The society which Guru Nanak had evolved needed to be shaped on separate ideological lines and to be moulded into a permanent community for its everlasting effect. The institution of Sangat is closely interlinked to that of Dharmsal, for a place was needed for the congregation, where they could learn Gurbani, repeat Naam and recite Kirtan. Wherever Guru went, he left clear instructions to his disciples to build institutions such as Dharmsals.

In the Sikh world-view, the human birth has been extolled as a rare boon of the Almighty Lord. Man is at the highest rung of the evolutionary ladder. Guru Arjan says: “For several births (you) were a mere worm, for several births an insect, for several births a fish, animal... after ages have you the glory of being man”. Again “Among eighty-four lakhs of species, man is assigned the supreme position, whosoever misses the opportunity, suffers the pain of
transmigration”. The Guru exhorts man to make the best use of his human birth: “You have obtained the privilege of the human body, and now is your opportunity to meet God”. Human birth on this earth is like a pilgrimage and man’s earthly sojourn a pilgrim’s stay in an inn, a dharamsala, from where he is to continue his journey for the other shore. Human life is a state of probation to perform righteous deeds to seek liberation from the inexorable law of Karma. Dharamsal, therefore acquires a symbolic mode – a place not for mere rest and victuals but for the performance of noble actions in accordance with the ethical code evolved by the founder of the faith. In fact, in setting of dharamsal, the creative vision of Guru Nanak found concrete expression. It is a faith that teaches optimism and exhorts us not to leave the dharmasal as the penitents of the past but the pilgrims of the future.

Dharamsal thus plays a pivotal role in the regeneration of a neophyte Sikh, for it is closely associated with sangat which is Guru Nanak’s school for moulding the personality of his Sikhs. During his Udasis, wherever Guru Nanak stayed, he asked his fervent followers to establish sangats to practise Naam and perform Kirtan after him. In fact, the concept of sangat was the first concrete step Guru Nanak took to break-away from the caste-ridden Hindu religion, for, to quote
Max Weber, Hinduism is exclusive in the sense that in no other way (except by being born to Hindu parents) can the individual enter its community. It shows that Hindu religion has no congregation. In *sangat*, sat men of all shades and all were equal and *sangat* proved the most important factor in Sikh egalitarianism. The centre for the *sangat* – whatever may be the quality of its structure- became a dharamsal. Guru Nanak’s spell transformed Kauda the savage who converted his mansion into a dharamsal and so did Sajjan, the thug.

With *Sangat* and Pangat, Dharamsal emerged an important medium of social and spiritual evolution ushered in by Guru Nanak. He liberated the common mind from the trammels of the *varna-ashrama-dharma* that enjoined upon the people a strict ceremonial and casteist code. Guru Nanak firmly believed that any amelioration at the empirical plane would surely lead to a spiritual revolution that denounced caste, empty ritualism, superstitious faith in gods and goddesses, spiritual hypocrisy of the priestly class and a false concept of purity and sanctity. Liberation from the tentacles of spiritual cant that had enmeshed the common mind for centuries was not an easy task. To remove the crust of custom from a servile mind a lot of persuasion, good-will, sense of equality and fraternity, selfless service of the poor and needy, interdining and singing hymns of praise of one
and only one Lord could transform “men into angels”. It was for this avowed aim that Guru Nanak established *sangats* because a *sangat* not only leads to the sharing of belief in a set of principles but also imparts the individual a sense of identity and a feeling that he belongs to a specific spiritual order.

Guru Nanak’s farsightedness, therefore, is quite evident from the concept of *sangat* that he established. After his enlightenment, Lord Buddha too travelled far and wide to spread his gospel but he could never conceive of *sangat* that later-on in Sikhism becomes the embodiment of the Guru. Wherever the *Sangat* gathered the place came to be known as *dharamsal*. At some places, the Guru’s affluent devotees donated buildings for the congregation and at other places the neophyte Sikhs by collecting donations, raised independent structures. About the significance of Dharamsals, Gurdarshan Singh rightly points out that “Dharamshals as centres of new society...not only came to serve as repositories of Sikh faith but also played a significant role in maintaining the corporate life of the community and re-inforcing the notion of religious collectivism”.

Dharamsal literally means an abode of Dharma, a place to practise righteousness in accordance with the tenets of the Sikh faith. In fact, in the Sikh scripture, this world has been hailed as a
Dharamsal, a form of spiritual inn, where the pilgrim on his journey to sachkhand stays for a while to learn the way to the realm of truth. Says Guru Nanak “The world is in its essence, a spiritual and moral order, i.e. Dharamsal⁶. Guru Angad too says : “The world is God’s house, in It is His abode, an ocean in which all beings move⁷”. Guru Amar Das opines that “By His ordinance is created the earth, the place for righteous action⁸”. Guru Ram Das regarded it as “a place where true sangat listens and sings God’s glory⁹”. Guru Nanak’s revelation, according to the Janamsakhi traditions, enjoined upon him the twin mission of spreading naam and establishing panth. To create panth amidst the prevailing social and spiritual chaos, Dharamsal became the nodal point where the sangat, gathered with new spiritual orientation. The Janamsakhi thus states:

Guru Nanak, your Panth will flourish. I shall bless your panth. Inculcate devotion towards me and strengthen (men’s obedience to their) dharma. As the Vaishnava, have their temple (ramsal), the Yogis, their seat (asan) and the Muslims their mosques, so your followers shall have their dharamshala¹⁰.

This surely indicates that the Dharamsal was a part of Guru Nanak’s divinely-ordained mission. It was essential to impart a distinct identity to Panth – a place of social, moral and spiritual regeneration where the empirical and spiritual meet to concretise an
altogether new and revolutionary ideology. Bhai Gurdas, in his peculiar poetic mode describes it as “a mansarovar and the Sikhs flock their like swans". Sunita Puri brings its organisational significance and its future ramifications in Sikhsim when she says that this “organisational structure of the new community”, imparted ‘solidarity and cohesion to the Sikh ranks and’ fused the far-flung and diverse units into a single well-integrated social order.

The first Dharmsal was established by Guru Nanak, according to Shamsher Singh Ashok at “the residence of Sajjan Thug at village Makhdoompura in Multan, which still exists in its original form”. Macauliffe also endorses this view when he says that “the first Sikh temple was constructed on the spot where Guru met Sheikh Sajjan and converted him to his views”. Guru, stayed at the house of Bhai Lalo which was converted into Dharmsal and to quote Parkash Singh, “even Malik Bhago converted his house into a Dharamsala”.

Wherever Baba Nanak put his hallowed feet, the place was sanctified. Bhai Gurdas writes in his inimitable style: “Wherever Baba put his feet, a religious place was established. All the Siddha places now have been renamed on the name of Nanak”. It acquired, therefore, great prominence as a Sikh institution and showed the radical departure of Nanakology from the prevailing spiritual traditions.
After his return from missionary travels, Guru Nanak took off his robe as a wandering minstrel on a divinely ordained mission and adopted the life of the householder in the newly established town of Kartarpur. According to G.C. Narang, Guru Nanak “founded the village of Kartarpur where he built the first Dharmsal”. Bhai Gurdas says: “The true Guru Nanak Dev inspired people to remember the true name of the Lord, whose form is truth. Founding a place of Dharma, at Kartarpur it was inhabited by the holy congregation as the abode of truth where Waheguru was imparted to the people”. In fact, it is Bhai Gurdas who suggested “Waheguru” as the Guru Mantra for naam simran.

The Dharmsal at Kartarpur says Ganda Singh “became a true demonstrative laboratory for the practical training of his followers” and was known as “Baba Nanak Di Dharamsala”. In fact, it was at Kartarpur the system of Sikh worship and Maryada was established. People would throng in large numbers to listen to the exhortations of Baba Nanak. Japuji and Asa di Var would form important part of morning worship. In the evening, after spiritual discourse, Sodar would be recited and the worship closed after Sohila. Here was started the tradition of Guru Ka Langar which proved of far-reaching consequences, for the commensal dining exploded, like the formation
of sangat, the varna-ashrama concept, for here people would sit in pangat, irrespective of caste and creed, social rank or political status and take food reciting Lord’s Naam all the time. Later on, other Dharmsals adopted the Kartarpur model and a distinct mode of worship and community kitchen became the inseparable part of the Dharmsals. Here was practised what the founder of the faith preached.

To carry out the mission of their master with rare fervence Guru Nanak’s successors consolidated and extended the institution of Dharmsal. Guru Angad established a Dharmsal at Khadoor Sahib, while Guru Amar Das’s presence lent lustre to Goindwal by the banks of fetterless Beas. Guru Angad introduced Gurmukhi script and teachings of the new faith were imparted in the language of the people. It gave a rude set back to Sanskrit and break with Hindu tradition became all the more wide. Guru Amar Das set the tradition of Langar on firm footing. Satta and Balwand sing praises of the Langar at Goindwal where under the loving care of Mata Khiwi, dainty dishes like kheer were served to the Sangat.

Morning bath or Ishnan forms an integral part of Sikh ablutions. In the ambrosial hour of morning the devout Sikh is expected to take a bath before joining the Sangat for morning worship. Guru Amar Das,
with the help of the **sewa** of the **Sangat** got a **baoli** dug at Goindwal for the Sikhs to have a bath and later on tanks and **baolis** became an integral part of the **Dharmasals** which later on came to be known as the **Gurdwaras**.

Guru Amar Das expressed a desire to establish a new **Dharmasal** for the propagation of Sikhism in the **Majha** region and enjoined upon his devout follower, Bhai Jetha, later on Guru Ram Das, to make efforts in this direction with the help of the **sangat**. Akbar, as the tradition goes, visited Guru Amar Das at Goindwal, partook Guru Ka **Langar** and donated 500 bighas of land to Bibi Bhani and it was on this land that Guru Ram Das founded Chak Ramdaspura which was later on known as Amritsar. A temple was raised and a **sarовар** dug up and filled with ambrosial water and a dip in the sacred tank was regarded as the most auspicious to purify the soul of its sins. Guru Arjan further developed the **Dharmasal** and lent it sanctity, for it became the centre of the Sikh pilgrimage. The **sanctum sanctorum** was built within the pool and came to be known as **Harmandir**, the house of God. The Guru said "**Harmandir** is a place where from you get to recognise God as He resides in **Harmandir**^{20}.

The Guru disclosed his purpose to build this **Dharmasal**, "Nanak has erected his home at the spot, where death, birth and decline
torment not”, and further says: “Lovely and holy is the spot where God’s devotees assemble21”. It was built as an abode of truth, where Guru’s Sikhs gathered. The name of Harmandir was deliberately chosen to signify ‘everybody’s temple22’. Madanjit Kaur rightly highlights the architectural and symbolic significance of Harmandir:

“The message of the four door architectural structure of the Golden Temple to mankind is unmistakable – ‘open your mind to the flood of divine light and see for yourself that inspite of hundreds of seeming differences, man is essentially the same everywhere and deserved to be allowed to live a free, peaceful and honourable life”.

Harmandir, with its impressive and imposing structure, standing in the midst of the sacred pool, whose ambrosial waters had the miraculous power to “transform even crows into swans”, to use the poetic metaphor, acquired primacy as a centre of Sikh pilgrimage and dearest to the heart of every Sikh. “In this way, Guru Arjan Dev gave the town an institution which was to ensure its primacy along all the places of Sikh pilgrimage24” The Guru prevailed upon his Sikhs to settle around the temple to pursue their temporal tasks and raise their households and in due course Amritsar became a centre of trade and commerce, the gateway to India for the traders from central Asia. Guru Arjan also founded Tarn Taran by constructing a Dharmsal and a big
and wide tank and then founded Kartarpur and Sri Hargobindpur as centres of Sikh faith.

Guru Hargobind established a network of Dharamsals in the places that he visited during his travels in Punjab and outside the state. His son Baba Gurditta appointed Almast, Phul and Balu Hasan as head preachers who travelled far and wide and set up dharmsals. Almast re-established dharmsal at Nanakmata which was captured by the yogis. Baba Phul established a dharmsal at Hoshiarpur and his disciples established dharmsals at Berar, in Deccan and Sind. Balu Hasan established them in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa. Guru Teg Bahadur during his missionary travels in the north-east regions not only revived the dharmsals set up by Guru Nanak's followers, but also established them at Patna and Dacca.

Dharamsal thus stood at the centre of the corporate life of the Panth. It fostered a feeling of consciousness and self identity in a new order that stressed monotheism and egalitarianism and welcomed whosoever willed to worship and pray with the sangat. Bhai Gurdas says: “Dharamsal is established on its four feet and all the four castes were converted into one caste of humanity.” Again: “As in betel leaf all colours mix and become one red colour, likewise by mixing all the Varnas one Sikh has been created.” The stress was on the truthful.
living and the Sikhs were to inculcate the fear of God and love for mankind. Thus, the dharamsal became a medium of communication of the gospel of the Gurus.

II

The organization of sangat and the consequent establishment of dharmsals considerably contributed towards the development of the Sikh religion and the evolution of the Panth. Guru Amar Das, finding it difficult to supervise Sangats at far flung places, divided the spiritual domain into twenty-two provinces called manjis. Each manji was under a devout Sikh, the Guru’s ecclesiastical representative, whose chief duty was to preach the mission of Guru Nanak and look after the dharmsals under his area. These manjis were further divided into piris to establish a sound organizational base to the emergent religion; these centres served as meeting grounds for the Sikhs to discuss matters of common human welfare.

Moreover, the maintenance of dharmsals and the smooth running of the Langar brought in their wake many socio-economic obligations. Balwant Singh Dhillon rightly points out: “Historical experience of the Sikh community suggests that to raise, maintain and run the dharamsala complex had always been the obligation of the Sikh
sangat" and that "to seek state patronage has never been the policy of Sikh Gurus\textsuperscript{29}. The Sikh Gurus were to see to it that at every dharamsal, Guru ka langar functioned smoothly and that it never suffered for want of provisions. For this, money was essential. To collect money from sangats spread all over the sub-continent, Guru Arjan organized the masand system.

The masand was the representative of the Guru. Devout and devoted to the house of Nanak, his chief obligation was to spread Guru Nanak's mission to bring people into the Sikh fold, to collect offerings at the dharamsals and render an account to the Guru once or twice a year. The author of Dabistan traces the origin of the masand:

It should be known that in the reign of the Afghan kings, the nobles were addressed in writing as Masand-I-Ali or the High seat... The Indians have reduced the word to masand. And as the Sikhs consider the Guru Sacha Padshah, the true king, they call their agents masand\textsuperscript{30}.

At the earlier stage voluntary offerings were the major fiscal source of the dharamsals. Guru Arjan, however, made it obligatory to a Sikh to give one-tenth of his earnings (daswandh) to the Guru and its collection was the duty of the masands. The masands would collect the money and render the account to the Guru at his court at Amritsar on the eve of the Baisakhi day every year. “Guru’s control over the
entire Sikh organization of the Sangat through the masands ensured the soldarity of the Sikh community.\textsuperscript{31}

The system went very well for some time. Through the support of the Sikh Sangats, Guru Arjan founded towns like Sri Hargobindpura, Tarn Taran and Kartarpur and could complete tanks at Amritsar and Tarn Taran and a baoli in Lahore. However, with the passage of time the lure of silver and the intoxication of power and pelf made many masands wilful and corrupt. It is evident from their treatment to Guru Tegh Bahadur at Amritsar. The tenth master dealt the masands with an iron hand and by creating the Khalsa abolished for ever the institution of masands in Sikhism.

Dharamsals thus played a stellar role in shaping the Sikh destiny. They were not mere hospices for the stay of wandering pilgrims, but centres of great importance where not only spiritual discourses were held but also the problems of the community discussed. “The great message of the emancipation from invidious distinctions and caste prejudices was instilled into the the hearts of the people, through these institutions of Sangat and pangat, originally established at these centres.\textsuperscript{32}"

Guru Arjan with judicious care and utmost reverence with the help of his most devoted scribe, Bhai Gurdas, compiled the Adi Granth,
the sacred Sikh scripture that contributed to the emergence of the Sikh
identity. Written in Gurmukhi script, the sacred text became "the
nucleus of the Sikh way of life and of all religious observances of the
Sikhs". On August 16, 1604, Guru Arjan ceremoniously installed the
Adi Granth in the sanctum sanctorum of the newly constructed
Harmandir and appointed Baba Budha as the first high priest of the
Harmandir Sahib. So great was his reverence that Guru Arjan would
sleep on the floor, while Adi Granth would adorn a bedecked bed.
Copies of Adi Granth were made and installed in dharamsalas. Thus
with the installation of the scripture, dharamsal became a Gurdwara.

"With the installation of Guru Granth Sahib in a Dharamsala, it
became a gurdwara (abode of the Guru)" and the gurdwara "emerged
as a new edifice on the Indian religious scene" and "this indestructible
symbol of the Sikh faith has aroused intense and indefinable feelings of
Sikhs everywhere" and a great part of the Sikh history revolves
around the gurdwaras. G.S. Dhillon too highlights the significance of
dharmals and gurdwaras: "Sikh shrines called gurdwaras or
dharmals have played a very significant role in shaping and
governing the life of the Sikhs and the course of their institutions,
ethos and tradition."
The Gurdwara became the heart of the Sikh community. To it they would repair in weal and woe. The Sangat elevated the drooping human spirits and the sewa engendered humility that would balance an overjoyous heart, for the idea of Gurmukh was to maintain sahaj or a state of equipoise under all circumstances. Guru Amar Das struck at the roots of many customs of popular Hinduism. He introduced the Sikh marriage custom known as Anand Karaj when he celebrated the marriage of his daughter Bibi Bhani with Bhai Jetha, later on known as Guru Ram Das. His own composition Anand Sabad was sung while the bride and the groom circumambulated four times around the Guru. The new marriage ceremony brought simplicity in marriage. “The composition of a new nuptial song which replaced the traditional scriptural texts in connection with the most important ceremony in a householder’s life was a significant event reflecting the new and separate identity of the Sikh Panth”.

Similarly, regarding obsequies, Guru Amar Das bade his son to perform his last rites in a way different from the prevailing Hindu customs and asked him not to perform any traditional rituals and to immerse his immortal remains in the Ganga – instead sing God’s praises. Call God instead of a Pandit and for the Garar Purana read God’s words.
These ceremonies thus liberated the Sikh faith from cultural and ritualistic ramifications of Hinduism. Guru says: ‘After I am gone, sing the Lord’s praise holy; call the learned, versed in the Divine scripture, to recite the Lord’s teaching, holy like Puranas’. Bhai Gurdas too highlights the separate social identity of the Sikhs. “Thus the Guru Panth is distinct and cannot be mixed with others”. Again, “Auspicious days, seasons, astrology, predicting the future with long spells be ignored by Sikhs”. “Birth rituals, shaving the tuft of hairs (mundan), using cow’s urine, betrothal and death ceremonies are meaningless” and “pilgrimages and auspicious days are forbidden for the Sikhs who should celebrate gurpurbs instead”. Bhai Gurdas thus explicates the dynamics of the Sikh faith by rejecting the prevailing Hindu customs. Thus the establishment of gurdwara was a practical step for carrying the society forward towards collective enlightenment, which fostered a feeling of conscious self-identity in new social order.

Gurdwara became the centre of all Sikh activities – spiritual and temporal. Sikh rites and ceremonies were performed in the presence of Granth Sahib. The rupture with Hindu traditions was complete and inviolable. It brought an internal change in the community and provided a spirit of coherence and unity. The Sikhs established cordial and closure relationships and welded into an independent community bound
together by their faith. The sangat took a unanimous decision on individual and corporate issues. Gurmatta passed in the presence of the Guru Granth was binding on all irrespective of their rank and position. Specific rehat maryada for Sikhs was evolved and also to run the gurdwaras effectively. Infrastructure was created to fulfil the Guru’s mandate.

Today, Gurdwara enjoys supreme position in Sikhism. To protect its integrity and sanctity is the primary duty of every Sikh. With the creation of the Khalsa, the saffron ensign became the symbol of the Sikh spirituality and love for freedom and duty to protect the dharma and oppose unrighteousness at all costs. With white marble domes and the Nishan Sahib fluttering in its compound, a Gurdwara thrills every Sikh’s heart, for it is a succour of the destitute, helpless and meek and wahiguru ultimately comes out of the mouth to see its resplendent glory in the break of dawn when hymns are recited and it throbs with every kind of activity – sewa by the devotees. The Sikhs bow their heads in gratitude to Guru Nanak who had blessed them with this august institution.
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