

Seva: Service of Humanity®

The Sikh Precept and Praxis

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PART I

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THE WORD SEVA IS OF ANCIENT ORIGIN. It does not have an equivalent in English but conveys the sense of service, voluntary or in employment; caring; worship; love and adoration. It also carries a connotation of charity. Thus to bring together the concept of *seva* one has to look at the ingredients of all these activities, their underlying motivations and place in the social ethics and belief system.

The concept of *seva* is not unique to any particular faith. In fact all traditions endorse the practice, though understandably there are differences in emphasis and the way it has been practiced. Hinduism commends selfless service, *nishkama* *seva*, without expectation of reward. Giving to Brahmins and the poor has been considered an act of charity. Christian thought considers charity to be a divinely infused habit, inclining human will to cherish God and man for the sake of God – love God and love thy neighbor – teaches the Bible [Luke 15]. The precedence for the choice of recipient seems to be self, wife, children, parents, brothers and sisters, friends, domestics, neighbours, fellow-countrymen, and then others. Judaic charity was broadly national in its origin; the Torah however calls to care for ‘the alien and the stranger in your land.’ In Islam the act of giving is greatly stressed though in practice it seems to have been extended to the co-religionists.

To explore the various facets of the concept of *seva* in Sikh thought, we will look at the usage of the related terms as it emerges from the scriptural literature and also look at the praxis as evidenced by Sikh living today and in history.

Seva in Sikh Thought

Broadly the word *seva* has been used in the Sikh scriptures for serving or being obedient and subservient in secular sense and serve the needy and the *sangat* as well as to revere, love, and worship the divine as a part of one’s spiritual quest. We hope to find that as a whole life faith, Sikh thought would have an integrated concept of *seva*, where both the social ethic and moral imperatives come together to encourage and reinforce devotee’s instincts for service and altruism.

Guru Nanak commended the triad of *nam*, *dan* and *ishnan* – name, charity and inner purity [also external cleanliness] which continue to serve as a concise definition of Sikh ethos. McLeod says ‘one achieves [freedom from cycle of transmigration] primarily through the practice of *nam simran* or meditation on the divine Name, though it is also assisted by alms-giving [*dan*] and necessarily involves pure living [*ishnan*].’² All three precepts in thought as well in praxis underpin the concept of *seva* though *dan* would seem more intimately and directly connected to it. Sikhs are persuaded to surrender themselves to the Guru totally, body, mind and materials – *tan*, *man*, *dhan* –and live per Guru’s teachings to achieve union with the Divine.³ All the three forms of devotion are important in this quest or *seva*.

At the level of popular understanding Sikh ethos is summed up in three guiding injunctions – *nam japna*, *kirt karni*, *vand chhakna* – reciting name, earning by hard, honest work and sharing what one earns, eats or has. According to W. Owen Cole, 'Kirat is central to the Sikh concept of *seva* or self-abnegating deeds of service. In *seva* no task is considered inferior or degrading; in fact the humbler the task the more honorable it is considered for the Sikh engaged in *seva*.' Regarding interlinking of the three injunctions he says that '*kirat karni* is on the one hand associated with and conditioned by *nam japna* ——— [and] on the other, *kirat*, sanctified by *nam*, must fulfil the mandatory injunction of *vand chhakna*.'⁵ Thus all the three injunctions guiding the way a Sikh should live his life are intrinsically embedded in the concept of serving and sharing.

Another mnemonic expression, going back to the Guru's time, summing up Sikh ideals is *deg*, *tegh*, *fateh*. Later Sikhs also adopted these three words for inscription on their seals and coins when they succeeded in establishing suzerainty over parts of North India in the early eighteenth century. The word *deg* carries the connotation of general benevolence, *tegh* of protecting the good from evil and *fateh* of victory in this righteous endeavor. This twin concept of charity and valor is also inherent in the Sikh ideal of *sant sipahi* or saint soldier – both characteristics leading to the objectives served by *seva*.

At another level, the supplication for *sarbat ka bhala* in the concluding line of ardas gives expression to the Sikhs prayer that their day should be filled with deeds to secure the well being of all. This also flows from the Sikh belief that God is an epitome of both being the master and *sevak*⁶ and that – *vidya veecharee ta parupkari* – the end of spiritual learning is to be of service and do good to others.

In Sikh thought charity and *seva* both help the devotee to grow spiritually even as he tries to promote betterment of others. *Seva* and altruism must be an expression of love, not of pity or reciprocity for as the Guru says 'one who is good if good is done unto him and not otherwise, does not love but only trades in love.'⁷ Make your supplication in ever so many ways to the divine that such love is for the low of the lowest – all, not limited to the like-minded or co religionists or in return.⁸

Motivation for Seva

The urge for *seva* is universal and is not restricted to humans. Gurbani says that all the beings are continuously engaged in God's service⁹ and even as all of them belong to that one Creator, none can earn any merit without *seva*.¹⁰ The motivation for *seva* therefore is inherent in consciousness, susceptible to being cultivated or suppressed.

At the level of humans, even though the instinct for *seva* may be intrinsic, for most the spirit finds expression in hard toil and work in worldly pursuits. Such effort is necessary but is not commended absent concurrent purity of conduct and spiritual growth of the individual. Guru Tegh Bahadur laments 'to who shall I speak of the condition of man's mind? Lured by greed, hoping to gain wealth, he runs in all directions. For securing his comfort he endures pain and waits on every one, like a dog wandering from door to door, not ever thinking of meditating on God [who has given all that we have].'¹¹ In a similar strain flows the thought that those who abandon *seva* of the One who supports all and serve the illusory material world – *maya* – are engaged in vain deeds and live an egoistic life. Such people are perverse and blind.¹²

The Guru also questions as to how can one hope to achieve a place in the Divine realm if he keeps serving sundry worldly bosses.¹³

The motivation for *seva* should therefore inspire one to serve God for blessed is the *sevak* whose love for God endures to the end – he serves God in life and enshrines His love in his heart while departing — Such a *sevak* is blessed and fruitful is his coming for he will realise the Lord.¹⁴ With such lofty possibility motivation to engage in *seva* is really a divine gift and comes to those who are so destined.¹⁵ Gurbani refers to – *har seva* - *seva* of God, *seva* of Guru and *seva* of people. We will now briefly look at each to grasp their import and inter connectedness.

Har(i) Seva

Sikh persuasion is to serve, love, adore, believe in, worship one God, referred frequently in Gurbani as *har*, and not any other.¹⁶ Dedicated and single-minded *seva* of *har* is sure to take the Guru oriented devotee to Hari's lotus feet.¹⁷ The experience of living a life of service to God is unique. The sense of tranquility and peace that descends on such people is way more sublime than the elation that may be induced in a king by his feeling of unfettered power and authority.¹⁸

The motivation to do *seva* comes to those who receive the grace of *har* and their sins are forgiven.¹⁹ They receive God's beneficence and their desires for the four *padarath* – traditionally thought to be the four desired outcomes of human action viz *kama* [life's pleasures], *artha* [economic well being], *dharma* [duty toward virtuous values] and *moksha* [liberation] – are satisfied.²⁰ Those that serve the Lord are absorbed into His being and attain freedom from the cycle of birth and death²¹ and become abiding as the Supreme Transcendent God is abiding.²²

The way to perform God's *seva* is severally described in the Granth and I will pick on one composition by Guru Arjun:

In various ways render thy service to God. Place your life, soul and wealth before Him. Forsake your ego, carry water, wave the fan and demonstrate your love to be a sacrifice to Him. O my mother happy is the wife who is pleasing to her Lord – I seek her company and will ever be the water carrier for maids of her handmaids and cherish dust of their feet. I will get her society if I am so destined and when it pleases Him get to meet my Swami to whom I will surrender all my meditation, austerities and rituals and offer what merit my dharmic deeds and my respectful devotion may have. I have renounced all false pride and attachment and become dust of feet of those in whose company my eyes may catch a glimpse of my Lord. I thus ponder over my Lord every moment and this is expression of my service unto Him.²³

Total surrender, forsaking of ego, deep sense of humility, abiding unquestioning love with nothing, physical, mental or material held back defines the way.

Guru Seva

The Granth is replete with references to the Guru-Sikh relation. Guru dispels darkness and shows the way. The Sikh in return has to be committed to the teaching of the Guru. This relationship of submission to the Guru's teachings is the essence of *Guru seva* and without thus imbibing the Guru's word the Sikh cannot find the path of true devotion to the Divine.²⁴ Consummation of such a relationship and the opportunity to perform *seva* comes only through Divine grace.²⁵

For Guru seva one must reach a state of total submission, and give up all thoughts of self-conceit.²⁶ Once conceit is subsumed and one accepts the guiding will of the Guru his toil and seva will yield *nam* to well up within his consciousness.²⁷ For indeed real seva of the Guru is to ponder over and internalise the *sabad*.²⁸

Seva of the Guru brings tremendous benefits. It purifies one's conscious, brings inner peace and removes the veil of darkness of ignorance.²⁹ ³⁰ One gets an understanding not only of all the three regions in the universe i.e. the totality of world external to the man³¹ but one is also able to grasp his inner self through seva of the Guru.³² It is only by serving the True Guru that liberation is obtained.³³

Jan Seva

Service of humanity, especially the poor and the needy, is most meritorious³⁴ and the Guru persuades this service to be performed, not just by giving money, but by doing it personally, with one's own physical effort and inner devotion, with the songs in loving praise of God on one's lips.³⁵ The emphasis is on *seva* through one's own personal effort be it physical or intellectual. Such service must be done without any expectation of merit; reward or recognition and it should be offered with a deep sense of humility. If motivated by ego one cannot perform *seva*. It is a futile effort - mere wasting away of the precious God given gift of body and mind.³⁶ *Jan* seva is the path to liberation and Nanak prays for God's merciful blessing to be put on this path.³⁷

[End of Part One]
[To be concluded]



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10. *Jete jee tete sabh tere vin seva phal kissai nahin* – Asa M I, p.356
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