

No one must go hungry

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Some months ago, Parveen Talha, the senior-most Muslim woman in the IAS and the big boss of customs and excise posted in Aurangabad, told me of a strange experience. She said, "You know for some months every train at every stop on the way to Nanded (Maharashtra) has young *sardars* entering all compartments to serve *daal* and *roti* to passengers free of charge. The *daal* is delicious. Who are these people?" I did not know but I told her that Nanded was one of the five *takhts* (thrones) of the *khalsa Panth*; it has a huge *gurdwara* commemorating the assassination of their last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, in 1708. I was intrigued and also happy that I belonged to the community of *daal-roti* servers.

A couple of months ago Mrs Charanjit Singh, who lives in New Friends Colony, New Delhi told me: "Every morning when I go to my office in Le Meridien (she is chairman of the hotel), my car is held up near *the dargah* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya because of a mob of hungry beggars milling round trucks loaded with *daal-roti* and rice which is distributed to them by a few young Sardars. I don't know who they are, but I know most of the crowd are local Muslims or Bangladeshis."

I was more intrigued and asked her to find out who was organizing this free *guru-ka-langar* by the roadside. The next day she rang me up and gave me the organiser's telephone number.

I got Sant Tarlochan Singh on the phone. "I don't want any publicity" he told me bluntly "It takes away any merit you may gain through *sewa* (service)."

I persisted, "You did not ring me up, I rang you. I want to know more about you and what you do." He relented but put off the meeting because he had fractured his leg while attending a seminar at the *langar-cum-clinic* at Bareilly for bonded labourers working in brick kilns. A week later he was able to move with the use of a walker and came to see me with his son, Kamaljit Singh, a strapping young man in his mid-thirties.

Tarlochan Singh is 67, a tall man dressed in white, from his *turban*, *kurta* down to his pyjamas. He has a silken white beard flowing to his navel. He looks every inch a *sant*. "I don't like to be called sant, I much prefer to be known as *veerjee* (elder brother)," he said with a broad smile.

His residence is known as *veerjee-da-dera* but his *ashram* is known as *santgarh* (sant's fortress). It is here that cooking large quantities of rice, *daal* and *chapattis* starts every evening and is ready by the early hours of the - next morning to be transported by trucks to different parts of the city and Delhi railway station. The queue outside Sis Gunj extends half-a-mile on either side. Veerjee himself sets out, broom in hand, on a round of the city's *gurdwaras* to sweep floors and say his prayers.

I asked what had inspired him to undertake his mission to feed the hungry. Without hesitation he replied, "Mother Teresa. I came to look upon her as my own mother and wanted to follow her example."

Tarlochan Singh had many turns and twists in his life. He was born in Mandalay (Burma) in 1935, the son of a prosperous timber contractor. Mandalay was bombed by the Japanese in 1942. He saw his own sister killed by shrapnel. The family migrated back to their ancestral village in Ludhiana district. He did his matriculation from his village school, went on to the government college, Ludhiana, for a degree in engineering and joined the Punjab Works Department. In 1962, he was posted as an overseer in Delhi and was at the Pusa Agricultural Institute. He retired in 1998. Eight years before his retirement he started on his mission to feed the poor. Now it has become a full-time occupation. "Where the poor are taken care of, there is Thy grace seen," he says, quoting Guru Nanak on the existence of God. "He fills pitchers that are empty and empties pitchers that are full."

"Where does the money for this massive operation come from?" I asked. He raised both his hands and replied, "God gives us all I ask for". This is exactly how Mother Teresa had answered the same question when I put it to her.

Mother Teresa had the Missionaries of Charity to which anyone could make his or her donation. Tarlochan Singh has no such organization and bluntly refuses to take money from anyone. "If you want to give anything, give me *atta* (flour) rice, *daal* or medicines", he replied; His son, Kamaljeet Singh, who is a jewellery designer by profession promised to give me a list of medicines they needed. When will I have time to go and buy medicines in bulk and deliver them at Santgarh - or *veerjee da dera* - God only knows.

In any event no list was sent to me. God who provided Tarlochan Singh with rations for the poor now also provides medicines for the sick. He tends to them himself; his clinic is the pavement adjoining the Chandni Chowk entrance to Gurdwara Sis Ganj.