By Reference to British Values, what are the best values for humans to aspire to?

Sheuli Sharna

Word Count (excluding footnote and referencing): 2916

The Measure of Humanity

Reimagining Values Through British Ideals and Sikh Ethics

There is a quiet violence in being told you live in a land of opportunity while watching doors close before you ever reach them. You hear words like ''liberty,'' ''equality,'' ''respect,'' and you want to believe them.[1] But somewhere between school gates that divide futures by postcode and professions that whisper ''not for people like you,'' you begin to understand that values, when not embodied, can become beautiful lies.[2]

And yet, it is precisely because of this fracture that the question matters more than ever: What are the best values for humans to aspire to?

The British values – democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance – are, on paper, magnificent.[3] They represent a cumulation of centuries of intellectual struggle and moral progress.[4] But for too many, they remain distant, seen as aspirational for some and ornamental for others. A society cannot be judged by the nobility of its values, but by who gets to live them.

If values are to be truly human, not merely national, they must reach the forgotten, protect the voiceless, and elevate the overlooked. That is the test.

This essay argues that while British civic values provide a vital foundation, they are not enough on their own. To build a world where no child's worth is determined by their background,

---

[1] Vernon Bogdanor, *The New British Constitution* (1st edn, Bloomsbury Publishing 2009).
[2] Diane Reay, *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes* (Policy Press 2017).
[3] Department for Education, 'Promoting Fundamental British Values through SMSC' (GOV.UK27 November 2014) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-fundamental-british-values-through-smsc>.
[4] Jeremy Waldron, *The Dignity of Legislation* (Cambridge University Press 1999).

where power is tempered by compassion and liberty is balanced by responsibility, we must turn to something deeper – something both ancient and radical.

The teachings of Guru Nanak, the founding prophet of Sikhism, offers precisely such moral vision.[5] His jurisprudence does not live in courtrooms or parliaments, but in the everyday acts of resistance against injustice,[6] in kitchens that feed strangers as family,[7] in the refusal to bow before caste, class, or empire. Sikh thought does not challenge British values – it completes them.

By reimagining human aspiration through the fusion of British ideals and Sikh ethical cosmology, we find not just ideals, but a relentless call to act. We uncover values that break through empty promises to build a society grounded in genuine belonging and unshakeable equality. These are the values humanity must fiercely pursue.

The Evolution and Limits of British Values

To understand what values humans must aspire to, we must first understand the values we have inherited and the silences they carry.

The modern formulation of ''British values'' is often traced back to five core principles: democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, tolerance.[8] These emerged from centuries of bloodshed, rebellion, debate, and transformation.[9] They are the hard-won legacies

[5] Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The Name of My Beloved: Verses of the Sikh Gurus* (Harpersanfrancisco 1995).
[6] Arvind-Pal S Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (Columbia University Press 2009).
[7] Eleanor M Nesbitt, *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press 2016).
[8] Department for Education, 'Promoting Fundamental British Values' (n 3).
[9] Bogdanor (n 1).

of Magna Carta and the English Civil War,[10] of suffragettes and anti-colonial struggles,[11] of war-time resilience and post-war reconstruction.

In theory, they represent a society that values freedom, fairness, and human dignity: A democracy that gives voice to the people and the rule of law that holds even kings accountable.

And yet – values cannot be judged by their definition, but by their distribution.

Across housing estates, classroom divides, and career ladders, it becomes clear that these values while foundational, are not universally experienced.[12] For those born into wealth, ''individual liberty'' means freedom to flourish. For those born into poverty, it can feel like the freedom to be ignored.[13]

In this disparity, a brutal truth: a value that is not accompanied by access becomes privilege disguised as principle.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the institutions that claim to protect and promote these values. Legal systems that speak of justice still often deliver outcomes shaped by postcode, accent, or race. Social Mobility remains more of a slogan than a reality. The very professions that claim to uphold British values like the law, politics, media, often feel closed to those who carry names, faces, or experiences outside the mainstream.[14]

---

[10] Nicholas Vincent, Magna Carta: *A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press 2012).
[11] Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette : The History of the Womens Militant Suffrage Movement 1905-1910* (Read Books 2009).

[12] Daniel Dorling, *Inequality and the 1%* (Verso 2014).
[13] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York, NY Anchor 1999).
[14] Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison, *Class Ceiling: Why It Pays to Be Privileged* (Policy Press 2019).

This is not to say British values are hollow. On the contrary, they represent profound moral aspirations.[15] The problem is not in the values themselves, but in their frailty when uprooted from empathy, action, and structural fairness. Tolerance without justice becomes passive indifference. Liberty without solidarity breeds inequality.

What then, must be done?

To answer this, we must go beyond reasserting these values. We must ask: what kind of moral framework would make these values real for all?

This answer lies in looking outside the narrow Western moral canon – not to reject British values, but to expand them. In doing so we encounter a jurisprudence rooted in divine oneness, collective responsibility, and fearless compassion.

It is here that Sikh thought and the revolutionary teachings of Guru Nanak emerge, not as a counterpoint, but as a completion.

Sikh Jurisprudence as Living Justice

What if the law was not a tool of the powerful, but a daily ritual of compassion? What if justice was not confined to verdicts and legislation, but practised daily in how we honour others and protect the vulnerable? This is the vision at the heart of Sikh jurisprudence. It is a moral tradition that disarms power, uplifts the voiceless, and recognises the sacred in every soul.

Founded in the late 15th century by Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Sikh thought was not born in comfort. It was born in confrontation against caste, against empire, against the spiritual emptiness of ritual without righteousness. Guru Nanak did not offer a religion in the narrow sense, but a revolution

[15] Bhikhu C Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Palgrave Macmillan, Cop 2006).

in moral perception.[16] He saw divinity as singular, formless, and present in every being whether they were rich or poor, king or labourer, woman or man. In that one idea, the entire logic of inequality was dismantled.

But this is not a philosophy meant to sit in scriptures. It was meant to walk barefoot in villages, to stand against tyranny, to serve without question. Sikh jurisprudence is a lived ethic, a daily insistence that justice must be done, not only spoken about.

At its core are several interwoven principles that speak directly to the values humanity ought to aspire to.

Sarbat da Bhala – The Welfare of All

This is not merely a hope, but a command. Every Sikh prayer ends with a call for the well-being of all humanity – not just Sikhs, not just the virtuous, not just the oppressed. Everyone. It is a radically inclusive value rooted in a belief that liberation cannot be individual; it must be collective.[17] The idea that no one is free until everyone is free is not new. It is a Sikh thought that demands that this be practised, not simply praised.

Seva – Selfless Service

Seva is the spiritual obligation to serve others as equals.[18] In a world obsessed with status and hierarchy, Seva dissolves ego. The Langar – the Sikh communal kitchen – is the most visible example: anyone of any background, sits side by side and eats the same food, serves by hands

[16] Pashaura Singh and Louis E Fenech*, The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* (Oxford University Press 2014).
[17] Singh, *The Name of My Beloved* (n 5).
[18] Harjot Oberoi*, The Construction of Religious Boundaries* (Oxford University Press, USA 1997).

that see no caste. But Seva goes beyond food. It is legal aid offered to the undocumented. It is a shoulder to the grieving. It is cleaning the wounds of strangers.

Miri-Piri – Temporal and Spiritual Sovereignty

One of the most radical idea in Sikh thought is the inseparability of spiritual depth and political agency.[19] The saint-soldier (Sant-Sipahi) ideal teaches that holiness without courage is hollow, and activism without humility is dangerous.[20] A just society requires both. It requires people who can wield power without being corrupted by it. In an age of performative politics and moral fatigue, Miri-Piri calls us to cultivate inner clarity and external courage, side by side.

Ik Onkar – Oneness of All

At a time where identity often fragments us, Sikh jurisprudence roots us in a metaphorical truth: we are all manifestations of the same divine light.[21] This is not poetic sentiment, it is a legal and ethical position. It insists that any system, state, or institution that treats some lives as disposable is fundamentally illegitimate. When divine light is everywhere, no injustice is small. No person is beneath notice.

Resistance as Worship

Guru Nanak's successors, particularly Guru Arjun and Guru Gobind Singh, institutionalised resistance to oppression not as a political strategy, but as a spiritual duty. The Sikh martyrs did not die for conquest, but to protect the rights of others, even those who did not share their faith. Guru Tegh Bahadur gave his life defending the religious freedom of Hindus – a striking

---

[19] Ibid.
[20] WH McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa* (Oxford University Press, USA 2003).
[21] Singh (n 5).

act of universalist morality.[22] In this framework, silence in the face of tyranny is not neutrality. It is complicity. True spirituality must interfere with injustice.

These principles do not simply complement British values, they animate them. Democracy without Sarbat da Bhala becomes factionalism. Liberty without Seva becomes selfishness. Rule of law without Ik Onkar becomes mechanical and blind to suffering. In the Sikh model, values are not just ideas to aspire to – they are disciplines to be embodied.

Moreover, Sikh jurisprudence is deeply aligned with the dream of social mobility, but it reframes it. It does not ask only, ''How can the poor rise?'' it asks, ''Why is there poverty at all?'' It does not measure success by access to elite spaces, but by how those spaces serve the most vulnerable. It does not idolise escape from working-class life, it dignifies the worker.

In a world growing numb to inequality, this tradition rekindles a vital truth: that values must cost something. They must ask something of us. They must change how we live.

Aspirational Values for Humanity

To ask what values humans should aspire to is not to ask a philosophical question. It is to ask: what kind of world do we want to build – and who will be allowed to belong in it?

Every value is a mirror. It shows us not only who we are, but who we are willing to leave behind. For too long, society has applauded values that sound noble, yet demand little. Tolerance without transformation. Liberty without solidarity. These are not true values.

But history offers us two remarkable sources of moral clarity. The British tradition, when at its best, gives us civic architecture: a framework of accountability, rule and voice. The Sikh

[22] Oberoi (n 18).

tradition, forged in the fires of spiritual rebellion and ethical devotion, offers us a soul: a sense of shared destiny, courageous empathy, and the refusal to divide humanity by status, caste, or creed.

These together work not as competing systems, but as complementary truths. We can define not only what values are admirable but what values are necessary for humanity's moral survival.

Below are values that must now become central to our collective imagination.

Radical Empathy

Tolerance asks us to accept others. Radical empathy demands that we understand them. It is not enough to ''put up with'' difference. That language is brittle. Sikh though teaches that the divine breathes in every face we meet, and so, we are called not to mere coexistence, but to connection.[23] Guru Nanak did not tolerate the oppressed – he walked with them, served them, defended them.[24] British society must now embrace this deeper standard: to listen across barriers, to see others not as threats, but as stories we do not yet understand.

Moral Courage

If there is one value that underpins both Sikh jurisprudence and Britain's finest historical moments, it is this: the courage to confront power with principle.[25]

Guru Nanak stood before emperors and priests and said what others dared not. So did the suffragettes. So did the civil rights activists. Sikh tradition frames this as the Sant-Sipahi (saint solider) ideal – to cultivate both spiritual depth and worldly bravery.

---

[23] Singh (n 5).
[24] Mandair (n 6).
[25] Ibid.

Today, we face systems that are quiet in their cruelty. Institutional racism. Class satisfaction. Apathy in the face of climate collapse. The value that we must aspire to is not politeness. It is defiance when conscience calls for it.

Shared Sovereignty

British democracy prizes individual liberty. Sikh thought reminds us that liberty without equity becomes elitism.[26]

Shared sovereignty means a society where everyone has a voice. It is not token inclusion. It is about power. It asks: Who decides? Who benefits? Who is heard when they whisper – and who is ignored when they scream?

This value reimagines democracy itself: not as a process of voting once every few years, but as an ethic of constant listening, redistribution, and institutional humility. A society where power is not hoarded, but held in trust for others.

This is the moral architecture that enables true social mobility.

Spiritual Pragmatism

Values fail when they live in slogans, not systems. What we now need is a spiritual pragmatism – a fusion of idealism and implementation.

Guru Nanak did not wait for utopia. He built one, meal by meal, principle by principle. The Langar system didn't theorise equality – it enacted it.[27] This is a lesson British values must absorb more deeply. It is not enough to teach ''liberty'' if systems are biased.

---

[26] Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2011).
[27] Oberoi (n 18).

Spiritual pragmatism asks us to ground lofty values in material reality. It is the bridge between theory and action, between human rights reports and hot meals for the hungry.

This value reminds us: If your values are not visible in your institutions, your rituals, your hiring practises, your textbooks – they are not values. They are illusions.

Universal Kinship

Perhaps the deepest value of all, the one both traditions reach for in their highest moments, is that we are not strangers to one another.

British mutual respect, when sincerely lived, gestures towards this. Sikh philosophy makes it its centre: Ik Onkar. We are not competitors in a race for survival. We are kin.[28] Not metaphorically. But metaphysically. A society that truly internalises this does not build policies that separate ''us'' from ''them.'' It does not criminalise poverty, or profit from inequality.[29] It does not build borders around healthcare, education, or dignity.

Universal kinship demands more than reform. It asks for reorientation of policy and of heart.

Together, these values form not a manifesto, but a moral map. They point not just towards a better future, but towards a more honest present. A society rooted in radical empathy, moral courage, shared sovereignty, spiritual pragmatism, and universal kinship would not merely aspire to justice. It would incarnate it.

This is what humanity must now reach for. Continued alienation, injustice, and moral fatigue is no longer bearable.

---

[28] Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent* (Cambridge University Press 1993).
[29] Mandair (n 6).

Personal Reflection and Future Vision

I was not born into privilege. I did not grow up surrounded by the quiet assurances of success – the inherited networks, the unspoken cultural fluency, the silent safety nets that so often decide futures long before exams or interviews. For people like me, even daring to dream beyond the postcode we come from can feel like a form of rebellion.

But rebellion, I've learned, is sacred.

It is sacred when it chooses hope over resignation. It is sacred when it draws on the wisdom of those who came before – not to mimic them, but to learn how they survived, resisted, and created meaning in unjust worlds.

You do not need to be born into a tradition to recognise its power, especially when it speaks directly to your struggle.

I find there is power in feeding anyone who comes to your door. In serving not from above, but from beside. In praying for the welfare of all. These are blueprints of a just society.

And they make me ask: What if the classrooms I sat in as a child had reflected the same ethic of universal dignity? What it the professions I once assumed were not ''for people like me'' had opened their doors with the same fierce welcome? What if success in Britain was not about escaping your background, but elevating it?

It is these questions, rooted in both British ideals and timeless ethical traditions, that now shape the future I want to help build.

I want to walk through the world with the quiet defiance that Sikhism teaches: the refusal to be small in the face of suffering, the insistence that values must live in action, and that knowledge that no act of courage, no matter how local or ordinary, is ever wasted.

These are the values I aspire to.

Conclusion – A Call to Moral Aspiration

What values should humanity aspire to?

This is not merely a question of ethics. It asks us what kind of future we want to build: one where values are merely spoken, or one where they are lived, shared, and renewed by all.[30]

We live at a time of crisis cloaked in civility. Suffering is systematised. Injustice is dignified and quietly administered. The stories we tell ourselves – of merit, fairness, democracy – often dissolve under the weight of lived reality, especially for those born far from privilege. In such a world, aspirational values must transform the conscience.

British values, when practised with integrity, gives us a vital civic grammar: liberty, law, voice, coexistence. But there is something missing without the soul that animates them. Without the humility and fire found in spiritual traditions that understand justice not only as a policy, but as a presence.

Sikh jurisprudence offers precisely this. It offers a morality that breathes, that cooks for strangers,[31] that resists empire, that prays for the welfare of all,[32] and that recognises the divine in the face of the forgotten.

---

[30] Nussbaum (n 24).
[31] Oberoi (n 19).
[32] Singh (n 26).

Together, these traditions form not two paths, but two pillars – and between them, a bridge. A bridge from theory to action. From inclusion to equity. From access to belonging. From survival to dignified flourishing.

The values humanity must now aspire to are those that confront inequality with courage. Values that do not simply adorn institutions but transform them. Values that centre those at the margins. This is not just a moral test; it is the measure of who we truly are.

Bibliography

Primary Source

Department for Education, 'Promoting Fundamental British Values through SMSC' (*GOV.UK*27 November 2014) https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-fundamental-british-values-through-smsc accessed 10 July 2025

Secondary Sources

Bogdanor, Vernon, *The New British Constitution* (1st edn., Bloomsbury Publishing 2009)

Dorling, Daniel, *Inequality and the 1%* (Verso 2014)

Friedman, Sam and Laurison, Daniel, *Class Ceiling: Why It Pays to Be Privileged* (Policy Press 2019)

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

McLeod, W H, *Sikhs of the Khalsa* (Oxford University Press, USA 2003)

Nesbitt, Eleanor, *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press 2016)

Oberoi, Harjot, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* (Oxford University Press, USA 1997)

Pankhurst, E Sylvia, The Suffragette: The History of the Women's Militant Suffrage Movement 1905-1910 (Read Books 2009)

Parekh, Bhikhu C, *Rethinking Multiculturalism : Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Palgrave Macmillan 2006)

Reay, Diane, *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes* (Policy Press 2017)

Sen, Amaryta, *Development as Freedom* (New York, NY Anchor 1999)

Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur*, The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent* (Cambridge University Press 1993).

——, *The Name of My Beloved : Verses of the Sikh Gurus* (Harpersanfrancisco 1995)

Singh, Pashaura and Fenech, Louis E, *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* (OUP Oxford 2014)

Vincent, Nicholas, *Magna Carta: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP Oxford 2012)

Waldron, Jeremy, *The Dignity of Legislation* (Cambridge University Press 1999)