

## **By reference to British values, what are the best values for humans to aspire to?**

### **Introduction**

What values should humans aspire to when the world feels both intimately connected and stubbornly unequal? The United Kingdom's articulation of fundamental British values including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs, offer a clear civic grammar. Since 2014, schools in England have been asked to "actively promote" British values as part of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development; the list includes democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance, and was consolidated via the Department for Education guidance.<sup>1</sup> The aim is to form citizens who can navigate pluralism without sliding into relativism or violence, and to anchor civic culture in a vocabulary everyone understands even if they disagree on theology or politics.

Such British values are necessary but not sufficient. Sikh jurisprudence, rooted in Guru Nanak's vision and embodied in practices like *sewa* (selfless service), *langar* (the community kitchen), and the Miri–Piri balance of spiritual integrity and temporal responsibility, adds motivational depth and social infrastructure. Read together, these traditions support a composite ethic for human aspiration: dignity, reason-giving justice, equality of status and access, liberty with responsibility, solidarity beyond tolerance, and truthful participation in public life. I substantiate this claim by (1) locating fundamental British values in law and education, (2) outlining Sikh jurisprudence as a living legal-ethical tradition, (3) comparing where they align and where Sikh thought constructively pushes further, and (4) translating the synthesis into practice.

### **1) Understanding British Values: Strengths and Strains**

British Values are not free-floating ideals; they carry statutory and policy heft. Department for Education guidance instructs schools to cultivate British values through debate, student voice, mock elections, and clear teaching on the distinction between religious rules and the law of the land.<sup>2</sup> In the wider legal order, the Human Rights Act 1998 gives domestic effect to Convention rights. Article 9 protects freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including manifestation, subject to limits necessary in a democratic society, and courts apply a proportionality test to balance these competing

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education, *Promoting fundamental British values through SMSC in schools* (November 2014).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

rights.<sup>3</sup> The Equality Act 2010 runs alongside this to protect “religion or belief” (s.10) and imposes the Public Sector Equality Duty (s.149) on public bodies to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations.<sup>4</sup>

Three strains recur in scholarship and practice. First, “tolerance” can be read as passive non-interference, under-reaching when communities need affirmative care. Second, “liberty” is sometimes treated as purely individual, ignoring the social conditions such as education, housing, and secure work that make self-authorship real. Third, British values secular register is rightly neutral but can be motivationally thin, overlooking traditions that fuse spiritual conviction with public responsibility. British values give us sturdy civic scaffolding, but they do not, on their own, furnish a complete home for a just society.

## **2) Sikh Jurisprudence: A Legal-Ethical Vision Oriented to the Good of All**

Sikh jurisprudence takes shape from multiple sources of authority: the Guru Nanak, the Guru Granth Sahib, the Rehat Maryada (Code of Sikh Conduct), institutions like the Akal Takht, and collective decision-making traditions (*Sarbat Khalsa*, *Panj Pyare*). From this matrix emerges a normative core: Ik Onkar (oneness) which grounds equality; *sewa* and *vand chhakko* (sharing) which bind property to responsibility; Sarbat da Bhala (welfare of all) which resets moral default from “my rights” to “our flourishing”; and Dharam Yudh as righteous struggle as last resort to protect the oppressed, disciplined by proportionality and compassion.<sup>5</sup>

The Miri-Piri doctrine, associated with Guru Hargobind and institutionalised through the Akal Takht, formalises the fusion of spiritual sovereignty (*piri*) and temporal authority (*miri*). It refuses a politics evacuated of ethics and a piety detached from public responsibility. In that sense, Sikh jurisprudence shapes the moral imagination in which law lives.

*Langar* operationalises equality by seating everyone, regardless of caste, gender, and status, on the floor to share a meal. This is not mere symbolism; it is a pedagogy of equality repeated daily across

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<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Act 1998; Schedule 1 (Article 9).

<sup>4</sup> Equality Act 2010, s.10 and s.149.

<sup>5</sup> Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), English Version of The *Sikh Rehat Maryada*, published by Dharam Parchar Committee (1994).

the Sikh world. Contemporary research treats *langar* as social-justice infrastructure that rehearses equality and solidarity, with spillover benefits for health and participation.<sup>6, 7, 8</sup>

Two clarifications help here. First, Sikh jurisprudence is not theocratic law-making. It is a legal-ethical *orientation* that shapes how institutions should act, in particular, that power must be exercised for the vulnerable and the community as a whole. Second, the tradition's insistence on equality before God underwrites equality before law. British constitutionalism and Sikh jurisprudence thus converge on rejecting arbitrariness, albeit from different starting points.

### **3) Where the Frameworks Meet and Where Sikh Thought Pushes Further**

There is obvious overlap. British rule of law resonates with the Sikh rejection of caprice and status privilege; the Equality Act's protection of religion or belief coheres with Sikh commitments to dignify diverse consciences; democratic participation maps onto Sikh collective practices like *Sarbat Khalsa*. In doctrinal areas such as religious manifestation at work or in education, British law uses proportionality to balance rights, a logic congenial to Sikh ethics, which favours context-sensitive, compassionate justice.

Sikh jurisprudence pushes the British framework in three constructive ways:

#### **1. From tolerance to solidarity.**

British "mutual respect and tolerance" is a good start. Sikh ethics insists we go further: to active service, redistribution, and standing with the marginalised (*sewa, vand chhakko*). If equality is to be more than formal, we need practices that close the gap between entitlement and access, and to recast resources as responsibilities, pushing institutions from benign non-interference to predictable provision.

#### **2. From liberty alone to liberty with responsibility.**

Individual liberty matters, but Sikh thought reframes liberty as a capability secured within community, freedom to cultivate virtue and to serve, not simply freedom from interference. This aligns with the principle of proportionality under our Human Rights (no absolute rights

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<sup>6</sup> Kanwarjeet Singh, Jane Southcott and Damien Lyons, 'Knowledge Meals, Research Relationships, and Postqualitative Offerings: Enacting Langar (a Sikh Tradition of a Shared Meal) as Pedagogy of Doctoral Supervision' (2022) 21 *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 1–13, doi:10.1177/16094069221097223.

<sup>7</sup> Sikh Socialists, 'Langar in Transition: A Sikh Socialists Reflection' (2022) 3 *Interfere* 95–106.

<sup>8</sup> Amrit Dafu-O'Reilly and others, 'Exploring the Religious Practice of Langar as a Route to Health Promotion in the Sikh Community in Northern England: A Qualitative Study' (2024) *Journal of Religion and Health*, advance online publication, doi:10.1007/s10943-024-02077-6.

to trump all others) and cautions against a jurisprudence that reduces freedom to consumer choice.

### 3. **From secular minimalism to ethical integration.**

British law must be religiously neutral. Sikh jurisprudence, while spiritually rooted, is public-facing and social in its outcomes. Its integration of temporal and spiritual obligations (Miri–Piri) supplies a vocabulary for civic virtues that are motivationally thick (why we *care*), yet produce secular goods (health, education, safety). This is a bridge, not a breach, of neutrality.

There are genuine pressure points where values collide. A person's conscience may clash with equality rules; visible religious dress or symbols in uniformed roles can raise safety or neutrality issues; and schools have to balance an inclusive ethos with a pupil's right to show their faith. In these situations, British courts use proportionality. They ask: Is the restriction lawful and pursuing a legitimate aim (like safety or non-discrimination)? Is it necessary, and is there a less restrictive way to achieve the same aim? Does it strike a fair overall balance between the individual and the community? That is the thread running through cases like *Begum*, *Eweida*, and *Lee*.<sup>9, 10, 11</sup> In *Begum*, the House of Lords upheld a school uniform policy as proportionate; in *Eweida*, Strasbourg found that domestic authorities gave excessive weight to corporate image over religious manifestation; in *Lee v Ashers*, the Supreme Court protected against compelled expression while reaffirming the centrality of non-discrimination. Sikh jurisprudence points in the same direction: responses should be measured and compassionate, protecting dignity while preventing harm. Making that shared approach explicit helps society handle disagreements without vilifying those who hold them.

### **(4) What are the best values for humans to aspire to?**

The British values framework gives us a robust civic core, but not the whole repertoire. Drawing on empirical work in education, human-rights jurisprudence, and Sikh jurisprudence, a defensible and workable set looks like this: dignity, justice (under law), equality (of status and access), liberty with responsibility, solidarity, and truthful participation in public life. Below I show how each element is grounded in British practice, where scholarship finds the limits of that practice, and how Sikh jurisprudence deepens the account.

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<sup>9</sup> *R (on the application of Begum) v Headteacher and Governors of Denbigh High School* [2006] UKHL 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Eweida and Others v UK* (2013) ECHR.

<sup>11</sup> *Lee (Respondent) v Ashers Baking Company Ltd and others (Appellants)* (Northern Ireland) UKSC/2017/0020

### **(a) Dignity**

At school level, official guidance expects pupils to respect people of all faiths and none, to identify and combat discrimination, and to understand that the law protects freedom of belief. This anchors a dignity norm in everyday institutional life. Still, education researchers warn that the Fundamental British Values policy can drift toward a narrow national identity frame unless it is intentionally tied to universal human-rights language. Struthers, for example, argues that teaching FBV through a *human-rights* lens prevents “Britishness” from crowding out the universal dignity claims those rights encode.<sup>12</sup> Sikh jurisprudence matches dignity with theology, Ik Onkar (oneness of the Divine) denies any hierarchy of human worth; humility and equality are not afterthoughts but first principles.

### **(b) The rule of law**

“Rule of law” is one of the clearest planks in the British list, and in courts it takes the form of public reasons and proportionality when rights collide. The *Eweida* judgments crystallise the template: identify a legitimate aim, test necessity, prefer less-restrictive means, and strike a fair balance.<sup>13</sup> That is justice that explains itself. Sikh thought converges: coercive power is legitimate only as a *last resort* to protect the vulnerable, and, crucially, moral authority must shape temporal authority (the Miri–Piri doctrine). Justice is not bare order; it is order answerable to compassion.

### **(c) Equality of status and of access**

British policy asks schools to cultivate respect across difference and to challenge discrimination; in law, equality duties require public bodies to have due regard to advancing equality of opportunity. That reaches beyond etiquette to structure. Yet education scholarship repeatedly finds that, without careful framing, British values policy work can slide into performative displays of “tolerance,” missing deeper structural barriers and, at times, acquiring nationalist overtones that some practitioners find uncomfortable.<sup>14, 15</sup> Sikh jurisprudence closes the gap between equal *status* and equal *access* by binding property and position to obligation: *sewa* (service) and *vand chhakko* (share what you earn) convert advantage into duties. The practice of *langar*, a shared meal where all sit and eat together,

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<sup>12</sup> Alison E C Struthers and Julie Mansuy, “‘British Values Are Also Values All Around the World’: Teaching Fundamental British Values through a Human Rights Lens” (2020) 12(3) *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 696–710, doi:10.1093/jhuman/huaa042.

<sup>13</sup> *Eweida and Others v UK* (2013) ECHR.

<sup>14</sup> Carol Vincent, ‘Cohesion, citizenship and coherence: schools’ responses to the British values policy’ (2019) 40(1) *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 17–32, doi:10.1080/01425692.2018.1496011.

<sup>15</sup> Cameron Henshall, Fida Sanjaddar and Howard Prosser, “‘Fundamental British values’: navigating nationalism and teacher practice’ (2024) *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 1–17, doi:10.1080/14767724.2024.2385548.

functions as an institutionalised equality lesson, with current research reading it as a live instrument of social justice.<sup>16, 17</sup>

#### **(d) Liberty with responsibility, not isolation**

Article 9 secures freedom of religion or belief, but situates it within a social context, meaning that manifestation may be limited to protect others' rights and safety, and courts must reason case-by-case. That is liberty within a community of equals, not liberty as immunity from the world. Sikh ethics makes the same move from the inside out: freedom isn't license to withdraw, it is the capacity to live truthfully and to serve. Miri–Piri ties inner freedom to public duty; vand chhakko requires that my gains become others' goods.

#### **(e) Solidarity as an upgrade from mere tolerance**

Policy language about “mutual respect and tolerance” is a good floor, but many scholars question whether tolerance is enough to carry a plural democracy. A growing literature recommends reframing British values teaching toward universal human-rights values and deliberation, precisely to avoid a thin, compliance-driven culture.<sup>18, 19</sup> Sikh jurisprudence supplies the motivational engine for that upgrade: Sarbat da Bhala (the welfare of all) makes care for the other a standing obligation, while sewa institutionalises that care. Work on langar in contemporary movements shows how solidarity becomes infrastructure: open, predictable, material support that equalises participation.<sup>20,</sup>

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#### **(f) Truthful participation in public life**

British values prize democracy in schools as practice (voice, mock elections, debate) rather than a civics worksheet. But if participation is to be truthful, it needs content that orients action to human flourishing. Here the capabilities literature is helpful, scholars argue that the aim of public order is to expand people's real freedoms, their capabilities to choose and pursue lives they value, by removing

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<sup>16</sup> Kanwarjeet Singh, Jane Southcott and Damien Lyons, 'Knowledge Meals, Research Relationships, and Postqualitative Offerings: Enacting Langar (a Sikh Tradition of a Shared Meal) as Pedagogy of Doctoral Supervision' (2022) 21 *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 1–13, doi:10.1177/16094069221097223.

<sup>17</sup> Sikh Socialists, 'Langar in Transition: A Sikh Socialists Reflection' (2022) 3 *Interfere* 95–106.

<sup>18</sup> Alison E C Struthers and Julie Mansuy, "'British Values Are Also Values All Around the World": Teaching Fundamental British Values through a Human Rights Lens' (2020) 12(3) *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 696–710, doi:10.1093/jhuman/huaa042.

<sup>19</sup> Edda Sant, James Weinberg and Jonas Thiel, 'Fail to plan, plan to fail. Are education policies in England helping teachers to deliver on the promise of democracy?' (2024) *British Educational Research Journal*, advance online publication, doi:10.1002/berj.4001.

<sup>20</sup> Kanwarjeet Singh, Jane Southcott and Damien Lyons, 'Knowledge Meals, Research Relationships, and Postqualitative Offerings: Enacting Langar (a Sikh Tradition of a Shared Meal) as Pedagogy of Doctoral Supervision' (2022) 21 *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 1–13, doi:10.1177/16094069221097223.

<sup>21</sup> Sikh Socialists, 'Langar in Transition: A Sikh Socialists Reflection' (2022) 3 *Interfere* 95–106.

obstacles like poverty, poor health, and lack of education.<sup>22, 23, 24</sup> Values, on this view, must be judged by whether they raise thresholds of capability, not merely by whether they are proclaimed. Sikh sources again resonate: honest living (*kirat karni*) and service are not private excellences but public goods, because my work and sharing enlarge the next person's capability set.

### Critical Synthesis

Three critiques often shadow British values: (a) they risk becoming performative or national-identity markers in classrooms, (b) "tolerance" can underreach in the face of structural injustice, and (c) the secular register, while rightly neutral, can be motivationally thin for many citizens. The research answers are instructive. First, anchor British values in universal human-rights language to avoid parochialism (Struthers). Second, replace performative tolerance with practices that redistribute access (equality as access, not only status). Third, enrich motivational depth by drawing on civic-compatible ethical traditions.

Sikh jurisprudence supplies exactly those reinforcements without breaching state neutrality. It translates equality into institutions (*langar*), liberty into duty (*vand chhakko*), and spirituality into public purpose (*Miri–Piri*). Because these are practices with demonstrated social effects, they answer the academic demand, familiar from the capabilities approach, that values be tested by whether they enlarge real freedoms.

### 5) From Ideal to Impact: A Social-Mobility Test

Values that matter change who gets in, not just how we behave once inside. The Social Mobility Commission's *State of the Nation 2024* maps stark regional disparities; prospects vary sharply by local authority, underscoring why equality must mean access as well as status.<sup>25</sup> At the Bar, the latest BSB report shows that 19.4% of practitioners were educated at UK independent schools, far above the national figure, illustrating persistent pipeline skew.<sup>26</sup> And across professions, the Social Mobility

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Wells, 'Sen's Capability Approach' (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.) <https://iep.utm.edu/sen-cap/> accessed 23 August 2025

<sup>23</sup> Martha C Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Harvard University Press 2011) ch 2 'The Central Capabilities' (extract, ASU Events, PDF)

<sup>24</sup> Denis O'Hearn, 'Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom*: Ten Years Later' (2009) 8 *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review* 9–15.

<sup>25</sup> Social Mobility Commission, 'State of the Nation 2024: Local to national, mapping opportunities for all' (Policy paper, 11 September 2024).

<sup>26</sup> Bar Standards Board, *Diversity at the Bar 2024: A summary of the latest available diversity data for the Bar* (Research report, January 2025).

Foundation reports a class pay gap of around 12% among professionals from working-class origins, while the Sutton Trust highlights the continued prevalence and cost of unpaid and underpaid internships.<sup>27, 28</sup>

A Sikh-inflected policy blueprint follows directly. First, pay every gateway so access does not depend on the ability to self-subsidise, *sewa* as standard. Second, contextualise recruitment, weighting achievement relative to opportunity to identify excellence under constraint, *Sarbat da Bhala* as a selection logic. Third, mentor longitudinally, because capability grows through community. Finally, create a “knowledge langar” so know-how is non-excludable and can be reused widely. Taken together, these measures are at once British (rule-bound fairness and equality duties) and Sikh (service, sharing, responsibility), and they scale across sectors where unpaid entry tickets and opaque queues still ration opportunity.

## Conclusion

By reference to British values, the best values to aspire to are those that: protect dignity and reason-giving justice through the rule of law; insist on equality of access as well as status; secure liberty with responsibility to others; upgrade respect to solidarity; and cultivate truthful, capability-expanding participation. British values provide a sturdy civic grammar and institutional checks; Sikh jurisprudence contributes the motivational engine and everyday institutions that make these values operative. The combined test is practical: do these values reliably raise people’s capabilities and broaden access to life-chances? If yes, they are not only admirable ideals; they are the right values to live by. Taken together, they offer a coherent, research-supported answer to the best values for human to aspire too and a credible path from ideal to impact.

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<sup>27</sup> Social Mobility Foundation, ‘The Class Pay Gap 2023’ (News, 31 October 2023).

<sup>28</sup> Erica Holt-White and Carl Cullinane, *Unpaid and Underpaid Internships* (The Sutton Trust, January 2025).