By Reference to British Values, What Are the Best Values for Humans to Aspire To?

"The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members."

— Mahatma Gandhi¹

Introduction

As Ronald Dworkin astutely observed, "Law's empire is defined by attitude, not territory or power or process." This underscores the imperative that values, rather than mere procedures, define the quality of a legal system. Such a sentiment is mirrored in the present inquiry, which interrogates the sufficiency of British values as the ultimate aspirational framework for humanity.

Values constitute the moral and ideological substratum upon which societies construct their legal systems, political institutions, and social frameworks. In the United Kingdom, the articulation and promotion of core "British values" including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance are regarded as essential to sustaining civic order and social cohesion. These principles permeate the UK's institutional structures and are explicitly embedded within educational policy and legal frameworks. However, this inquiry interrogates whether these principles alone embody the optimal aspirational values for humankind.

This current essay advances the argument that, although British values provide a critical architecture for safeguarding procedural justice and individual autonomy, they remain insufficient in isolation, particularly when considered against relational values such as Seva (selfless service),³ Sarbat da Bhala (universal welfare)⁴, and Ik Onkar (the unity of humanity)⁵ from within Sikh jurisprudence. These values offer a transformative framework for integrating individual dignity with collective responsibility and will be explored in depth to demonstrate how they can complement and enhance British legal traditions. The criteria identified will be assessed for their ability to enhance and support British legal procedures. A comprehensive ethical framework necessitates the integration of more relational, duty oriented paradigms such as those found within Sikh jurisprudence. Sikh legal philosophy, grounded in doctrines of equality, altruistic service (Seva)⁶, and universal welfare (Sarbat da Bhala)⁷, offers a vital lens through which the question may be re-examined. Through a critical exposition of British values and their constraints, juxtaposed with Sikh legal ethics, this essay elucidates an integrated model that not only preserves individual dignity but also

¹ Mahatma Gandhi, Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India 1969) vol 82, 13

² Ronald Dworkin, Law's Empire (Harvard University Press 1986) 407.

³ Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 1.

⁴ The Sikh Prayer Ardas, concluding line, as translated in Harbans Singh (ed), The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism (Punjabi University 1992) vol I.

⁵ Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 1.

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fortifies collective responsibility, thereby promoting a society anchored in both legal justice and moral compassion.

British Values: Strengths and Limitations

As Lord Neuberger, former President of the UK Supreme Court, aptly noted, "The rule of law is a bulwark against tyranny, ensuring that power is not exercised arbitrarily." This highlights the enduring significance of British constitutional principles, which are deeply enmeshed within the United Kingdom's legal heritage. The Magna Carta of 1215,9 is frequently cited as a seminal moment in constitutional history, establishing the foundational axiom that even sovereign authority is subordinate to the rule of law. A.V. Dicey's canonical formulation of the rule of law underscores the primacy of legal equality and the repudiation of arbitrary power, asserting that "no man is above the law, and every man, whatever be his rank or condition, is subject to the ordinary law of the realm." This jurisprudential principle remains pivotal in the architecture of the British constitutional order.

The procedural apparatus of British democracy empowers citizens to participate in the legislative process through electoral mechanisms, thereby upholding the principle of political agency. As John Rawls observed, "The fair value of political liberties is necessary to guarantee that citizens equally enjoy the worth of their rights." The rule of law ensures that power is exercised according to predetermined and transparent norms, while individual liberty guarantees protections relating to expression, conscience, and association. Mutual respect and tolerance are posited as prerequisites for harmonious coexistence within Britain's increasingly multicultural society.

These values are crystallised in landmark legislative instruments such as the Human Rights Act 1998¹¹ and the Equality Act 2010.¹² Jurisprudence such as R (Miller) v Prime Minister has reaffirmed the inviolability of constitutional accountability and the supremacy of Parliament.¹³ Nonetheless, as Lord Bingham cautions, the rule of law must be imbued with substantive content lest it become an empty procedural shell.¹⁴ As he famously stated, "The rule of law requires that all persons and authorities within the state... should be bound by and entitled to the benefit of laws publicly made, taking effect in the future and publicly administered in the courts."¹¹

Academic critiques have underscored the potential superficiality of British values. For instance, the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 has been criticised for undermining tolerance

⁸ Lord Neuberger, 'Justice in an Age of Austerity' (Tom Sargant Memorial Lecture, JUSTICE, 15 October 2013)

⁹ Magna Carta 1215, c 39.

¹⁰ A.V. Dicey, Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution (Macmillan 1885).

¹¹ Human Rights Act 1998

¹² Equality Act 2010

¹³ R (Miller) v Prime Minister [2019] UKSC 41.

¹⁴ Tom Bingham, The Rule of Law (Penguin 2010) 8.

by restricting the rights of refugees,¹⁵ revealing a gap between the proclaimed values and their application. Bhikhu Parekh further argues that mere non-interference, as tolerance, fails to foster true solidarity,¹⁶ while Amartya Sen warns that procedural liberty without redistributive justice perpetuates inequality and results in "freedom for wolves, not for lambs."¹⁷ These further critiques highlight the ethical gaps in British liberalism, especially its reluctance to address systemic injustice.

Moreover, the politicisation of British values raises further concerns. The Prevent Strategy, ostensibly aimed at countering radicalisation, has been criticised for disproportionately targeting Muslim communities and for fostering a climate of surveillance and suspicion. Tariq Modood astutely observes that such initiatives risk devolving into coercive assimilation, thereby undermining the pluralistic ideals they purport to uphold. In Modood's words, "A multicultural society cannot be sustained merely through tolerance; it requires an ethos of equal respect."

Thus, while British values furnish essential protections for democratic governance and individual rights, their adequacy as aspirational human values is contingent upon their ethical deepening through commitments to substantive equality and communal solidarity.

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¹⁵ House of Lords, 'Nationality and Borders Bill: Impact Assessment' (HL Deb, 28 February 2022) vol 819 col 531.

¹⁶ Bhikhu Parekh, Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory (Harvard University Press 2000).

¹⁷ Amartya Sen, Development as Freedom (Oxford University Press 1999).

¹⁸ A.V. Dicey, Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution (Macmillan 1885).

¹⁹ the Human Rights Act 1998

²⁰ Equality Act 2010

Parliament.²¹ Nonetheless, as Lord Bingham cautions, the rule of law must be imbued with substantive content lest it become an empty procedural shell.²²

Recent Scholarly critiques of British values have emerged, highlighting their potential superficiality. One particularly salient example is the ongoing debate over the UK's asylum and immigration policies, particularly the Nationality and Borders Act 2022.²³ Critics argue that this legislation undermines the value of tolerance by restricting the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, thereby exposing tensions between the rhetorical commitment to mutual respect and the practical implementation of exclusionary policies.²⁴ This contemporary case illustrates the complex disjunction between the theoretical ideal of British values and their operationalisation in law and policy. Bhikhu Parekh contends that tolerance, conceptualised narrowly as non-interference, fails to cultivate genuine solidarity or civic empathy.²⁵ Amartya Sen similarly warns that an exclusive focus on procedural liberty, absent redistributive justice, risks perpetuating structural inequalities, leading to "freedom for wolves, not for lambs."²⁶ These critiques foreground the ethical lacunae inherent within British liberalism, particularly its reticence in confronting systemic injustice.

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Sikh Jurisprudence: A Relational Ethical Paradigm

As Professor Pashaura Singh asserts, Sikh jurisprudence is unique in its holistic integration of spirituality, ethical obligation, and temporal justice.²⁹This perspective highlights the

²¹ R (Miller) v Prime Minister [2019] UKSC 41 [55]

²² Tom Bingham, The Rule of Law (Penguin 2010) 55-64

²³ Nationality and Borders Act 2022

²⁴ Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, 'Nationality and Borders Bill: Why It Must Be Opposed' (JCWI, 2022)

²⁵ Bhikhu Parekh, Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory (Harvard University Press 2000).

²⁶ Amartya Sen, Development as Freedom (Oxford University Press 1999) 17.

²⁷ Arun Kundnani, The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror (Verso 2014).

²⁸ Tariq Modood, Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory (Harvard University Press 2000)

²⁹ Pashaura Singh, The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning and Authority (Oxford University Press 2000).

inseparability of Sikh ethical principles from legal doctrines, offering a model distinct from Western liberal frameworks. Sikh jurisprudence offers an alternative legal and ethical paradigm, deeply embedded in the spiritual and temporal teachings of Guru Nanak and codified in the Guru Granth Sahib. What is central to Sikh legal philosophy is the doctrine of Ik Onkar, which proclaims the ontological unity of all existence: "There is but one God; all beings are His creation." This theological premise informs an egalitarian legal worldview, which rejects hierarchical distinctions based on caste, gender, or social status.

At the core of Sikh ethics lies Seva, the principle of selfless service. Seva transcends mere voluntary charity; it constitutes a binding moral obligation to actively pursue the welfare of others, and without the anticipation of personal gain. Guru Nanak's injunction that "the highest religion is to serve humanity"³¹ epitomises this ethic, which permeates Sikh community practices. As scholar Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair observes, "Sikh legal ethics collapse the distinction between religious devotion and civic duty, creating a model of justice that is both participatory and compassionate."³²

Equally significant is Sarbat da Bhala, the aspiration for universal welfare. Unlike Western liberalism, which primarily emphasises individual rights, Sikh jurisprudence prescribes affirmative obligations toward others. Economic justice is institutionalised through Vand Chakna (the sharing of resources) and Kirat Karni (earning through honest means),³³ both of these Tennent's, which reflect the conviction that wealth is inherently communal.

Historical manifestations of these principles are evident in the governance of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, whose leadership is often hailed as a paradigm of secular rule infused with Sikh ethical principles.³⁴ His reign featured several progressive reforms, including the abolition of capital punishment, robust protections for religious minorities, and equitable resource distribution. Singh actively appointed individuals from diverse religious backgrounds, including Muslims and Hindus, to high-ranking positions of authority, thereby promoting interfaith inclusivity. His administration also implemented judicial reforms that ensured fair and accessible courts for all citizens, regardless of social status or faith, As Gurharpal Singh observes, "Maharaja Ranjit Singh's governance provides a remarkable case study of secular administration rooted in Sikh ethical principles, demonstrating a unique blend of justice, tolerance, and pluralism."³⁵

³⁰ Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 1.

³¹ Guru Nanak, quoted in Pashaura Singh, Life and Work of Guru Nanak (Oxford University Press 2019).

³² Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation (Columbia University Press 2009)

³³ Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 1245; see also Pashaura Singh, Life and Work of Guru Nanak (Oxford University Press 2019).

³⁴ Gurharpal Singh, "Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Governance: A Sikh Perspective" (2004) Journal of Punjab Studies 11(1)

³⁵ Gurharpal Singh, "Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Governance: A Sikh Perspective" (2004) Journal of Punjab Studies 11(1).

Furthermore, Singh allocated state resources to support religious institutions across different faiths, reflecting the practical application of Sarbat da Bhala within the country's governance. His policies and actions established a historical precedent for secularism deeply informed by Sikh ethical principles. His administration is frequently lauded as a paradigmatic example of secular rule grounded in Sikh ethics, as it abolished capital punishment, safeguarded religious minorities, and fostered equitable resource distribution.³⁶

Comparative Synthesis

As Martha Nussbaum asserts, "Justice requires a narrative imagination that can comprehend the experiences of others, especially those different from ourselves." This observation is pivotal when comparing British legal values and Sikh jurisprudence, as it highlights the necessity of cross cultural empathy and critical engagement. While British legal traditions excel in outlining procedural rights and individual autonomy, Sikh jurisprudence emphasizes relational duties and communal welfare. Both systems, however, reveal overlapping commitments to justice and fairness, suggesting that a carefully calibrated integration could yield a more holistic legal framework capable of addressing contemporary ethical and social challenges. The formerwhich excels in delineating procedural safeguards and protecting individual autonomy, whereas the latter prioritises relational obligations and substantive welfare.

Conor Gearty has cautioned against the British legal system's tendency to rely excessively on negative liberty and procedural formalism, often to the detriment of substantive justice. He argues that "an obsession with process risks ignoring questions of distributive fairness and solidarity." ³⁸Conversely, critiques of communitarian frameworks caution that an overemphasis on collective duties may imperil individual freedoms, as Michael sandel states "A politics that asks too much of its citizens risks turning into a politics of coercion, not community." ³⁹

Nevertheless, Sikh jurisprudence navigates this tension through the theological centrality of Ik Onkar, affirming that duties to others enhance rather than constrain personal dignity. Duties within Sikh legal thought are not mere burdens but affirmations of shared humanity. As Professor Dharam Singh notes, "The Sikh ethos integrates rights with duties, seeing service to others as the highest form of spiritual and civic fulfilment." ¹⁸

In practice, the intersections between British legal frameworks and Sikh jurisprudence are notable, manifesting through shared commitments to service, justice, anti-discrimination, and human rights protections. Recent advancements within the British legal system, such as a heightened prioritisation of pro bono initiatives and the progressive adoption of restorative

³⁶ Priya Atwal, Royals and Rebels: The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Empire (C Hurst & Co 2020) 80-85.

³⁷ Martha C Nussbaum, Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life (Beacon Press 1995) 83.

³⁸ Conor Gearty, On Fantasy Island: Britain, Human Rights and the Politics of Freedom (Oxford University Press 2016) 96–97

³⁹ Michael J Sandel, Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy (Harvard University Press 1996) p 6.

justice models, reflect compelling parallels with the principles of Seva and reconciliation intrinsic to Sikh traditions. Although each system is founded upon distinct premises, both increasingly recognise the societal advantages inherent in service-oriented approaches to law. The United Kingdom's anti-discrimination statutes, for instance, echo Sarbat da Bhala's directive toward universal justice by reinforcing measures that protect marginalised communities. This alignment exemplifies how core values of equity and dignity can develop independently within separate normative traditions while ultimately converging in practical application.

Another significant point of intersection is the integration of religious arbitration mechanisms, a development enabled by the rise of legal pluralism in the UK. Religious arbitration forums, such as those utilised by Sikh communities for resolving personal and communal disputes, have demonstrated⁴⁰ the feasibility of harmonising faith-based dispute resolution processes with secular legal standards particularly under the UK's Arbitration Act 1996.⁴¹ The successful incorporation of these mechanisms evidences the practicality of blending religious and secular approaches to adjudication.

Collectively, these areas of overlap suggest that British proceduralism and Sikh relational ethics, when thoughtfully integrated, constitute a comprehensive and nuanced value system. This synthesis achieves a balance between safeguarding individual rights and advancing collective wellbeing, rather than functioning in isolation, these frameworks can be deliberately blended to establish a more holistic model for legal and ethical reasoning. In doing so, the strengths of each tradition are harnessed to address contemporary socio-legal complexities more effectively.

A detailed examination also highlights both the convergence and divergence between British legal philosophy and Sikh jurisprudence. British law is particularly distinguished by its emphasis on procedural safeguards and individual autonomy, whereas Sikh legal thought foregrounds relational duties and substantive welfare. As legal scholar Conor Gearty again observes, the British system's strong reliance on negative liberty and procedural formalism may at times preclude substantive justice. 42 Conversely, communitarian legal philosophies often face the critique that an excessive focus on collective duties risks undermining individual freedoms. As Michael J Sandel cautions, "A politics that asks too much of its citizens risks turning into a politics of coercion, not community." Sikh jurisprudence,

⁴⁰ Rajnaara Akhtar, "Religious Arbitration in the UK: Protecting Women or Subjugating Them?" (2016) 38 Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law 277.

⁴¹ Arbitration Act 1996

⁴² Conor Gearty, On Fantasy Island: Britain, Human Rights and the Politics of Freedom (Oxford University Press 2016) 96–97.

⁴³ Michael J Sandel, Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy (Harvard University Press 1996) 6.

however, navigates this tension through the theological centrality of Ik Onkar, positing that obligations to others are essential not for restricting but for enhancing personal dignity. Thus, within Sikh legal understanding, duties are framed as affirmations of shared humanity rather than as burdens.

In practical terms, the British legal system's increasing attention to pro bono work and its gradual integration of restorative justice continue to reflect enduring Sikh tenets of Seva and reconciliation. Despite their differing philosophical foundations, these systems are converging towards the recognition of the societal value offered by service-driven legal methods. Moreover, the alignment of UK anti-discrimination laws with the universal justice imperative of Sarbat da Bhala bolsters protections for disadvantaged groups, illustrating the capacity of independent traditions to manifest similar commitments to fairness and dignity. Additionally, the expansion of legal pluralism in the UK has facilitated the inclusion of religious arbitration forums—including those used by Sikh communities—to actively resolve civil and communal matters, thereby demonstrating the practicality and effectiveness of integrating religiously-informed dispute resolution processes within a broader secular legal framework.

Taken together, these intersections demonstrate that British proceduralism and Sikh relational ethics, when carefully synthesised, offer a robust and nuanced value system that balances the protection of individual liberties with the promotion of collective welfare. Rather than merely coexisting, these frameworks can be strategically combined to create a more holistic legal and ethical model, one that leverages the strengths of both traditions to address contemporary social and legal challenges effectively. capable of safeguarding individual liberties while promoting collective well-being. The British legal system's embrace of pro bono work and its gradual incorporation of restorative justice principles mirror the Sikh commitment to Seva and reconciliation. Anti-discrimination legislation within the UK resonates with Sarbat da Bhala's mandate for universal justice. Moreover, legal pluralism in the UK has increasingly recognised religious arbitration mechanisms, including those utilised within Sikh communities.

Thus, the synthesis of British proceduralism with Sikh relational ethics yields an integrated value system that simultaneously secures individual rights and mandates communal solidarity.

Conclusion

By reference to British values, the optimal values for humanity to pursue are those that blend the procedural protections of democracy, the rule of law, and individual liberty with the relational and duty-based commitments of Sikh jurisprudence—equality, selfless service, and universal welfare, into a unified ethical framework. This synthesis offers a balanced approach to justice and compassion, enabling both individual dignity and collective responsibility to thrive within a pluralistic legal culture, procedural protections of democracy, the rule of law, and individual liberty with the relational and duty-based commitments of Sikh jurisprudence: equality, selfless service, and universal welfare. Such a synthesis transcends the limitations of either system in isolation, offering a comprehensive ethical framework grounded in both justice and compassion.

This integrative approach holds profound implications for the legal profession, particularly in areas such as family law, human rights advocacy, and multicultural dispute resolution. By combining procedural protections with relational ethics, it provides legal practitioners with a comprehensive framework for addressing complex cases involving cultural pluralism, systemic inequality, and social justice. Legal professionals, especially those engaged in initiatives like the Guru Nanak Social Mobility Scholarship, can draw on this synthesis to enhance their ethical commitments and advance a more inclusive legal culture. where cultural values and legal norms frequently intersect. It also offers a pathway to reshape judicial reasoning and legislative reform in fields such as human rights law, immigration policy, and multicultural dispute resolution, thereby encouraging legal professionals to engage more deeply with both procedural safeguards and substantive ethical obligations, offering legal practitioners a more sophisticated ethical foundation for addressing multicultural challenges and systemic inequalities. Aspiring barristers and legal practitioners engaging with this synthesis may find themselves better equipped to navigate cases involving multicultural disputes, ethical lawyering, and restorative justice, especially for those engaged in social mobility initiatives like the Guru Nanak Social Mobility Scholarship, where cultivating both procedural expertise and ethical service is paramount. Legal professionals must not only master procedural legalism but also cultivate ethical commitments to service, solidarity, and the promotion of substantive justice. In doing so, they may contribute to the construction of a legal culture that honours both individual dignity and collective flourishing.

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Martin Luther King Jr.

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