

# *Learn to Lead*

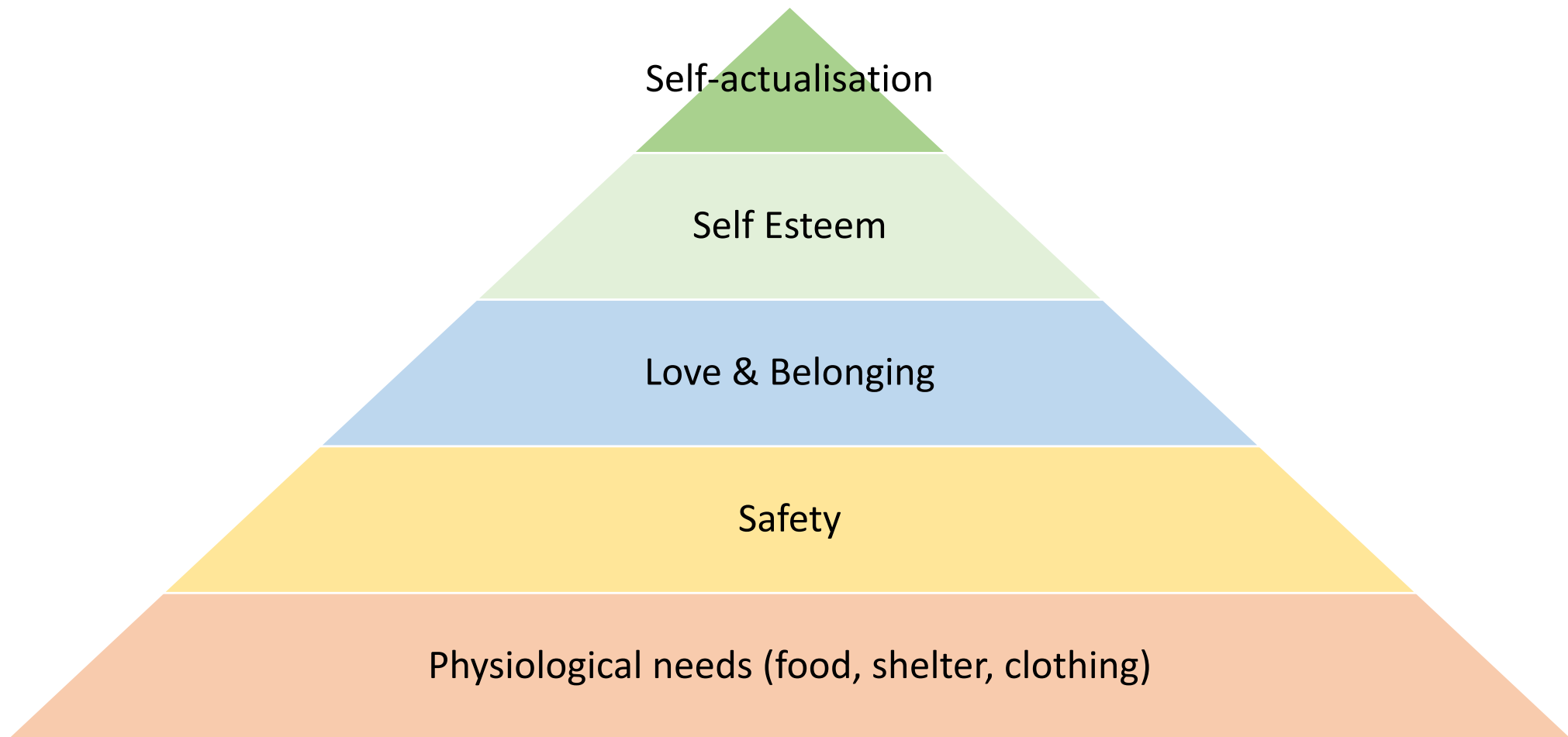
## *The importance of learning by Dr. Jesvir Kaur Mahil*

Sikhs tend to inherently value the role of education and most would probably agree that when leaders stop learning, their leadership begins to wane and stagnate. Since the foundation of the Sikh religion, the majority of Panjabi Sikhs have roots in an ancestral farming heritage. In contrast, in the international diaspora, a significant proportion of Sikhs are highly educated professionals. This transition from agricultural to professional cultures and norms means that the purpose of learning may have shifted to adapt to the context in which we find ourselves. Therefore, it is worth reflecting on our motivations for learning from various contemporary perspectives.

First, there is the societal point of view, emphasising citizenship as the main purpose of education. Highly educated, skilled, and hard-working members of society are likely to raise the level of productivity, quality of life and well-being for all. However, one does not need to be highly educated nor skilled to add value, raise the level of productivity and social quality of life. First generation immigrants in the UK, in the 1960s, like my own parents, demonstrated that their adherence to the Sikh concept of kirat kamao, working hard to earn an ethical livelihood, required neither a formal education nor high levels of industrial skills. For most of the Sikhs from my community in Stafford, UK, knowing what is meant by kirat kamao and applying this concept in practice was sufficient to survive the harsh environment of a foreign country where they did not even understand the local language. Through working hard to earn ethical livelihoods, Sikhs managed to establish themselves within the host community, so that their children, the second generation of Sikhs in the UK, could, unlike their parents, have the opportunities to become highly skilled and educated.

As an alternative perspective for exploring our motivations for learning, we could use Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970, Maslow and Lowry, 1999) as a lens (see Figure 1)

Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1970)



It is tempting to apply Maslow's hierarchy of needs to simplistically explain that the first generation of Sikhs to the UK were most concerned with survival needs and their main motivation for learning was to get jobs that would enable them to provide food, shelter and clothing for their families. At first glance, it may seem appropriate to assume that the second generation of Sikhs have worked their way up Maslow's ladder, being more concerned with love, belonging and developing their self-esteem in a country that is not native to their ancestors. Indeed, I have often found myself commenting that the third generation of Sikhs, like my nephews and nieces, are in a position to more easily follow their creative interests, having the security, sense of belonging and self-esteem provided through the efforts of the first two generations of Sikhs in the diaspora.

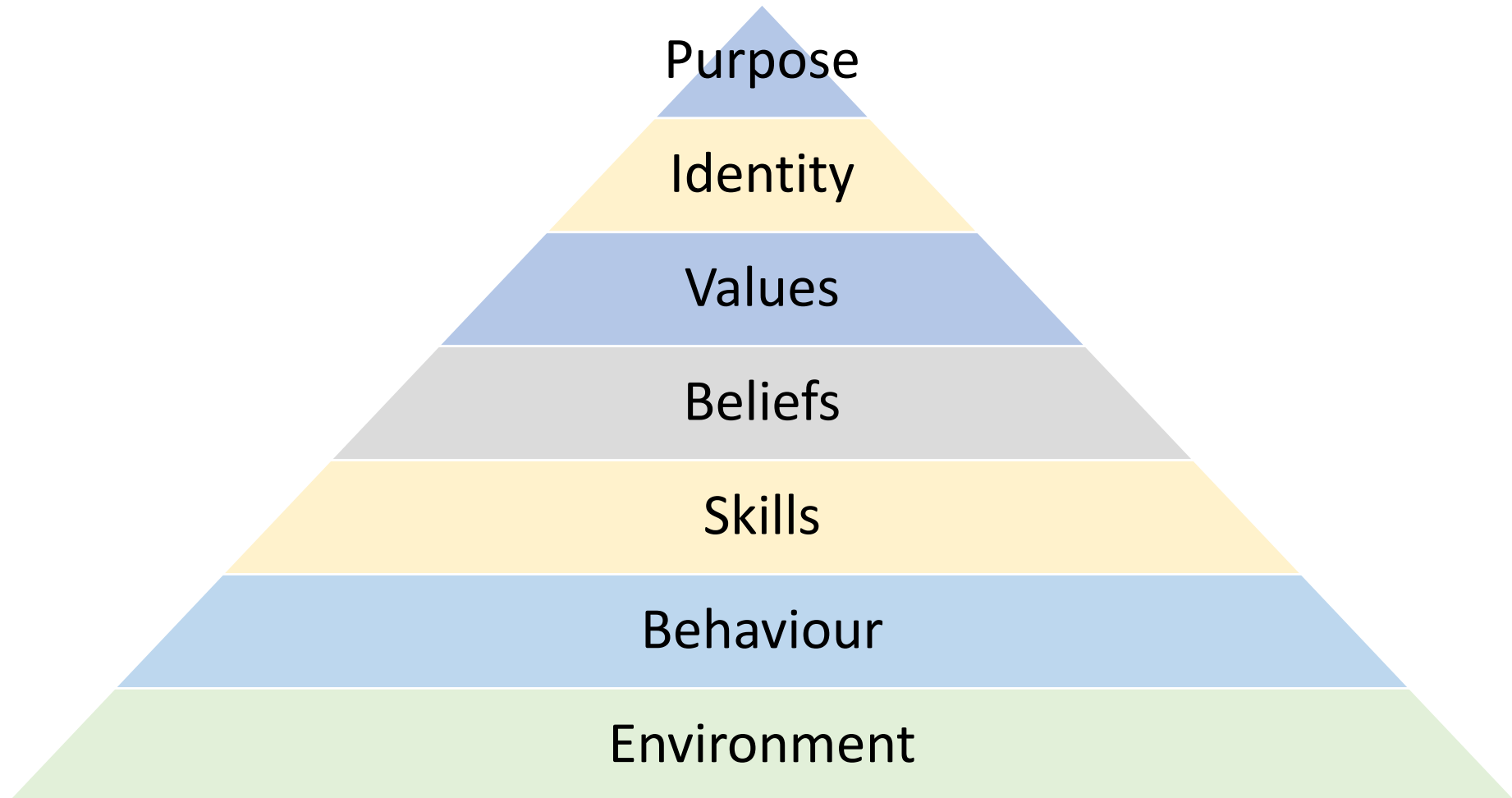
There is a problem in making such assumptions.

The first generation of Sikhs in the UK were not all driven by physiological needs as Maslow's hierarchy of needs may falsely suggest. They might have arrived in the UK with practically empty pockets financially. However, they came with a DNA deeply imbued with a rich heritage of success and victory over many kinds of struggles and strife. It takes tremendous courage to risk the safety, comfort and our sense of belonging in homes where our ancestors have lived for centuries, to uproot and re-establish ourselves in potentially hostile environments. Therefore, I would suggest that the first generation of Sikhs in the UK were driven by a desire for self-actualisation (at the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs) rather than physiological needs (at the bottom of the hierarchy). First generation Sikhs were willing to altruistically make sacrifices for the advancement of their offspring. Not all of them learnt about this type of self-actualisation through formal education. Many of them simply prayed (Nam Japo) for a better quality of life and took steps, with faith and trust, in the direction in which life seemed to pull them, so that they could earn an honest livelihood (kirat kamao) and have the means to support their extended families in the process (bandh shako).

It is important to recognise the wealth of historical cultural capital that our parents, the first generation of Sikhs in the diaspora, brought with them. When we speak of social mobility of immigrants, we need to avoid the complacent belief that we have already come a long way from the point of zero. The traumas entailed in being uprooted and having to re-establish ourselves in foreign soil can take several generations to overcome. Becoming professionals in the UK may still be a long way off from the positions we held in the Panjab, as landowners (zamindaar), government officials and high-profile decision makers. My fore-fathers established a village in the Panjab which is still thriving over 300 years later and it still bears our family name: Mahil Gaila. The name and history of my ancestral village is a constant reminder that much of our apparent social mobility in a foreign land may be an illusion compared with the achievements of our ancestors in the land of their birth.

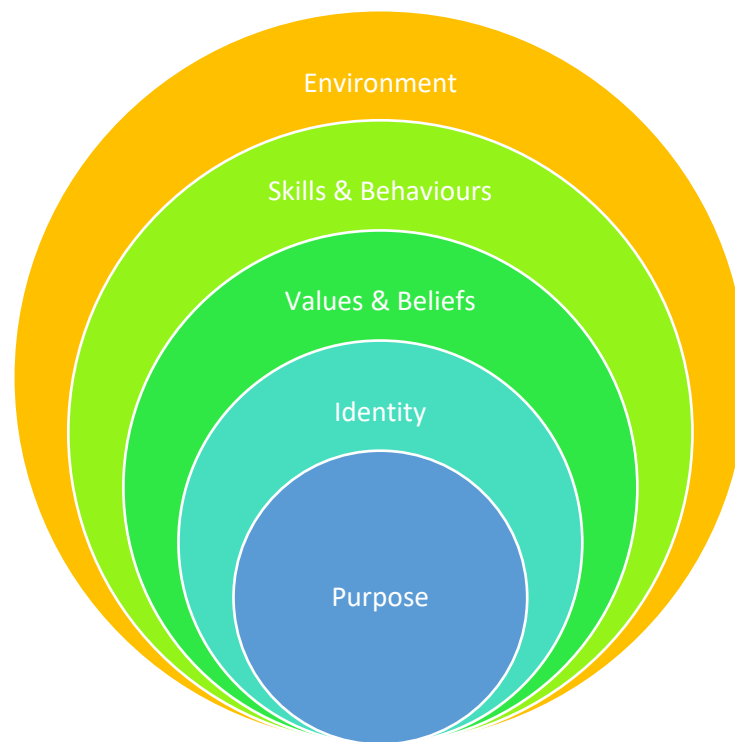
A third way of analysing our motivations for learning is through the lens of Dilts (1996) who created an alternative to Maslow's hierarchy of needs as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Dilts (1996) Logical Levels of Change



Dilts' neuro-logical levels provides a comprehensive tool for understanding our motivations to learn which include purpose, identity, values, beliefs, existing skills and the environment in which we find ourselves. At lower levels of education, the purpose for learning may simply be to find a job whereas at higher levels of learning, the purpose may be to transform culture so that there is a greater degree of social justice. Integral to our purpose is our identity. If we identify as being a teacher, our purpose for learning will be quite different compared with someone who identifies as being a creative artist. Our core values and ingrained beliefs will also shape our learning. Moreover, we cannot separate our identity from the contextual environment in which we are located as there is an inter-connectedness between our internal and external environments that determines what we learn, how we learn and for what desired outcome.

Figure 3: Adaptation of Dilts' Logical Levels to highlight drivers that motivate learning (Mahil 2021)



Sikhi teaches us to sit on the floor and share what we eat as equals, in a communal langar. Those who lead are usually the sewadars, serving us. The most powerful leader may well be the one who serves at the deepest level. Learning to be a sewadar requires humility, patience and empathy with those we choose to serve, which can be derived from practising Sikh principles such as Nam Japo, Kirat Kamao and Bandh Shako

In contrast to sewa that revolves around our physiological needs for water and food, as professionals, we can use our skills to feed and enhance the mind as well as the body. The type of sewa we choose to do will be determined by our identity and values. Unfortunately, we may lack clarity around the inner compass of identity and values that guide our decisions and shape our destinies. Who are we and what is most important to us?

Each one of us has a unique identity although there are patterns of behaviour which Jung and Read (1968) explained as universal, hereditary archetypes, which unconsciously influence our behaviour. If our chosen identity is a Sage, we will behave differently compared with if our chosen identity is an Artist or a Hero.

Preparation for a meaningful journey of learning requires critical reflection on the core drivers of our learning: Purpose, Identity and Values

What is our purpose in learning? Is it to gain security, recognition and confidence? Is the main focus of our learning to grow, make a contribution to society and to lead transformational change?

As we mature, we may experience deeper levels of understanding of Nam Japo, Kirat Kamao and Bandh Shako and this may be expressed in the quality of our learning and the leadership we demonstrate in our contextual environments.

What is your purpose, identity and values in **learning** to lead?

Do the models of Maslow (Fig 1) Dilts (Fig 2) or Mahil (Fig 3) serve to clarify your motivations for learning?