Reimagining Fundamental British Values (FBV) as fraternity: a view through the values of *Sangat* in Sikhi

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Attempts by successive governments to define fundamental British values (hereinafter FBV) have culminated into a concise list of five key values released by the Department of Education in 2014: 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs'.[1] However, attempts to mandatorily promote these values, particularly in schools, have been faced with some legitimate criticism, especially from minority ethnic and religious groups.[2] Given the timing of these educational proposals, coinciding with growing rhetoric of ultra-nationalism in the UK, Richardson shows that "students from minority ethnic…backgrounds are likely to feel increasingly alienated by the rhetoric around FBV".[3] Even the national teachers union NASUWT has acknowledged that "[mandatory FBV] requirement has also sometimes been misinterpreted as an instruction to promote stereotypical ideas of what it means to be 'British' or to celebrate Britain's imperial past."[4]

Given this context, in what ways can I, a first-generation immigrant from India – who faced social boycott in India because of my mixed-caste status – speak about British values. British imperial history has been critiqued for the loss of human dignity and freedom in colonial South Asia and by some accounts it also institutionalised caste and attempted to pit community against community.[5] At the same time, the British Parliament for the first time implemented compulsory primary education through Compulsory Education Act, 1870 which trickled down to the dominion of India in the 20th century.[6] This allowed my maternal grandfather, a lower-caste child bricklayer to enter a school for the first time, changing my family history fundamentally. Britain was also a crucial force behind the defeat of Nazism in the Europe – a defeat which marked the end of the Jewish holocaust and restoration of democracy in Europe. Several soldiers from the British commonwealth, including thousands from the subcontinent, a substantial portion of them Sikhs, fought side-by-side Britons in that great war. This contradictory past often animates the way Britons think about and relate to FBV.

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[1] Department for Education (2014) Consultation on Promoting British Values in Schools. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/consultation-on-promoting-british-values-in-school>

[2] Struthers, A. E. C., & Mansuy, J. (2020). 'British Values Are Also Values All Around the World': Teaching Fundamental British Values through a Human Rights Lens. Journal of Human Rights Practice, 12(3), 696–710. https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huaa042; Busher, J., Choudhury T., Thomas P., and Harris. G. (2017). What the Prevent Duty Means for Schools and Colleges in England: An Analysis of Educationalists' Experiences.https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/files/11090509/BusherChoudhuryThomasHarrisWhatthePreventdutymeansforschoolsandcolleges.pdf .

[3] Richardson, R. (2015). British values and British identity: Muddles, mixtures, and ways ahead. London Review of Education, 13(2) pp. 37-48 (as cited in Struthers and Mansuy (2020) (note 2))

[4] NASUWT. (2016). Universal Values: Responding Holistically to the Requirement to Promote Fundamental British Values. https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/uploads/assets/uploaded/b49175fd-4bf6-4f2d-ac5b2759c03015be.pdf (as cited in Struthers and Mansuy (2020) (note 2))

[5] Tharoor, S. (2016). An era of darkness: The British empire in India. Aleph Book Company.

[6] Mondal, A. (2017). Free and Compulsory Primary Education in India Under the British Raj: A Tale of an Unfulfilled Dream. *SAGE Open*, *7*(3), 2158244017727037. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017727037

Therefore, this essay is an unabashedly Asian reimagination of British values, through the lens of reformative movements and philosophies indigenous to South Asia – chief among them the philosophy and praxis of *Sikhi*. I will argue that Sikh philosophical tradition of *Sangat* (fellowship) which proposes to foster unity and fraternity, is crucial to the reimagination of these FBV. These are the values that we residents of Britain should aspire towards and should infuse our understanding of British values.

Part I, will unpack FBV and attempt a jurisprudential analysis of the five values. I will show that fraternity is the understated value that can be read as inherent in these values, as well as crucial for the realisation of the values of equality, rule of law and personal liberty. Part II will dive into the philosophical worldview of Sikhi and its graceful and emancipatory rendition of the value of fraternity. Part III will conclude by emphasising how these values can help us aspire for a just and pluralistic British society by cultivating the value of fraternity.

I. Jurisprudential analysis of Fundamental British Values: the underrated principle of fraternity

It is useful to compartmentalise the FBV into two sets in order to analyse them. The first sets of the three FBV – democracy, rule of law and personal liberty – clearly suggest rights and protections of the individual against the state. However, we can notice that the remaining two FBVs – mutual respect and tolerance for all faiths – are couched in the language of an obligation or a sense of democratic duty to show mutual respect and respect different faiths. These two values can be considered the second set.

i. First set of values: democracy, rule of law and personal liberty

As mentioned above, the first set of values concern rights and protections which regulate relationship with the state. Democracy, as a value, has a long and variegated history in Great Britain. It emerged from the Magna Carta in 1215, which sought to limit the power of the king to impose taxes without any popular representation – it proclaimed that there would be no taxation without "common counsel"[7]. Ever since, democracy in the UK has meant two crucial things: right of universal franchise for all eligible voters as well as parliamentary sovereignty i.e. sovereignty of our elected representatives over government. There principles were well cemented by the Petition of Right (1628) and the Bill of Rights (1689). But the British understanding of democracy itself can be seen to include some crucial protections beyond the right to vote for a popular government to power. Crucially, rule of law has come to signify limitations on government power and protection from arbitrary use of power. Captured in the proverb "Even the king is not above the law", rule of law suggests limits and constrains on state power.[8] A crucial facet of rule of law is separation of power between institutions of government and the system of checks (and balance) exercised both by the parliament and the courts on the powers of the executive, which rules in the name of the monarch.[9] Finally, these protections are further secured by personal liberty, which secures protection of life from excesses of government, and unlawful detention.[10] The Human Rights Act, 1998 can be seen as

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[7] Magna Carta, 2012 § 12

[8] Bracton, H. (1968). On the laws and customs of England (S. E. Thorne, Trans., Vol. 2). Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. (Original work published c. 1250).

[9] Allan, T. R. S. (2016). The Rule of Law. In D. Dyzenhaus & M. Thorburn (Eds.), Philosophical Foundations of Constitutional Law Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198754527.003.0011

[10] Habeus Corpus Act, 1679

a crucial piece of legislation which ensured and further recognised human rights and protections of speech and liberty.[11]

However, on a plain reading, the first set of values inherent in UK constitutionalism – democracy, rule of law and personal liberty – do not provide any guidance on how they should be realised by common Britons, especially those from diverse backgrounds. In other words, these values do not immediately inspire a sense of common brotherhood or belonging among the citizens. What seems missing here is a cultural consciousness about how these values govern relationship between British citizens, towards realising these values as a collective. In this context, some scholars have also suggested that FBV values at the national level should be taught in schools by linking them to broader discourse of human rights, by "encouraging learners to be global citizens who will contribute to the building of a broader culture that is respectful of human rights"[12] A qualitative research on the reception of FBV shows that these values are often perceived as culturally 'empty' by Britons, who often may not specialise in the history or political philosophy behind these values[13].

ii. Second set of values: mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths

Encouragingly, the same study shows that, people from diverse communities have come to recognise that the second set of FBV – namely mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths – allows citizens to have dual identities.[14] One can be Hindu, Sikh, Indian, Afro-Caribbean or Pakistani, *as well as* British. To be British is then to "easily hold dual-identities without impeding their sense of belonging in either social circle"[15] It is here that the fourth and the final FBV can help us chart a path to reimagine British values. The philosopher John Rawls suggests that mutual respect "entails showing someone respect because they are a 'moral being', with a sense of justice and conception of the good".[16] Similarly "tolerance [of religions] can be constructed as 'openness': a more expansive possibility where difference is not seen as threatening but as creating possibilities."[17]

We can see that these two values concern not just an individual but rooted in the sense of community, a sense of solidarity between and within communities. There are crucial synergies here with principles of Sikhi – namely *Sangat* (fellowship) and *Pangat* (sharing a meal) which are

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[11] The Human Rights Act, 1998 art. 5

[12] Struthers and Mansuy (n 2)

[13] Bhambra, M. (2021). Perceptions, experiences and accommodations of Britishness; an exploration of national identity amongst young British Sikhs and Hindus in London. *National Identities*, *24*(4), 393–412. https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2021.1935836

[14] Rawls, J. (1993). Political liberalism. Columbia University Press (as cited in Bhambra (n 13))

[15] Id

[16] Ackroyd, R., & Elton-Chalcraft, S. (2025). Teachers' constructions of mutual respect and tolerance through the lens of Religious Education: fundamental British values – propaganda or longstanding aims of RE? Journal of Beliefs & Values, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2025.2501816 (citing Rawls, J. (1971). A Theory of Justice. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press)

[17] Id

aimed at "fostering unity and fraternity through shared experiences and mutual support"[18]. For instance the Sikh Ardas/prayer ends with the term – "*Sarbat da bhala"* meaning "may everyone prosper".[19] Therefore, these five FBV should not be understood as silos. Rather my argument here will be that values of fraternity and fellowship are central to the realisation of the other values of democracy, rule of law and personal liberty. As the UK's report to the UNHRC puts it that "integration [in the UK] is not seen as a flattening process of assimilation, but as equality of opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual toleration"[20]

iii. Fraternity: a crucial value in Sikhi, the UK and democratic Europe

In terms of political values, we must understand the second set of values - mutual respect and tolerance of diverse faiths – as key values which constitute the third value in the trifecta of the French revolution : equality, liberty and *fraternity*. On the other hand, the first set of FBV – rule of law, democracy and liberty – constitute the first two French Revolution values of *equality* before law and *liberty*. After all, the French revolution of the working classes is often considered an offshoot of the Glorious revolution in the UK, which changed UK from a monarchy to a constitutional monarchy with parliamentary sovereignty of elected representatives. These values of equality, liberty and fraternity also were the central aspirations of democratic forces which secured victory over Nazism in Europe on May 8, 1945. Seen in this way, the idea of fraternity and brotherhood is inherent in FBV and crucial to the realisation of democracy, rule of law and personal liberty.

The relationship between values of equality and fraternity is explained perfectly in Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS), the Sikh holy book, also considered the last and eternal teacher (Guru):

"Sabẖ ek ḏarisat samaṯ kar ḏekẖai sabẖ āṯam rām pacẖẖān jī▫o

Look upon all with equality and recognize the Supreme Soul (God), pervading among all. (SGGS, M. 1, P. 446) [21]

Fraternity therefore is most important in the realisation of rule of law. For working class Britons, this principle can easily capture their imagination. Fraternity means the kind of common brotherhood, which has been common among Britons who participated in the Bristol Bus boycott of 1963 to end discrimination against Blacks and Asians bus drivers; for miners who descended into the pits together regardless of skin colour or faith; of the kind seen in popular mobilisations to bring down statues of slave owners in the UK. As Borgetto puts it fraternity is a "subterranean and diffuse pathway"[22] to the realisation of the goals of rule of law, liberty and democracy. In the words of Ambedkar, the modern Indian leader, lawyer and reformer who

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[18] Singh, D. P. (2020). "Interfaith Dialogue: A Perspective from Sikhi." In Interfaith Dialogues: A Sikh Perspective, edited by Hardev Singh Virk, 42–60. New Delhi: Guru Nanak Foundation.

[19] Id at 6

[20] Parekh, B. (2000) Report: The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain. London: Runnymede Trust Commission. as cited in Wiles, E. (2007). Headscarves, Human Rights, and Harmonious Multicultural Society: Implications of the French Ban for Interpretations of Equality. Law & Society Review, 41(3), 699–736. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5893.2007.00318.x

[21] As cited in Singh P. (n 18)

[22] As cited in Gilbert, J., & Keane, D. (2016). Equality versus fraternity? Rethinking France and its minorities. International Journal of Constitutional Law, 14(4), 883-905

started a revolution against casteism, "Without fraternity, liberty and equality could not become a natural course of things. It would require a constable to enforce them"[23]. Fraternity as a value therefore keenly recognises the limits of positive law – "it pushe(s) positive law to its limits, and its true operationalization ha[s] to be premised on a *form of love of citizen for his fellow citizen*"[24].

II. *Sangat*: a reimagination of fundamental British values by reference to Sikhi

In this section, I show how we can better understand fraternity using Sikh jurisprudence and history on this value. First conceived by Guru Nanak to rescue South Asia and the world from the throes of casteism and religious fundamentalism, Sikh jurisprudence provides the perfect conduit to popularise fraternity, and by association FBV in the UK today. Consistent with the tradition of pluralism, teaching of Sikhi highlights the importance of interfaith dialogue between communities. The Shri Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of teachings contains the teachings of saints from varied faiths from reformist Hindu saints to formerly untouchable Dalit sants like Sant Ravidas to Sufi Muslim saints – therefore it is truly emblematic of the spirit of pluralism inherent FBV.

In his most influential book against casteism, particularly in Hindu society called 'Annihilation of Caste', Ambedkar, India's foremost intellectual of the lower castes writes that, "the political revolution of the Sikhs was preceded by the religious and social revolution led by Guru Nanak."[25] "Ambedkar's argument was that emancipation of the mind had to precede social and political revolution"[26] – something the Sikhism had managed to do. One of the key scholars of Sikhi, Pashaura Singh, highlights the motivation of Guru Nanak in sparking this social revolution as evidenced by three key institutions he founded: "s*aṅgat* (holy fellowship or congregation) in which all felt that they belonged to one large spiritual fraternity; the *dharamsālā*, the original form of the Sikh place of worship; and the *laṅgar*: the communal meal, prepared as a community service by members of the *sangat*"[27]. Guru ka langar' or the community cooked meal in Gurudwaras and caste-neutral nature of '*sewa*' (performing acts of service in the Gurudwara for the *Sangat*) were by many account the first organised resistance against taboos surrounding commingling and inter-dining between different castes – in a subcontinent where even the shadow of a lower-caste human could be considered polluting. This is what Ambedkar refers to as the central social revolution sparked by Sikhism – the revolution of communal love and fraternity.

In modern India under British rule, the Singh Sabha movement in the 1920s took over control of the gurudwaras from upper-caste Hindu priests and ensured 'unquestioned entrance

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[23] Ambedkar, B.R. (1949) Indian Constitutional Assembly Debates Vol VI (25 Nov. 1949). Parliament of India

[24] Narain, A., (2017). What Would an Ambedkarite Jurisprudence Look Like? National Law School of India Review, 29(1), pp. 1–20.

[25] Ambedkar, B. R. (1936). Annihilation of Caste. New Delhi: Navayana Publishing Pvt Ltd

[26] Omvedt G. (accessed 2025) Dr Ambedkar and Sikhism. Velivada. Retrieved August 16, 2025, from https://velivada.com/2017/10/30/dr-babasaheb-ambedkar-sikhism/

[27] Singh, P. (2014). An Overview of Sikh History. In P. Singh & L. E. Fenech (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199699308.013.028

to Sikh places of worship' for all, especially the lower and formerly untouchable castes.[28] This was happening at the same time in Indian society, where Ambedkar, the leader of the depressed castes, had tried to force entry into Hindu temples, but was stopped by the upper-caste establishment. More crucially, in education the Chief Khalsa Diwan, a branch of the Singh Sabha movement, set up schools which "oversaw a great expansion in the number of schools equalize social relations between castes".[29] Inspired by this, compulsory education for all was finally legislated seriously in 1920s by Indian provincial legislatures under British dominion.[30] My maternal grandfather, a lower-caste child bricklayer would tread into school for the first time, as a result – sharing space with upper castes, who hitherto had monopoly over all educational opportunities. The anti-caste consciousness created by Sikhi – which had legitimised these practices – had a big role in normalising inter-caste interactions and prefiguring educational reform, making it accessible to all.

III. Conclusion: fraternity in Sikhi and the quest for British democratic values

How has Sikh philosophy of Sangat (fraternity and fellowship) animated rule of law, democracy and personal liberty in the UK and how can it continue to do so? In the essay, I showed how fraternity is crucial to the realisation of protections like rule of law, democracy and liberty promised by FBV. I conclude with some discussion of how followers of Sikhi have imbibed and later contributed to democratic values in the UK and how this can help us reformulate FBV to keep fraternity as the focus of our collective aspirations as humans.

Despite having a long history of contact with the UK, Sikh immigrants from the subcontinent to the UK became a target for discrimination, especially aimed at their turbans. Notwithstanding the everyday race relations and the ubiquity of violence against them, Sikhs easily imbued the UK values of rule of law and made their claims before legal forums. Several complaints surrounding discrimination in entry to hotels and restaurants were made to race relations board constituted under the Race relations Act, 1976.[31] However, the most crucially legal vindication came with the case of *Sewa Singh Mandla v. Dowell Dee*[32], where the House of Lords ruled that Sikhs constituted a racial group, and discriminating with them based on the wearing of turbans fell foul of the Race Relations Act, 1976. This was not just a victory of a particular community. The case became a precedent for "how schools and similar institutions must accommodate cultural and religious practices to avoid unlawful discrimination"[33]

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[28] Juergensmeyer, M. (1988). Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Social Vision of Untouchables. Delhi (as cited in Jodhka, S. S. (2014). Changing Manifestations of Caste in the Sikh Panth. In P. Singh & L. E. Fenech (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Oxford University Press.)https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199699308.013.006

[29] Mandair, N. S. (2014). Colonial Formations of Sikhism. In P. Singh & L. E. Fenech (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199699308.013.042

[30] Mondal, A. (2017). Free and Compulsory Primary Education in India Under the British Raj: A Tale of an Unfulfilled Dream. *SAGE Open*, *7*(3), 2158244017727037. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017727037

[31] Bebber, B. (2017). Model migrants?: Sikh activism and race relations organisations in Britain. *Contemporary British History*, *31*(4), 568–592. https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2017.1280400

[32] *Mandla v Dowell-Lee* [1982] UKHL 7

[33] Desk, C. E. (1982). Recognition of Sikhs as a Racial Group under the Race Relations Act 1976: Mandla v. Dowell Lee. Casemine (Accessed 16 August 2025) https://www.casemine.com. https://www.casemine.com/commentary/uk/recognition-of-sikhs-as-a-racial-group-under-the-race-relations-act-1976:-mandla-v.-dowell-lee/view

This case, resulting from the Guru-Sikhs' legal and social mobilisation, was a key victory for the FBV of democracy and rule of law. The spirit of comingling and belief in social solidarity which led the Sikh appellants to move the courts had resulted in this crucial constitutional moment which underscored the value of fraternity. Fraternity is therefore a thread which runs through the teachings of Sikhi and can be seen to interact harmoniously and productively with values of democracy, liberty and rule of law in the UK constitutionalism. "It is precisely through the 'pluriversal', the 'co-contaminating', and the 'interdependent being-with-the-other' that the Way of the Gur-Sikh gains enunciation"[34]. Fraternity or *Sangat* is that value which can allow ordinary Britons, as well as ordinary humans from diverse backgrounds to speak truth to power – to claim their human rights – and be vindicated. Fraternity or *Sangat* is the value that human beings should aspire for.

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[34] Bhogal, B. S. (2014). Postcolonial and Postmodern Perspectives on Sikhism. In P. Singh & L. E. Fenech (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* (p. 0). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199699308.013.038