Faith, Belonging, and the Making of English Identity: A Sikh Perspective

Professor Jasjit Singh, University of Leeds

I still remember the first time someone shouted 'Bin Laden' at me, soon after 9/11. It had nothing to do with my actions or beliefs. It was about how I, as a turbaned, bearded Sikh man, was being misread through a new public shorthand of threat. That shorthand was directed primarily at Muslims, but it travelled beyond this, attaching itself to anyone who could plausibly be read as part of the same imagined category. Moments like that highlight how belonging to an English identity is not simply declared in official documents but also enacted in everyday life. How are citizens read, who gets categorised, and who is required to explain themselves before they are accepted?

Discussions of faith and national identity in England often highlight the deep historical entanglements of Christianity with the institutions of the English state, the growing visibility of Islam in public life, or the challenge of articulating a plural national story in a rapidly changing society. Yet the Sikh experience in England offers a distinctive vantage point, shaped by migration, minoritisation, activism and the cultivation of belonging across multiple generations. Sikh perspectives illuminate Englishness not as a static inheritance but as a dynamic and contested cultural field. For Sikhs in England, the question is rarely whether one is English or British in some abstract sense. Rather, it is how forms of identity rooted in the Sikh tradition, with its own ethical and institutional frameworks, interact with political and cultural narratives of Englishness. This interplay involves recognition, misrecognition and, increasingly, self-definition.

Migration, memory and belonging

Although a small number of Sikhs arrived in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Sikh settlement in England grew in the post partition period after the Second World War. Former servicemen, agricultural workers and ex-imperial subjects entered as labour migrants, often recruited into industries experiencing acute shortages, including manufacturing and engineering, transport, and other forms of industrial labour in post-war England. Many quickly found themselves building new lives, institutions and families in cities such as London, Birmingham, Coventry, Wolverhampton, Leeds and Manchester. This was later supplemented by migration from East Africa in the 1970s and, from the mid-1990s onwards, by Sikh arrivals from Afghanistan.

The early generations navigated a cultural and political environment in which Englishness was implicitly racialised as white and Christian. The lack of recognition, whether in housing, employment or the emergent multicultural policies of the 1970s, shaped Sikh collective memory. Campaigns such as the landmark 1983 *Mandla v Dowell-Lee* case, which established Sikhs as an ethnic group under the Race Relations Act, were not simply about legal protection but about asserting visibility within a society that had not envisaged them as part of its national story (*Mandla v Dowell-Lee*). This foundational experience continues to influence how many Sikhs relate to English identity today. For those raised within families marked by migration and struggle, belonging is rarely taken for granted. It is negotiated, cultivated and, at times, contested.

Faith as ethical orientation and civic practice

Sikhi offers its own frameworks for understanding belonging. Rather than positioning the community in tension with English identity, many Sikhs draw on teachings that emphasise service (*seva*), welfare (*sarbat da bhala*), and the inseparability of spiritual and temporal responsibility (*miri piri*) as anchors for civic participation. These principles have historically animated Sikh engagement in English public life, from trade union activism in the 1970s and 1980s to present-day involvement in local government, education, interfaith partnerships and the charitable sector.

The visibility of Sikh-led humanitarian organisations during crises, from Khalsa Aid's international interventions to Nishkam SWAT's feeding the homeless to local gurdwaras' community kitchens during the COVID-19 pandemic, has also reshaped public perceptions of faith-based contributions to civic welfare. For many Sikhs, such actions are not expressions of 'integration' into an English civic ethos. They stem from Sikh ethical commitments around *sarbat da bhala* that resonate with, but are not dependent on, national narratives of duty or service.

Representation, misrecognition and the politics of identity

Yet the relationship between Sikhs and national identity in England has been shaped as much by misrecognition as by engagement. In public discourse, Sikhs are frequently collapsed into broader South Asian categories. This flattening of difference has consequences, ranging from hostility directed at visible Sikhs in the aftermath of 9/11 and 7/7, to the persistent misidentification of Sikh symbols such as the *dastār* (turban) and *kirpan*.

These experiences influence how Sikhs perceive institutions that claim to articulate English or British identity. Narratives of Englishness that centre cultural homogeneity or Christian normativity can be experienced as exclusionary, even when they claim to be broadly accommodating. Conversely, framings of English identity that emphasise civic equality, shared ethical commitments and protection for minority traditions tend to resonate more strongly. The challenge is that both versions coexist in contemporary public life, often uneasily.

A further complication is that Sikh visibility and grievance can be actively exploited by those seeking to sharpen social division. One pattern that recurs in recent British public life is the attempt by far-right movements to recruit or showcase Sikhs as 'proof' that anti-Muslim rhetoric is not racist, or that hostility to Islam is simply a defence of women, freedom, or 'British values'. This strategy depends on turning minority communities against each other and turning Sikh participation into a symbolic weapon in a wider culture war (see, for example, reporting on attempted coalition-building across Sikh, Hindu and Jewish constituencies in anti-Muslim campaigns: iNews, 2024).

What makes this dynamic particularly difficult is that it does not operate in a vacuum. In parts of Sikh community life, suspicion toward Muslims is shaped by a cluster of historical and contemporary narratives including inherited memories of Mughal rule and Partition, local experiences of demographic change and competition over resources, university campus encounters framed through proselytism anxieties, and the post-9/11 period in which turban wearing Sikhs became targets of anti-Muslim hate crimes. These narratives do not determine Sikh attitudes in any uniform way, but they can create conditions in which boundary making feels morally necessary and group identities become more easily polarised.

Within that wider landscape, a narrative around safeguarding concerns relating to the grooming of Sikh girls by Muslim men have sometimes become a focal point for community mobilisation, and in recent years some discourses have recast these concerns in explicitly communal terms. Safeguarding anxieties are real and must be addressed, but when they harden into generalised suspicion of an entire faith community, they become a ready-made resource for political exploitation. From a Sikh perspective, resisting such co-option is not only a matter of community relations. It is also part of what it means to contribute to a renewed English identity: one grounded in civic equality and mutual recognition rather than suspicion, scapegoating, and the instrumental use of minority voices.

Generational shifts and emerging forms of belonging

Sikhs born and raised in England in the early twenty-first century, often display a more complex set of attachments. Many are confident in claiming Englishness alongside Britishness, Punjabi heritage and Sikh religious identity. They move through institutions that are more diverse than those of their parents or grandparents yet also navigate new forms of scrutiny shaped by security discourse and the politics of identity.

Digital culture plays a key role in this emerging landscape. Social media platforms are spaces where Sikh artists, activists and educators articulate narratives of identity that are transnational yet locally grounded. These forms of online community building complicate traditional ideas of national belonging. A Sikh teenager in Leicester might be shaped as much by global Sikh influencers, Punjabi music videos or transnational activism around farmers' protests as by overt symbols of English identity. For this generation, Englishness is not necessarily a core identity but a contextual one, relevant in some settings, backgrounded in others, and always negotiated alongside the religious and cultural frameworks that give meaning to daily life. These layered forms of belonging are often most visible not in formal political discourse, but in everyday practices and popular culture, nowhere more clearly than in sport.

Sport, fandom and everyday Englishness

Sport offers a particularly revealing lens on Sikh relationships to English identity. Unlike debates about citizenship, history or culture, sport provides a space where Englishness is lived rather than argued over. It is performed through loyalty, emotion and shared ritual, often without the scrutiny that accompanies more explicit claims to national belonging.

Football has been especially significant in this regard. Many Sikhs in England are enthusiastic supporters of their local football teams or well-known Premier League teams and of the England national football team, particularly during major tournaments. Wearing England shirts, flying flags, or gathering with friends and family to watch matches allows Sikhs to participate in Englishness as an emotional community rather than an inherited identity. In these moments, Englishness can feel accessible, collective and ordinary.

This matters because it contrasts with other public arenas where Sikh belonging can sometimes feel conditional or contested. Football fandom rarely demands explanation. It does not ask supporters to justify their presence or perform integration. Instead, it offers a version of Englishness grounded in participation rather than ancestry. Informal and organised Sikh football supporters' groups exemplify this dynamic, creating spaces where Sikh identity and English loyalty coexist without tension or contradiction. Cricket support is often more layered. Some Sikhs support England wholeheartedly, while others hold plural attachments

shaped by empire, migration and family memory, illustrating that national belonging can be complex without being disloyal.

Plural identities in a changing England

What, then, does the Sikh experience add to broader conversations about faith and English national identities? First, it demonstrates that belonging is not a one-way process in which minorities simply 'integrate' into a pre-existing English identity. Rather, England itself is reshaped through the presence, practices and institutions of its diverse communities. Gurdwaras, Sikh schools, heritage projects and cultural festivals have become part of the local fabric in many English cities, contributing to a plural public sphere.

Second, the Sikh case illustrates the ongoing importance of recognition. Policies, media narratives and institutional practices that acknowledge the distinctiveness of Sikhi, as a faith, as a cultural tradition, and as a community with its own forms of authority, are more likely to foster durable forms of belonging. Third, the Sikh experience challenges the tendency to view English identity solely through historical or cultural continuity. For many Sikhs, belonging is anchored not in ancestry but in ethical commitments and social participation. This shifts the emphasis from lineage to practice, from heritage to contribution. Finally, Sikh perspectives remind us that national identity in England is not settled. It is contested terrain, shaped not only by majoritarian narratives but by the voices of those who have had to fight to be seen, heard and included.

Towards a more capacious Englishness

As England continues to grapple with questions of national identity in a multi-faith and multi-ethnic society, Sikh experiences offer both caution and possibility. They show the cost of exclusion, misrecognition and racialised notions of belonging. But they also highlight the potential for an Englishness grounded in civic equality, ethical responsibility and genuine pluralism.

Such an Englishness would not require Sikhs, or any minority community, to shed their distinctive identities. Instead, it would create space for those identities to flourish, contributing to a shared national life without collapsing difference. If English identity is to remain meaningful in the twenty-first century, it will need to reflect the realities of those who call England home. Sikhs have been part of that story for over half a century. The question now is whether England's national narratives can evolve to recognise Sikhs not as guests or outsiders, but as participants in the ongoing making of England itself.

Professor Jasjit Singh is Professor of Religion and Global Engagement at the University of Leeds and Pro-Dean International for the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures. His research focuses on religious transmission, digital religion, and the representation of religious minorities, with a particular emphasis on Sikh diasporas. He co-chairs the Sikh Studies Unit at the American Academy of Religion and has held visiting positions internationally, including as the inaugural Visiting Professor in Sikh Studies at the National University of Singapore. His current work explores the interaction between religion and technology, in particular the impact of the digital on Sikh diasporas.