

From Tradition to Transformation: A Deep Dive into the Evolution of Sikh *Langar* and its Impact on Image Building in present times.

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Abstract:

Embraced as an innovative form of charity, the practice of community kitchen or what is known as *langar*, was designed to champion the principle of equality for all people worldwide, regardless of various discriminations. Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of Sikhism, the youngest religion of the world initiated the practice of community kitchen within the fold of the new faith with the vision of treating everyone equally. Popularly known as *Langar*, the community kitchen is a cornerstone of the Sikh faith, promoting the tradition of communal dining. It also presents an area for communication and social interaction between people belonging to diverse religious and socio-economic backgrounds. Central to Sikhism, the importance of the community kitchen is underscored by the belief in having food before prayer. It embodies values of communal spirit, inclusivity, engagement and the unity of humankind, serving to advocate the notion of human equality and providing a secure, welcoming sanctuary. Motivated by Guru Nanak's zeal for aiding the impoverished and bridging societal divides, the practice of community kitchen thrived alongside the growth and development of Sikhism; a practice that persists even today.

The research paper aims to discuss the evolution and significance of the *langar* practice with special reference to Community Kitchen at Golden Temple, Amritsar, Punjab. The paper also explores about how the practice serves to enhance the image building of Sikhism. The data is collected through primary sources such as interviews and discussions in the premises of the *langar* hall, Golden Temple, Amritsar.

Keywords- Community kitchen, *langar*, equality, Sikhism, humankind, Guru Nanak Dev, institutions, Image building.

1. Introduction

The core tenets of Sikhism are reflected in the *langar*, or communal kitchen. One of the three fundamental teachings of the religion's founder, Guru Nanak, is embodied in this practice: *Vand Chakko*, or sharing with others. The other two are *Naam Japo*, or meditating on His name, and *Kirat Karo*, or earning an honest living. Sikhism places a strong emphasis on the "equality of all," and one way that this idea is expressed is through the idea of a community kitchen.

Volunteers from the community clean and serve the kitchen while people eat together while sitting on the floor. Sikhs, both in India and beyond, take great satisfaction in this custom, which includes greeting and feeding guests in the Gurudwaras while they dine together on the floor. The *langar* embodies the four Sikh tenets of equality, service, hospitality, and charity. Equality is frequently mentioned as the fundamental element of *langar* by everyone who sits in rows, side by side, Sikhs and non-Sikhs, wealthy and poor.

The bigger and more comprehensive Bhakti tradition, which promoted equality and justice, is where Sikhism first emerged as a new religious movement (Judge, 2005). The theistic devotional movement that first appeared in medieval India and later served as a driving force behind the establishment and subsequent revolution of Sikhism is known as the Bhakti movement (14th–15th Century) (Pathak, 1998). Kabir Das, Ramanuja, Ravi Das, Ramananda, Nanak Dev, Mira Bai, and Tulsi Das are a few of the well-known figures linked to the movement; they all advocated for human equality. Guru Nanak Dev (1469–1539) founded a brand-new religion that rejected the conventional Indian path of renunciation and penance (Madan, 1992).

By designating his pupil and successor, Guru Angad Dev (1504–1552), as the second Guru of the religion, Guru Nanak Dev formalized his teachings. This marked the beginning of the charisma transference procedure and ritual. Guru Amar Das, the third Guru, lived from 1479 to 1574 and advocated for women's equality, the ban on Sati, and *langar*. However, Gobind Singh (1666–1708), the tenth and final Guru, was the one who started the Sikh baptism rite and made fundamental reforms to the Sikhs' beliefs and customs.

Additionally, Guru Gobind Singh established the "Khalsa Panth," a group of devotees who were closely associated with the Guru. Additionally, he requested that his followers use the term "Singh" in their names, which sets them apart from those who did not embrace the recently established system (Judge, 2005). Guru Gobind Singh stated shortly before his death that the Sikh Holy Scripture, Guru Granth Sahib, would take the place of the current line of human Gurus and be regarded as the highest spiritual authority for Sikhs. It also gave the Khalsa Panth or the Sikhs themselves temporal authority. Consequently, the Guru's power and role were transferred to the holy text, the Guru Granth Sahib, the Khalsa, and the Sangat which is the community gathered together (Baird, 1981).

In Sikhism, the Sangat is highly valued; hence providing services to the community also becomes crucial. The community kitchen thrived with the rise of Sikhism and was a Sikh institution by the 17th century, having been inspired by Guru Nanak's compassion for feeding the

underprivileged and eradicating all forms of social separation. Even now, people still do this (Singh, 1963).

As time went on, Sikhism's doctrines and practices solidified its foundation on the subcontinent. Gurudwaras are Sikh places of worship that were built in various locations around the nation by various Gurus at various points in time. These Gurudwaras functioned as educational institutions where the ten Gurus' teachings and principles were disseminated. It also contributed to strengthen the roots of Sikhism. Gurudwaras consists of a big room where men and women gather together and participate in community prayers.

This type of community willingly helps to serve and feed the guests at Gurudwaras in the community kitchen. Whether in India or elsewhere, a communal kitchen is still an essential and necessary component of any Gurudwara (Takhar, 2016).

2. Literature Review

Books, journals, reports, and articles are all consulted as part of the literature review for this study. Studies that offer a plan for the work to be done addressing related ideas, such as an introduction to Sikhism, the basis and spread of Sikhism, important practices, and community services in Sikhism, are taken into account.

2.1 Intense discontent with the state of affairs and the founder's endeavor to cut the Brahmanic chains that bound every Hindu's hands and feet gave rise to Sikhism in the fifteenth century. In his discussion of Sikhism and the Sikhs, Griffin (1901) describes the Sikhs as a race that was courageous and possessed the Punjab plains. He demonstrates how the revolt of Sikhism against Brahmanism is comparable to the Protestant uprising against the Roman Catholic Church, which was more of a resistance movement against the intolerable ambitions of the priestly elite than a dispute over philosophical beliefs. Therefore, the reformers in the East and the West rebelled against these goals. It is an odd coincidence that Martin Luther King and Guru Nanak were born and passed away within a few years of one another, yet their knowledge was synchronized.

2.2 In a significant work, Singh (2012) provides an overview of Sikh politics, history, culture, and practice. His concerns are larger and wider, and his worldview is deeper ingrained in the Sikh teachings' mission. What started out as a personal quest for the ultimate truth that focused on identity and theological questions has expanded into a larger concern for the community and its position in the global arena. It is also recognized, nevertheless, that a Sikh is anchored in Sangat and does not ascend the inner mountain by himself. Thus, community issues become significant, if not decisive.

2.3 In his work on Sikhism, Cole (2005) talked about Sikhs, their beliefs, customs, and way of life. Accepting the broad tenet that Sikhism is a religion that is said to have both a head in eternity and feet on the ground, the author discusses how each Sikh is an individual and how the Sikh identity is more constant than that of Christians, who can differ greatly depending on whether they are Quakers or Roman Catholics, African or Dutch. The author's conclusion

discusses Sikhism as an ethnic religion that is intimately related to Punjab in terms of culture, language, and ethnicity. Despite the fact that their forefathers may have departed the Punjab a century ago, the great majority of Sikhs are Punjabi.

2.4 Some research has concentrated more on Sikhism's practices than on the religion's origins, growth, and theology. Singh (2017) emphasized the idea of Sadh Sangat, or the Sikhism congregation. Guru Bani (preaching) and Sangat (congregation) are the means by which Sikhs and Guru are united. The faith's founder, Guru Nanak, foresaw the new era, which would have a global society that was similar to a small, close-knit village. Religions and cultures that had previously been separated would now coexist as close neighbors. The relationship between people's cultures and beliefs, as well as between faiths, will be enhanced by new scientific and technological discoveries and inventions. The sole assembly of the seeker in such a society would be the one that liberates the faith.

2.5 Desjardins (2009) talked about how important communal meals are in Sikhism. Every Sikh house of worship serves the communal meal, or *langar* as it is known in Sikhism, which is essential to Sikh religious practice and philosophy. He talked about the characteristics and fundamental principles of Sikh *langar* as well as some unique aspects of this food-centered indication of Sikh religious life, such as outreach activities and internal community building.

2.6 According to Nesbitt (2016), Sikhism is a disciplined and hardworking culture with a strong sense of community because the majority of actions are done for the benefit of the family and community rather than for the individual. Sikhism takes this concept even more seriously than Hinduism, despite the fact that there is a school of thought within Hinduism that encourages its adherents to renounce while still living in the world and fulfilling their obligations. It is important to note the commitment to live in the world and carry out one's responsibilities while remaining aloof from the results of one's actions. The author highlights the strong communal and mutual-aid values that exist among the members of the community as a significant aspect of Sikhism. A strong belief in being open-handed is demonstrated by *langar*, in which food is served among all who wishes for it.

3. Research Methodology

The investigation was conducted from a phenomenological point of view. A phenomena is an experience that a person or group of people share that is seen to be worthwhile to investigate, learn more about, and gain a better understanding of what happens to those who go through that lived experience. One such experience is the current work of opinion expression on communal kitchens, their many facets, and their practical effects on society. As a result, the phenomenological perspective is used in this work.

The main assumptions of Phenomenology that are used in this work are:

- a) a) A group of people share a common experience; in this case, that experience is the pilgrims and visitors who work in the communal kitchen and realize how common it is to

share food.

- b) The phenomenon is deliberately experienced by the group; pilgrims and tourists share food with strangers knowingly and without hesitation, as well as their space.
- c) In this instance, visitors and pilgrims define and share the actual occurrences that they observe and experience, and then provide an explanation of the practice. As opposed to any preconceived assumptions, the experiences shared determine the nature of reality of the phenomena and its true significance.
- d) The phenomenon has been studied both empirically and philosophically; in this study, the researcher has attempted to concentrate on the empirical events from the respondents' perspectives as well as the philosophy underlying the practice.

4. Evolution of Community Kitchen

The *Langar*/Pangat, also known as the Community Kitchen in Sikhism, is the organization that promoted the idea of fraternity among the congregation or Sangat. This free communal kitchen was established as far ago as Sikhism. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, used the term *langar*, which is derived from the Sanskrit word "Analgrah," which means the cooking place or the communal kitchen. His successors continued this tradition. The organization served four purposes. The first was to influence the Sangat's secular component. Second, it increased the Sikh Organization's operational effectiveness. Thirdly, it put the equality concept into action by requiring everyone, regardless of social standing, to sit on the ground, share meals, and endure; fourthly, it served as a binding factor among believers of Sikh religion (Singh, 1996).

In Sikhism, *Langar* is commonly referred to as Guru-ka. *Langar* can refer to the Guru's *langar*, the *langar* associated with a Gurudwara (the Guru's residence), or the *langar* in the Guru's name. "An alms house," "an asylum for the poor and destitute," and "a community kitchen kept by a great man for his supporters and dependents, the holy men and the needy" are all meanings of the Persian word "*langar*." Because it was "run by the Guru" and is being operated "in the name of the Guru," Guru-ka-*langar* conveys the final meaning more than the others. Truthful living, sharing one's food with others, the recitation of the Holy Name, and adoration of God were not the same as the values of love and social duty but also to be practically applied in the daily lives of the followers. Thus Sangat is referred to as the gathering of people and Pangat is referred to as the sitting as well as eating together in the same line in what we call as Guru-ka-*Langar* (Singh, 1994).

His successors adopted the practice that Guru Nanak had started, using it as a living force to bring people together on a single platform. Nanak's successor, Guru Angad, organized *langar* extensively. He and his spouse, Mata Khivi, evaluated meal preparation and distribution while working in the *langar* process. All of the contributions he received were used for *langar*, and food was distributed to pilgrims from far locations as well as people of all faiths. Rice cooked in milk (kheer) with ghee was one of the delectable foods prepared in the Guru's kitchen (Singh, Singh G, 1999). The communal kitchen established itself as a standard practice under the reign of Guru Amar Das. All visitors who were devotees were given *langar*. The third Guru made Goindwal as his congregational center; he had given instructions to his followers that to take food first every time they come to visit him (Kaur, 2016).

Under his close supervision, Guru Ramdas carried on the custom and established it in Ramdaspur (Amritsar). Additionally, he added new dimensions to the *langar* that were based on theological measures. The omnipresence of God appears to him in the service of *langar*. According to him,

*“Lord Himself is the field; Himself the Farmer and Himself He grows and grinds the corn; Himself He cooks and Himself he gives the dishes and puts food in them; Himself He sits down to eat it; Himself He gives the water, toothpick and Himself He puts water for gargling; He Himself calls and sits in the congregation and Himself sees it off”*¹

The community kitchen was a well-known Sikh institution by the end of the sixteenth century after Guru Arjan Dev continued the tradition. Its expansion extends beyond the Gurus' headquarters, and the Sikhs are likewise tasked with maintaining it (Banerjee, 1972). Guru Arjan Dev changed the custom of generosity and gave it a new form by establishing *daswandh*, or the tenth portion of one's wages, and stationed *masands* at various locations to gather sacrifices and tribute from Sikhs in order to fortify the Sikh Panth. They conduct *langars* in the *dharamsalas* based on this collection (Singh, 1969).

Anybody who entered a Sikh's home during the time of Guru Hargobind with the Guru's name on his lips was greeted warmly and given food. By this point, the *langar* had become a standard practice, and loyal Sikhs were operating free kitchens in their homes. No one was denied food or permitted to go hungry, and everyone received a complimentary lunch (Singh, 1949).

When a stranger or visitor comes to see him in the name of their Guru, the Sikhs view it as the highest form of devotion. They treated him as a brother and friend and did their best to serve him if someone, no matter how unknown or outsider, came even at midnight and took the name of Baba Nanak (Singh, 1969). The succeeding Gurus also continued the practice of *Langar*. As a result, wherever the Gurus went, the communal kitchen flourished and spread. With the aid of gifts from all sides, Guru Teg Bahadur also maintained an open kitchen for all of his guests and devotees, which attracted a large number of people to partake in his abundance (Singh, 1962). The Guru instructed the Sikhs to eat together if they wanted to join their circle and to not tolerate any discrimination against the lower castes. Even now, this tradition that began five hundred years ago is still in use (Grewal, 1976).

The community kitchen within the Gurudwara always serves vegetarian food that is freshly prepared using only natural ingredients to all guests. Sikhs are not required to be vegetarians, even though the Gurudwara solely serves vegetarian meals. It is generally accepted that Sikhs have the freedom to choose between eating meat or vegetarianism. However, Guru Gobind Singh told the Khalsa Panth not to eat kosher meat, which is meat that has been killed and prepared for consumption in accordance with Islamic law, if meat is to be consumed at all (Singh, Kaur S, 1994).

¹ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 550

Because it is accessible to everyone, vegetarian food is served at *Langar*. due to the fact that different individuals and religions have different dietary requirements and methods for preparing meat. The safest option, according to Sikh Gurus, was to allow vegetarian cuisine for *langar* as Sikhs accept these limitations and welcome people from all backgrounds and faiths. On the eve of the *Holla Mohalla* celebration, the *Nihangs*, a small but ancient Sikh sect in India, serve meat under the name *Maha Parsad*, which is an exception to the vegetarian *langar*. According to Guru Nanak Dev, there is no need in debating the virtues of eating or not eating meat from a religious standpoint because carrying a strict diet does not make an individual pure or lift himself to a high status; spiritually or otherwise in comparison to another individual (Pathak, 2007).

5. Community building and its relation with Image Building in Sikhism

This aspect of community kitchen is understood as a part of field work which was conducted in Golden Temple, Amritsar. The respondents were among the visitors who were enquired whether the practice of community kitchen helps in enhancing the image building of Sikhism in present times and the responses of these visitors are mentioned below.

When asked if the community kitchen aids in the development of Sikhism's image during the conversation, one responder said she would not consider *langar* practice an intentional effort to support Sikhism's image construction. In actuality, what counts here is how much Sikhs value service. She said that "I have witnessed Gurudwaras in the most isolated regions of our nation carrying on the service" (the answer first mentioned that her hometown is situated near one of India's international borders). She went on to say that Sikhs provide this job because it is ingrained in their culture and heritage, and she does not believe that there is a specific goal to promote them or build their image. If this were the case, there would have been distinct equipment dedicated to this task because image development necessitates a campaign and an asset of its own.

Another respondent seeks God's blessings and tranquility by making one or two annual trips to the sacred place. She felt that practicing *langar* instills in people a sense of service and empathy, as well as the ability to adapt and respect and regard others. "In my view, there is no concept like image building through this service," she shared. This is solely a human service. The Sikh community is well-known throughout the world for their welfare and *Sewa* programs. The contributions made by Sikhs to society are quite significant. She went on to say that rather than focusing on image-building or PR stunts, the teachings of Guru Gobind Singh and Guru Granth Sahib only and exclusively emphasize love, compassion, and service to humanity.

Because it offers opportunities for integration and a sense of community, a student respondent believes that the community kitchen practice is essential in the modern era. He gave an affirmative response when asked if he thought that using the community kitchen to help create one's image would set Sikhism apart from other religions and make it relevant in the contemporary world.

A respondent who is employed by the Haryana government has made five or six trips to the sacred location. According to him, Golden Temple is a reflection of a place of profound spiritual vision and fraternity. In addition to pilgrims who travel from distant places to receive the Guru's

blessings, people come here to receive blessings and the opportunity to assist society. He explained that the Community Kitchen is Guru Ka *Prashad* for everyone and is intended for the benefit of society. Since a significant portion of the population is struggling financially and cannot make ends meet, this technique is genuinely urgently needed. The communal kitchen can assist these individuals who are in a situation where they are powerless. Although it is true that the community aids in the development of the Sikhism image, he felt that the Sikhs' entire welfare programs should also be greatly commended, not just the community kitchen. "These programs are large-scale acts of assistance to others." According to him, it conveys the idea that since God provides us with everything in life; we ought to honor him by helping those in need who lack access to such necessities.

"Golden Temple is an open house of worship for all people belonging to all religions and regions," stated a local who works at a bank and has made three visits to the location. It is a historical location, and the staff is always willing to help. Every hour of the day, the community kitchen is open to everyone and serves *Prashad* to everyone without distinction. The purpose of this activity is to demonstrate the equality of all people. This exercise teaches us how to find fulfillment in serving others. A communal kitchen contributes to the globalization of the Sikh community. This tradition itself is an example of how Sikhs unite regardless of caste, geography, or religion. These individuals are serving others in the best manner they can", she added.

It is clear that when the topic of image building is brought up directly, both Gurudwaras take offense and frequently offer arguments against it. Instead, they view *Sewa* as a component of Sikh thought. The respondents in this case made the observation that image is not a clear concept that underpins service provision. Even when it occurs, it does so as a latent consequence. The respondents concur that separate set equipment or media is necessary for image development because it is part of the agenda. It is challenging to believe that this service is provided for image-building purposes, nevertheless, because the Sikh community lacks such distinct set equipment.

The sociological idea of "Manifest and Latent Functions," which was proposed by R. K. Merton in his book "Social Theory and Social Structure" (1949), can help explain the above question of whether or not *langar* aids in the construction of Sikhism's image. According to Merton, hidden functions are those that are not intentionally intended, whereas manifest functions are the acknowledged and intended outcomes of a social event. Therefore, latent functions are the positive effects of an entity that are not intended and may not be immediately evident, whereas manifest functions are the beneficial outcomes of an entity that are often visible to society. Given this, it may be said that the communal kitchen's obvious purpose is to provide service and *Sewa*, whereas the other purpose i.e. the latent purpose can be attached to the image building.

"Intentionality" is a key idea in phenomenology that has to do with perceptions. The phenomenological approach entails putting aside preconceived ideas and interpreting events as they are reported by the people who are having them. In this instance, the respondents talked about how they don't think the Sikh community has any such intentions behind the goal of enhancing its image through *langar* practice. Respondents who learn about the practice and community through their work outside of Gurudwaras—such as in the context of COVID-19 and

farmer agitation—do not believe that this is related to image development. They do, however, think that image building is an unexpected effect of their service, and that their community's image is being improved as a result of this practice.

6. Conclusion

The concepts of Sewa in Sikhism, the idea of Vand Chakko, and the significance placed on the concept of Sarbat da Bhalla, or the wellbeing of all, form the functional ideology underlying the community kitchen practice in both Gurudwaras. A sense of pride, satisfaction, and completion is felt by individuals providing Sewa in the service. They seek a greater meaning in providing Sewa, and they are well aware that what they are doing is not typical (everyday) job. These individuals do, however, understand that involvement in *langar* must be moral or spiritual rather than temporal.

Given that social ties and value systems are fundamental components of an individual's identity, exposure to and communication of differing viewpoints, as well as the repercussions of doing so, can influence how people perceive intercommunal relations and their functional potential.

Sikhism and its current practice of the "community kitchen" in Gurudwaras and elsewhere is another unusual fusion of religion and spiritualism with the well-being and economic prosperity of a community. Unlike any other religion or group, it combines productivity and skill with service to humanity. The study has come to the conclusion that the strength of any theology lies in a mix of its theory and practice, despite the recent changes that have affected all of the main religions in the world, including Sikhism, as this work demonstrates.

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