Chapter-III

SANGAT

While the preceding chapter was devoted to the exposition of the mission of Guru Nanak, i.e. his aim of organizing a society and building a new social order based on justice and equality as an alternative to the caste-ridden social set up of the day, the chapter under study attempts to discuss how he preferred practice to precept and laid the foundation of the basic institutions to carry out his mission. These institutions evolved their own ethos on which was based the code of conduct which every Sikh was enjoined to accept in life. Gone were the superstitions, rituals, customs, notions of pollution and purity, which were so deeply engraved in the Indian psyche. Guru Nanak, established the authority of his doctrines and started a new religion devoid of any impurity, which was altogether a new way of life. Bhai Gurdas aptly says: "Nanak nirma! panth chalaya or Panth nirala". Again he says: "He took birth in the iron age and rejected all the six philosophies and founded a spiritual kingdom in the citadel of truth with powerful foundation". This chapter is focussed on the
important institution of *Sangat* which has played the stellar role in the transformation of Sikhism.

Guru Nanak’s apprehension of the Ultimate Reality brought great tidings to the common man who found it difficult to leave his hearth and home to practise austerities in some recondite hermitage in a dense forest far away from the din of the madding crowd. Man need not don the saffron robe and with a begging bowl in hand drift from door to door for food and sustenance. In the outlook of Guru Nanak, such a man was no more than a parasite who lived on the earnings of others. In his *Siddha Gosht*, he admonished the *yogis* who, on the one and stressed renunciation, and on the other, went to the householder to beg for alms. Guru Nanak says: “Neither in the patched quilt, nor the staff, nor in smearing with ashes the limbs, lies yoga. Nor lies it in ear rings, or cropping close the hair, or in blowing the horn; To live pure amid impurities of the world – thus is the yoga way attained3”. About *Sanyasi* he says: “One renouncing desire is the true *Sanyasi*, From continence comes true joy of living in the body4”. Similarly, *Bairagi* is defined as the “one who in the holy Name is dyed, that is, immersed5”.

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Guru Nanak, thus, favoured the life of a house holder. In his estimation, Bhai Lalo was far more worthy than a solitary recluse who is afraid of the world and its allurements and runs away from it, in search of some heaven where the passional propensities no longer tease him out of his meditative thoughts. Guru says: “True Siddhas, yoga practitioners, yogis and itinerant mendicants are those, that on the sole conferrer of attainments have meditated. Those getting realization, (the word) touch the Lord’s feet and attain union”.

Guru Nanak’s spiritual ideal was, therefore, of universal significance. He brought wisdom from cave and hermitage and scattered it in the streets for the common man to pick up to sanctify his day to day life. He wanted to see the presence of the divine in each heart, for he believed that all were children of the same father and rejected the concept of the chosen one and also the esoteric cults which felt shy of sharing their wisdom with the common rung of mankind. He wished to reform all the social patterns in accordance with demand set up by religion and to build revolutionary religious institutions. It shows that “his view of society emanates from the same integrated vision that constitutes his view of God, universal man and humanity”.
Wherever the Guru went, he spoke in the spiritual idiom of the people he conversed with. In order to recognise the religious unity, the intervening period of Guru Nanak’s udasis was a time when his hymns were memorized and recited by the Sikhs at some chosen place of the area. This gathering for the purpose of fulfilling the master’s mandate gave birth to the institution of Sangat, where the process of transmission of his teachings took a specific turn. Guru established a religious group of responsible individuals who were common people and all were essentially equal in status. The responsibility was undertaken by the Sangat as a body, and all members were called on individually to support. Everyone ought to live his spiritual life entirely within its norms. In this way, a new community was built up.

To achieve the ideal of beautiful living, Guru Nanak’s most coveted goal, there had to be, “a distinct orientation and education in creating a new attitude towards social life”. Guru’s command was that they all should live harmoniously and worship together and also see that right and justice should prevail among all human beings. For that, he gave a total orientation to build a godly life, emphasized personal relationship within the group and wanted that there should be a cultural homogeneity within the groups. It shows that, “the Guru seems to be in favour of a system in which each individual is enabled
to work out his salvation in collaboration with the like-minded individuals, composing a society of sages (Sadh Sangat)\(^9\).

II

To establish an egalitarian order, based on the twin principles of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, it was essential to create a new society far from the existing social set up circumscribed by the Varna Ashrama constrictions. Sangat was the first step taken by Nanak for the fulfilment of his divine mission. Says Bhai Gurdas: “Guru Nanak laid the foundation of the abode of truth in the form of Sangat, where he preached to all the four Varnas\(^10\)”. The individual psyche receives stimulus in a gathering of like-minded persons. Jagjit Singh rightly says: “An assembly of like-minded, pious and truthful people provides each one of us the right environment for spiritual growth\(^11\)”. In the Sangat, there prevails a spiritual aura, the collective psychic consciousness, where the wayward, individual consciousness that wanders like a wayward elephant, gets purified and returns to the Guru’s feet and attains a kind of spiritual fixation.

In the Indian tradition, the samitis and sabhas are as old as the Vedic times. The Rig Veda as well as the Atharva spell their roles which were mainly of advisory nature so far as the samities were
concerned and sabhas also performed the adjudicatory roles in rural societies. But the concept of Sangat has spiritual ramifications. It had its origin in sadh Sangat – a holy assembly. Guru Nanak defines sat Sangat as: “The society, where the name of one God alone is mentioned12”. Again, “Those resorting to the holy congregation are of blessed birth; One devoted to the holy master is in truth an anchorite while keeping a household. Such live dyed in ecstasy of God’s love, Their hearts satiated with joy in the Lord13”. Sadh Sangat is the congregation where the name of God is repeated. Guru Arjan described Sangat as a place of shelter, he says: “In holy company fall under His shelter; your mind and body before Him place14”. This Sangat is the coterie of individuals who share spiritual affinities and hail one another ‘Bhai’ which means ‘brother’ – one who shares the same belief. Bhai Gurdas said: “The Guru merged himself in the Sangat and made his disciples like himself15”. Again, “It is an abode of truth where the formless one resides in the form of word16”. The term ‘sadh’ acquires the profound meaning when it is associated with Sangat. Bhai Kahan Singh defines ‘sadh’ as a “person who has subdued desire, controlled the mind and is deeply absorbed in divine vision17”.

In the company of Sangat, devotion to the Guru is inculcated. Bhai Gurdas says: “Through loving devotion, they meet the Lord18”. It
became a medium of spiritual communication and proved of infinite social and cultural value in later times. Bhagat Singh rightly says that, apart from religious purposes, "matters of common interest were not excluded from its deliberations".

Sangat, moreover, acted as a great leveller, for persons, irrespective of caste and creed, social rank and position, were received with love and joy as fellow questers on pilgrimage to the realm of truth. Sangat immensely contributed towards wielding the Sikhs into a closely knit and united body. The institution of Sangat proved of immense value in evolving the Sikh community as a casteless society. The evaluation of this institution ultimately gave birth to concepts like pangat and Langar which led to the emergence of the Sikh community as a nation. Says Ganda Singh: "The subsequent history of the Sikh community stabilized into Sangats and prepared for its development into a distinct nationality under the succeeding Gurus. For it led to the concept of Panth and later on to the creation of Khalsa. At another place, Ganda Singh goes a step further: "The organization of the Dal Khalsa and the republican nature of the Sikh Misals during the eighteenth century also had their birth in the Sangat".
To practise godliness, Sangat was the right assemblage and right environment. It was a form of mint where was forged the ideal human conduct that would lead to God-orientation. All falsehood of flesh and mind would burn away and truth alone would survive. Bhai Gurdas says: “Dirt of sins is cleansed here and he wins the grace of Lord\textsuperscript{22}”. Haumai, the greatest stumbling block on way to spiritual realization loses its hold and is replaced by meekness and humility greatly extolled by Guru Nanak as the cardinal virtues in man. Guru says: “Whoever seeks good repute to gather, In holy company his egoism must discard\textsuperscript{23}”. Again; “Pre-eminent among men is the person, whose egotism in holy company is effaced\textsuperscript{24}”.

Again: “one may indulge in a million feats of cleverness, And with millions make alliances: Without holy company comes not fulfilment; Without the Name goes not torment of suffering\textsuperscript{25}”.

Death of the ego would mean awakening of the somnolent soul. The slumbering self gets the rude shake when the hymns sung in Sangat reverate in the human mind and their resonance and vibration stir the sleeping soul. Bhai Gurdas rightly says: “By becoming dead in life they meet the Guru in Sangat and become humble\textsuperscript{26}”. The Guru
says, “Join the company of the holy; in company of the holy, shall be obtained joy in the Lord.” Guru Arjan enumerates the advantages of sadh Sangat: “In the company of the saints, the soul attains happiness, man acquires all virtues, gets a glimpse of God, his mind gets peace, reaches the height of the spirit, enters the Lord’s presence and is granted His Name.”

Wherever, Guru Nanak went, he established Sangats and appointed his nominees to spread his message. This organizational step strengthened the Sikh faith outside Punjab and led to the evolution of Sikh identity. Each Sangat was placed under the stewardship of a devout and dedicated Sikh. Teja Singh says: “Bhai Lalo was the first one to be appointed to preach in the North and Sheikh Sajjan in the South-West of Punjab” and enumerates many other places where Sangats were established by Guru Nanak and his successors in and outside India. According to Teja Singh, most prominent among these Sangats were:

- Gopal Das in Benares
- Jhanda Badi in Bushair
- Budhan Shah in Kiratpur
- Mahi in Mahisar
- Kaljug, a priest’s son in Jagannath Puri
- Devlut in Lushai (Tibet)
- Salis Rai in Patna
- Raja Shivnabh in Ceylon

After his udasis when Guru Nanak took off the garb of a wandering minstrel of the Almighty Lord and donned the ordinary
raiment of a householder, he established a Sangat at Kartarpur. Bhai Gurdas states the daily routine of the Sangat and the recitation of different hymns gave birth to Sikh ritualism and mode of worship. Sewa Dass states: “The Sikhs met early morning and recited Japji and Asa di Var. In the evening, Rahras was read and at night Kirtan Sohila was read before going to sleep. Twice a day Langar was served. Later on this pattern was followed by all the Sangats.”

The membership of Sangat was open to one and all. It was truly egalitarian in spirit. It was like the house of God whose portals open in all four directions as Guru Nanak has already demonstrated at Mecca. Sir Charles Wilkinson, the author of Sikhs and Their College at Patna (1781) visited Patna Sahib and asked the sewadars if he could “ascend to the hall” They said, “it was the place of worship open to me and all men.”

Guru Angad improved upon his master’s system and strengthened the institution of Sangat at Khadoor Sahib, where Asa di Var was recited to the accompaniment of the music of Satta and Balwand and, “instructions were imparted by the Guru.” The following of the Sikh gurus began to increase day by day and during Guru Amar Das’s tenure, the society was further strengthened when Guru abolished the religious and social customs of Hindus. The number
swelled to such an extent even in far-flung areas that a need was felt to administer them in the spirit of Sikh Faith. To supervise the Sikh Sangat effectively, Guru Amar Das established twenty-two manjis and fifty-two piris. Each manji was under the charge of a devout and dependable disciple of the Guru and in Guru’s absence was expected to discharge all obligations enjoined by the master. According to G.C. Narang, this arrangement went “a long way in strengthening the foundations of Sikh Church and in carrying on the propaganda in different parts of the country.”

To collect offerings from different Sangats, Guru Arjan introduced the masand system. The masands would collect tithes and other gifts offered by the devout to the Guru and render the account of these collections to the Guru in the month of Baisakh every year. Mohsin Fani gives us information about “the appointment of masands in every town and about collecting offerings from the Sikhs.” He often quotes that Sikhism was developing as a separate religion.

During Guru Arjun’s tenure, the movement spread to the rural areas and number of Jats embraced the new faith. The Sikh Sangat on festival days – Baisakhi and Divali would come from far and near to have a holy glimpse of their master and precious offerings like carpets and horses of rare breed would come from Kabul and Qandhar.
Amritsar would vibrate with activities as *Sangat* of all hues and shades would lend lustre to the court of their Guru. Guru Hargobind undertook extensive missionary travels up to Kashmir in the North and established *Sangat* wherever he stayed. At his behest, *Akal Takht* was raised by the *Sangat* and it became a symbol of Sikh service and the whole-hearted dedication to the immortal Lord.

*Sewa* in Sikhism is of primary importance. The *Sangat* is expected to gladly perform all kinds of chores at the Guru’s place. Hewing of wood, drawing of water from the well early in the morning for Sikhs to bathe and cooking of food in the *Langar*, cleaning of utensils, were considered the greatest forms of worship. Every Sikh in the *Sangat* was enjoined to take part in these manual activities. Greater importance was given to the dusting of the shoes of *Sangat*, for it generated a sense of humility – one of the greatest virtues extolled by Guru Nanak who called himself the lowliest of the low. *Sangats* also gladly participated in any construction work undertaken by the Guru. It was the loving support of the Sikh *Sangat* that enabled Guru Arjan to found towns like Sri Hargobindpur, Tarn Taran, Kartarpur and tanks and temples at Amritsar, Tarn Taran and *Bauli* in the Dabbi Bazar in Lahore. In Christianity the way of Martha is considered as efficacious as that of Mary to attain salvation. Similarly, in Sikhism the
way of works is no less important than the way of meditation. In this way “Guru’s control over the entire Sikh organization of the Sangat through the masands ensured the solidarity of the Sikh community\textsuperscript{38}”. Simran and sewa cater to the enlightenment of one’s soul as well as to the well-being of the community.

Guru Arjan’s martyrdom at the hands of the bat-eyed Muslim orthodoxy raised the question of self-defence so far as the Sikh identity and its institutions were concerned. Though Sikhism, like Islam was essentially a missionary religion, it never evolved any coercion like the importance of Jehad in Islam, where the Prophet enjoins its followers to resort to Jehad to convert infidels into the Islamic fold. It is this concept that accounts for the rise of the crescent from Bengal to Spain. In the context of prevailing persecution, the Sikh Sangats were obliged to assume certain additional responsibilities. It was a question of self-preservation against the bigoted and tyrannous rule. For this purpose, “Masands were commanded to bring offerings of arms and horses instead of money\textsuperscript{39}”. The Sikh Gurus in their entire history never had had any political motive to wrest any territory as has been wrongly interpreted by some historians. If they rose in arms against the tyranny of the day, it was to protect their Dharma and its rising institutions.

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Gradually, Sikh Sangat acquired enough power and could influence decisions concerning the matters of the faith. Kesar Singh Chhibber testifies how “The Sangat of Baba Bakala declares Guru Tegh Bahadur as the ninth Guru^40^”. Guru Tegh Bahadur took extensive tours in the East upto Dhaka and Assam. This is quite evident from the hukamnamas he wrote to sangats, especially the sangat of Patna to look after his infant son and the family^41^.

Moreover, the sangat gradually acquired an aura of sanctity. Bhai Gurdas had earlier said: “One disciple is a single Sikh. Two form a holy association, but where there are five present, there is God himself^42^”. Guru Ram Das has observed, “The Guru is a Sikh and the Sikh who practises the Guru’s word is at one with the Guru^43^”. Guru Gobind Singh baptised the five beloved ones and created the Khalsa. He set a unique example in the history of religions of mankind by praying to his disciples to initiate him into the Khalsa fold and bowing before his baptised five, he sought Khande de Pahul from them. The Khalsa Panth became the embodiment of the tenth master. Says Teja Singh: “Now after the death of Guru Gobind Singh, the personality and the word were separated. The Panth was invested with the personality of the Guru and the incorporated word become the Gyan Guru^44^”. Bhagat Singh explains the point more explicitly:
On the one hand Sangat identifies the Guru with God and on the other he identifies the Sangat with the Guru. In this way, a divine character is attributed to the collective body of the Sangat which became sacrosanct and authoritative for the individual members of the congregation. The Sangat played a vital role in the integration of the community\textsuperscript{45}.

Thus Guru Nanak created response to challenges of Hindu Varna Ashrama that stressed rigid casteism and Muslim orthodoxy that believed in coercion and persecution and proved effective in the establishment of Sangat that grew from strength to strength and culminated in the creation of the Khalsa – a casteless order of saint-soldiers who represented the spirit of the Guru and worshipped Shabad-Guru as their eternal preceptor. As a sign that the Guru has placed himself eternally in his Sikhs, it was declared by him:

Let him that wishes to see me go to an assembly of Sikhs and approach them with faith and reverence; He will surely see me amongst them\textsuperscript{46}.

\textbf{IV}

\textit{Kirtan} was an inseparable part of the Sangat established by Guru Nanak, wherever he went. Before he set out on his \textit{udasis}, he asked Bhai Pharinda at Sultanpur to make a rebeck for him. This musical instrument he handed over to Bhai Mardana, his life long companion
during his travels over land and sea. Whenever the prophetic
inspiration would inspire Guru Nanak, the minstrel of God, he would
ask Bhai Mardana to touch the chord of his rebeck so that the Master
might sing. His celestial strains melted the hearts of Kauda, the
savage, and Sajjan, the hard-hearted thug, and they fell at the master’s
feet and converted their homes into Dharmasals to gather the devotees
to sing the praises of the Lord. This music disarmed the charms of
Kamrup woman; it melted many an obdurate heart to follow Baba
Nanak’s way.

In fact, music has been the soul of spirituality. It touches the
dormant spiritual sensibility and awakens it to listen to the music of
spheres – the anhad nad. The psalm singing of the Christians, the
hymn singing of the Hindus, the mantra-intoning of the Buddhists and
the frantic music of the Sufi saints – all have one thing in common -
they rouse the spirit, they become one with the music and experience
the state of bliss. Guru Nanak acknowledges that he is a bard of the
Lord:

I was a minstrel out of work, the Lord gave me
employment. The mighty one instructed me:
night and day, sing my praise – the Lord did to
summon this minstrel. To His Court High: On
me he bestowed the robe of honour. Again:
Nanak utters what the Lord inspires. Nanak
utters the word of truth – truth he utters; truth
the time calls for. Himself doing all, all to Him is known – thus is the bard Nanak’s utterance. To Bhai Lalo: O’Lalo, as I receive the word of the Lord, so do I utter.

As Lord’s poet, Nanak would sing spontaneously songs in praise of God and to that Bhai Mardana would provide celestial strains. Sangat would listen to Guru’s hymns in rapt attention and many a sensitive, devoted soul would visit the realm of truth. So Kirtan acquires prominence in the Sikh Sangat. Shabad Kirtan enlightened and enraptured the Sangat. Bhai Gurdas testifies: “Gurbani is sung in congregation.” Guru said, “In the company of saints, all heard songs of rejoicing. In the company of saints, by our good fortune, we encounter the Lord.” Laudation of the Lord’s merit is my treasure.

Kirtan concretizes the concept of collectivism and, therefore, an expression of corporate worship. It was the principle of learning and reinforcing the Guru’s teachings concerning the divine name. It was a nursery rhyme in the Guru’s school to re-orient the minds towards God. Guru Arjan said: “In my mind, I cherish a keen desire that I may get up and make efforts every day: O’Nanak, friend bless me so that I may remain engaged in singing the Lord’s praises.” Again, the Guru says, that the place where congregation was held and Kirtan recited...
becomes pious and is linked to heaven, “Heaven is where is Thy laudation sung”.

*Kirtan* in *Sangat* produces a spiritual atmosphere which brings the participants in holy communion. It has become an integral part of the Sikh ritualism and takes place at the time of all Sikh social ceremonies concerning birth, initiation, marriage and death. In any function, where the *Guru Granth Sahib* is present, *Kirtan* becomes an essential part of the ceremony. The Guru has said: “In Kalyuga, the *Kirtan* is supreme”. So the highest deed is the singing of the Lord’s praises and in the company of *Sadh Sangat* and considered as the sole form of worship. It weans the weary self away from tinsel and tawdry of the material world and enables it to hold a communion with the divine and experiences *ananda* and *santi*, the *summum bonum* of light.

Thus, *Sangat* clearly connotes that salvation cannot be achieved without participation in the *sadh Sangat*. The true spiritual progress is promoted through *satsang*: “In the vast majority of the cases, spiritual awakening is brought about through *satsang* or the company of the holy” for “the touch of divine light is lit by contact with the spirit of flame” and the soul in bondage to brute things becomes free and soars “heavenwards from a liberated and highly evolved personality with magnetic attractions”. From this it follows that, “Sikhism regards a
co-operative society as the only truly religious society. It conceived the religious evolution of man as a necessary and integral pre-requisite and condition of its march towards the ideal society.  

The place where the Sangat was held came to be known as dharmsal. The erection of dharmsal became an object of supreme importance for the Sikh gurus, for wherever the Sangat was to be established a dharmsal was essential for the gathering, so the establishment of Sangat led to the institution of dharmsal which forms the subject of analysis in the next chapter.
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