

# Our Heritage: Examining our Social Responsibility

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The Supreme Court of India in an appeal in 2000, by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) against the judgment of the High Court of Punjab and Haryana, pronounced a significant ruling of far-reaching consequence, that Sri Guru Granth Sahib is a "juristic person": "It can therefore hold and use the gifted properties given to it by its followers out of love, in charity" and "this is by creation of an endowment like others for the public good, for enhancing the religious fervour including feeding the poor."

[vide: The Hindu, 2 April 2000]

Three important concepts need to be clarified in this context. First, "*Daswand*" (or tithes) - this is perhaps the only specific and mandatory directive given by the Guru requiring a Sikh to contribute one-tenth of his income from his honest labour towards the welfare of the community and humanity in general. This mandate of *daswand* is different from the traditional view that whenever you go to visit or worship your Guru, you should not go empty handed, but make some offerings to Him.

"*Daan*" - an act of charity - generally moving from the superior to the inferior or the have to the have-not. (It is sometimes loosely used by ignorant persons when making contributions to the Gurdwara - since you cannot make donations to the Guru);

"*Bheta*" - an act of offering or tribute/gift from one of an inferior position to one of superior/mighty position, and in this context, usually given out of love or respect.

## **Concept of Community Assets:**

In general, in the absence of any organised method, Sikh devotees contribute to the community assets through some of the following methods:

- contributions to Degh on service days, special occasions, gurpurabs, etc.;
- contributions for specific and special projects like building funds, celebrations of centenary celebrations/anniversary of death, etc;
- Tithe (*daswand*) contributions, or gifts;
- underwriting shortfalls in certain projects;
- accretions or capital gains that occur through passive or active investment portfolio management.

In general, once a contribution/offering is made and there is no manner of identifying any portion as belonging to any particular person then that becomes part of the pool of the community assets.

These contributions do not include specific gifts or donations to members of the community by individuals, like gutkas/newsletters/audio tapes, etc. which a person may contribute to enhance their social responsibility or charitable inclinations.

### **What are community assets used for?**

The underlying sole guiding philosophy (or the "principal value") is that these assets be applied for the general welfare of the community and humanity at large without discrimination. They are utilised for the running of institutions/gurdwaras and to host functions and programs and conduct other welfare activities.

Traditionally what did the Gurus do with the offerings of the devotees and the contributions of his well-wishers? In line with the principal value, they initiated programs for the building of gurdwaras (example: Harimandir Sahib, enhancing the spiritual aspect) to even collecting materials and horses to build an army of Sikhs to defend the faith and to fight against oppression and tyranny (for the preservation of life, human rights and dignity - as carried out by the 6th Guru and 10th Guru).

The two extremes of the spectrum are: the Langar system (Degh - or the concept of the kitchen cauldron filled for the hungry and the needy) and the Scimitar (Tegh) for the protection of life and human rights (example of Guru Tegh Bahadur ji) as enunciated by the 6th Guru, Guru Hargobind and the 10th Guru. In between these two extremes, other services, like medical help, were provided.

### **Is the sole guiding principle (principal value) still being adhered to?**

Though the principle is to employ the community assets and contributions for the general welfare and upkeep of the Sikh community and society in general, inevitably the wealth/assets was/is used for the Sikh community itself save for isolated cases of "charity/sharing" with other communities.

This may not be unusual for any community to do - that is, to look after its own interests first. It is in accordance with normal human behaviour. But do we, or are we, as Sikhs allowed to fall in the category of the norm? Our value system requires us to be above the norm and to be extraordinary!

The Buddhist community in Singapore, gifted to the Sikh community, on the 300th Khalsa celebrations \$100,000. This is an example of religious harmonisation and sharing in the joys of each other.

The most visible example of discharge of this principal value is the langar system - open to all humanity. Perhaps, because it is not widely known or advertised, (and in this our

public relations has been severely shortcoming) those who enjoy the langar are mainly members of the Sikh community. How many in the Sikh community are in the category of the poor and needy that we can say honestly that the langar rightly is for them? Has this become an abuse of the system or dereliction of duty or have we forgotten the underlying reason for it?

The langar system is in accordance with the teachings of the Guru that a Gursikh never lets one go hungry, because feeding the poor is like putting it into the treasury of the Guru "*Garib dhay moo, Guru di golak* - Bhai Gurdas (this is the only instance seemingly where the act of charity may be equivalent to *Bheta*).

But like the langar system, is there any similar obligation on us, for example, to educate our children and also help our neighbour who is in need? If yes, where are the educational scholarships - whether for deserving Sikh students or for those from other communities?

What about circumstances in between these two ends:

- Like providing jobs;
- Like providing education to your neighbour and friend in need;
- Like assisting unmarried girls/widows/divorcees to find husbands or remarry;
- Like setting up homes for waifs and wayward children;
- Like setting up legal aid war chest for human rights contentions;
- Like setting up rehabilitation centres for drug addicts; or
- Disaster relief funds for those affected by them; or
- Funds to aid victims of riots/rape and pillage in civil wars;
- Using skills to upgrade the community through intellectual enhancement programs;
- Giving tuitions to other communities - by way of intellectual contribution;
- Protecting and enhancing women and children rights and welfare programs, etc.

Although the mandate by the Guru was to use the community assets for the living and needy - feeding both the psyche and also materially (langar/education, etc.) we seem to

have narrowed down this responsibility into one or two cases of langar and celebrations of festivals. All other activities have become ad hoc.

The reason is purely, a lack of perception and understanding amongst teachers, parents and priests of the values that the Guru has imparted to us. We have chosen to abdicate this responsibility to the guardians of the gurdwaras and institutions - who for most of the time are ignorant and unversed in the values themselves.

There is a constant cry in the community (not only amongst the youth, but also the elderly), that the gurdwara and the institutions have failed them. Is this cry justified?

There is an implicit belief by the members of the Sikh community that in times of need they could turn to the gurdwaras for help - for example, of monetary or emotional help. How did this assumption come about?

Are the community members right in believing so? If yes, then why are the gurdwaras not fulfilling their obligation? Why are we not living up to it?

Is the complaint that money and resources are unnecessarily being wasted on building additional gurdwaras at the drop of a scarf or insult or beautifying them rather than spending the resources on uplifting the people or doing more for the *sangat*, a valid complaint?

Why is/are there

- Extravagant and wasteful lighting at celebrations - even after everyone has left;
- Wasteful projects and schemes which benefit a minority of the *sangat*?
- Insufficient attention being paid to training proper granthis, lecturers, teachers, even psychologists, etc. to meet modern society's demands? (It is like the community wishes to be stuck in a time warp.)

Gurdwaras that do not give monetary help to the needy or even shelter? Is this a role that they should adopt? Is it sufficient to say that the state is providing it and the Gurdwara need not?

There is the teaching that a Sikh is never a beggar, but are the gurdwaras not taking this principle too far in denying help/assistance to those in need? Is this not a neglect or an abuse of duty?

Let me narrate an incident:

A farmer had a pair of oxen to plough his fields. The farmer could not plough the land with one ox. He went to the *Dehra* of a holy man to seek help. He saw two healthy and

strong oxen there which had been gifted to the holy man by a devotee. He asked the holy man for one, and explained the reason. He was given one. He returned to the *Dehra* after a few days and explained that the ox that he took from the *Dehra* was stronger than the one he originally possessed and it "dragged" the one he owned. He could not plough the land properly. He asked the holy man to give him the ox in *Dehra*, as it would make a suitable pair with the one he first took. The holy man gave him that too. (Actual incident at Baba Harnam Singh Dehra in 1947 as narrated to me by my father)

Ordinary folks make the assumption and believe that if you went to a holy man for help, you would get help. Is this belief a valid one? Do we not make a similar assumption about the Guru's house - to get relief or aid of some form? If not from the Guru, then where do we turn to?

Where did this implicit assumption arise from and when did this obligation to serve get printed on our psyche that we can honestly conclude that the gurdwaras have failed in their duty when they do not assist us?

One thing is certainly clear - today we attribute it as ONE of the causes why so many Sikhs are leaving the religion and becoming victims to predatorial hunts of other religions.

### **The role and rights of Sangats as registered societies**

Most modern societies requires people who group together for a particular purpose/cause to form associations/societies, to be registered under the governing law of the land. The members of the association are subject to rules and to the general law of the land. The members hold elections, elect office bearers and confer authority on them, and carry out their desired activities.

In such systems on a legalistic and narrow view, only members can complain/seek redress against anyone who commits a breach of duty/or appropriation of that society's assets.

### **Collectivity of *Sat-sangat* in Sikhism**

The ideal definition is given by the Guru in "*Sat sangat kaisee janeeai, jithai eko naam vakhaani-ai*" (Sri Raag Mahalla 1 Ghar3 - SGGGS 71/72)

*Where the name of the Lord is recited, that place is the Satsangat.*

Persons who are united by the common goal of reciting the name of Sri Waheguru are the true sangat. No membership, only presence and in the presence of those who are there to recite the name of the Lord is necessary. No rules govern them. The only governing rule is: service to and welfare of others, because to them:

"*Sabhey vastoo kauooria, sachay nao mitha*" (Pauri - Gauri ki Vaar Mahalla 5 SGGS 321) *Tu Ghat ghat antar sarab nirantar ji har eko purkh samana* (Asa Mahala 4 So Purakh - SGGS 11)

In such cases all contributions and assets belong to the *sangat*. The guru is recognised as the true owner of these assets and the *sangat* members as His *sewadars* - pure and simple.

But our *gurdwaras* are run as associations. These *gurdwaras* although intended to be for their members - in reality - are open to all and sundry. Often it is such that worship is relegated a minor role and other social activities take prominence. Any person is allowed into the activities/service, and the lines between *sangat* and association gets blurred as to who can take part in the activities - except standing for elections.

How then can a non-member complain of any abuse, neglect and misappropriation or fraud of the society's assets? To the custodians? But in many cases it is the custodians who are at fault and who have no sense of duty at all. So who is to guard the guards? The answer can only be: the *Sangat*.

Who are the custodians and what is their duty, if any? How far does this duty extend? Are there any checks and balances of this responsibility, and any remedies for the breach of this duty? Does this duty extend to the *sangat* at large or is it restricted only to the managers and officials of the *gurdwara*?

Does any member of the *sangat* have a right to demand the proper compliance of this duty?

We must note that even the 10th Guru shut down *gurdwaras* when the *massands* got out of hand. The aim was not to allow the abuse of community assets, amongst other things.

It is common knowledge, and in some communities an accepted fact, that those vying for executive positions in the *gurdwara* committee are not only jockeying for petty power positions, but some also take the opportunity to put their hands in the till of the Guru by commencing projects which will benefit certain members of the committee or their families.

In general while the attitude of the majority of the *sangat* is that the assets belong to the *sangat/guru*, other than correction of minor infractions, not many persons would go out of their way to retrieve the wrongful appropriations/misuse and abuse of these assets or even to bring up to the notice of the community/*sangat* some wrongful allocation or misappropriation of the community assets or even extravagant expenditure.

They prefer to see it happen and not say/do anything about it - and if they do, it would only be to a few family members or friends hoping that some form of embarrassment of the offending officials/persons would be sufficient - even if there is no restitution. But is

this sufficient? Why is there hesitancy to bring it out in the open or to confront the individual and ask for the misappropriated assets to be returned or the community be compensated? The answer lies in the perception and recognition of duty to the Guru.

The religious duty has always been considered as the highest duty of all. The 10th Guru created the Khalsa, after being prompted by the moral cowardice of the crowd at the execution of his father, Guru Tegh Bahadur. This duty - to speak up, fight against corruption/tyranny/dishonesty, etc. has been running in the mainstream of the religion since Guru Nanak, yet we seem to have forgotten the values.

Consider some simple examples of misappropriation that happen everyday in our gurdwaras:

- Sangat members taking home langar utensils and not returning them - despite noticing them and becoming aware of them at home;
- Extravagant expenditure and wastage of lighting on festivals by the officials;
- Sewadars demanding excessive budgets for ill-conceived and unplanned projects and in some cases projects without merit and perhaps only advantageous to the promoter or few select friends;
- Sangat members even failing to ask for justification of such expenditure;
- Sangat members seeing lights/fans on in empty halls, and permitting wastage;
- Favouritism in putting relatives and cronies in positions and thereby not taking advantage of skilful persons, etc.

In all such cases, is there a general responsibility on the sangat or any member of the sangat? Or the officials? More severe cases exist all over.

A citizen of a country has been given the right by law to lodge complaints of violation of the law - even though the acts do not directly affect him and in some cases to apprehend the culprit. But no such agencies exist in the *sangat* - either to hear complaints, investigate or to seek redress and obtain compensation or retrieve the articles. **Should such agencies be created?**

**Investment in human society:** All over the world surplus monies and assets of the gurdwaras and institutions are lying in their vaults or bank accounts, without being invested. They only bring benefits to the banks and to no one else. Is there a similar duty in Sikhism to ensure that these assets grow or be applied to productive projects that can bring in greater returns? The custodians are trustees of the assets belonging to the community or the Guru. There is a duty placed here upon all the trustees to ensure

that the assets are not wasted or whetted away on non-productive ventures. It is clear there is a severe neglect of the duty to the community and the Guru where such assets/funds are not wisely invested or put into the projects that can reap greater rewards. Let me cite an example:

- A sewadar proposes to the gurdwara to finance an exhibition, purportedly for the benefit of the community, when in fact the aim is to gather material and resources for thesis of a degree program and to appropriate the resources for private business purposes. Or, a sewadar asks for an exorbitant sum from a gurdwara to finance the research or for setting up of an institute to teach *Gurmat Sangit* without disclosing to the gurdwara that similar approaches have been made to other agencies and persons all over the world at the same time or of what funds that have been received.

What should a sangat member do if he is aware of or is suspicious of the circumstances of the requests?

It is about time that we reflected upon our obligations to the community and the duties handling the community assets and became vigilant against surreptitious attempts made by sewadars and officials to siphon off assets or breach their duties under apparent guises of benefits to the community.

