

Sociology of *Langar*: A View from the West

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Ah! Another successful trip to the Gurdwara. I listened to *kirtan*, had some *prashad* and then went downstairs for *Langar*. All in all, it was a fairly successful trip. I must say langar is some pretty good food. I mean when one actually dissects langar, it encompasses all the food groups: protein, vegetables, dairy and grains. No wonder langar is so popular! An added bonus is that it tastes absolutely amazing.

Now, we all know that the Langar, or free kitchen was started by Guru Nanak. It was designed to uphold the principle of equality between all people of the world regardless of religion, caste, colour, creed, age, gender or social status. In addition to the ideals of equality, the tradition of Langar expresses the ethics of sharing, community, inclusiveness and oneness of all humankind. In Langar, only vegetarian food is served. This is done to ensure that all people, irrespective of their dietary restrictions will feel welcome to eat as equals. The institution of Guru ka Langar has in the past served the community in many ways: It has ensured the participation of Sikhs in a task of service for mankind. Langar also teaches the etiquette of sitting and eating in a community situation, which has played a great part in upholding the virtue of sameness of all human beings; providing a welcome, secure and protected sanctuary. In fact, W.O. Cole, a well known author on Sikhism, once said "..., the unique concept of universality and the system of Langar (free community meal) in Sikhism are the two features that attract me towards the study of Sikhism. Langar is the exclusive feature of Sikhism and found nowhere else in the world. Sikhism is the only religion which welcomes each and every one to its langar without any discrimination of caste, creed, color, or sex."

But the spirit of what the Gurus established hundreds of years ago, i.e. sharing - needs to be preserved in today's modern age. Let's look at the facts: Most of us in the west live in cookie cutter homes, drive at least one car and have enough money to be able to amass lots of wealth (evidenced by the dozens of jewellery shops popping up everywhere). All in all, we live a pretty good lifestyle. There is nothing wrong with that. We have been blessed indeed. Gone are the days when we travelled from afar in extreme weather conditions, either by foot or by horse and carriage. Most of us, nowadays, do not come to the Gurdwara starved, deprived and in dire need of the necessities of life. Why is it, then, that we constantly find *langar* being distributed to the 'overfed' population in our society, and not to the ones who are actually in need of it? And the generosity doesn't just stop there. Take a look at any Nagar Kirtan and you'll find more food than people attending the Nagar Kirtan. Thus making the institution of langar a social call rather than actually serving a spiritual purpose. We hardly ever consider an out-reach of the spirit of Langar to, say, the poorest of poor in African Sahara and elsewhere.

Don't get me wrong. I think the concept of *Langar* is very important and is actually a phenomenal idea given to us by our revolutionary Gurus. However, the concept of langar just does not serve its purpose in today's western society or rather, is not being used the way it was meant to be by our Gurus. I actually know people who go to the Gurdwara to eat langar three times a day just to avoid going home to cook! How many of us actually think, "the purpose of this is for me to eat with my fellow human beings,

regardless of our differences in caste color or creed and share a common meal?" I hope we would not see the resurgence of the divisive caste names being used by some Sikhs, and then on top being proud of it. Nor should there be caste based Gurdwaras (which in itself is a slap to Sikhi, but I digress). So the true concept of *langar* seems to be irrelevant in today's modern society.

While outreach may need special effort, the principle of sharing remains valid and urgent. Let us pool our resources and rationalize our methodology. To start with, Langar should be kept simple. It should only consist of a simple dahl, or sabzi, yogurt and roti or rice. Please cut out the ladoos, gulab jamuns, samosas, kheer, mathees and pakoras etc. and the sweetened teas. We, in the west, are currently facing a huge obesity crisis and a recent study just showed that a 30 year old south Asian (Indian/Punjabi) man's health is equivalent to that of a 70 year old Caucasian man (and women are no better). To the gurdwara committee, please help save your community by deciding to cut out all of the namkeens, mithais, sweet chais, bhatures, poories etc. in the name of health. Besides the obvious benefit to the community, the committee will have a sangat that will live longer and thus be able to financially support the gurdwara for a very very long time and then the media attention the management would get for being proactive in health would only help spread Sikhi.

Secondly, the money saved from all of the excess foods (which we have now decided is unhealthy and therefore are morally obligated to eliminate such foods), we can use for humanitarian purposes. But here is the catch. We either go to homeless shelters to distribute the food in a true "free kitchen concept" or tell the local support services to get the poor, impoverished, and less fortunate *into* the gurdwara. I am in favor of the latter. I'd like to see how many Sikhs truly feel comfortable sitting next to a homeless man eating the same food. I bet it would surely make them eat a lot faster.

Will there be a lot of outcry.. yes, will people threaten to stop coming to gurdwaras, or switch Gurdwaras ..of course! But it wasn't easy for the king Akbar either to sit down with commoners and eat Langar before meeting with Guru Amar Das ji. If a king can do it, why can't we? Why don't we have a place like a homeless shelter for a gurdwara. Infact, go a step further and help in rehabilitation. It always amazes me that Sikhs in the most faraway places in the world manage to put these concepts into practice, yet we in major cities, with thousands of Sikhs, cannot do it. One would think it to be the other way around. Take, for example, the Guru Nanak Gurdwara in Kenya. It is a nice, pleasant place with a diverse sangat, but even more exciting is the building across the street — the "Guru Nanak Harambee Dispensary Center." The dispensary center is as big, if not bigger, than the Gurdwara itself. Isn't it refreshing that the Gurdwara not only serves langar each day, but it has devoted equal resources to distributing aid? In Kenya, Harambee is a means of reaching across differences in wealth, tribal ancestry, gender, and profession. What an utterly beautiful name for a wonderful place. Kudos to the Kenyan Sikhs for putting into practice what the Gurus preached. As Sikhs, we all must learn to go outside of our comfort zone and make an honest attempt to put into practice the Gurus' teachings. Only then can we say whole heartedly that we have indeed sat and broken bread with our fellow human being as the gurus intended.

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