

# Institutions that Foster Virtue The Spirit of Sangat

*I.J. Singh\**

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\* New York University, New York, USA. Email: [inder.singh@nyu.edu](mailto:inder.singh@nyu.edu)

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In the secular world of the United States, during the debate over the ratification of the Constitution, James Madison opined that the a republic inherently has a higher degree of virtue than any other form of government. Thomas Jefferson further argued that the civic machinery should consist of smaller political structural units or "wards" of no more than a few hundred which would allow every citizen to participate in self governance. Chief benefits of self-government, it was strongly affirmed, were education and character-development of citizens. Later, Alexis de Tocqueville recommended the formation of small voluntary associations and institutions, and emphasized their importance in generating human connection. Human connectedness, I need not add, is the glue that binds societies. This is how communities are built, this is how they survive and thrive.

The goals of religion are not inimical to those of civil society, though they are contrary to the directions of despotic governments. Religious institutions exist to foster virtue. That is their primary purpose. Most religions emphasize that God exists in his creation, and is to be experienced through service to his creation, primarily mankind. To discover the "state of grace" where thinking beyond the self becomes the goal requires that humans discern the Creator within the Self by stilling the mind; this is achieved by prayer and meditation and, most importantly, by grace. The first virtue, basic to all else, then becomes the building of character. Sikhism arguably aims to mould character and improve civil life. For these goals the **sangat** provides the refining crucible. For Sikhs **sangat** becomes the mechanism for human connectedness.

I think Jefferson and de Tocqueville were right in that human connectedness and virtue are best nurtured in small units. The smallest unit which fosters responsibility and a commitment to others is the family, hence the emphasis on family life. But centuries before the Fathers of the American experiment, Guru Nanak and his successor-Gurus enunciated and illustrated this principle most forcefully.

The Gurus - founding Masters of Sikhism - travelled extensively throughout the Indian subcontinent and beyond. Everywhere they went they established new congregations of those who accepted the Sikh way. Each Guru received the mandate to spread Sikhism from his predecessor, but each Guru founded a township and a community that he nurtured in his lifetime. The **sangats** necessarily remained small. Representatives from far-flung communities traveled once or twice a year to visit the Guru and reinforce their connection to the teachings. In a small **sangat**, people knew each other; Sikhs did not feel distanced from the decisions that impacted on the community. Local **sangats** retained considerable autonomy. Their voices were heard; none felt disenfranchised. Now things are different, and seem to be changing at an awesome if not an alarming rate. Our Gurdwaras have become monuments to the egos of the builders. There is more marble in many gurdwaras than in any respectable mausoleum. The gold on some could feed a small nation. I wonder if we are constructing ornate white elephants

that do little for the community. The committees that manage the facilities, and micromanage the programs and activities, are so remote from the ordinary Sikh that they are virtual strangers to each other. Impressive as they are, there is anonymity in attending such huge Gurdwaras.

Sikhism is founded on republican principles. The divine power dwells in the people's souls. That is why the current attempts to recast it into a model akin to the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church do not sit well. I am talking of a republican system of government here, not the political party that is currently in power in the United States. In order to return to those republican principles that lie at the core of Sikh teaching and where the **sangat** is supreme, perhaps we need small gurdwaras in every community and neighbourhood, like a church in its own parish. In a small parish the same faces are seen at every service. People learn to know each other. They attend services and marry within their own parish church. They pray, play, talk, laugh, cry, commiserate and break bread together. This is how they form the nucleus of a *sangat* that is a crucible for character building.

I hardly need to point out an ancillary benefit. In a smaller neighbourhood Gurdwara, the management will not become drunk and heady with their own power over an ever-expanding 'bank account' but will remain accountable to the small community of their neighbours. The importance and the meaning of the Gurdwara lie - not in the price of its marble or acreage - but in what kind of human-connectedness does it provide to its people. **The question is how a visitor to the Gurdwara is transformed into a crucial unit of *sangat*.**

I know that in this age where growth is worshipped and 'bigger is better', I seem to be swimming against the tide. Character building does not occur in a society where neighbors do not even recognize each other. A *sangat* of strangers is no **sangat** at all.

