

GURU NANAK SOCIAL MOBILITY SCHOLARSHIP ESSAY:

Was Theresa May right when she said Sikh values are “values we need more than ever as we forge a new ambitious role for Britain in the world”?

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## INTRODUCTION

With the looming uncertainty of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, we must acknowledge that Britain's role in the world is changing now more than ever. According to May's *Vaisakhi* statement, forging a new and ambitious role for the country, on a global scale, requires Sikh values such as "equality and respect [...] fairness and helping those less fortunate".<sup>1</sup> However, there is much more to Sikh jurisprudence that has the power to impact Britain's socio-political and economic development for the better. The benefits of applying Sikh values domestically in order to impact the world on an international level are particularly apparent if we consider the much larger context of global political upheaval caused not only by 'Brexit', but also the nomination of Trump in the US, the 'refugee crisis'<sup>2</sup> and the decrease in members of the International Criminal Court,<sup>3</sup> to name only a few factors that highlight the state of public disillusionment in political leaders across the world. This brings us to the esoteric teachings from the Guru Granth Sahib, and the question of whether applying Sikh values can help restore the public's faith in our political representatives and consequently, the ability of Britain itself to become an innovative transnational leader. In this essay, I will first look to define each of the relevant "Sikh values" applicable, before considering whether they are needed more than ever in order to develop the country and forge a more ambitious role for Britain in the world as a whole.

## SIKHISM AND THE VALUE OF EQUALITY

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<sup>1</sup> Statement by Theresa May, 14 April 2017. Available: <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/vaisakhi-2017-theresa-mays-message>> Accessed 01/09/2018.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Trilling, 'Five myths about the refugee crisis' The Guardian, 5 June 2018.

<sup>3</sup> 'Burundi first to leave International Criminal Court' *Al Jazeera*, 27 October 2017. Available: <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/burundi-leave-international-criminal-court-171027080533712.html>> Accessed 02/09/18.

Sikhism is the fifth largest world religion, with “its own founder prophet (Guru Nanak), scripture (Guru Granth Sahib), discipline and ceremonies (rahit), and community centres (gurdwara)”.<sup>4</sup> Sikhism was established by ten spiritual messengers or ‘Gurus’ over a period of 239 years from 1469 to 1708.<sup>5</sup> The *Guru Granth Sahib* covers 1430 pages and contains the words of the Ten Gurus of Sikhism along with various Saints. This holy text is unique as it is viewed as a living guru and is the only scripture of its kind that contains writings of those of other faiths.

In this respect, one key religious teaching of Sikhism includes the principle of equality and fighting for the rights of others. This is because all humans are to be considered equal and embodying the sanctity of life, regardless of caste, race or gender, as these are all irrelevant to spiritual progress.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, equality and diversity are defining values of British society that have already been used to develop the country as a whole. Despite human rights concerns regarding the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union, it appears that “continued adherence to democratic principles, human rights and fundamental freedoms” are going to be protected in the UK.<sup>7</sup> However, the extent to which *equality* in the UK will be safeguarded remains in question.<sup>8</sup> The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has highlighted that “employment rights” and “funding for women’s services” are the most at risk if the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms as well as EU funding opportunities are lost as a result of

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<sup>4</sup> Simran Jeet Singh, *10 Things I Wish Everyone Knew About Sikhism*, 01 November 2017. Available at: <<https://www.onfaith.co/commentary/10-things-i-wish-everyone-knew-about-sikhism>> Accessed 01/09/18.

<sup>5</sup> Sikh Missionary Society U.K. ‘NEO FAITH: The Sikh Faith’ (2014) Available: <<http://www.sikhmissionarysociety.org/sms/smsarticles/essaysonsikhvalues/>> Accessed 02/09/18.

<sup>6</sup> Eleanor Nesbitt, ‘A focus on: Sikhism’, *Community Practitioner* Vol. 91, Iss. 3, (Apr 2018): 33-36.

<sup>7</sup> European Parliament resolution of 14 March 2018 on the framework of the future EU-UK relationship (2018/2573(RSP)).

<sup>8</sup> Liberty, ‘Human rights in the UK after Brexit’ Available: <<https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/human-rights/human-rights-uk-after-brexit>> Accessed 01/09/18.

Britain departing the EU.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the British public are faced with increasing uncertainty about their rights to equal treatment. Consequently, May was right to advise that domestic principles and Sikh values of equality are needed now more than ever in Britain. Until the public are provided with greater certainty about their rights to equality, it remains difficult to not only enforce them legally but also to expect its importance to be recognised socially. Equality is necessary for the effective functioning of the country and both the protection and support of its people. The country will not be able to forge a new ambitious role for itself in the world until Sikh values, such as equality are given much more credence by the lay people and their political representatives.

In addition, equality is defined as being equal in status, rights, as well as opportunity.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, we must consider whether May is also suggesting that Britain needs to improve the distribution of equality of opportunity across the country as a whole. According to the Northern Powerhouse Project, GCSE pupils in the north of England make a third of a grade less progress overall than their peers in London.<sup>11</sup> As a result of reduced education and welfare funding for the north of the country, those from disadvantaged northern backgrounds are facing a further disadvantage when going on to compete in the job market. Subsequently, we see a ripple effect that begins from a slight funding inequality during school education that goes on to exacerbate the country's North-South divide; evolving to impact and stunt Britain's entire economic capacity. In spite of government efforts to work on such inequality, the Northern Powerhouse

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<sup>9</sup> EHRC, 'Pressing for progress: women's rights and gender equality in 2018' July 2018; Maya Oppenheim, *British women to lose 'fundamental rights' because of Brexit, warns human rights report*, *The Independent*, 23 July 2018.

<sup>10</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary, 'Equality' (2018) Oxford University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Northern Powerhouse Partnership (NPP) Report, *Educating the North: driving ambition across the Powerhouse*, 01 February 2018; Frances Perraudin, 'Disadvantaged pupils achieve lower grades in north than in London', *The Guardian*, 01 February 2018.

project has failed to meet its objectives over the past five years.<sup>12</sup> Thus, this further emphasises the necessity of equality in Britain, as a value that is needed for the growth of the country and its dispersed economic development.

Consequently, May was correct to suggest Britain needs Sikh values, such as equality now more than ever. If we are able to enforce the application of equality in the above legal, socio-political and economic areas, this will inevitably benefit the public and British society as a whole. The Sikh principle of equality has the capacity to impact the community, as individuals who feel that their rights are protected and their hurdles are no greater than their peers will likely be more willing to have faith in their political representatives. Thus, a stronger Britain domestically will result in a far more stable one that allows for the ability to forge itself a new and ambitious role in the world as a whole.

#### SIKHISM AND THE VALUE OF CHARITY AND GOOD DEEDS

Another essential Sikh value is *Vand Chhakna*, or sharing with others.<sup>13</sup> This value exists in Sikhism as it encourages individuals to devote their lives to serving others so that they may rid themselves of their own ego and pride. Sikh scripture advises that if you allow your ego (Ahankar) to take over then you are more likely to give in to the remaining vices of lust (Kaam), anger (Krodth), greed (Lobh) and materialism (Moh).<sup>14</sup> Such vices are analogous to the seven deadly sins that must be avoided within Christianity.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the notion of compulsory charity within faith can be compared to the third Pillar of Islam, 'Zakat'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ed Cox, 'Five years after its launch, the Northern Powerhouse is still a work in progress', *iNews*, 16 February 2018. Available: <<https://inews.co.uk/opinion/five-years-launch-northern-powerhouse-still-work-progress/>> Accessed 02/09/18.

<sup>13</sup> See Guru Granth Sahib, Page 761.

<sup>14</sup> See Guru Granth Sahib, Page 1388 Shabad 5352; Page 1395 Shabad 5390.

<sup>15</sup> Lust (Matthew 5:28); Gluttony (Proverbs 23:21); Greed (Ephesians 4:19); Laziness (Proverbs 15:19); Wrath (Proverbs 15:1); Envy (1 Peter 2:1-2); Pride (Proverbs 16:18).

<sup>16</sup> The Holy Quran, 21:73; 22:78; 3:134.

Highlighting the accepting nature of the Sikh religion; the first Guru travelled through Asia and Africa speaking in temples, mosques and at numerous pilgrimage sites before those of various religions, where he encouraged respect and equality rather than conversion.<sup>17</sup>

When considering the need for Sikh values of charity and selflessness in Britain today, we must take into account statistics on the recent standard of living. According to the Resolution Foundation, last year the UK suffered the largest single year rise in poverty since 1988.<sup>18</sup> The Audit conducted by the think tank highlights factors that have increased rates of poverty since 2015, such as “the unexpected spike in inflation after the Brexit vote”, and also government freezing of the nominal value of tax credits, child benefit and housing benefits.<sup>19</sup> Such political decisions also appear to have been the predominant cause of the increased use of food banks across the country. In this respect, between April 2017 and March 2018 The Trussell Trust’s food bank network distributed 13% more emergency supplies than the previous year.<sup>20</sup> Unsurprisingly, this leads one to believe that the Sikh value of sharing and providing for others is indeed needed now more than ever. However, this also highlights the need for greater government spending on social welfare, as well as the need for individual charitable donations. Although May was correct in her statement, it must be highlighted that charity should first begin at home, and May’s policies are needed to more accurately reflect the values that she clearly wishes her voters to demonstrate; so that Britain is *able* to forge this ambitious new role in the world without negatively impacting its subjects.

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<sup>17</sup> Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus Sacred Writings and Authors* (1909) Low Price Publications (ISBN 8175361328).

<sup>18</sup> Ben Chu, ‘Biggest rise in UK poverty since Margaret Thatcher was in power, experts claim’ *The Independent*, 23 July 2018.

<sup>19</sup> A. Corlett, S. Clarke, C. D’Arcy, J. Wood., ‘The Living Standards Audit 2018’, *The Resolution Foundation*, 24 July 2018. Available: <<https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-living-standards-audit-2018/>> Accessed 02/09/18

<sup>20</sup> The Trussell Trust, ‘End of Year Stats’ (2018). Available: <<https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/>> Accessed 02/09/18.

## THE VICES

This brings us to the five vices in Sikhism that one should avoid or attempt to battle in life. The vices should be overcome with the five weapons detailed in scripture: Humility (Nimrata) Compassion (Daya), Truth (Sat), Contentment (Santokh), and Love (Pyar). We have, in some small part, covered three of the vices already. These include egotistical behaviour, greed, and materialism as these can all be overcome through acts of selflessly giving to others, as detailed by charity above. So we will firstly consider the relevance of lust. In recent news, we have been bombarded with reports of sexual abuse by high profile individuals. Amongst other things, this prompted an Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse,<sup>21</sup> the resignation of British defence minister Michael Fallon,<sup>22</sup> as well as a scathing report relating to legal aid workers by the House of Commons International Development Committee.<sup>23</sup> Taking into account such investigations along with public distrust of those in power across the globe,<sup>24</sup> it is clear that now, more than ever; Britain must look to enforce the application of Sikh values including the deterrence of such immoral and illegal conduct relating to the vice of lust.

The final vice we will consider is that of anger, which must also be avoided in Sikhism. In terms of May's statement, it is again right that Sikh values of avoiding particular behaviours are needed more than ever. This is due to the police watchdog's recent warning that an increase in hate crime across the country is a 'real possibility' following the UK's 2019 exit from the

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<sup>21</sup> IICSA, Interim Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, April 2018. Available: <<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/reports/interim>> Accessed 02/09/18.

<sup>22</sup> W. James, E. Piper, 'Fallon resigns in growing harassment scandal' *Reuters*, 01 November 2017. Available: <<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-politics-fallon/fallon-resigns-in-growing-harassment-scandal-idUKKBN1D15Q5>> Accessed 02/09/18.

<sup>23</sup> Sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector inquiry (2018) Report available: <<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmintdev/840/84002.htm>> Accessed 02/09/18.

<sup>24</sup> B. Jacobs, S. Siddiqui, S. Bixby, 'You can do anything!': Trump brags on tape about using fame to get women' *The Guardian*, 08 October 2016. Available: <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/07/donald-trump-leaked-recording-women>> Accessed 02/09/18.

European Union.<sup>25</sup> The link between hate crime and anger is detailed within a report drafted in 2016 by the EHRC, entitled “Causes and motivations of hate crime.” The report labels anger as a causal factor of such criminal behaviour.<sup>26</sup> From the information provided above, we can see how the UK’s imminent departure from the European Union, coupled with financial insecurity arising from insufficient welfare provisions and increased distrust of political representatives, appears to have aggravated the masses into the vice of anger. The question is whether this anger can be battled whilst reinforcing Sikh values. As the Sikh way advocates the use of truth as a weapon, one may surmise that such anger could be overcome by using truth in for the obliteration of ignorance through education of the masses. Consequently, this emphasises that more must be done in order to diminish the impact of anger as well as disillusionment across the country so that we may develop and forge the ambitious future May seems to believe we have the capacity for.

## SIKHISM AND THE VALUE OF HONESTY

The concept of *Kit Karna*, or earning an honest living is essential to Sikh jurisprudence and the final value we will consider in this essay. Sikh dedication to truth and honesty was promoted throughout the Guru Ganth Sahib, but was given even more prominence by the tenth living guru, Guru Gobind Singh. He created the *Khalsa*, a spiritual method for devout Sikhs who wish to externally represent their beliefs through symbolic garments. The most recognized symbolic dress in Sikhism is the turban. In the *Khalsa*, this is perceived as a ‘crown of spirituality’ that acts as a beacon of help to any and all of those in need. Similarly the *Kara*, or bangle of steel worn by the *Khalsa*, represents an external bond to the truth and freedom from other

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<sup>25</sup> Vikram Dodd, ‘Brexit will trigger rise in hate crimes, warns police watchdog’ *The Guardian*, 19 July 2018; HMICFRS, ‘State of Policing: The Annual Assessment of Policing in England and Wales 2017’ June 2018.

<sup>26</sup> EHRC, *Causes and motivations of hate crime*, July 2016, p.38. Available: <<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research-report-102-causes-and-motivations-of-hate-crime.pdf>> Accessed 02/09/18.

entanglements. In addition, the *Kirpan* is a traditional sword that represents a commitment to righteously defend the fine line of the truth.<sup>27</sup> Such symbolism highlights the importance of truth and honesty within the Sikh faith. This raises the question of whether such honesty is a value that we need more than ever as we forge a new ambitious role for Britain in the world. In light of Britain's changing role in the world arising from Brexit, there is arguably a greater need for honesty between political representatives and the voting people.<sup>28</sup> Prior to the referendum result we saw political parties campaigning both illegally<sup>29</sup> and with dishonest propaganda.<sup>30</sup> Despite such actions, at least 48% of the voting British public now find themselves suffering from an unexpected and unwanted blow to their economy and legal rights. The International Monetary Fund has advised that although Britain is currently the sixth largest economy in the world, it will likely perform the worst as it attempts to navigate the unknown terrain that is Brexit.<sup>31</sup> This begs the question of whether such a disastrous result could have been prevented if Sikh values had been applied during the campaign. Whilst we are unable to consider such hypotheticals given the many factors that may impact democracy, we are now in a position where we can hopefully learn from past mistakes and develop the country moving forward.

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<sup>27</sup> Encyclomedia of the Sikhs, 'The Making of the Khalsa' (2012). Available: <[http://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Introduction\\_to\\_Sikhism](http://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Introduction_to_Sikhism)> Accessed 02/09/18.

<sup>28</sup> 'It's time for honesty from Theresa May on the Brexit deal' *The Independent*, 5 July 2018. Available: <<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/editorials/editorial-chequers-brexit-honesty-theresa-may-third-way-a8432841.html>> Accessed 02/09/18; James Blitz, 'More honesty needed from Whitehall over Brexit', *The Financial Times*, 18 April 2018. Available: <<https://www.ft.com/content/418a6352-42fc-11e8-803a-295c97e6fd0b>> Accessed 02/09/18.

<sup>29</sup> Alastair Jamieson, 'Brexit chaos: Britain's Vote Leave campaign fined for illegal referendum overspend', *NBC News*, 17 July 2018. Available: <<https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/brexit-referendum/brexit-chaos-vote-leave-fined-illegal-brexit-referendum-overspend-n891931>> Accessed 02/09/18.

<sup>30</sup> Jon Stone, 'Brexit lies: The demonstrably false claims of the EU referendum campaign' *The Guardian*, 17 December 2017. Available: <<https://www.independent.co.uk/infact/brexit-second-referendum-false-claims-eu-referendum-campaign-lies-fake-news-a8113381.html>> Accessed 02/09/18.

<sup>31</sup> IMF Country Focus, 'UK Economy Must Get More Efficient', *International Monetary Fund*, 14 February 2018. Available: <<https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2018/02/08/na021418-uk-economy-must-get-more-efficient>> Accessed 02/09/18.

However, it must be emphasised that the Sikh principles of honesty and truth must begin with May and our own political representatives themselves, before they can effectively be applied to developing the country as a whole. In this respect, recent Brexit negotiations have seen our political representative continuing to voice illogical terms whilst being attacked by her own cabinet members.<sup>32</sup> This exemplifies the need for greater transparency, honesty and communication between political representatives and the public. Until such changes are made, we are left wanting and lacking a *Kirpan* of our own with which to cut through the illogical and untrue, so as to forge a truly new and ambitious role for Britain in the world as a whole. As such, May was right to say that Sikh values of honesty and truth are needed now more than ever, so that the trust of the population can be restored in light of past grievances and so that we can better develop as a nation of honest working individuals.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, May was indeed correct to state that Sikh values are needed more than ever in Britain. This essay has attempted to outline the most relevant, core values of Sikhism that can be applied to building a better Britain, whilst taking into account its current state of political and socio-economic upheaval; so as to consider the context in which May conferred her message. Moreover, despite the negative examples detailed above, the UK maintains an incredibly influential position in the world. We are a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the sixth largest economy in the world, a nuclear weapons state, a member of the world's most powerful intelligence agreement, as well as a cultural superpower.<sup>33</sup> However, by considering and applying the fundamental principles of Sikhism - such as: equality, fighting for

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<sup>32</sup> Chris Green, 'Theresa May fighting to keep Brexit plan alive as it is attacked by EU and her own party' *iNews*, 02 September 2018. Available: <<https://inews.co.uk/news/brexit/theresa-may-fights-brexit-plan-alive-attacked-eu-tories/>> Accessed 02/09/18.

<sup>33</sup> James Forsyth, 'Will Britain find a new role in the world after Brexit?' *The Spectator*, 14 April 2018. Available: <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/04/will-britain-find-a-new-role-in-the-world-after-brexit/>> Accessed 02/09/18.

the rights of others, selflessly serving others before ourselves, living a disciplined life, living honestly without harming others, and overcoming selfish egotistical behaviour through education and the fight for truth - this will better enable us to develop as individuals and also as a country, so that we may go on to forge a new ambitious role for Britain in the world we have today.