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SIKHI, SEVA, AND SARBAT DA BHALA IN A PANDEMIC

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I don't know all the principles of their faith, but I know the principles that they exercise. It's love. It's service. It's selflessness. It's sharing, sharing and caring. They are just amazing people. They set an example for a lot of other faiths.

— San Antonio Food Bank CEO and president Eric Cooper¹

By April 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic managed to instill fear within people around the world. As lockdowns were enforced and the virus limited people's ability to leave the confines of their residence, Sikhs in different countries looked to their religious doctrines and saw an opportunity to serve their communities. Through their response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Sikhs find themselves in a familiar position. Sikhs practice the concepts of *seva* ("selfless service") and *sarbat da bhala* ("the welfare of all") on a daily basis, and these values are deeply rooted in the foundation of Sikhi.² These two concepts have allowed Sikhs to have a global impact with regard to the economy and society during the abrupt breakout of the coronavirus, which caused chaos and panic throughout the world. Through the practices of their religious beliefs, Sikhs are not only serving many different communities, but simultaneously teaching the world about Sikhi. By looking at key concepts of Sikhi, this paper will explore how Sikhs' service during this global pandemic serves as an educational tool to understand Sikhs and Sikhi across a

wide range of academic disciplines, including but not limited to religion, history, and world civilizations.

Sikhi, Seva, and Sarbat da Bhala

Seva is one of the key tenets of the Sikh faith. The tradition of seva has been practiced by Sikhs for over 500 years, beginning with Guru Nanak, the religion's founder. Sikh historian J. S. Grewal points out that "new religious ideology was needed to become the basis of new social order" as Guru Nanak "denounced contemporary politics, society, and religion."³ The unjust rule of Afghan rulers prompted Guru Nanak to encourage people to "turn to God, the true king, the king of kings [as] his service alone is true service."⁴ However, being of service to God is not simply interior devotion or singing recitations, but it also consists of selfless service to others (*seva*), which comes in many forms. Guru Nanak exemplified this by defying the Afghan rule and standing side by side with the lowest members of society, bringing forth societal issues and directly challenging the caste system, which has suppressed millions in South Asia for centuries. Grewal notes that Guru Nanak preached "one should cultivate true humility and be of service to others."⁵ Guru Nanak's emphasis on service frequently intersects with the concept of *sarbat da bhala*, which translates to "the welfare of all." Guru Nanak's successor, Guru Angad, institutionalized a parallel practice in the form of *langar*, or a community kitchen. The main purpose of *langar* is to ensure that no one would be hungry regardless of caste, gender, religion, economic status, or ethnicity. *Langar*, in its own right, was a revolutionary act against social hierarchies and the caste system.

According to prominent Sikh scholar Kahn Singh Nabha, one of the key elements of a *gurdwara* (Sikh house of worship) is that it serves as a "storehouse of food for the hungry;" therefore, *langar* can now be found at every *gurdwara* across the world.⁶ *Gurdwaras* can be a great resource for the entire community, whether Sikh or not. For example, following the establishment of Stockton *Gurdwara* in 1912, the Sikh community wanted to ensure that South Asians would not become "charges on public charity." Stockton was the first *gurdwara* in the United States and served the needs of South Asian immigrants but also fellow Americans when need be. The *gurdwara* leadership stated that "if a man is hungry and out of funds, we feed him. Our dining room is open at all hours of the day and is closed only for a few hours during the night. The unfortunate hungry American will be as welcome as our own people."⁷ The combination of *seva*, *sarbat da bhala*, and *langar* motivated Sikhs and Sikh organizations across the world to mobilize. These values to act selflessly and help others without any reward or selfish intentions are deeply rooted in their faith, with *gurdwaras* oftentimes being the institution used to highlight these practices.



Figure 1: Gurdwaras across Asia have become reliable sources of food for all—regardless of caste, gender, religion, or economic status—and the sole food resource for many. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

New Pandemic-Related Examples

Income inequality and access to health care highlighted the differences between individuals' caste, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity during the pandemic, as several communities were more susceptible to being affected by the virus than others. Looking beyond what makes us different, Sikhs stepped into lead roles where governments failed. They took the initiative to help as many people as possible who were affected by the drastic changes this pandemic brought to society. Although the lockdown in India—which was one of the world's most stringent—bans religious gatherings, gurdwaras across the country remained open to serve millions of people. Gurdwaras throughout the world have remained open through wars and plagues, and this pandemic would be no exception. Religious services at gurdwaras may have temporarily stopped, but this only elevated the importance of langar and the gurdwara as being more than a religious institution. Gurdwaras have become a major source of food for millions of people worldwide during this global pandemic. Although langar has always been a key aspect of the gurdwara, many people are beginning to learn the importance of seva and langar within the Sikh faith. Through Gurdwara Bhagod Sahib, which is along a remote highway in the Indian state of Maharashtra, Sikhs fed two million people within ten weeks. Baba Karnail Singh, the lead *sevadhar* (“one who does seva”), states that his



Figure 2: At Gurdwara Bangla Sahib, Sikhs begin their work at 3:00 a.m. daily to ensure 35,000 meals are prepared by 9:00 a.m. for government officials to distribute. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

motivation comes from “the ‘*marzi*’ (‘will’) of Waheguru (God). We are only his instruments in the service to humanity.”⁸ Langar has been provided for travelers along this remote highway for decades and continues to be the sole source of food for several hundred kilometers. Even in some of the country’s busiest cities, Sikhs play a major role in providing services. The *Los Angeles Times* writes about India’s capital: “Bangla Sahib is the largest of New Delhi’s 10 gurdwaras, whose kitchens together form a vital part of the city’s strategy to feed the poor during the pandemic.”⁹ Realizing their inability to provide for citizens, the government of New Delhi requested assistance from the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee. Sikhs and gurdwaras in New Delhi began serving 40,000 meals per day, which has since increased to 100,000 meals for citizens living on the streets and for those who lost everything as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

From a remote highway to the busy streets of New Delhi, the practice of *seva* and *langar* for *sarbat da bhala* has now impacted the lives of millions globally during this pandemic as Sikhs in the diaspora have brought these practices with them. In the United Kingdom, the gurdwara in Slough “responded to the lockdown by reinventing itself as an emergency food operation, delivering thousands of meals a day.”¹⁰ Similar work by Sikhs is being done across North America, Europe, Asia, Australia, and Africa. Beyond just *langar*, certain Sikh communities are

creating health kits to distribute to communities in need. Seva continues to take form in many different ways. Just as seva is a significant part of the Sikh way of life, *dasvandh* is equally as important. *Dasvandh* translates to “a tenth part” and is an act of donating 10 percent of one’s livelihood, both financial and in the form of time and service such as seva, to a charitable cause. Not only have Sikhs aided millions of people who have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic through langar; much of this has been funded by donations from the Sikh community. With gurdwaras in Delhi serving 100,000 meals daily, Sikhs across the globe pitched in to ensure the seva in India continues; however, Sikhs in the diaspora financially support local charitable causes as well to help non-Sikh and non-Asian neighbors. The Sikh Dharamsal of San Antonio raised approximately \$250,000 in donations for its local food bank in addition to delivering hundreds of meals.¹¹



Figure 3: As medical workers across the world have been extremely busy with handling the COVID-19 pandemic, Sikhs began providing meals to medical workers in an attempt to ease the burden for them during this pandemic. Photo by author.

These practices are nothing new for Sikhs, as they have served those in need throughout history. A prominent example of serving anyone in need came during a battle between the Mughal and Sikh armies in the seventeenth century, when a Sikh by the name of Bhai Kanhaiya gave water to and treated injured soldiers regardless of which army they belonged to. Over the years, Sikhs have continued to serve communities, especially during natural disasters. Many Sikh organizations are founded on the basis of making the world a better place—or *sarbat da bhala*. The importance of globalization at the turn of the century also resulted in the establishment of two of the most prominent Sikh humanitarian relief, nonprofit organizations, Khalsa Aid and United Sikhs. Both organizations provide humanitarian aid in areas affected by natural or manufactured disasters such as war, floods, and earthquakes. In fact, they have frequently been the first on the scene to help distribute food, water, clothing, and medical and sanitation supplies. *Seva* has no boundaries, as it continues to aid those in first-world countries as well. In 2017, Hurricane Harvey, a Category 4 hurricane, hit the states of Louisiana and Texas in the United States. The majority of the damage was done to the Houston metropolitan area, with a substantial portion of the city remaining underwater for days and uninhabitable for weeks or months. Sikhs from across the nation immediately took action, pitching in to aid those affected by the hurricane by donating thousands of items, volunteering their time, preparing meals, and delivering food.¹²

With governments across the world burdened by the pandemic for various reasons, the Sikh community provides services for several communities who are unable to access aid from governmental resources for different reasons. For certain communities, Sikhs are the only ones providing services. Through their *seva*, Sikhs have shown resilience and made a global economic, political, and social impact, with their faith serving as a guide during the COVID-19 pandemic. While many people are now learning about Sikhs through their pandemic *seva*, Sikhs are simply continuing a 500-year-old tradition started by Guru Nanak. Thus, teachers at all levels can use this unique coronavirus situation to introduce their students to the religious, social, political, and economic importance of both historic and contemporary Sikhi.

Notes

¹ Tom Orsborn, “San Antonio Food Bank Benefits from Sikh Philosophy of ‘Selflessness,’” *San Antonio Express-News*, April 26, 2020, <https://www.expressnews.com/news/local/article/San-Antonio-Food-Bank-benefits-from-Sikh-15227808.php>.

² “Sikhi” is used rather than the common term “Sikhism,” as the latter is a Western construct and members of the Sikh faith typically use the former. Edward Said notes that Europeans referred to Islam as “Mohammadism” because Mohammad was the founder of the religion; therefore, since the religion of Christ was called Christianity, the religion of

Mohammad should be called Mohammadism (*Orientalism* 60). Muslims were unfamiliar with the terminology; however, Europeans continued to use the Western-created term and impose it onto Muslims. With this in mind, Sikhi is used throughout the article.

³J. S. Grewal. *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 28.

⁴Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, 29.

⁵J. S. Grewal. *Guru Nanak in History* (Chandigarh: Panjab University, 1969), 185.

⁶Kahn Singh Nabha. *Encyclopedia of Sikh Literature*, (India: National Bookshop, 2008), 428.

⁷*Stockton Record*, November 22, 1915.

⁸“81-year-old Sikh Man Feeds 2 Million on Remote Maharashtra Highway,” *The Tribune*, May 31, 2020, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/81-year-old-sikh-man-feeds-2-million-on-remote-maharashtra-highway-92396>.

⁹Emily Schmall, “Sikh Kitchens Feed New Delhi’s Masses during Coronavirus Lockdown.” *The Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-05-21/sikh-kitchens-feed-new-delhis-masses-in-virus-lockdown>.

¹⁰Jim Reed, “Coronavirus: The Sikh Community Kitchen Feeding Thousands.” *BBC*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-52966810/coronavirus-the-sikh-community-kitchen-feeding-thousands>.

¹¹Tom Orsborn, “San Antonio Food Bank Benefits from Sikh Philosophy of ‘Selflessness.’”

¹²Upneet Kaur Aujla, “In the Face of Tragedy, This Is What Sikhs Do.” *HuffPost*, September 5, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/in-the-face-of-tragedy-this-is-what-sikhs-do_b_59af194de4b0b5e53101cae7.