What Are We Becoming Together?

Indigenous Nations, the Crown, and Sikh Canadians After 125 Years

A society can survive disagreement about its origins. It cannot indefinitely survive uncertainty about its destination.

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Introduction

On June 6, 2026, the plaza outside the Vancouver Art Gallery became a dense landscape of collective memory during a Sikh Genocide Remembrance marking the forty-second anniversary of June 1984. Against the grey-stone facade of the former provincial courthouse, black, blue, and saffron filled the plaza. A Khalistan flag rose above the Sangat, which faced a stark wall of posters bearing the names, stories, and testimonies of those lost in the 1984 Sikh Genocide.

The atmosphere reached its deepest point during the Ardas. As the cadence of the prayer carried into the downtown air, the noise of Vancouver's urban core seemed to recede into a unified silence. The prayer concluded with the traditional invocation of Sarbat da bhala—the well-being of all humanity—leaving the plaza in a spirit of chardi kala.

This resilient dignity coexisted with historical grief. In the silence following the Ardas, the proceedings moved into the vocabulary of contemporary institutional life. A speaker stepped to the microphone and, while the Sangat still carried the emotional weight of a diaspora mourning state violence in its homeland, turned to the reality of its present geography. Describing himself as an "uninvited guest" on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, he spoke of how our presence implicates us in the structures of colonialism. **His words hung heavily over the crowd.**

Placed after the Ardas, the land acknowledgement did more than follow institutional protocol. It placed the universal plea for humanity's well-being in direct tension with the structures of colonialism. The moment exposed a difficult civic impasse: a community recovering its own stolen history was simultaneously asked to understand itself as an "uninvited guest" on unceded territory and as structurally implicated in a state still organized through colonial relationships.

This tension is not confined to families whose Canadian histories span generations. A Sikh who arrived only days earlier does not enter an empty historical field. By joining a Sangat and participating in institutions shaped by more than a century of Sikh life in Canada, the newcomer encounters an existing inheritance of memory and responsibility.

Land acknowledgements are often offered with genuine sincerity. Yet, when repeated without a corresponding account of relationship, they can ossify into performative rituals within progressive circles and public bureaucracies—linguistic gestures that simulate accountability while deferring the more demanding work of defining how long-term presence matures into shared civic responsibility. A performance of perpetual apology cannot resolve the foundational dilemma:

If Sikh Canadians remain “uninvited guests” after more than 125 years, what exactly is the destination of that language?

The question is not a rejection of reconciliation. It is not an argument against acknowledging Indigenous nations, treaty relationships, unceded territories, or the continuing reality of Indigenous rights. Those matters are foundational to any honest account of Canada.

The question is different.

Sikh Canadians are the primary case study here, but the question extends to other long-established, multi-generational diasporic communities—**including Chinese, Japanese, and others**—whose histories also exceed a century on this land. Their experiences are not interchangeable. Each carries distinct relationships to exclusion, citizenship, state violence, and place. What they share is the absence of a sufficiently developed language of belonging joined to responsibility.

I offer this not as a representative speaking for all Sikhs or all communities, but as one Sikh Canadian asking what responsibilities arise when presence becomes generational, and what obligations that inheritance places upon the newest arrival.

Governments apologize. Museums curate. Universities theorize. Cities issue land acknowledgements, and public institutions increasingly recognize that history matters. Yet a silence remains. Mainstream institutional discourse has become skilled at explaining how we got here; it is less certain about what Indigenous nations, the Crown, and long-established communities such as Sikh Canadians are meant to become together.

The question is not how Sikh Canadians can escape responsibility. It is how responsibility should mature once presence becomes generational—and how that maturity can be inherited by every new member who enters the lineage.

Scope and Distinct Realities

The boundaries of this inquiry must be drawn with precision. Contemporary debate often assumes that challenging an institutional category amounts to retreating from civic responsibility. It does not. Exposing an aggregate label such as “South Asian” as historically and structurally inadequate is not an attempt to evade accountability. It is a demand for historical and civilizational precision.

Foundational Premise: This essay unreservedly recognizes the inherent rights of Indigenous nations. Reconciliation is too important to remain solely a language of process. If reconciliation is a journey, it is reasonable to ask whether its institutional path has adequately articulated a destination.

Distinct Realities: Sikh Canadians are not equivalent to Indigenous nations, nor are Sikhs Indigenous to Canada. Indigeneity on this continent is a distinct legal, historical, political, and cultural reality grounded in prior presence, peoplehood, land, law, self-determination, and constitutional recognition. Collapsing multi-generational diasporic settlement into Indigenous nationhood would diminish the specificity of both.

The Geographies of Heritage: The Sikh Panth is historically, spiritually, and civilizationally rooted in Punjab. That rootedness should not be collapsed into the constitutional and legal frameworks through which Indigenous peoples and their rights are recognized in Canada. The histories must be understood on their own terms.

The Evolution of Multiculturalism: Multiculturalism provided an essential architecture of entry, protection, and civic inclusion. Yet a framework designed to manage arrival does not necessarily provide a complete language for communities whose histories now span generations and whose futures are increasingly intertwined with those of Indigenous nations and the Crown.

This essay identifies a conceptual gap in Canadian public thought: the relative absence of a future-oriented language describing the relationship among Indigenous nations, the Crown, and long-established multi-generational communities. Relevant scholarship exists across Indigenous studies, diaspora studies, settler-colonial studies, and critical multiculturalism. What remains underdeveloped is an account of this relationship grounded in Sikh collective memory, Panthic institutional continuity, and Gurmat-based responsibility.

Indigenous nations must never be treated as a single, undifferentiated interlocutor. Any meaningful relationship must be shaped by the particular laws, histories, territories, and priorities of the nations concerned. No general Canadian formula—and no internally developed Sikh vocabulary—can substitute for relationships built with the specific nations whose territories Sikh Canadians inhabit.

What I heard that afternoon during a Panthic remembrance was therefore more than an isolated choice of words. It reflected a dominant bureaucratic grammar: one that casts a community gathered in solemn memory as permanently uninvited, while also aggregating its history and leaving its belonging perpetually provisional.

I. A Landscape Rich in Origins

Every society develops stories of origin. Origins explain legitimacy. They tell peoples where they came from, what they survived, and why their institutions matter.

Public discourse in British Columbia has become increasingly attentive to the historical lineages that shape the province. Indigenous nations maintain histories rooted in land, kinship, law, language, and ceremony. The Crown maintains narratives of sovereignty, treaty, constitutional continuity, and governance. Immigrant communities carry stories of departure, arrival, exclusion, labour, adaptation, and contribution.

This layered order is encoded in the contemporary Oath of Citizenship, which links allegiance to the Crown with a pledge to observe the laws of Canada, including the Constitution's recognition and affirmation of the Aboriginal and treaty rights of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.[1] Citizenship is therefore not merely a private contract between an individual and the state. It places citizens within a constitutional landscape already shaped by relationships between Indigenous peoples and the Crown.

That structure becomes more complex when viewed through Sikh Canadian history. Sikh presence in Canada reaches back more than 125 years. The Abbotsford Sikh Temple, built in 1911 and used continuously since then, is a National Historic Site and the oldest surviving Sikh temple in North America.[2] Early Sikh labourers worked in sawmills, on railways, and in agriculture. Gurdwaras became not only places of worship but centres of language, mutual aid, political organization, and memory.

The Trans-Historical Shift

Viewed through a purely individual, linear lens, history can appear to be a personal receipt of time served. Within a trans-historical tradition, however, history operates as a collective well: people draw from it without having personally lived every event it contains.

The Historical Lineage: More Than 125 Years of Presence

Lineage	Question	Horizon
Early pioneers	Will we be allowed to remain?	Arrival
Later generations	Do we truly belong here?	Identity
Descendants and newcomers	What is our role?	Responsibility

The individual who arrived on Tuesday does not begin at historical Day Zero. The newcomer does not inherit the pioneer's biography or acquire a territorial claim. But by entering the Sangat and participating in a Panthic community whose Canadian institutions and memories predate them, the newcomer enters a field of accumulated responsibility. The language of arrival grows less adequate with every generation. The newest arrival therefore encounters the later-generation question immediately: **What is our role?**

A people cannot remain forever at the threshold of a house it has helped sustain for more than a century.

Origins explain legitimacy. Destinations explain purpose.

II. The Relational Triangle and the Civilizational Vertex

Much public discourse presents reconciliation as a bilateral relationship between Indigenous nations and the Crown. That framework is constitutionally indispensable. Treaties were made with the Crown, and section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982 recognizes and affirms existing Aboriginal and treaty rights.[3]

Yet twenty-first-century Canada contains a further civic reality that remains under-theorized: long-established, multi-generational communities whose institutional presence now spans more than a century. Naming this reality does not create a new constitutional order or an exclusive club based on genealogy.

It identifies what I call a collective civilizational lineage.

This creates an ethical and relational triangle of responsibility:

Constitutional / Civic Actor	Position in the Relationship
The Crown / Constitutional State	Public Authority and Constitutional Duty
Indigenous Nations	Inherent Sovereignty, Title, Law, and Peoplehood
Sikh Canadian Presence: 125+ Years	Collective Civilizational Lineage

The descendant of a 1911 pioneer and the newcomer who arrived on Tuesday do not possess identical experiences, memories, or civic histories. Participation in the Sangat and the Panth does not erase those differences. It can, however, bring both into a collective lineage whose accumulated memory generates present obligations. Neither acquires an Indigenous claim to territory. Both can assume responsibility as citizens, neighbours, institution-builders, and inheritors of Canada's shared civic future.

This relationship is rarely named explicitly. Administrative categories may have practical uses, but a framework designed to count populations cannot adequately recognize historical lineages. If Sikh communities are enduring participants in Canada's constitutional and civic order, their ethical relationship with Indigenous nations cannot remain undefined. Public discourse needs language for this civilizational vertex and for the responsibilities that arise from sharing a future.

"Collective civilizational lineage" is used here descriptively, not juridically. It confers no territorial jurisdiction, inherent sovereignty, or constitutional status comparable to that of Indigenous nations. It names a historical community whose institutions, memories, obligations, and collective presence persist across generations, including through the participation of new members. The triangle therefore describes a relationship of responsibility, not an equality of legal authority.

Collective civilizational lineage is neither racial nor genealogically closed. It is sustained through participation in institutions, memory, practice, and responsibility. It does not require uniform political views, nor does it authorize any individual or institution to speak for every Sikh.

III. Four Horizons of Destination

If our public institutions possess an underdeveloped language of future orientation, it is useful to consider several possible horizons without prematurely endorsing any one of them:

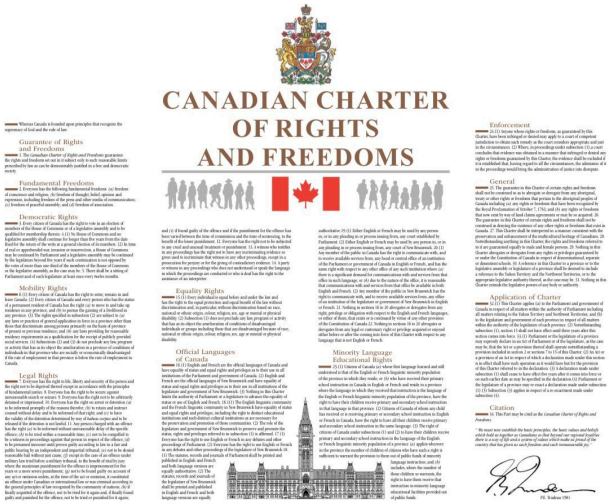
The Multicultural Horizon: In this model, communities continue to maintain cultural distinctions while sharing a common civic identity within existing constitutional structures. Rather than indicating failure, it raises the question of whether a framework originally designed to manage arrival and cultural inclusion is sufficient, on its own, to describe long-term civic relationships among peoples whose histories now span multiple generations.

The Treaty-Constitutional Horizon: The relationship between Indigenous nations and the Crown remains the country's primary constitutional axis. Other communities participate within that framework but do not displace its legal architecture. The future is understood principally through the renewal of treaty relationships, the honour of the Crown, and Indigenous self-determination.

The Plural Relational Horizon: Indigenous nations, the Crown, and long-established communities develop durable forms of relationship that acknowledge constitutional distinctions while recognizing a shared future. The objective is coexistence among multiple centres of memory, responsibility, institutional life, and belonging.

The Civic Covenantal Horizon: Rather than grounding belonging primarily in origin, this model grounds it in shared obligations. Communities remain distinct, but their relationship is increasingly defined by duties toward one another, future generations, and the land they inhabit together. The emphasis shifts from recognition to responsibility.

These horizons are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. Elements of each already exist in Canadian life. Their purpose is not to prescribe a finished constitutional design, but to establish that alternatives to permanent ambiguity are imaginable. The challenge is not merely to remember together; it is to imagine together.


CANADIAN CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS

IV. Memory, Museums, and Custodianship

The deepest questions of identity are also questions of memory. We do not remember in isolation; communities, rituals, and shared meanings hold history together. For this reason, cultural erasure rarely requires outright destruction. It can occur through reclassification: events remain visible while the frameworks through which they are understood quietly change.

Museums and heritage classifications do not merely preserve public memory; they produce it. A museum label or an archive description is an active exercise of framing reality.

The history of the Guru Nanak Jahaz offers a powerful case study. In 1914, Baba Gurdit Singh chartered the Japanese steamship registered as the Komagata Maru. Following an Ardas at a Gurdwara Sahib in Hong Kong, the vessel was renamed Guru Nanak Jahaz. It sailed with 377 passengers—341 Sikhs, 24 Muslims, and 12 Hindus—most from Punjab.[4] The voyage was simultaneously an act of migration, a Sikh-led institutional undertaking, and a direct challenge to Canada's racist continuous-journey regime.

This history can be told through more than one frame. Yet a revealing shift occurs when a specifically Sikh-led and Punjabi-rooted memory is absorbed into a broader institutional narrative. The Province initially announced Haq and History as a project to showcase Punjabi Canadian history; later institutional descriptions present the travelling exhibition as an exploration of "South Asian Canadian histories."[5] While this broader frame is "deployed to build coalitions" that may support Indigenous sovereignty and challenge the Crown, doing so while extracting state funding creates a profound paradox—one that forces an identity foreclosure on the very historical custodians whose specific memory is being leveraged.

The federal heritage register's description of the Abbotsford Sikh Temple as evidence of both the early Sikh community and the "larger Indo-Canadian community" illustrates an older layer of the same tension.[6] A similar risk appears in broad curriculum frameworks, where the distinct institutional contributions of Sikh pioneers can be absorbed into generalized accounts of diverse immigrant contributions.

Community Memory	Dominant Institutional Frame
Guru Nanak Jahaz	Komagata Maru
Sikh Memory	Immigrant History
Sikh Heritage	South Asian History

Nothing is erased in the literal sense. The record remains visible, but the specific custodians recede. When a Sikh-led anti-colonial history is folded into broad narratives of inclusion, citizenship, and diversity, its sharper claims about power, naming, and autonomous identity can be softened. Reclassification is one of the quietest ways a people can be forgotten without anything disappearing from the archive.

The central museum question is:

Who remembers, who names, and who interprets?

If diversity is to be more than aggregation, it must preserve distinction. If heritage is to be more than display, it must honour custodianship. Otherwise, the past survives, but the people fade.

V. The Politics of Aggregation

Modern states govern partly by simplifying human complexity into administrative categories. Marginalized communities may adopt broad labels tactically to build coalitions. The problem begins when temporary alliances harden into permanent identities. Because these categories shape funding, consultation, institutional access, data collection, and public recognition, communities are encouraged to enter the same administrative folders that later claim authority to define them.

Once institutionalized, such categories acquire a self-reinforcing logic. Bureaucracies can substitute symbolic recognition and aggregate representation for the harder work of addressing distinct histories, power relations, and institutional responsibilities. The result is a managed politics of equivalence: communities are grouped together, measured through common frameworks, and invited to compete for recognition within categories the state has already constructed.

In progressive spaces, activist discourse, and institutional diversity frameworks, this bureaucratic shorthand has become everyday political vernacular. Aggregate terms such as “South Asian,” and omnibus acronyms such as BIPOC and IBPOC, have migrated from coalition language into policy manuals, consultation structures, and equity metrics. Used without care, they can create administrative silos that claim interpretive authority over communities whose historical lineages are more complex than the labels.

A deeper conceptual difficulty follows. Relationships grounded in inherent sovereignty, treaty, title, and nationhood are not equivalent to categories designed for demographic accounting. When sovereign Indigenous nations and non-sovereign diasporic communities are folded into a single “equity-seeking” bloc, the language of inclusion can obscure the difference between inherent authority and a request for representation within state institutions. An acronym useful for coalition politics should not be allowed to flatten the constitutional distinction between Indigenous peoples and other racialized communities.

Institutional vocabulary therefore operates in two directions at once. It administers inherited identity through aggregation and civic belonging through provisionalization. “South Asian” compresses who a people have been; “uninvited guest” leaves unresolved what they may become. One reorganizes the past, while the other suspends the future.

VI. The Paradox of Belonging and the “Settler” Vocabulary

Sikh Canadians increasingly occupy a difficult and insufficiently mapped civic threshold. They are not Indigenous peoples, and they must not appropriate Indigenous nationhood or title. Yet many are no longer recent immigrants, and a community with more than 125 years of presence cannot adequately be understood through the language of temporary arrival. The question is therefore not whether Sikh Canadians bear responsibilities toward Indigenous peoples. They unquestionably do. The question is whether fulfilling those responsibilities requires them to describe themselves permanently as guests who can never belong.

This provisionalization appears not only in the language of "settler" and "uninvited guest," but in the institutional treatment of ordinary civic names. The B.C. government's web writing guide for Indigenous content discourages the unqualified use of "British Columbians." It reasons that some Indigenous peoples identify primarily with their own sovereign nations and that the term may also exclude newcomers and refugees; it recommends "people living in B.C." instead.[7]

The distinction concerning Indigenous nations deserves respect: no provincial identity should be imposed on peoples who understand themselves through their own nationhood, laws, and territories. Yet the inclusion of newcomers and refugees within the same rationale reveals a different problem. Rather than expanding "British Columbian" to include those building lives in the province, the guidance withdraws the civic name and replaces it with a description of physical location. "People living in B.C." can describe residence, but it cannot express membership, inheritance, or belonging.

This is how provisionalization enters grammar. A person may live here, work here, raise children here, build institutions here, and accept responsibilities toward this place and its future, yet remain linguistically outside the civic "we." The institution recognizes presence while withholding the language through which presence matures into belonging.

This language has moved beyond activist and academic circles and entered legislative discourse. In a members' statement recorded in the British Columbia Hansard on May 15, 2025, MLA Rohini Arora defended the terms "settler," "uninvited guest," and "colonizer." She stated: "I am a settler. I was born here, but my family came from India through Canada's colonial immigration system." She argued that self-referring as settlers signals an understanding of colonization and a commitment to shared responsibility.[8]

The moral premise deserves serious consideration: non-Indigenous Canadians cannot treat Indigenous dispossession as a completed event safely confined to the past. Yet the vocabulary used to express that responsibility produces an unresolved contradiction.

Within the same governing political culture, a Canadian-born legislator can describe herself as a settler and endorse "uninvited guest" as a meaningful term, while her official caucus biography identifies her as "the first South Asian woman from the BC NDP to be elected as an MLA in Burnaby."[9] The descriptions appear progressive, but they perform related forms of compression.

The terms are not synonyms. "Settler" can describe a structural relationship to a settler-colonial state. "Uninvited guest" is a moral metaphor of hospitality and conditional presence. "Colonizer" may suggest active participation in colonial domination. When these meanings are collapsed into a single vocabulary of identity, structural analysis can become personal ontology. A person is no longer asked only to recognize the colonial order in which they live; they are encouraged to understand their own presence as a continuing intrusion—anonymous in historical origin and suspended in civic futurity.

For Sikh Canadians, this contradiction is especially consequential. Their Canadian presence did not begin as an equal partnership in colonial expansion. Early Sikh migrants entered a racially exclusionary state that restricted their movement, denied them political equality, attempted to prevent family reunification, and treated them as permanently foreign. None of this makes Sikh Canadians Indigenous, and racial exclusion does not absolve them of responsibilities arising from life on Indigenous lands. It does mean, however, that imperial colonizer, racialized labourer, excluded migrant, refugee, citizen, and multi-generational community cannot responsibly be collapsed into one undifferentiated identity.

The institutional contradiction should therefore not be reduced to an accusation against one legislator. It is larger than Rohini Arora. It belongs to a political vocabulary that asks racialized citizens to surrender historical specificity under the administrative designation "**South Asian**," while simultaneously asking them to understand their relationship to Canada through a permanent language of arrival.

Canada cannot demand the responsibilities of inheritance while preserving the vocabulary of permanent guesthood.

The burden of resolving this contradiction does not rest upon Sikh Canadians alone. Those who describe long-established communities as “uninvited guests” must also account for the civic consequences of that language. If the term names a temporary moral awakening, they must explain what relationship is meant to follow it. If it names a permanent status, they must explain how generations of Canadian-born citizens can be entrusted with responsibility for this country while remaining forever outside its civic inheritance.

The danger becomes clearest when “uninvited guest” ceases to be a context-specific ethical metaphor and hardens into a permanent civic identity. Reactionary nationalism can seize upon that language and complete the sentence: If you are truly uninvited, why do you not leave?

That is not an Indigenous demand, nor is it the argument advanced here. It is the foreseeable nativist misuse of a vocabulary that renders racialized belonging perpetually conditional. Language intended to challenge colonial complacency can be turned against the communities using it, reviving the old accusation that they remain foreigners regardless of birth, citizenship, duration, sacrifice, or service.

The answer cannot be to deny Indigenous sovereignty, title, treaty, or historical dispossession. But duration matters to citizenship, memory, political responsibility, and belonging. A people can acknowledge that they are not Indigenous without describing themselves as eternally external to the country in which generations have been born, buried, and entrusted with its future.

What is required is a more exact civic vocabulary—one capable of distinguishing Indigenous nationhood from non-Indigenous belonging, colonial power from racialized migration, and historical responsibility from permanent foreignness. Sikh Canadians need not choose between denying colonial history and apologizing indefinitely for their own existence.

Responsible belonging, as used here, means a durable, non-territorial form of membership: full civic belonging without any claim to Indigenous title, and permanent responsibility without permanent foreignness.

The task is neither to claim the land in an Indigenous sense nor to retreat into the identity of the perpetual guest. It is to ask how a long-established Sikh Canadian community can belong responsibly—without erasing Indigenous title, without disappearing inside an administrative category, and without surrendering its place in the future of Canada.

VII. Sikh Political Theology: The Sovereignty of Responsibility

To construct this more exact civic vocabulary, long-established communities cannot rely on the bureaucratic state alone for their moral language. A vocabulary capable of resisting both the dissolution of identity and the provisionalization of belonging must also be drawn from a community’s own intellectual and spiritual lineages. For Sikh Canadians, the conceptual architecture already exists within Gurmat—the Guru’s teachings. It shifts the axis of civic engagement from external recognition to internal obligation, moving the central question from What are we owed? and How are we categorized? toward an unconditional demand: What is our duty?

Rather than functioning as passive cultural values, principles within Sikh political theology can provide an internally authoritative ethical framework for life on Indigenous territories within a constitutional order structured through the Crown:

Patshahi (Sovereign Consciousness): Patshahi is an antidote to the twin compressions of the state. It names an inherent, divinely grounded dignity that refuses to reduce the Sikh to a passive object of external taxonomy. It rejects both administrative containment within the “South Asian” label and the provisional vulnerability of the permanent “uninvited guest.” A community grounded in Patshahi does not depend on the state to confer dignity or authenticate its existence. It can demand justice, accurate recognition, and constitutional accountability without treating public institutions as the source of Sikh worth. This is moral self-government, not jurisdiction over others.

Miri-Piri (The Indivisibility of the Temporal and Spiritual): Miri-Piri provides the bridge between sacred memory and present geography. Spiritual conviction cannot be confined to private belief or insulated from political and material realities. For the Sikh Canadian—whether descended from early pioneers or newly arrived—the spiritual life of the Sangat is intertwined with the temporal reality of the land it inhabits. One cannot seek spiritual elevation while remaining indifferent to the treaty or unceded status of that land, or to continuing injustices experienced by the Indigenous nations connected to it.

Dharam (Moral Order) and Seva (Disciplined Action): Within this vocabulary, Dharam redefines belonging. Belonging is measured not only by state admission or symbolic acknowledgement, but by the righteousness of one’s conduct in relation to

truth. Seva is the active embodiment of Dharam—not intermittent charity, but a disciplined orientation toward the welfare of all: Sarbat da bhala.

Using this theology as a civic foundation requires internal discipline, not an external claim to jurisdiction. Gurmat is not deployed here to self-author rights over land, bypass Indigenous law, or substitute Sikh moral conviction for genuine relationship with Indigenous nations. It does not claim sovereignty over others; it governs the conduct of the self and the community. It asks how a people must act on lands from which they have received safety, sustenance, and life.

This requires civic translation, not religious enforcement. Internal vocabulary can anchor a community's sense of permanent duty, but its outward expression must be translated into conduct directed toward the common good.

Langar offers the clearest example. The communal kitchen does not demand that public institutions adopt Sikh theological language. It translates a spiritual imperative into a universal civic practice: the collective duty to ensure that no neighbour goes hungry. Applied to reconciliation, the same method transforms the community's role from symbolic acknowledgement to disciplined relationship.

The questions "What happened to us?" and "What are we owed?" remain necessary. A people cannot pursue justice while forgetting either injury or obligation. Gurmat adds a third question that prevents memory and rights from becoming the limits of civic life: What are we permanently responsible for on this land?

Gurmat can discipline Sikh conduct, but it cannot unilaterally define the terms of relationship with Indigenous nations. Those terms must emerge through listening, encounter, consent, and sustained relationships with the particular nations whose territories Sikh Canadians inhabit. An internally authoritative vocabulary should prepare a community to enter those relationships with dignity and responsibility—not license it to speak for those with whom relationship is still being built.

VIII. Home, Homeland, and the Seventh Generation

A people can have a homeland and a home simultaneously. Punjab remains the historical homeland of the Sikh Panth—the soil in which its sacred geography and historical consciousness took form. But Canada has also become home. Not in the shallow sense of comfort, but in the deep sense of burial, birth, labour, worship, and inheritance.

The question becomes unavoidable when we think about children not yet born. What do we tell a later-generation Sikh child born in Canada? Is that child a guest? A settler? A Canadian? A neighbour? A steward? Which of these names carries responsibility without erasing belonging?

Communities cannot transmit what they have not defined. If we do not articulate a story consciously, institutions will provide one unconsciously. That child will inherit a census category, a museum label, a diversity framework, or a geographic box. But will they inherit a relationship?

Responsibility toward generations yet unborn appears in many moral traditions. The "Seventh Generation" value is particularly associated with Haudenosaunee thought, in which present decisions are assessed in relation to descendants and the continuity of culture.[10] The Sikh question raised here is parallel but internally grounded: what relationship, responsibility, and memory will today's Sangat transmit to Sikhs born generations from now? How will it ensure that the newcomer enters that future not as a bystander, but as an immediate participant in responsibility?

IX. The Institutional Silence on Destination

Among the institutions shaping Canadian civic life, none claims greater constitutional continuity than the Crown. Yet the Crown's relative silence on destination preserves ambiguity where a language of relationship is needed.

Whatever its institutional cause, this silence leaves foundational questions of relationship and power unresolved. Multi-generational communities remain caught in a cycle of permanent arrival and provisional belonging even as the state asks them to assume increasing civic responsibility.

Mainstream institutions have developed sophisticated languages for acknowledging historical grievances, auditing diversity metrics, and issuing land acknowledgements. These practices matter, but they remain largely retrospective. They can catalogue past harms without committing the state or society to a clearer future relationship.

The Oath of Citizenship names the constitutional landscape, but it does not define its horizon.

The relational triangle must never be mistaken for a triangle of equal power, authority, or obligation. Indigenous nations did not create the settler state, and long-established racialized communities did not design its constitutional architecture. The Crown remains the principal bearer of constitutional and institutional responsibility. Sikh Canadian responsibilities are real, but they are ethical, relational, and civic; they cannot substitute for the Crown's duties concerning title, treaty, restitution, jurisdiction, and the honour of the Crown.

The horizons of destination must therefore be neither dictated solely by the state nor converted into blueprints for bureaucratic co-optation. They must become invitations to genuine relationships among distinct peoples and institutions.

The challenge for the Crown is to move beyond a language of admission toward a language of inheritance. The Canadian constitutional order possesses increasingly sophisticated accounts of historical legitimacy. Its account of future orientation remains unfinished. Legitimacy without orientation eventually produces drift.

X. What Are We Becoming Together?

Contemporary public thought suffers from a failure of collective imagination. Progressive and institutional vocabularies have become skilled at naming historical harms and colonial structures, yet remain less developed when asked to describe the horizon of future relationship. That unfinished task leaves several structural questions.

What does it mean for a people to live on a land for more than 125 years, while both its newest arrivals and later generations are still addressed primarily through a language of temporary presence?

What responsibilities arise when presence becomes generational, long-term residence becomes inherited civic responsibility, and memory takes root in the place where people live?

What does Gurmat require of a community that has found safety, raised children, built institutions, and inherited responsibility on this land?

To ask seriously is to ask how Sikh Canadians can honour the distinct constitutional and historical reality of Indigenous nations while remaining faithful to their own memories and institutions; how Seva can move beyond the walls of the Gurdwara; and how Miri-Piri can be translated into civic life.

How do we ensure that grandchildren and newly arrived neighbours inherit not merely a census category, museum label, or demographic designation, but a meaningful relationship with the place they call home?

The deepest question is therefore not whether institutions possess a language of destination. It is whether we possess one ourselves.

This essay offers one position: Sikh Canadians are neither Indigenous sovereigns nor permanently uninvited guests. They are responsible members of Canada's civic inheritance. Those who assign them permanent guesthood must explain what future, if any, that status permits.

Some questions lose their power when answered too quickly. Their purpose is to begin a conversation, not to close one.

Archives can tell us how we arrived. Treaties can tell us what was promised. The census can tell us who is present. Museums can tell us what has been remembered. None can answer, by itself, the question that waits beyond memory.

That question belongs to the future. It asks not only where we came from, but what we are becoming together.

By Raj Singh Bhandall
Wanjara Nomad Collections

Selected Notes and Sources

Sources are provided for the essay's principal factual and institutional claims. Accessed June 20, 2026.

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