Title:

By reference to ‘British Values,’ what are the best values for humans to aspire to?

Essay Title

British Values and Sikh Jurisprudence: A Shared Ethic of Justice and Social Mobility

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Overview: By reference to British Values, what are the best values for humans to aspire to?

The concept of "**British Values**," as formally promoted in the UK's educational, legal, and civic frameworks, provides a meaningful lens through which to examine aspirational human values. Democracy, The Rule of Law, individual Liberty, Mutual Respect and Tolerance were introduced through governmental guidance, notably in response to growing concerns about extremism and social cohesion in the early 21st century.[1] While culturally situated, these values align with broader Enlightenment and liberal democratic ideals, providing a platform for ethical human flourishing.

Democracy

Promotes the value of participation, accountability, and equality in governance. As an aspirational human ideal, it nurtures the ethical imperative of shared responsibility, inclusion, and deliberative dialogue. When democracy is internalised not merely as a system of government but as a moral orientation, it encourages individuals to

[1] Department for Education. Promoting Fundamental British Values as Part of SMSC in Schools. London: DfE, 2014.

cultivate fairness, civic virtue, and a respect for diverse voices. These attributes are foundational in the development of empathetic and socially engaged citizens. As Habermas argues, democratic practices reinforce the communicative rationality essential for ethical public discourse.[2]

The Rule of Law

Often seen as a procedural safeguard, also reflects a deep moral aspiration, the commitment to justice, predictability, and the protection of fundamental rights. As Lord Bingham notes, the rule of law is a “shield of the powerless against the powerful” and a cornerstone of civilised life.[3] For individuals, internalising the value of the rule of law means acknowledging the primacy of ethical constraints over arbitrary power. It affirms the notion that no one is above the law and that legal frameworks should be guided by principles of fairness and equity. The aspiration here lies in the universal respect for justice as a social and personal obligation.

Individual liberty

Pertains to the right of individuals to think, speak, and act freely, so long as they do not infringe upon the rights of others. This value, far from promoting unbounded self-interest, implies a recognition of personal responsibility, self-determination, and moral agency. As Berlin famously distinguishes, positive liberty implies the capacity for rational self-governance.[4] It calls upon individuals to develop their abilities for autonomy and ethical discernment, thus forming the bedrock for self-realisation and dignity. Importantly, liberty also requires the cultivation of self-restraint and respect

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[2] Habermas, Jürgen. Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996.

[3] Bingham, Tom. The Rule of Law. London: Penguin, 2010.

[4] Berlin, Isaiah. Four Essays on Liberty. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969

for others' freedoms, a paradox that highlights the nuanced ethical demands of true freedom.

Mutual Respect and Tolerance

Of those with different beliefs and lifestyles represent perhaps the most relational of the British Values. In a pluralistic society, the ability to coexist peacefully and constructively across differences is not merely a social necessity but a profound moral achievement. As Parekh argues, tolerance is not mere forbearance but a positive engagement with diversity[5]

These values call for empathy, recognition of shared humanity, and a commitment to dialogue over dogma. They also involve active engagement with the 'Other' and a rejection of dehumanisation, prejudice, or xenophobia. Taken collectively, these British Values articulate a framework of aspiration that aligns with broader humanistic and cosmopolitan ethical ideals. They serve not only as social guidelines but also as personal virtues, promoting the cultivation of the self in ways that honour both autonomy and solidarity. While they emerge from the specific political culture of the United Kingdom, they resonate with global discourses on human rights, dignity, and moral progress.

The best values for humans to aspire to, grounded in British Values are those that encourage personal integrity, collective responsibility, and respect for difference. These values, when sincerely pursued, can foster more just, compassionate, and resilient societies.

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[5] Parekh, Bhikhu. Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

Overview: By reference to Sikh Values, what are the best values for humans to aspire to?”

Sikhism presents a deeply spiritual and socially grounded ethical framework. Rooted in the teachings of Guru Nanak and the ten successive Sikh Gurus, Sikh values offer

a rich model of human aspiration one that blends devotion with action, and personal integrity with social justice.[6]

Foundational Sikh values:

Naam Japna - meditative remembrance of God.

This discipline cultivates inner mindfulness and moral clarity. However, spirituality in Sikhism is inherently engaged with the world. The aspirational ideal here is not detachment, but the integration of spiritual consciousness into ethical living.[7]

Truth (Sat) - is paramount in Sikh ethics.

Guru Nanak asserted that “Truth is the highest virtue, but higher still is truthful living”[8] this value signifies integrity, authenticity, and alignment between inner conviction and outer conduct.

Kirat Karni - earning through honest means

emphasises economic ethics. It encourages diligence, self-respect, and rejection of corruption or exploitation. Sikh teachings honour honest labour as a form of spiritual discipline and social contribution[9]

Vand Chakna - the practice of sharing with others underscores community solidarity and social equity

This value is actualised through seva (*selfless service*), a core Sikh ethic that demands humility, generosity, and collective responsibility.

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[6] Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. The Name of My Beloved: Verses of the Sikh Gurus. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995.

[7] Mandair, Arvind-Pal Singh. Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

[8] Guru Granth Sahib, p. 62.

[9] Singh, Pashaura. “Kirat Karni: The Sikh Ethic of Earning One’s Living.” In Sikhism and Ethics, edited by Harbans Singh, Patiala: Punjabi University Press, 2005

The institution of Langar. (*community kitchen*) operationalises this ideal, welcoming all regardless of caste, creed, or class[10]

Sikhism also foregrounds equality and justice. It was one of the first major religions to reject caste hierarchy explicitly. Guru Gobind Singh's formation of the Khalsa included both men and women from all social backgrounds, embodying a radical call to egalitarianism and resistance against oppression.[11]Justice in Sikh thought is not passive but active, a commitment to protect the vulnerable and challenge injustice.

Finally,

Nimrata (*humility*)

Is a transformative value that combats Haumai (*ego*), considered the root of moral error and human suffering. Humility allows individuals to recognise the divine in others and to act with compassion and wisdom.[12]

Sikh values such as truthfulness, honest labour, selfless service, justice, and humility are powerful ethical ideals. They guide not only religious practice but also provide a universally relevant vision for human flourishing.

[10] Jakobsh, Doris R. Sikhism. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012.

[11] Grewal, J. S. The Sikhs of the Punjab. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

[12] Singh, Gopal. A History of the Sikh People. New Delhi: World Sikh University Press, 1979.

Essay Title

British Values and Sikh Jurisprudence: A Shared Ethic of Justice and Social Mobility

I. Abstract

At the core of every just society lies a set of guiding principles that do more than maintain order, they inspire identity, shape moral vision, and build inclusive communities. This essay explores the powerful interplay between core British values, democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance whost incorporating and discussing Sikh jurisprudence, a tradition grounded in equality, service, and spiritual self-determination.

Drawing on case law such as ***Mandla v Dowell Lee*** and ***Chahal v United Kingdom***, empirical data, and community-led initiatives including the Sikh Court and the Guru Nanak Social Mobility Scholarship, the essay demonstrates how civic ideals and faith-based ethics can converge to promote justice, empowerment, and cohesion in modern Britain. Rather than treating these systems as separate or oppositional, this paper argues that British civic ideals and Sikh philosophy are mutually reinforcing. Together, they offer a moral and legal framework that uplifts individuals, strengthens democratic institutions, and cultivates a society built on dignity, inclusion, and responsibility.

II. Introduction

What makes for a good society? Beyond policy and governance, the question revolves around values, what we prioritise, how we relate to others, and the principles we pass down through generations. In an era marked by political polarisation and social fragmentation, these questions gain renewed urgency. Since 2018, the Guru Nanak Social Mobility Scholarships, founded by barrister **Mukhtiar Singh** and supported by the **Sikh Education Council** have sought to make

professions like law and medicine accessible to those from underprivileged backgrounds. Yet the programme is not merely a financial aid initiative. It is a broader attempt to reintroduce Sikh jurisprudence as a living ethical tradition with deep relevance for contemporary legal and civic life.

This essay examines the question:

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

It does so through an integrated framework, engaging with five British civic values and aligning them with corresponding Sikh principles. These insights are not just theoretical, they are grounded in real-world examples, such as the development of the Sikh Court in London, and legal judgments that have tested the balance between cultural identity and legal universality.

III. Democracy: Voice, Consent, Participation

Democracy in the British context is defined by political participation, legal accountability, and representation. But these elements are not exclusive to Western governance, they echo longstanding Sikh practices of communal deliberation and equality-based decision-making. One of the clearest examples emerges from the formation of the ***Khalsa in 1699 by Guru Gobind Singh***. This spiritual collective, open to all castes and inclusive of women, symbolised the rejection of hierarchical power and the embrace of shared leadership. Decision-making within Sikh tradition often follows ***Gurmata*** consensus-based resolutions passed through deliberative processes that respect every participant's voice. This participatory ethos is mirrored in British law. In ***Mandla v Dowell Lee [1983] 2 AC 548***, the House of Lords ruled that a school had indirectly discriminated against a Sikh boy by banning turbans. The

case underscored that democracy is meaningless unless institutions are accountable to the lived identities of minority communities. Representation must include cultural and religious expression within the civic space.

The Sikh Court in London, established under the **Arbitration Act 1996**, furthers this democratic ideal. Its operation is voluntary, transparent, and legally compliant. By respecting both cultural specificity and legal standards, it shows that participatory democracy can evolve to include diverse ethical perspectives, thereby strengthening democratic legitimacy rather than undermining it.

IV. Rule of Law: Equality, Protection, and Justice

The rule of law is foundational to British justice. It ensures that power is exercised within defined limits, rights are protected through due process, and equality is not just aspirational but actionable. These principles resonate strongly with Sikh jurisprudence, where legal and moral reasoning are deeply intertwined. A profound example is the ***martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur***, who sacrificed his life in defence of the religious freedom of Kashmiri Hindus. This act was not about preserving one's own faith but protecting the principle of freedom of conscience, a notion that lies at the very heart of legal impartiality.

Modern legal precedent echoes this moral stance. In ***Chahal v United Kingdom (1996) 23 EHRR 413***, the European Court of Human Rights held that deporting Mr Chahal based on secret evidence violated **Articles 3 and 8 of the European Convention**. The ruling confirmed that national security does not override procedural fairness, a cornerstone of the rule of law. The Sikh Court offers a contemporary expression of these values. By functioning within the framework of UK law, with oversight and anonymised rulings, it balances community ethics with legal

proceduralism. Sikh teachings elevate the law from a tool of enforcement to a vehicle for justice, ensuring fairness is both legally sound and morally anchored.

V. Individual Liberty: Self-Determination and Responsibility

British civic life prizes liberty, the right to think freely, worship without fear, and pursue one's goals. This principle finds deep resonance in Sikhism, where freedom is seen not only as a right but as a spiritual responsibility. Guru Hargobind's release from Gwalior Fort is emblematic. Upon being freed, he demanded the liberation of 52 other prisoners insisting that liberty must be collective. Commemorated as Bandi Chhor Divas, this moment highlights that freedom, in Sikh thought, must benefit others, not just oneself. This aligns with ***Chahal v United Kingdom***, where liberty was protected even under political duress. Similarly, Sikh ethics promote '**Seva**' (*selfless service*), reinforcing that personal autonomy should be exercised with accountability to the wider community.

Statistically, British Sikhs exemplify this balance. With 87% homeownership and 66% earning over £40,000 annually, they enjoy high levels of socio-economic autonomy. Yet this is coupled with deep community involvement, from charity drives to interfaith dialogue. The Sikh Court upholds liberty through voluntary participation, showing that cultural identity can be honoured without coercing conformity. In both traditions, liberty is not license but stewardship a commitment to freedom that respects both individual and collective dignity.

VI. Mutual Respect and Tolerance: Multicultural Cohesion

Mutual respect and tolerance are vital in a multicultural democracy. These values go beyond tolerance-as-avoidance, they demand active engagement and sincere

recognition of difference. Sikhism has long been rooted in this ethic. Guru Nanak rejected caste and religious segregation, proclaiming the oneness of humanity. Later, Guru Tegh Bahadur gave his life to defend the rights of others to practice their faith, arguably one of the clearest examples of interfaith solidarity. Modern expressions of this ethos include Langar (*the free communal kitchen*), where all are served equally regardless of background. Across Britain, Sikh communities practice Seva through food banks, disaster relief, and public service, demonstrating that cultural identity can be a bridge, not a barrier.

Despite these contributions, challenges remain. Islamophobia, discrimination, and stereotyping persist. The Sikh Court has faced scrutiny, particularly around gender equity. Activists like Pragna Patel have raised valid concerns about power dynamics in community-based arbitration. Yet, the Sikh Court functions within the legal boundaries of the **Arbitration Act 1996**. Participation is optional, judgments are reviewable, and independence is safeguarded, thus illustrating that respect for culture and rights need not be mutually exclusive. Mutual respect flourishes when both institutions and communities engage as equals. Sikh jurisprudence provides a template for such engagement, one grounded in dignity, responsibility, and justice.

VII. **Sikh Jurisprudence and Social Mobility**

The Guru Nanak Social Mobility Scholarship is a case study in applied values. It aims to dismantle systemic barriers, whether economic, educational, or cultural that prevent talented individuals from accessing elite professions. Sikh ethics offer a clear roadmap. Kirat karo (*honest work*), vidya (*pursuit of knowledge*), and seva (*service*) are principles that cultivate both personal growth and communal well-being. These values do more than uplift individuals, they transform society.

The scholarship not only provides financial support but also mentorship, educational access, and moral formation. Mock trials, bar mentoring, and legal internships are key components. This approach levels the playing field while preserving cultural identity.

Crucially, the Sikh Court offers a model of jurisprudence in action. Its transparent, legally compliant framework proves how cultural understanding can enhance legal practice. Introducing Sikh legal philosophy into citizenship and law curricula could further this mission, therefore enriching both education and civic identity. Sikh jurisprudence, when taught and practised, offers more than tradition. It becomes a vehicle for justice, equity, and opportunity, linking personal empowerment to public good.

VIII. **Addressing Criticism: Balancing Tradition and Rights**

Criticism of faith-based arbitration often centres on concerns around gender inequality, community pressure, and legal fragmentation. While such scrutiny is essential in a democratic society, it must be grounded in fact. The Sikh Court, unlike informal tribunals, operates under formal legal structures. Governed by the **Arbitration Act 1996**, it requires informed consent, ensures procedural fairness, and maintains transparency through anonymised rulings and independent oversight. Participation is voluntary, and all parties retain access to secular courts. Pragna Patel and others have rightly cautioned against systems that may reproduce patriarchal norms. Yet, when faith-based mechanisms incorporate legal safeguards, they need not undermine rights. Rather, they can expand access to justice, particularly for those hesitant to engage with the mainstream judiciary.

Sikh jurisprudence offers a framework of ethical reasoning that complements legal protections. Rooted in equality and accountability, it allows for culturally informed, rights-respecting resolution, where law is applied not despite identity, but through it.

IX. **Conclusion**

This essay has explored the convergence between core British civic values and Sikh jurisprudence. Far from being distinct or conflicting, these frameworks mutually reinforce a shared ethic of justice, dignity, and social cohesion.

Through legal cases like Mandla v Dowell Lee and Chahal v United Kingdom, we see how British courts have upheld democratic values in complex, multicultural contexts. Sikh history embodied in the lives of Guru Nanak, Guru Tegh Bahadur, and Guru Hargobind offers a long-standing tradition of standing for human rights, equality, and ethical leadership. Initiatives like the Sikh Court and the Guru Nanak Scholarship translate these values into lived experience. They provide accessible justice, support professional aspiration, and instil moral purpose in future leaders.

The best values to aspire to are those that are lived and not just legislated. When democracy is participatory, when the rule of law is just, when liberty is responsible, when respect is mutual, and when tolerance is active, society becomes not just functional but flourishing.

Sikh jurisprudence does not dilute British values, it deepens them. It offers a way to honour tradition without compromising rights, to engage diversity without weakening unity. Together, they present a vision of justice that is not only inclusive, but profoundly human.

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