops. However, one may point out that the UK has introduced resettlement schemes but these do not guarantee immediate safety to refugees. Furthermore, Ukrainian refugees under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme are provided with immediate sanctuary by their sponsors whereas Afghan refugees were 'still living in hotels [after] nine months' and forced to live on 'an allowance of just £8 per week.'²⁰ If one looks to the Sikh faith, a central feature of Sikh places of worship is the institution of Langar 'a free communal kitchen' which is run and maintained by worshippers. This system applies the principle of equality by seating worshippers from all backgrounds shoulder to shoulder in a line ('pangat') on the floor and serving one meal to the whole congregation. In this way, Sikhs have not only been able to feed upwards of 100,000 people but they are imparting the virtue of equality.²¹ One can see that the UK is not only reluctant to receive refugees but it uses policy to divide refugees and only allows those to enter that it considers worthy of asylum. The system of Langar provides a model to the UK government of how refugees- irrespective of their country of origin- should be treated with equal access to food and shelter.

This analysis has drawn on the central theme of compassion and touched on many other crucial Sikh principles including righteous duty, justice, equality, and selfless service. It has been demonstrated that UK immigration policy has consistently sought to undermine the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, the UK government has vacated its humanitarian responsibilities, showing preferential treatment to refugees that it deems worthy and only accepting refugees when it is politically convenient. Compassionate policy arises from the human reaction to injustice; however, the UK government's response was an immoral attempt to use the invasion of Ukraine to maintain power and distract the public from lockdown rule-breaking. The UK's attitude towards migrants is reflected in their current and former immigration policy wherein the government has abandoned their international responsibility, ignored fundamental human rights and attempted to offload its asylum obligations to Rwanda. It is now looking to introduce laws which would make these intentions legal and part of the permanent immigration system. On the other hand, we have UK citizens who have shown an outpouring of gratitude and readiness to help Ukrainian people. The Homes for Ukraine Scheme was a unique piece of policy but for all the wrong reasons. The UK government placed the burden of providing basic goods on the UK public and implemented overprotective checks which prevented applications from being granted promptly. Although when comparing the reception of Ukrainians to the treatment of Afghan refugees it leaves no doubt that the UK government has failed to deliver an immigration system or asylum policy which is consistent with the Sikh conception of compassion. Rather there are principles and teachings in Sikhism which would provide the UK government with a far better understanding of compassionate policy and create a fairer immigration system.

¹⁹ Guru Gobind Singh Ji, Jaap Sahib, Page 1. Also see Akaal Ustat, Page 11.

²⁰ Refugees from Ukraine and Afghanistan treated differently, charity warns, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-wiltshire-62334985>

²¹ 'The Kitchen at the Golden Temple Feeds up to 100,000 People a Day for Free', Twisted Sifter, <https://twistedsifter.com/2012/08/kitchen-at-the-golden-temple-feeds-people-for-free-langar/#:~:text=On%20religious%20holidays%20and%20weekends%2C%20the%20langar%20can,at%20the%20Golden%20Temple%20from%20preparation%20to%20cleaning.>

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