

# Stories that shape our leadership styles

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Our behaviour is deeply influenced by the stories we have heard from childhood (Skinner, 1974) and our cultural values, beliefs and attitudes shape our lifestyles (Bandler and Grinder, 1979) so that we become the protagonists we have admired, and either consciously or unconsciously aspire to emulate. The Austrian psychologist, Carl Gustav Jung, identified 12 archetypes that are common to Eastern and Western cultures around the world (Salman, 1997). The following website clearly explains these archetypes in accessible language: [12 Jungian archetypes](#) (Neill, 2021) I have adapted some of these Jungian labels for the sake of relevance to popular Sikh heritage stories.

Using my intuition, derived from decades of personal experience of Sikhism, born into and raised in Sikhism from birth, supported by evidence from my research conversations with around 20 international Sikh professionals, gives me the impression that there are 6 Jungian archetypes that Sikhs are more likely to be associated with:

Archetype	Role	Value
<b>Sage</b>	Educator	Wisdom
<b>Pioneer</b>	Traveller	Prosperity
<b>Rebel</b>	Revolutionary	Change
<b>Good Neighbour</b>	Citizenship	Compassion
<b>Hero</b>	Activist	Courage
<b>Martyr</b>	Carer	Altruism

In contrast, there are 6 Jungian archetypes that Sikh leaders are less likely to be associated with:

Archetype	Role	Value
<b>Joker</b>	Entertainer	Humour
<b>Conformist</b>	Civil servant	Safety
<b>Alchemist</b>	Doctors	Healing
<b>Creative</b>	Artist	creativity
<b>Ruler</b>	Manager	Power
<b>Romantic</b>	Family	Happiness

These 12 archetypes are found in some shape or form in popular classic stories that have survived centuries. They are perhaps most useful when seen as a spectrum of behaviours rather than distinct, categorical identities. Moreover, an individual can express a diverse range of archetypes through their behaviour, depending on their stage in life and the context in which they find themselves.

I interviewed around 20 Sikhs from my list of contacts on the social media platform LinkedIn, asking the question:

Which stories from our Sikh heritage inspire you? How have these stories shaped your behaviour in the family, work/study organisation and community?

The responses I received from this small but representative sample of professional Sikhs, included stories which conveyed 6 distinct Jungian archetypes as listed in the table below:

Table 1: Most popular stories from Sikh heritage

Protagonist	Archetype	Story
Guru Nanak	Sage	Enlightened following 3 days submerged in River Ravi, Panjab (nam japo)
	Rebel	Rejected Hindu rites and rituals
	Pioneer	Travelled on foot to at least 9 countries (from Panjab to Mecca, Iraq, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan) continue to learn
	Good neighbour	Fed hungry hermits rather than investing in trade (Sacha Sauda); ate with honest and humble carpenter (Bhai Lalo) rather than exploitative and rich landowner; kirat kamao
Guru Gobind Singh	Hero	Defended weaker communities
	Martyr	Sacrificed his sons for the faith, altruistically
	Rebel	Disrupted power of Moghul rulers
Guru Arjan Dev	Martyr	Sacrificed his life for the faith, altruistically
Guru Tegh Bahadur	Martyr	Sacrificed his life defending others, altruistically
Maharaja Ranjit Singh	Hero	Defended human rights of Muslims, Hindus and Christians
	Ruler	Raised level of literacy in Panjab to over 80% during his rule; created peaceful co-existence between Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Christians
Bhai Ganaya	Good neighbour	Gave water in the battlefield to friend and foe alike; treated all equally
Bhai Lalo	Good neighbour	Shared his humble home and the very little food he had with his guests, Guru Nanak and his companion Bhai Mardana
Mai Bhago	Martyr	Led 40 defectors from Guru Gobind's army back into a losing battle against ruling Moghuls, where Mai Bhago survived but the 40 soldiers all died.
Bhagat Singh	Rebel	Disrupted dysfunctional British colonisation systems
	Martyr	Hanged for his participation in independence of India

The most common archetype in the stories recounted to me, throughout my lifetime and also during my research, has been that of "Martyr" (Guru Gobind Singh, Guru Arjan Dev, Guru Tegh Bahadur, Mai Bhago, Bhagat Singh) even though stories about the founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak, do not incorporate any messages of martyrdom at all. Stories about Guru Nanak often depict him as a "Good neighbour" archetype, kindly feeding the hungry hermits and preferring to spend time with the humble carpenter Bhai Lalo rather than accepting the more lucrative opportunity offered by the wealthy but exploitative Malik. Guru Nanak was a renowned Sage and a Rebel, rejecting rites and rituals. He was also a Pioneer, travelling across the world on foot, postulating his ideology about oneness, equality and a direct relationship with God, without the need for intermediary priests.

Sikh stories representing archetypal Conformists, Romantics, Creative artists, Jokers or Alchemists are rare. None of the professionals I have interviewed for my research recounted stories where the protagonist depicted these characteristics and behaviours.

Naturally, there is a whole spectrum of personalities in Sikh society, influenced by a multitude of cultures (not solely Sikh culture) and stories that are much broader in scope than those focused on archetypal Martyrdom, Rebellion, Heroism and being a Good Neighbour through generosity and kind acts of service. It is our preferences, choices and natural inclinations that determine the roles we play out most fully and the roles we avoid, shy away from and reject, for example Joker or Conformist even though these roles are the bedrock of a happy and harmonious society.

A social media platform such as LinkedIn simply reflects a relatively narrow spectrum of professionals and business owners who identify as being Sikh. Those who have chosen to participate in my research are a further sub-set of this small spectrum. Their reasons for being connected to me may be academic, professional or business related and their motivations in contributing to the research may range from a desire to be a “Good Neighbour” by contributing to research without seeking personal gain, to becoming a “Pioneer” through the leadership initiatives. Some participants may be driven by a desire to be a “Rebel”, disrupting dysfunctional systems that perpetuate social injustice, inequalities and illusions. Each of these different reasons for participating in the research creates a smaller subset in the sample of professional Sikhs I have selected

It is reasonable to assume that those who have connected with me on LinkedIn and chosen to collaborate in my research, reflect my own values, which I have alluded to on numerous occasions: courage, compassion, confidence, creativity and altruism. This small sample of Sikh society recollect stories of martyrdom, rebellion and the importance of being a Good Neighbour, much more easily than stories of conformity, romanticism, alchemy and creativity.

This may simply suggest that leadership is not obviously associated with archetypal Conformity, Romanticism and Entertainers, regardless of how creative we are. The term “leadership” may also attract some more than others. I am using this term synonymously with “protagonist” as I believe that we are all leaders in the roles we choose to play in life. However, those who identify strongly with archetypes such as Creative, Conformist or Joker, may not be drawn to participating in research that does not serve their interests.

Nevertheless, as my research progresses, the underlying reasons and the impact on our psyche, of associating closely with archetypal Martyrdom, Heroism and Rebellion rather than Ruling, Entertaining and being a transformative Alchemist, may emerge, creatively.

For now, it is useful to contemplate on some of the fundamental differences between the stories we identify with most easily and the stories that are currently less apparent, if not absent entirely from our Sikh consciousness. These differences may be significant.

One of the differences between a “Hero” and a “Ruler” is that the hero is more concerned with rescuing people than governing them. This reflects the harsh historical reality that Sikhs fought courageously for independence for many decades but did not assert their authority, when they had the opportunity to do so, to claim an independent Panjab in 1947.

A “Martyr” is more likely to remain loyal in relationships that require a great deal of compassion, altruism and self-sacrifice whereas a “Romantic” may value intimate relationships that are more beautiful and pleasing based on physical and emotional attractiveness. Sikhs tend to favour a

deterministic belief, that our lives are governed by a transcendental power which brings us together through a deeper force of attractiveness rather than attractiveness based on superficial physical beauty and transient emotions. This belief means that martyrdom is likely to be rewarded much more than a seemingly frivolous search for pleasure and elusive happiness.

Following the example of Guru Nanak Ji, Sikhs have travelled and become successful Pioneers around the world, setting up communities, organisations and enterprises wherever they have settled as part of the diaspora. They appear to be less visible in the world stage as “Creative Artists”, their talents for using their imagination to create cultural innovations in an international context, are relatively less developed.

Throughout the past five centuries, since the formation of our religion, Sikhs have found themselves in the role of “Rebel”, revolutionaries disrupting oppressive systems that perpetuate social injustice. From the stories we hear most predominantly, as Rebels, we are eventually subdued through cultural hegemony, the power of the ruling culture in which we invariably find ourselves, being a minority even in our homeland. We are less likely to be associated with stories of Alchemy where we have been able to transform the culture around us, as though by magic, easily and effortlessly.

Although a significant majority of Sikhs would probably identify with the archetype of “Good Neighbour”, valuing fairness, equality and kindness through neighbourly friendships and outstanding citizenship, they are less likely to identify with the archetype of “Conformist” where safety, happiness and a desire to avoid punishment are the deeper drivers of behaviour.

One of the predominant aspirational archetypes for Sikhs is that of “Sage”, where the values of truth, wisdom and intelligence lead to outstanding excellence in education. Cultural norms encourage Sikhs to become scholars, philosophers, academics, researchers and teachers. On the other hand, these cultural norms discourage young Sikhs from aspiring to be “Jokers”, enjoying life fully, having a great time and lightening up the world as joyous and fun-loving comedians.

As we learn to lead, using Sikh philosophy, values and principles as our moral compass, it is important to become aware of the imprints on our identities, carved by the stories we are told, the stories we tell ourselves and the stories we tell others. The impact of these conscious and unconscious impressions is evident in the spaces we occupy in an international environment.

At present, especially during a year of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, it seems that Sikhs are most visibly associated with being ‘Good Neighbours’, valued citizens who can be trusted and relied upon. Around the world, Sikhs are being acknowledged for their kind, generous and selfless service to brethren and strangers alike, providing food and shelter for those in need, just as Guru Nanak did, in the Sacha Sauda story, over 5 centuries ago.

In stark contrast, the only Ruler we immortalise through our stories is Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who ruled Panjab for a short-lived period of just 38 years. In an international context, we have yet to make our mark as Creative Artists, Jokers and Alchemists, transforming culture, creatively.

Even though the archetypes represent a spectrum of behaviours rather than distinct roles, what is it about our Sikh consciousness that makes us lean towards being Heroes rather than Rulers; Martyrs rather than Romantics, Sages rather than Alchemists and Rebels rather than Conformists? How powerful are the stories we hold dear in our lives, in shaping our roles as protagonists in our own stories?



### Research for “Learn to Lead”.

As my research unfolds and insights emerge, I will continue to ask questions such as:

Which stories from our Sikh heritage inspire you? How have these stories shaped your behaviour in the family, work/study organisation and community?

What are the stories we are told; the stories we tell ourselves; the stories we become?

Which archetypes do your favourite Sikh stories emulate:

Sage, Rebel, Hero, Martyr, Good Neighbour, Pioneer Conformist, Joker, Romantic, Ruler, Alchemist, Artist

What are your thoughts on the archetypes we desire to emulate and those we trivialise?

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