



# Sikh Research Journal

**Vol. 5 No. 1**

This article is from \*Sikh Research Journal\*, the online peer-reviewed journal of Sikh and Punjabi Studies \*

Sikh Research Journal \*Vol. 5. No. 1. Published: Spring 2020

<http://sikhresearchjournal.org>

<http://sikhfoundation.org>

## **Children of the Divine: Bhagat Puran Singh's Pingalwara and the Children's Rights Principle of Non-discrimination**

**Jaspreet Kaur Bal**

*Professor of Child and Youth Care, Humber College, Toronto, Canada*

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the Sikh principle of non-discrimination and Bhagat Puran Singh's work with the marginalized in India. I start by outlining the principle of non-discrimination in Sikh and global human rights discourses. I then move on to looking at historic and contemporary examples of this principle in practice, including the life of Bhagat Puran Singh. I demonstrate that the right to non-discrimination, while recent in western children's rights discourse, has long standing force in Sikh tradition and the foundation of Pingalwara in Panjab. The work of Bhagat Puran Singh serves to address the need for a comprehensive strategy for India to work on the right to non-discrimination.

**Keywords:** Children's rights, Sikh, non-discrimination, Pingalwara, Puran Singh

### **Introduction**

Sikhi was a way of life founded by Guru Nanak Dev Ji in 15<sup>th</sup> century South Asia, during a time rife with discrimination based on caste, gender, age and religion (J. Singh, 1981). At the center of Sikh ideology was the push to combat this discrimination and establish, in its place, the principle of undeniable equity. The issues that plagued society in the 15<sup>th</sup> century have far from disappeared in modern times. Presently, the United Nation Committee on the Rights of the Child remarks, in their concluding observations for India's reports on children's rights, that:

The Committee is concerned at the disparity among different groups of children in access to education, health care, safe water and sanitation and other social services and to the enjoyment of the rights enshrined in the Convention. It is also concerned at the persisting discrimination against children from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, children with disabilities, children with HIV/AIDS, as well as asylum-seeking and refugee children. (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2014)

The vision that Guru Nanak Dev Ji set out with, of an equitable society, still remains largely unfulfilled in India and moreover Panjab. This paper will start by elaborating on this vision of equity, framed as the principle of non-discrimination. The paper will look at how the principle of non-discrimination compares with the right to non-discrimination in modern children's rights. Specifically using the life

and legacy of Bhagat Puran Singh, the founder of the institution of the Pingalwara, I will demonstrate how the Sikh discourse both predates and compliments modern human rights efforts. The Pingalwara is currently one of the most successful examples of a Sikh-based social welfare organization. They have seven branches, a printing press, a nursery, sustainable farms, schools, medical centers, vocational centers, and international support (All India Pingalwara Charitable Society Amritsar, 2017). Bhagat Puran Singh, in his treatment of the most marginalized in Indian society embodied the spirit of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's teachings and presents a possibility for achieving the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child's (UNCRC) right to non-discrimination.

### Sikhi and the Principle of Non-discrimination

While it is impossible to recount every instance of non-discrimination in Sikh scripture, *baani*, and Sikh history, *ithaas*, this section presents a few key instances that demonstrate how deeply rooted non-discrimination is. The principle of non-discrimination shows up primarily in the *baani* that was revealed to the Gurus. When the founder of Sikhi, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, penned his revelations on the origins of the Divine he reflected that there was no socially constructed basis for discrimination of any kind at the very start. In a *shabad* in raag Maru on *ang* 1035, Guru Nanak Dev Ji writes of a divine time before there was water, air, birth, death, sunrise or sunset.

There was no Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva.

No one was seen, except the One Divine.

There was no female or male, no social class or caste of birth; no one experienced pain or pleasure. ||4||<sup>1</sup>

Guru Nanak Dev Ji was born into a Hindu family of a merchant caste. From early childhood, a young Nanak challenged many of the discriminatory practices he saw in his immediate surroundings. When he started his travels, his companion, the musician Bhai Mardana, was not only of a lower caste but also, as a Muslim, was a different faith altogether (K. Singh, 2004); this was quite radical at a time when people of different faiths did not have many such interactions (Kapur, 2017). In one of the more famous stories from Guru Nanak Dev Ji's life, he went to Saidpur and was invited to eat with the town chief Malik Bhago. The corrupt chief had made most of his money by overtaxing and wrongfully taking from hardworking farmers. Guru Nanak Dev Ji chose, instead, to eat at the house of a carpenter named Bhai Lalo, a man of few means which had been earned by honest work. When an enraged Malik Bhago confronted Guru Nanak Dev Ji, he was shown the difference in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Translations of original text.

food of the two men. As the Bhai Bala Janamsakhi<sup>2</sup> states Guru Nanak Dev Ji squeezed one *roti* from each man and while blood dripped from Malik Bhago's, milk came from Bhai Lalo's (C. Singh & J. Singh, n.d.). The metaphor and message of the story demonstrates the purity of food earned by honest means versus the poison of food earned through corruption. Moved by this interaction, Bhai Lalo went on to become an important Sikh and run a *dharmshala*. Each man was known for being either rich or poor in the world, but their connection with the Divine showed a reversal in their true fortunes (C. Singh & J. Singh, n.d.). From the onset of Sikh ideology, Guru Nanak Dev Ji never paid respect to worldly markers of discrimination and instead looked to markers of truth and encouraged his followers to do the same.

The Sikh faith continued with nine other Gurus, each an embodiment of that first Nanak with a pen name to match. They also entrenched in the institutions they created and the words they scripted, the undeniable right to live a life without discrimination. The second Nanak, Guru Angad Dev Ji, built on the legacy of non-discrimination through many social reforms. During this time, religious scriptures were the property of the high-caste elites. The inaccessible language of Sanskrit kept secrets of the Divine from the masses, leaving high caste priests to be interpreters and mediators. Guru Angad Dev Ji cemented the language of *Gurmukhi*, simultaneously planting the seeds for a connected to Gurbaani and freeing knowledge from the select few who had access to Sanskrit (T. Singh, G. Singh, 2006). This new language was easy to understand and made the revelations of the Gurus available to the common person.

Also during this time, Mata Khivi, to whom Guru Angad Dev Ji was married, formally established the practice of langar in which anyone could come to the Guru's court and receive food. Everyone would sit on the same ground and eat the same food; a practice that was groundbreaking at that time and continues to shatter ideas of hierarchy today. As Bhai Balvand and Bhai Sathaa describe in their Var in Ramkali in Guru Granth Sahib Ji,

Balvand says that Khivi, the Guru's wife, is a noble woman, who gives soothing,  
leafy shade to all.

She distributes the bounty of the Guru's Langar; the kheer - the rice pudding and  
ghee, is like sweet ambrosia.

The faces of the Guru's Sikhs are radiant and bright; the self-willed, self-oriented  
others are pale, like straw.

The Master gave His approval, when Angad exerted Himself heroically.

Such is the Husband of mother Khivi; He sustains the world. ||3||

---

<sup>2</sup> The Bhai Bala Janamsakhis are a popular account of the stories of Gur Nanak Dev Ji's life.

In the life of the third Nanak, Guru Amar Das Ji, we saw yet again, the extension of every sphere of life to every human without regard for social position. During the time of Guru Amar Das Ji, Sikhi was growing and there was a need for a shift in governance. As the Guru could not be present everywhere, representatives were sent out on their behalf as a part of the *Manji* system. The representatives of each local area were tasked with things such as serving the congregation, spreading the Guru's message and collecting offerings (T. Singh, G. Singh, 2006). Amongst those appointed were women, often in challenging areas like Kashmir and Afghanistan (N.K. Singh, 2005). Guru Amar Das Ji also raised his own daughter, Bibi Bhani to be an active political and social member of the community. Bibi Bhani also played a foundational role in what would later come to be known as the city of Amritsar.

In conjunction with establishing equity amongst castes and genders, the Gurus also focused on equity in age. The Gurus themselves ranged in age from a child to a senior and there was never a condition of age put on the ability to achieve union with the Divine. Guru Harkrishan Ji, the 8<sup>th</sup> Nanak, led his Sikhs from the age of 5. Guru Amar Das Ji, the third Nanak, took on the Guruship at the age of 72 (T. Singh, G. Singh, 2006). *Gurbaani* revealed to Guru Arjun Dev Ji in raag Sorath reflects,

The One is our father; we are the children of the One. You are our Guru.  
Listen, friends: my soul is a sacrifice, a sacrifice to You; reveal to me the Blessed  
Vision of Your Darshan. ||1||

Thus the practice of not discriminating against all of humanity, as we are all children of the One divine energy that sustains us, was embedded into Sikh buildings, practices, institutions, scriptures and ways of life.

The fifth Nanak, Guru Arjun Dev Ji continued to build on Sikh principles as they designed Harmandir Sahib, the foremost of all Sikh centers, in such a way so that those arriving would have to step down in humility to reach the scriptures that were then elevated at the center of the building. Also, the main structure was built with four doors, in every direction, to be open to all castes and people. Thus, the Sikh principle of non-discrimination was built, literally, into the walls of the highest of institutions (Kaur, 1983).

The ninth Nanak, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji demonstrated, at the cost of his life, that he would extend humanity and compassion to everyone without regard for their social position. In what would come to be known as a historical moment not just for Sikhs, but for all Indians, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji set out to challenge the tyrannical reign of Aurangzeb in the late 1600s. The time was tumultuous for Sikhs, but notably for Hindus as well. There were decrees by Aurangzeb that Hindu schools and temples should be demolished. When the persecutes Hindus came to

Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji for help, at the guidance of the then young Gobind Rai (later Guru Gobind Singh), Guru Tegh Bahadur set in motion a series of travels towards the ruler that led to his eventual arrest and execution (T. Singh, G. Singh, 2006). In the two years of travels and rallying of fellow Sikhs, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji held his resolve to support those who were being oppressed, even when they were of a different religion. He went towards his death upholding the value of non-discrimination. The legacy of not discriminating on the basis of age, caste, gender and now religion grew stronger in the wake of these events.

After the light of Nanak passed through ten physical forms, the Guruship manifested in two parts: first and foremost, in the divine text of Guru Granth and second in the body of the people, the Guru Panth. Guru Gobind Singh Ji, as the last living Guru, upheld the value of placing Gurbaani, the written revelations of the Gurus, in the highest esteem. It was an easy transition to place the authority of the living Guruship into the scriptures. As a revolutionary act, during Vasakhi of 1699, Guru Gobind Singh Ji also transferred this authority into the body of the collective. This democratic body of the Guru Panth was envisioned as the fluid, dynamic, and political counterpart to the eternal perfection of the Guru Granth (N.K. Singh, 2005). The Panth, although imperfect in its execution, has strived to uphold the principle of non-discrimination.

This struggle between the ideals of the Guru Granth, and the performance of the Guru Panth is nowhere more notable than with the case of the caste system. The caste system in India was designed with intention and has deep historical roots and contemporary authority. Everything down to who was allowed to have government roles as well as military rank was determined by the system and favored high-caste Hindus. A contemporary review of caste relations in Sikhi demonstrates everything from neglect to overt discrimination still exist in realms with Sikh influence (G, Singh, 2010). Conversely, in writing on the transformative social power of the Panth, Jagjit Singh writes, 'Above all, the Sikh Panth abolished not only caste-status but an entire social system based on it.' (p.310, 1981). The Gurus consistently recruited lower-caste people to be in their service and in the post-Guru period, leaders like Banda Singh Bahadur had armies of lower castes (Singh, J. 1981). As they were allowed to climb the ranks, this time period saw those who were of few means, return from the army and be well established in society. During this pre-industrial time, land was also the main means of income. Thus, class struggles, as they were linked to caste, defined the social mobility of most of society. The feudal *Zamindar* system sustained the power of a few higher-class elites and had lower-caste peasants work the land with little to no benefit to themselves. In this climate, Banda Singh Bahadur lead a revolution and saw that the land was returned to those who worked it (J. Singh, 1981).

Another post-Guru period revolution that upheld the value of non-discrimination was the Singh Sabha movement and their fight for education rights for women and lower-castes. Sikh women were also amongst the first in India to be given the right to vote in 1925 by The Gurdwara Act (N.K. Singh, 2005). Rooted in the principles of the Guru, the Panth has continued to integrate non-discrimination into its institutions and practices.

### **Children's Rights and the Right to Non-discrimination**

Almost 300 years after the final Guru lived in bodily form, in 1989, in the modern western world, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention in the Rights of the Child which is one of the most widely signed and ratified human rights treaties mandating non-discrimination ever (United Nations, 1989). The Convention on the Rights of the Child is an international policy document that forms law in ratifying countries including India. It provides guidance to form policy in a manner that attempts to transform the lives of children at a local level. It is also a treaty that offers a common ethical framework, from a global-moral consensus, for all those who work with children and young people (Melton, 2005). Specifically, it is a document containing 54 articles that outline the rights of children as state responsibilities (United Nations, 1989). The four main principles of the CRC are the right to life and healthy development, the right to best-interest, the right to non-discrimination and the right to participation. The right to non-discrimination specifically reads,

1. States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.
2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members. (United Nations, 1989)

Other areas of rights covered include civil rights and freedoms, family environment and alternative care, basic health and welfare, education and cultural activities, and finally special protection measures.

In order to make these rights a reality, there are a number of responsibilities that states need to take on. The UNCRC asks states to turn the writings of the CRC into legislation and monitor their effectiveness. Early on, countries are to change legislation and see that existing legislation is in the spirit of the Convention.

Collecting information, training those who work with children, and reporting are also important elements. Whereas the first 41 articles pertain specifically to the rights of children, from 42 onwards, state responsibilities such as reporting procedures and dissemination are discussed. Article 44 requires ratifying states to report their progress to the Committee on the Rights of the Child two years after initially signing and every 5 years thereafter (United Nations, 1989). The Committee in Geneva then submits feedback to the countries in the form of Concluding Observations. These Concluding Observations report positive and negative developments in the reporting country and also provide suggestions for improvement (Robertson, 2001).

The concluding observations from India's report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child paint a grim picture when it comes to discrimination against children. The committee begins by noting that the previous committee report's recommendations have not been followed by the country. As previously mentioned, the committee highlights discrimination on the basis of caste, tribe, gender, ability, and refugee status. The recommendations of the committee include the following. First, that the country should adopt a comprehensive strategy to combat discrimination and have adequate programs in place to guarantee their results. Specifically, with regards to female children,

The Committee urges the State party to adopt a comprehensive approach to take effective and systematic action to prevent and combat social, cultural and economic discrimination against girls and women, including its root causes, social and institutional norms and practices that are inconsistent with the provisions of the Convention and that perpetuate discrimination against girls. (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2014)

This report essentially serves as an indicator that by measure of the global-moral consensus of the UNCRC, India largely discriminates against children and is thereby in violation of their basic human rights.

At the same time, India is in a historical moment, where charging the state with the welfare of its citizens has been a failed project. The rise of welfare reforms in the west in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which in turn grew into the creation of a social safety net in the inter-war and post-World War 2 years, saw the care for the most vulnerable in society become the responsibility of the State (Dehler, 2011). While the specific model varied depending on the country, there was a general consensus that society at large would provide the resources and care for those who were physically or mentally unable to do so for themselves.

With chronic issues of poverty, discrimination and regional conflicts, India was unable to create a social welfare system to care for those who fell through the cracks. By default, the care for the disabled, the orphaned and the destitute often fell to religious organizations amongst others (Dabir & Athale, 2011). Current neoliberal reform in India is arguable both top-down and bottom up (Anjaria & Rao, 2014). A shift to a rights-driven social reforms has contended with the many complexities of Indian politics, economics, and demographics (Deshpande, Kailash, & Tillin, 2017). The heterogeneous flow of power means that state players impact citizens on the ground, but there has also been impact that moves from those doing the work of welfare on the ground back towards the state. The work of the Pingalwara in Panjab, and the life of Bhagat Puran Singh then becomes a model for how the recommendations of the committee can be realized through a Sikh framework.

### **Bhagat Puran Singh and the Pingalwara**

Bhagat Puran Singh was born in Panjab to a Hindu family. The title Bhagat, rarely rewarded to a Sikh, denotes one who is constant *bhagti* or loving worship of the Divine. Bhagat Puran Singh writes, in his autobiography, of his mother, who instilled in him his compassion and empathy for all of humanity (P. Singh, 2016). She planted trees, fed birds, removed thorns from walking paths, and taught her son to do the same. Like many women in Panjab, she was the center of her family. She worked, prayed, raised her son and gave money and grains to the various religious men that would come to her village. During Bhagat Puran Singh's school years, she worked as a domestic servant in the house of a doctor and sent her monthly earning to her son via money order. Despite being illiterate, she learned from them how to recite Japji Sahib, the foundational revelation of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. When her son, then named Ramji Das, fell ill with a fever at the age of 7, she vowed that if he got better, his life would be devoted to the service of humanity. His parents ran a home filled with Hindu rituals, including feeding and worshipping young girls as they represented goddesses. It is to this that Puran Singh credits how he 'developed respect for women and also how to huminity [him]self completely to the almighty' (P. Singh, 2016, p. 12). He also stated, "Looking at my own life, I think that if from childhood a child is taught about love and compassion, then he will start on the path of helping others and would spend his entire life doing this service." (P. Singh, 2016, p.12).

In one of his significant memories, Bhagat Puran Singh recalls that as a young man, having completed his exams for this tenth class, he went to a *mandir*, a Hindu place of worship, and washed sandalwood paste off of idols. This voluntary task took him a long time and as he was hungry by the end, he sat down to eat with the students learning Sanskrit at that *mandir*. He was kicked out by the priest and not given

anything to eat. By contrast, a few days later, he found himself at a Sikh *Gurduwara*. Literally translated as the door of the Guru, this community institution was open to everyone and provided food with no regard for discriminatory practices. The same concept of langar, started by the aforementioned Mata Khivi, came full circle in providing an example of non-discrimination and other-oriented service for the young Puran Singh. After leaving Gurduwara Reru Sahib, Bhagat Puran Singh returned home, kept his hair and started adhering to a Sikh way of life (P. Singh, 2016). He ended up spending the next 24 years of his life in service at Gurduwara Dehra Sahib in Lahore where the seeds of the Pingalwara were planted. While at Gurduwara Dehra Sahib, Bhagat Puran Singh also had access to the libraries of Lahore. He spent his time studying national and international social problems as well as his primary task which was caring for the sick, disabled, and homeless that came to the Gurduwara. After the British were forced from India, Panjab was divided into Pakistan and current day Panjab, India. This historic Partition in 1947 forced Bhagat Puran Singh from the Gurduwara in Lahore and he arrived in Amritsar where he continued his service of humanity.

It was before this huge life shift however, and during his time in Lahore at Gurduwara Dehra Sahib, that Bhagat Puran Singh formed a relationship that would define his life. In 1934, someone abandoned a young boy at the steps of the Gurduwara assuming that he would be cared for. The child, Piara, was not verbal, could not feed or bathe himself and could not turn sides. Bhagat Puran Singh took it upon himself to care for this child well into his adult life. For fourteen of these years, Bhagat Puran Singh literally carried Piara around his shoulders and on his back. Piara had signs and sounds that only Bhagat Puran Singh understood and the two were never apart from each other. When Piara turned 18, Bhagat Puran Singh stopped carrying him everywhere but he continued to care for him for decades to come. Although he was initially given a life expectancy of 30 years, Piara lived well into his senior years. Bhagat Puran Singh never married or had children of his own. Piara was the primary recipient of Bhagat Puran Singh's fatherly affection, he was an incredible source of joy for his caretaker. He was a symbol of the Bhagat's caregiving not just for all in need, but specifically children. Bhagat Puran Singh considered himself blessed to be able to care for Piara and said 'without him, my whole life would be tasteless.' (P. Singh, 2016, p.49). In his later life, Bhagat Puran Singh went on to win many awards and accolades but his greatest joy was Piara, the "garland around his neck" (Singh & Sekhon, 2001). No worldly acclaim ever measured up to being able to run towards doing the work that most of the world ran away from.

After partition, being forced from Lahore and Gurduwara Dehra Sahib, Bhagat Puran Singh found himself in Amritsar where he worked tirelessly and with endless hope to care for those who society abandoned. He initially arrived at Khalsa College

Camp, a refugee camp for those displaced by the violent Partition, where despite his circumstances and the state of the country, Bhagat Puran Singh continued his care of Piara. He still wore him on his back and was proud of the fact that up until Piara was 18, Bhagat Puran Singh never so much as took a sick day to stop caring for the young man. The refugee camp held somewhere between 23 000 and 25 000 people many of who were sick, had disabilities, or were abandoned. Bhagat Puran Singh took personal responsibility for all of the most destitute in the refugee camp, often without the help of another person and in addition to the full-time responsibility of caring for Piara. He fought for their food, cleaned their soiled clothes, hauled their water, and often watched them die of easily treatable illnesses and then cremated their bodies. Instead of being defeated by the circumstances of the refugee camps and the smell of death and excrement, Bhagat Puran Singh marveled at the miracle that he was always able to get food for those he was caring for; he was astonished by what faith and nature provided him (P. Singh, 2016, p. 85).

After the refugee camp shut down, Bhagat Puran Singh moved his charges to sit underneath a pipal tree in front of the Railway Station Post Office in Amritsar. From here he would beg for food and after feeding those he was caring for, he would serve the rest to those sitting outside a nearby hospital. While the police did try and remove Bhagat Puran Singh from the railway station, the station master stood by him and said that no one would be relocated. Thus, they were able to develop a routine and provide food and care in a somewhat clean if not crowded environment.; Piara, in turn, liked the bustling environment and being around a lot of people. While here, the Bhagat continued to read newspapers, visit libraries, and expand his mind. His fascination with trees and the environment continued to grow into a consciousness that would later manifest in actions to save the very earth he inhabited. Bhagat Puran Singh recounts, in his biography, the many individuals he served at this time. He knew their names, their stories, the exact details of their hospital visits and how their final rites were conducted. Nothing about his service lacked humanity. He never turned his consciousness from the stark and painful realities of his world. He looked death, poverty, starvation, illness and genocide in the eye and never lost his respect for the divine grace by which he was able to serve.

The following years saw Bhagat Puran Singh continuing his work and constantly shifting from one place to another. He took those he cared for to abandoned houses, underneath other trees, an abandoned cinema and eventually founded a building for what would come to be known as the Pingalawara; the name that he gave his institution translates into a house or an asylum for the disabled. The Pingalwara started to take shape in 1948 and continued to grow in infrastructure and funding in its latter years. Bhagat Puran Singh recalls being inspired by the following revelation from the pen of the fifth Nanak, Guru Arjun Dev Ji, in Jaitsiri,

Pauree:

He dwells in a broken-down shack, in tattered clothes,  
with no social status, no honor and no respect; he wanders in the wilderness,  
with no friend or lover, without wealth, beauty, relatives or relations.  
Even so, he is the king of the whole world, if his mind is imbued with the name of  
the Divine.  
With the dust of his feet, men are redeemed, because the Divine is very pleased  
with him. ||7||

Disregarding markers of social status was always at the core of the work that Bhagat Puran Singh did. In his lifetime, he personally oversaw the work of the Pingalwara as it expanded into an institution that served hundreds of individuals who has been discarded by the society in which they lived. He simultaneously worked as a writer, establishing a printing press, writing and distributing literature on multiple subjects. Being an activist for the environment was central to his mission. As a pioneer environmentalist, the Bhagat did everything from pick up garbage on the streets to plant trees and develop knowledge on a sustainable environment.

Finally, in August of 1992, at the age of 88, and after a lifetime of service, Bhagat Puran Singh's mortality caught up with him and he left his body. His legacy remains; He wrote tirelessly and left specific instructions for future generations on how to care for the environment, our fellow humans, and Sikhi. He created institutions and inspired a movement that still has incredible force. In reflecting on writing about his life he says,

I want to narrate these stories so I can tell to the youth that a poor young man with no financial resources or political power can provide the service to the poor with astonishing results and can spend life of immeasurable spiritual happiness and thus can achieve evolutionary progress of his energies and receive respect of the world. (P. Singh, 2016, p. 90).

At present, the work that Bhagat Puran Singh started, continues in Panjab. The fight to serve those who the world blatantly discriminates against goes strong with international support and funding. The Pingalwara Charitable Society Amritsar has 7 branches and serves over 1700 patrons. They have a printing press, a nursery for trees, and a dairy farm. They also have '5 schools, 2 dental clinics, an ultrasound centre, an eye clinic, an artificial limbs centre, a physiotherapy centre, a sewing and stitching centre, etc. etc. All these services and facilities are provided free of cost' (All India Pingalwara Charitable Society Amritsar, 2017). At the head of many of the initiatives are women; from Dr. Inderjit Kaur, who is the current President of the entire establishment, to Abinash Kaur Kang, who works tirelessly in Canada as

the lead fundraiser overseas, women work with everything they have to keep the mission of the Pingalwara alive (All India Pingalwara Charitable Society Amrtisar, 2017). Inspired by Bhagat Puran Singh's love for Sikhi, their actions continue to change the world.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper has done the work of establishing first and foremost, a lack of children's rights in India. As the committee on the rights of the child notes, 'India [is] home to 472 million children, which is 20 per cent of the world's child population.' (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2014). The glaring violence produced against children on the basis of age, caste, tribe, ability, illness and other factors has massive impact (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2014). Sikhs while representing a small part of India, they have a lot of ideological influence and have maintained a human rights discourse since the inception of the religion (Kapoor, 2018).

Modern human rights frameworks like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, highlight the right of children to exist free of discrimination (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). While the Indian state has signed and ratified the convention, and subsequently submitted multiple reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, they have remained suspiciously silent in including the contributions of religious organizations (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2014). This, while religious organizations have filled in the gap left by the broken welfare state and steppe din to take care of the most vulnerable (Dabir & Athale, 2011).

Recounting Sikh scripture and history demonstrates the fundamental value of non-discrimination in Sikh socio-political and spiritual ideology. This rejection of discriminatory practices shows up in Sikh scripture, architecture, in the lives of the Gurus, and in the movements in the post-Guru period. As an extension, and a formidable example of this value, the life of Bhagat Puran Singh, and his legacy of the Pingalwara were examined. Essentially, Bhagat Puran Singh did, with the core Sikh value of non-discrimination, that which the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child demands in its key principals.

Bhagat Puran Singh cited many influences for the work that he did. The Bhagat referred most to his mother, his Guru and his love of Piara. He said Piara was 'a great support in my life. Had he not met me, I would not have been able to set up Pingalwara and won the love and respect of the world upto 80 years of my life, I have lived it with the innocence and purity of a child.' (P. Singh, 2016, p.87). Bhagat Puran Singh never waited for the right funding or circumstances to start his work. His life was a series of incredibly challenging circumstances throughout

which he served humanity with little or no regard for the enormity of the implausible. He labored, physically, mentally, spiritually and financially with the audacity of assuming the world could be a better place for those he served. He served everyone, without considering their station in life. He was the human embodiment of the Sikh value of non-discrimination.

As per the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Government of India needs a comprehensive strategy for addressing the violations to the right to non-discrimination. The work, in the past and present, of Bhagat Puran Singh's Pingalwara provides a model for one of the many pathways that could be taken to address this violation.

The Indian state should both explicitly mention the work of organizations like the Pingalwara in their state reports, and draw inspiration from these organizations to put the right of non-discrimination into practice for the world most vulnerable children. In practical terms, this does not necessarily mean a large-scale reproduction of the Pingalwara model at a state level. Part of the success, as shown through the biography of Bhagat Puran Singh is the intention that informs his experience and the grassroots level organizing. Therefore, when state reports or alternative reports are submitted to the UN committee on the rights of the child, the Pingalwara should be given specific mention. Simultaneously, as the state continues to develop social welfare in the face of the many unique economic, political and demographic challenges that India has, resources should be given to bottom up models like the Pingalwara. In the many heterogeneous ways that power moves in regards to the care of the most vulnerable, the expertise of those on the ground should be given precedence. The combination of closing this gap in reporting, and structural support for existing bottom up programs will ultimately serve the rights-based approach of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## References

- All India Pingalwara Charitable Society Amritsar. (2017). *Introduction of Pingalwara*. Retrieved from <http://pingalwara.org/pingalwara1/>
- Anjaria, J. S., & Rao, U. (2014). Talking back to the state: citizens' engagement after neoliberal reform in India. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 22(4), 410-427. doi:10.1111/1469-8676.12088
- Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2014). *Committee on Rights of Child examines reports of India under the Convention and Protocols on Children in armed conflict, Sale of Children*. Retrieved from

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14663&LangID=E>

Dabir, N., & Athale, N. (2011). *From Street to Hope: Faith Based and Secular Programs in Los Angeles, Mumbai and Nairobi for Street Living Children*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd.

Dehler, G. J. (2011). Creation of the welfare state. In A. J. Andrea, *World history encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO

Deshpande, R., Kailash, K. K. & Tillin, L. (2017). States as laboratories: The politics of social welfare policies in India. *India Review*, 16(1), 85-105. doi:10.1080/14736489.2017.1279928

Kapoor, S. S. (2018). Human rights and Sikh Gurus [A brief study]. *The Sikh Courier International*, 73, 9-10.

Kapur, K. K. (2017). The artist and the saint. *Sikh Formations*, 13(1-2), 107-113. doi:10.1080/17448727.2016.1147182

Kaur, M. (1983). *The Golden temple, past and present*. Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press.

Melton, G. B. (2005). Building humane communities respectful of children: the significance of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Behavioural Sciences and the Law*, 12, 12-34.

Robertson, H. (2001). The right to rights. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82, 719-721.

Singh, C. & Singh J. (Eds.). (n.d.). *Janam Sakhi Bhai Bale Wali*. Amritsar: Jeevan Printers

Singh, G. (2010). Editorial Note Caste and Caste Relations in Contemporary Sikh Society. *Sikh Formations*, 6(1), 1-2. doi:10.1080/17448727.2010.486220

Singh, J. (1981). *Percussions of history: the Sikh revolution & in the caravan of revolutions*. Nanakshahi Trust.

Singh, K. (2004). *Janamsakhi tradition*. Amritsar: Printwell.

Singh, N. K. (2005). *The birth of the Khalsa: a feminist re-memory of Sikh identity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Singh, P. (2016). *Unforgettable memoirs of my life* (R. P. Singh, I. Kaur, & M. S. Goraya, (Trans.). Amritsar: Printwell.

Singh, P. & Sekhon, H. K. (2001). *Garland around my neck: the story of Puran Singh of Pingalwara*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers.

Singh, T. & Singh, G. (2006). *A short history of the Sikhs*. Delhi: M/s Anand sons.

Singh, V. (2010). *Puratan jaman sakhi Shri Guru Nanak Dev Ji*. New Delhi: Printograph.

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2014). *Concluding observations on the consolidated third and fourth periodic reports of India*, U.N., Doc. CRC/C/IND/CO/3-4

United Nations General Assembly. (1989). *The Convention on the Rights of the Child*.