

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?”

Introduction.

On the 5th of February 2011, David Cameron denounced multiculturalism at the Munich Security Conference, claiming that it had failed¹. The former Prime Minister’s speech was criticised, not only because it vilified minorities about their national identity, but because the EDL’s ‘Home-Coming March’ coincided in my hometown of Luton². I was in Year 11 and preparing for my upcoming GCSE examinations at a local comprehensive school, where the deputy head teacher summoned an emergency school meeting in which the students, mainly of South Asian and Afro-Caribbean heritage, were advised not to proceed into town. The mood amongst the wider community was equally heedful, with local businesses closing for the day. In my immediate family, my headscarf-wearing mother, aunt and cousins decided not to leave their houses for fear of violence and reprisal. Almost six years later, on the anniversary of the Khalsa, the current Prime Minister Theresa May forwarded her well wishes to the Sikh Community for Vaisakhi, emphasising the importance of Sikh values such as equality, respect and the promotion of social justice³. Notwithstanding this, racism, gender inequality and structural disparity continue to persist in British society. This paper will take a multi-disciplinary approach by examining Sikh jurisprudence in line with the aforementioned issues, arguing that the adoption of Sikh values would result in a progressive and ambitious Britain. Part one will examine racism through the context of Indian casteism. Part two will wrestle with female inequality through the gender pay gap and domestic violence. Part three will grapple with structural disparity, exploring its future impact.

¹ Full transcript | David Cameron | Speech on radicalisation and Islamic extremism | Munich | 5 February 2011
<<https://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/02/terrorism-islam-ideology>>

² EDL Stages Protest in Luton < <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/feb/05/edl-stage-protest-luton>>

³ UK will need Sikh values of equality, respect post Brexit: Theresa May, 13 April 2017
<<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/uk-will-need-sikh-values-of-equality-respect-post-brexit-theresa-may/articleshow/58163846.cms>>

Racism.

Guru Nanak unintentionally founded Sikhism on reformist and egalitarian principles in Northern India, drawing inspiration from Sufi Islam and Hinduism⁴. Hindu society is divided into castes, reflecting social status in society⁵. However, in my respectful view, casteism is a form of racism because it seeks to legitimise discrimination and prejudice against those of a lower caste. For example, those at the bottom of the Indian hierarchy, the Dalits, have been deprived of the most basic fundamental human rights such as access to health care, education and employment⁶. The Dalits have asserted their civil and political rights to peaceful protest and armed struggle, but their voices have been largely ignored by the Indian Government. Guru Nanak vehemently rejected the dichotomy between lower and higher castes. Subsequent Gurus such as Guru Amar Das have also denounced the caste system, arguing that the moral character is what matters to God⁷. Three verses of the Holy Guru Granth Sahib in Japji Sahib are of particular note. Firstly, Page 3 states that *“The entire universe is made of the same clay. The Potter has shaped it into all sorts of vessels.”*⁸ Secondly, Pages 1349 -1350 states *“The clay is the same, but the Fashioner has fashioned it in various ways. There is nothing wrong with the pot of clay.”*⁹ Thirdly, Page 28 states *“Accept all humans as your equals, and let them be your only sect.”*¹⁰ These verses champion human equality, failing to categorise or distinguish between race, caste or creed. Instead, Sikhism celebrates and emphasises egalitarianism, believing that all human life is equal. Therefore, Sikh Jurisprudence rejects casteism, which is a social construction in its entirety because it seeks to fight all forms of discrimination and prejudice.

⁴ H.S Bains, *The Sikhs – A People* (1983), 4.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Smita Narula, Human Rights Watch, *Broken People: Caste Violence against india’s untouchables* (1999)

⁷ Owen Cole, Piara Singh Sambhi, *Sikhism* (1973), 15.

⁸ Siri Guru Granth Sahib,3.

⁹ Ibid, 1349-1350.

¹⁰ Ibid,28.

Whilst significant progress has been made in Race Relations, namely with the inception of the Race Relations Act 1965¹¹, it is respectfully suggested that this statute failed to eradicate racism in Britain. The 1970s-1980s witnessed riots in Brixton, Birmingham, and the infamous Rivers of Blood speech by Enoch Powell. Mr Powell's speech fanned the flames of racial hatred further, introducing "Paki-Bashing" - a violent form of racism which resulted in physical and verbal racist abuse hurled towards the South-Asian community¹². These attacks were fuelled by the media and its anti-immigrant sentiment, further exacerbated by the blasé attitude of police forces towards victims of hate crime¹³. Thirty years on, the United Kingdom voted on its membership of the EU on Thursday 23 June 2016. 52% of voters opted to leave the European Union¹⁴. The referendum result not only prompted the resignation of David Cameron, but also in the increase of racism, religious intolerance and violence against minorities. The UN Special Rapporteur Ms. E Tendayi Achiume, during an official visit to the UK noted that *"A Brexit-related trend that threatens racial equality in the UK has been the growth in the acceptability of explicit racial, ethnic and religious intolerance"*¹⁵. The Special Rapporteur's position is evidenced by statistics from the Institute for the Study of Civil Society Crime, which reported a 57% increase in hate crime-related incidents since the Brexit referendum¹⁶. Therefore, it would be disingenuous to omit Britain's gloomy history from public discourse, which is tinged with racial prejudice, violence and discrimination.

In my respectful view, the racism and prejudice inherent in British society today is akin to the casteism prevalent during the Gurus' lifetime. This is because the Anti- Sikh Pogroms in 1984, Anti-

¹¹ Race Relations Act 1965

¹² Stephen Ashe, Satnam Virdee, and Laurence Brown, Striking back against racist violence in the East End of London, 1968–1970 (2016) <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5327924/>>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ EU Referendum <<https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/eu-referendum>>

¹⁵ Please note that a full report will be submitted on June 2019 session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. For the preliminary press release, please see <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/brexit-racism-religious-intolerance-united-nations-special-rapporteur-a8348021.html>>

¹⁶ Civitas, Hate Crime: the facts behind the headlines

<<https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/hatecrimethefactsbehindtheheadlines.pdf>>

Semitism during the Nazi Regime, and current Islamophobia are unified by the concept of othering. Othering establishes a hierarchy based on social identity and belonging, with those considered inferior deprived of basic human dignity and vulnerable to violence, discrimination and prejudice. For example, Boris Johnson's recent ill-judged comments on the Burka not only reinforces this mentality, but it also seeks to dehumanise Muslim women¹⁷. This disposition, with respect, is inconsistent with Sikh Jurisprudence, which views all life as equal and does not distinguish between race and religion. In addition to the passages quoted above, Page 1330 of the Guru Granth Sahib states, *"Do not enquire about one's caste and birth...honour is determined by deeds"*¹⁸. In the same context, *Mandla v Dowell-Lee*¹⁹ was a case concerning racial discrimination, where a Sikh boy was refused school admission due to not cutting his hair (Kesh). This case positively changed the law, holding that Sikhs were an ethnic group under Statute Law. Observing the Kesh is a form of obedience to God, which is underpinned by universal human equality²⁰. Therefore, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that Sikhism will extinguish racism entirely, but the adoption of Sikh values unquestionably fosters greater understanding and tolerance between different races and religions.

¹⁷ Boris Johnson: pressure mounts in Tory party over burqa remarks
<<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/aug/07/boris-johnsons-burqa-remarks-offensive-foreign-office-minister-alistair-burt>>

¹⁸ Guru Granth Sahib (n 5), 1330.

¹⁹ [1983] 2 AC 548

²⁰ W.H Mcleod, *The Way of the Sikh* (1975)

Inequality of Women.

Traditional attitudes towards women have functioned as an inherent obstacle in attaining their equality and realisation of rights. During the Gurus' lifetime, some cultural practices such as polygamy and women restricted to becoming housewives, with minimal access to their own land and property, exemplified gender inequality. However, the issue of gender inequality is not confined to those cultures and timeframe, but it is a universal phenomenon. Gender-based discrimination is defined under Article 1 of the Convention against the Discrimination of Women as:

*"discrimination against women shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field."*²¹

This is not an exhaustive list, but gender-based discrimination encompasses the gender pay gap and domestic violence. This explicates that gender discrimination is an inherent problem in the twenty-first century, and unfortunately, it also occurs on British soil. For example, Ryanair revealed a gender pay gap of 72%, with women making up only 3% of the top quarter of earners at the airline²². Similarly, in local Government, North Hertfordshire District Council, whose workforce is 65% women

²¹ UN General Assembly, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 18 December 1979, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1249, 13

²² Ryan Air Gender Pay Report <<https://investor.ryanair.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/.../ryanair-gender-pay-gap.pdf>>

and 35% men has a gender pay gap of 34%, with 61% of the top roles taken by men²³. These statistics are staggering and make for uncomfortable reading. In my view, it illustrates retrogression in gender equality and the role it plays in our society.

On the other hand, Sikhism has championed women's rights, arguing for equality between the sexes. Guru Nanak has been labelled a feminist by commentators such as Nesbit²⁴, highlighting the following verse in the Guru Granth Sahib, *"our birth is from a woman and in a woman we grow. Woman is our friend and from woman comes the family. If one woman dies we seek another; without woman there can be no bond. Why call woman bad when she gives birth to Rajas? Woman herself is born of a woman, and none comes into this world without her."*²⁵ In the same context, Guru Nanak supports gender equality, enunciating that *"In a woman man is conceived, from a woman he is born ... why denounce her, the one from whom even kings are born. From a woman, women are born. None may exist without woman"*²⁶. Guru Nanak's contention is further supported by Guru Amar Das, who condemned polygamy and the act of sati, which is the ritual burning of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre²⁷. Notwithstanding the disdainful attitudes which existed in the 15th Century, the Sikh position on gender equality is admirable, not only because it was progressive in a society with a misogynistic outlook, but because it recognised the value of women. Both Guru Nanak and Guru Amar Das sought to achieve gender equality by giving women full access to the Sikh religion, freedom to preach, lead congregations, encouraged access to education and forbade female infanticide. Therefore, it is plausible to suggest that Sikhism champions gender equality; the adoption of these values would inevitably result in female inclusion, resulting in an ambitious British future.

²³ Gender Pay Gap: the key statistics < <https://www.aol.co.uk/news/2018/04/04/gender-pay-gap-the-key-statistics/?guccounter=1>>

²⁴ Eleanor Nesbit, Sikhism: a very short introduction (2005)

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Researched <<https://www.sikhs.org/guru3.htm>>

Notwithstanding the above, domestic violence and its practices continue to surface in today's society. This issue is heightened in the South-Asian community, where women are constrained by 'family honour' and stigma by the wider community, failing to notify the authorities of domestic violence. Part of the issue is that there is no legal definition of domestic violence. However, a helpful definition has been forwarded by the CPS' Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Domestic Violence as:

*"any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender and sexuality."*²⁸

Domestic violence is seen by many as the extension of men's patriarchal attitudes towards women, which is exemplified in South-Asian cultures where traditional gender roles still exist²⁹. However, the verses in the Guru Granth Sahib defy these conventions, providing no justification, or legitimacy to the unequal treatment of women. However, the principles of fairness and equal opportunity were later embedded into the Sikh Rehat Maryada (Sikh Code of Conduct) which Sikhs must follow as a part of their religion. Alternatively, it is clear that the Gurus' contemporaneous position sought to achieve opportunities for the weak and oppressed. During their lifetime, this was achieved by advocating against actions such as dowry, female infanticide and veiling. Therefore, Sikh values promote female liberation through feminist values.

²⁸ Domestic violence and abuse <<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-violence-and-abuse#domestic-violence-and-abuse-new-definition>>

²⁹ Alison Diduck and Felicity Kaganas, 'Family Law, Gender and the State : Text, Cases and Materials', 548.

Social Justice.

In the UK today, The Government's Policy Document "Social Justice: Transforming Lives" states that there are hundreds of thousands of individuals and families living profoundly troubled lives marked by multiple disadvantages³⁰. This is not an exhaustive list, but social issues include: the attainment gap between pupils from low-income families (those eligible for free school meals) and their peers through all stages of education, including entry into higher education; secondly, there are 1.1 million dependent Alcohol drinkers in England and close to 306,000 heroin and crack cocaine users in Britain, with an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 children in England and Wales where one or both parents have serious drug problems³¹. These issues have been exacerbated by the Government's crippling annual benefit cuts to social welfare negatively affecting those families already struggling with the aforementioned issues³². It comes as no surprise that children who grow up in unstable environments created by, amongst other things, the attainment gap, increased debt, or substance misuse issues experience a poorer outcome in later life, with 24% of prisoners stating that they were in Local Authority care as a child³³. These statistics are deeply troubling and are reflective of the unfortunate status quo. Therefore, it is clear that inequality of opportunity, unfairness, and unequal treatment has overwhelmingly contributed to social disparity.

Social justice has always been an important part of Sikhism. Therefore, it is unsurprising to note that one of the tenets of the Sikh faith is Dasvandh - a contribution in the name of the Guru, one-tenth of

³⁰ Social Justice: Transforming Lives, 13 March 2012 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-justice-transforming-lives>>

³¹ Ibid

³² Millions of families on brink face deepest benefit cuts in years: <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/mar/10/poverty-benefits-families-cuts-austerity-hammond-poor-welfare>> (10 March 2018)

³³ (n 31) ibid.

earnings forwarded for common resources towards the community³⁴. The following verse in Guru Granth Sahib states that *“One who works for what he eats, and gives some of what he has - O Nanak, he knows the Path.”* A practical illustration of this is the free kitchen (Langar), where anyone, irrespective of their race, caste, religion or social class is welcomed with a free vegetarian meal, which is consumed sitting on the ground. Cole has postulated that during the time of Guru Nanak, it is unlikely that anyone would ever have been sent away from his presence hungry³⁵. Likewise, Guru Amar Das proclaimed the words *“First eat together and then meet together”* in the company of the great Emperor Akbar³⁶. Both Gurus utilised Langar as a method of underlining unity and equality of humankind. This is also evidenced by the humanitarian work undertaken by Khalsa Aid, performed without desire (nishkam), without intention (nishkapat), and with complete humility (nimarta)³⁷. On the other hand, the disadvantaged, namely those with substance misuse issues, spiralling debts, and limited education are united by the lack of community engagement. These individuals are excluded from mainstream society, but Langar seeks to achieve community cohesion and inclusion. Therefore, Sikh values are underpinned by humanity, integrity, equality and champion social justice. This would, without doubt, forge an ambitious and inclusive Britain.

³⁴ Mcleod (n 21)

³⁵ Nesbit (n 25) ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Seva also Sewa, short for the word Karseva refers to "selfless service", work or service performed without any thought of reward or personal benefit.

Conclusion

In light of the above, the Prime Minister Theresa May is correct in saying that the adoption of Sikh values would lead to a more prosperous and ambitious future for Britain. Firstly, notwithstanding the enactment of the Race Relations Act, British history is tinged with racism and prejudice. One only needs to look to the aftermath of Brexit, which resulted in indiscriminate acts of violence against minorities. It has been respectfully suggested that casteism during the Gurus' lifetime is akin to racism because it is also based on societal discrimination; it is just another form. Whilst it can be conceded that Sikhism is unable to eradicate racism and prejudice in its entirety, the adoption of Sikh values would better achieve prosperity by fostering greater understanding and tolerance between different races and religions. Secondly, the mistreatment of women, either through domestic violence or the gender pay gap has hindered equality, becoming an inherent obstacle towards their progression and attainment in society. From its inception, Sikhism has championed female inclusion by giving them the freedom to preach and lead congregations, access education and was critical of misogynistic practices such as Sati. This is clearly evidenced in the verses of the Guru Granth Sahib and the Sikh Rehat Maryada. Therefore, the adoption of Sikh values would unquestionably involve female inclusion, resulting in a more ambitious and prosperous Britain. Finally, Sikhism promotes social justice through Dasvandh and Langar. Both of these practices are important for disadvantaged communities whose struggles usually escape public discourse. Unsurprisingly, the quest for social justice is performed without desire (nishkam), without intention (nishkapat), and with complete humility (nimarta). The outcome of this analysis indicates that the adoption of Sikh values would result in a more prosperous and ambitious Britain, demonstrating that it is long overdue.