CHAPTER IV

LANGAR
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background

The Langar, known in Sanskrit as 'Analgrha' or the community kitchen was started by Guru Nanak and was continued by the successive Gurus. It was used as a powerful institution for the uplift of the downtrodden who had been groaning under the yoke of socio-economic-cum-political inequities and religious discriminations prevalent in the society at that time.

The idea of a community kitchen had existed much earlier in the Vedic Age, as is evident from a reference to the Atharva-Veda, which says: 'Identical shall be your drink, in common shall be your share of the food'. But these community kitchens which were run on the charities of the people, who considered it a religious merit to provide food and shelter to the needy and the poor, lost their social value with the passage of time. The advent of the caste-system led to divisions on the basis of Varanashram-dharma and as a result of that, social inequities crept into the Indian society. The Brahmans, intoxicated with class arrogance, refused to intermix with the lower classes and introduced the

sacred lines of the 'chowka'. They exploited this agency for their personal ends and created dissensions, social discrimination, hatred and untouchability in the society.

Community kitchen formed a part of the monastic order of the Buddhists and the Jains. Islam, with its pronounced emphasis on social equality, laid stress on inter-dining. The reformers of the Bhakti-Movement also championed the cause of social inter-communion. But these earlier efforts were not institutionalized attempts at breaking the barriers that divided the people.

Guru Nanak understood that the real cause of the misery of the people was their disunity born out of social prejudice and social barriers. He started the langar as a crusade against social injustice, oppression and tyranny of the caste-system. In this institution, the ideals of love and service, fraternity and equality were taught and practised by the followers of the Gurus. He taught the people that all men were the children of God and, as such, all were brothers. The Guru's langar was to be open to all, where all were to be seated and served food together, irrespective of caste or social status. He stressed upon earning one's bread by honest labour, to follow the ideal—"work is worship" as one's motto, to share one's earnings with
others willingly and to meditate on the Holy Nam. He told the people that charity was to be given willingly, with love and devotion. He preached that the worship of God lay in selfless service of the masses who were all the creation of one and the same God. Thus the service of the people was the service of God.

CONTENTIONS OF THE GURUS

The 'Guru-ka-Langar', thus, grew into an institution where lessons in social service and practical ethics were given and practised. It helped the Sikhs in sublimating their personal ego for the service of mankind. This is borne out by the various slokas of the Gurus incorporated into the Guru Granth:

He alone, O Nanak, knoweth the way
Who earneth with the sweat of his brow,
and then shareth it with others.2

Var Sarang, M.I

Those who put in hard work and labour
and repeat the Name, their faces will
glow with an inner light, their efforts
shall bear fruit and they will be
saved from the cycle of transmigration.3

Japji, Slok, M.I

2. श्रावी जीव मनुष्य लोग तथा तथा तथा रूपान्तर नहीं
   वर जनो, भगवान 1, प:1245

3. निस्तो जीव जीवित जो नमुना जीव
   तथा जीव तथा विष तथा कुटि तथा
   सुननी, अलेह भगवान 1, प: 8
Making an earnest effort, live thou whole;
earning, abide thou in joy.

Contemplating thy Lord, meet thou Him, and Thy anxiety is dispelled.

*Var Guir*, M.V

One should earn one's living
with honest means and share it
with the humble, the poor and the needy.

*Gurpartap Surva*, Rut.V

He who earns his living with hard work
and honest means, and gives 'Daswandh'
in the name of the Guru will earn fame in this world.

*Rahtnama, Bhai Nand Lal*

One should share his food with others and should not eat alone.

*Rahtnama, Bhai Desa Singh*

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4. 4. ਹੁਏ ਦੋਲੇਸ ਤੋਂ ਹੀ ਅਧਾਰਤਾ ਸੰਘ ਕੁੱਦੁ
   ਕੁਰ ਕੁਰਾ, ਭਾਗ 5, ਪ: 522

5. ਚਾਹੁ ਲਿਵਾ ਤਰਣ ਸਿਆ ਕਾਰਦੇ
   ਵਂਤ ਭਾਜਣਾ ਲਈ ਪੁਤ ਮਦਰੇ

6. ਰਸਤੇ ਰੋਤ ਨੇ ਰੋਤ ਕਾਰੇਂ ਦ' ਰੋਤ ਨੇ ਪਰਤ ਖਰੀ ਆਰਦੇ
   ਪਿਕ 'ਜੂ ਦ੍ਰਿਪੈ ਨੇ ਪੀਨੀ ਵਿਸ਼ਦ ਮੁਖਮ ਸਰੁ ਨਾ ਹਿਰਾ ਤੇਲੀ
   ਜਾਗ਼ਤੀ ਆਦਰੀ ਤੇ ਰਾਖ਼ਦਾ

7. ਟੌਲ ਦੀ ਪਿੰਡ ਭਰੀ ਤਰਹ ਅਰਵਲ ਕੇ ਜਲ ਲੋੜਿਆ
   ਜਾਗ਼ਤੀ ਆਦਰੀ ਰੋਕੀ ਵਿਸ਼ਦ
The true disciples are those who are humble, and earn their bread by the sweat of their brow and share their food with their brethren.  

Bhai Gurdas, Var, 32

In 'Prem Sagar' it is mentioned that the disciples should do honest labour and earn their livelihood by honest means. It is better to resign to the will of the Lord under all circumstances and to render help to the needy and the poor, even at the cost of one's own interests.

The Sikh Gurus not only laid stress on earning one's bread with honest labour and sharing it with others, but also tried to inculcate the high ideals of love and service in the Sikhs. They enjoined upon them the service of humanity as a whole and told them that unless their earnings were shared voluntarily and willingly, the charity given was useless.

One should serve mankind in this world for a better life in the next.  

Sri Rag, M.I

8. Bhai Gurdas, Var. 32
   बैरागी वर, 32
   जिन्होंने नर्तक द्वारा बनाया गया
   जीवन की ज्योति में भित्ति लगाया

9. Randhir Singh, Bhai, Prem Sagar, p.73.

10. Randhir Singh, Bhai, Prem Sagar, p.73.
    नर्तक द्वारा बनाया गया
The whole creation is Thy kingdom, but none can achieve anything without service. 11

Asa, M.I

I touch the feet of the Gursikhs with all humility. 12

Suhri, M.I

Men of contentment serve their Lord and dwell upon none but the True One. They put not their feet in sin; yea, they do good and practise Dharma. They loosen their worldly bonds and eat but sparingly. And God's immense grace is upon them; and He blesseth them with more and more. And by the praise of the great, one attaineth to him. 13

Var Asa, M.I

Service done under compulsion is of no avail. Nanak says, one should serve others ungrudgingly and with pleasure. 14

Var Suhri, M.II

11. ਗੋਵਰਦਣ ਦੇ ਕੂਟ ਵਿਕਾਰ ਹੋਏ ਤੋਂ ਛੋਠੇ ਨਹੀਂ

ਪੁਸਤਕ 1, ਪ�: 354

12. ਤੇ ਤੋਂ ਬਾਹਰ ਵਿਰਾਂਦਾ ਮਨੁੱਖ ਵਿਚਿ ਵਿੱਚ ਚੁੱਕੀ ਅਗਿਤ ਨਹੀਂ

ਪੁਸਤਕ 1, ਪ�: 763

13. ਪਿਆਲ ਹੋਏ ਵਿਚਿ ਵਿਰਾਂਦਾ ਮਨੁੱਖ ਵਿਚਿ ਵਿੱਚ ਚੁੱਕੀ ਅਗਿਤ ਨਹੀਂ

ਪੁਸਤਕ 1, ਪ�: 466-67

14. ਬਣ ਵਾਂ ਦੇ ਵਿਚਿ ਬੁਰੂ ਨਹੀਂ ਹੀਲਾਕਰ

ਪੁਸਤਕ 2, ਪ�: 787
As the elephant surrenders its will to the goad and the anvil to the smith, so should one surrender one's body and mind (to the Guru) and be ever alert in the service of God. 15

Var Sorath, M.III

The service of the people is supreme. 16

Gauri Gawareri, M.IV

One can get happiness only with selfless service. 17

Gond, M.IV

Be merciful, O Lord, and bless me with Thy vision, that I sing Thy praises morning and evening, and wipe the dust of Thy slave's feet with my hair; this is my life's object. 18

Gujri, M.V

15. अमले निकट निकट खड़े उन अमले निकट निकट खड़े
अतूत भव अवध जनें यहीं में एक तरीके
निकट खड़े जरूर निकट पर यहीं शरीर सुगमित कर दीजें

वन में हठ भव 3, पृ 861

16. नौ ली में हठ हुआ जनें

बंधुओं अवध भव 4, पृ 164

17. निवृत्त में धुम तीर्धे विरह लेनी,
जा पर मह स्नेह मृद उठीले

वन में हठ 4, पृ 861

18. तेज मीठ तम खड़े लक्ष्मी रोहित में

कुली भव 5, पृ 500
One should go on serving till the last breath; only then one can meet the Lord. 19

Ran Kali, M.V

I pray O God, bless me with the company of the Gursikhs, so that I may serve them by fanning, fetching water for them, serving food to them. 20

Suhil, M.V

I wish to be in the company of the Gursikhs so that I should serve them, by bringing water, carrying it on my head, washing their feet with my own hands, sweeping in front of their doors and fanning them. This wish of mine can only be fulfilled with His grace. 21

Bilawal, M.V

19. ਅਤੀ tੱਤਾਤੀ ਹੀਉਸ਼ ਅਧੂਬ ਭੈ ਮੇਜ ਅਧੂਬ
ਅਰਸ ਤੇ ਹੀਉਸ਼ ਮੱਛ ਨਾਸ਼ ਜੀ ਉਲਚਕ ਮੁਖ ਅਧੂਬ

ਰਾਮਲਾਲ। ਅਲਹ 5, ਪਜ: 883

20. ਅਖਾ ਦੇਖੀ ਜਰੀ ਦੇਖ ਰੋਕਤਾ ਤੇ ਪੋਸਤ ਭੌਮ ਕਾਰਾ
ਤਰਕ ਤੀ ਭੂਮ ਪ੍ਰਸ ਦੇਖਦਾ ਤੇ ਤਾ ਦੇਖਦੁ ਪਖ

ਪੁਰਬਾ ਅਲਹ 5, ਪਜ: 749

21. ਨਾਲ ਦੇਖਿ ਦੇਖਨ ਭੂਮ ਬਰਤ ਪਖ ਲੱਖ ਲੱਖਨਾਲ ਰੋਸੁ ਕਰਾਤ ਰੋਸੁ ਕਰਾਤੀ ਲੱਖ ਲੱਖਨਾਲ ਨਾਲ ਨਾਲ ਨਾਲ ਭੂਮ ਪ੍ਰਸ ਪੇਸ ਹੋ ਲੱਖਨਾਲ

ਨਦਪੂਰਤ ਅਲਹ 5, ਪਜ: 813
The Gursikhs should serve one another. Only by serving, one can attain happiness. One should cultivate humility and share one's food with others. 22

Bhai Gurdas, Var, 20

In the Suri Prakash, it is mentioned that Guru Ram Dass stressed the ideal of service to the Sikhs saying: "Cast away the robe of pride, jealousy and backbiting and put on the simple garb of humility. If a Sikh calls at your door, welcome him open-heartedly, offer him food and clothing with love and don't refuse him anything." 23

Guru Har Rai, while emphasizing the importance of service and langar to his Sikhs, told them that by giving food to the needy, one could attain salvation. "The Sikhs should daily distribute langar in their homes to everybody who calls at their doors. Nobody should go without food or remain hungry. Wherever there are Gursikhs, there should

22. ੰੰਸੰਖੀ ਲੂਸੀਲੀ ਮੇਲ ਲਭਾਇਆ
ਤਹਾ ਸੰਬੰਧ ਹੀ ਮੇਲ ਸੰ ਕਲ ਲਭਾਇਆ,
ਅਤੇ ਸੰਬੰਧ ਦੀ ਵਿਸ਼ੱਲੀ ਨਵੀਂ ਲਭਾਇਆ
ਤਹਾ ਰੋਪ ਅਕਾਲ ਲਦੀ ਲਭਾਇਆ,
ਅਕਾਲ ਅੰਤ ਪੁਜਾਰੀ ਖੀਣ ਬੁਲਾਵਾਇਆ

ਜਗੀ ਬੁਲਾਵਾਇਆ, 20, ਪੁੰਨਰ ਤੀ 10

be a langar. The langar is only meant for disabled persons and religious preachers. The worldly people should do 'Kirt' and not depend on the langar. ... He is my Sikh who serves with humility". 24

DEVELOPMENT OF LANGAR UNDER THE GURUS

The ideals of love and social service, honest labour and sharing one's food with others, the repetition of the holy Nam and worship of Hari were not only preached to the people by the Gurus, but were also applied by them in their daily life. Guru Nanak openly spoke against the existing social distinctions and divisions in the society and tried to bring unity in the ranks of the people by inculcating in them a common mode of worship by starting social institutions of Sangat and Pangat. Sangat stands for association of people and Pangat stands for sitting and eating together in the same row in 'Guru-ka-Langar'. 25 He enjoined upon the people to share their food with others and asked them to consider the kitchen in their house as 'Guru-ka-Langar'. He had great love and sympathy for the poor and the needy, and even as a child the Guru used to visit and serve the Hindu and Muslim saints and faqirs living in the neighbourhood of Talwandi and distributed articles of food and clothing. He was an embodiment of love and service and whosoever went

to his door never returned disappointed. When his father once gave him money to start a trade and to strike a "Khara Sauda", (profitable bargain), he fed the hungry saints near Chuharkana (now in West Pakistan), considering that act to be the best bargain. At Sultanpur, the Guru used to address the Sangats regularly in the evening and feed them. He was not fond of hoarding money, and distributed everything which he received as salary to the poor and the needy. 26 He considered the people better than his own self, and had a firm faith that the spirit of the Lord permeated all the living beings, and the best service of God was the service of the people. During the course of his travels, he preached and practised these ideals. The Guru preferred to stay at Eminabad with a poor carpenter, Bhai Lalo, who earned his bread by hard labour rather than with Malik Bhago, the local Dewan, who was a proud and dishonest official. The Guru refused to join the grand feast which the Malik had given and to which he had invited all the holy men of the town. The Malik personally met the Guru and asked him why he had refused to join his feast and instead had eaten the food from Lalo who was a Sudra and of low caste. The Guru told him that he had no caste and preferred to eat coarse food earned with hard labour and not the dainty dishes prepared by using money earned with evil means. Malik Bhago

fell at the Guru's feet and begged for mercy.27

The Guru blessed him and told him to abstain from sinful living. Malik Bhago distributed the whole of his wealth among the poor and started a life of love, service and devotion. He made it a principle of his life to earn his living honestly. His house became a 'dharamsal', where he started the langar for everybody without any consideration of caste and creed, being rich or poor, high or low.28 In this way the Guru removed his false pride of high caste and inculcated in him the spirit of doing 'Kirt' and sharing the fruits of it with others. The Guru then converted Sajjan Thag who, like Malik Bhago, distributed everything among the needy and converted his house into a 'Sach Dharamsal' (The temple of truth), where he started serving food and giving shelter to all, irrespective of caste and creed. Guru Nanak visited the decoit Bhoomia's kitchen at Dacca. Bhoomia requested the Guru to take food from his kitchen, which the Guru refused, saying that it was saturated with the blood of the poor. Bhoomia fell at the feet of the Guru who gave him instructions not to harass and persecute innocent people, but to speak the truth and not to harm a person whose salt he had tasted ever in life. Bhoomia promised to obey the

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Guru with all sincerity and the Guru with other saints and travellers took food from his langar and stayed with him for sometime. Bhoomia later on served food to all in the name of God and his kitchen became the 'Guru-ka-Langar'.

Bhai Mansukh, a devoted Sikh of the Guru, visited Ceylon in one of his trade trips. He used to distribute the sacred food among his neighbours after his prayers every morning.²⁹ Sivanabh, a Raja of Ceylon had ordered the 'Akadashi fast' to be strictly observed throughout his kingdom. Mansukh prepared the sacred food on that day. A complaint was lodged against him to the Raja who called for him and asked him the reasons for preparing the sacred food. Mansukh told him that all his doubts and fears were dispelled by the teachings of the Guru. Raja Sivanabh was very much impressed with his talks and requested him to arrange for his meeting with the Guru. Mansukh told him to go on invoking the Name of God with sincere feeling and the Guru would definitely come to him. Guru Nanak went to Ceylon and stayed in the garden of Sivanabh. The King went barefoot to see the Guru and requested him to sanctify his palace with his visit. The Guru told him to start a langar and build a 'dharamsal' for the poor and the needy. The langar was immediately started and the work of construction of the dharamsal

was taken up. The Guru stayed there for several months and addressed congregations.  

The Guru settled as a farmer during the later part of his life at Kartarpur, where he built a dharamsal and attached to it the langer or a free kitchen, which became a distinctive feature of the colony. The corn which was produced by the sweat of his own brow as he tilled his land himself, was used for feeding those who came to see him. The poor and the needy, who came to him, never went empty-handed from his door. Gradually, the people started working together for this common cause and brought their earnings for the Guru’s langer as their contribution, whenever they visited him. He, thus, gave a practical demonstration of his teaching, viz. earning one’s bread by honest labour and sharing one’s earnings with others by starting the free kitchen at Kartarpur.

The example set by Guru Nanak was followed by his successors, who tried to make this institution as a living force to unite the people on a common platform. Guru Angad organized the langer on a large scale. He and his wife, Mata Khivi, personally worked in the langer and helped in the cooking and the distribution of food. Guru Angad got practical training and experience of service, while working in Guru

31. Parkash Singh, The Sikh Gurus and the Temple of Bread, p.34.
Nanak's kitchen at Kartarpur, where he used to bring provisions for the langar and also helped the Guru in tilling the land. He always volunteered himself for all types of service to the Guru. Once he carried three wet bundles of grass on his head for the cows and buffaloes, when Guru Nanak's own son spurned this work. He always willingly and readily carried out the order of the Guru.

Guru Angad spent all the offerings, which he received, on the langar at Khadur, where free food was distributed to persons of all creeds, and the pilgrims who came to see the Guru from distant places. The Guru's kitchen provided delicious dishes like rice boiled in milk and ghee, but the Guru never touched that food and took coarse food earned by twisting "strings of muni".

The daily routine in the Guru's langar at Khadur was that at about nine o'clock, all visitors sat in a line without any distinction and the food was served to them. Afterwards, the food was distributed among the children and then the Guru gave religious instructions. The service in the langar was done by the Sikhs.

One evening, the dinner in the Guru's kitchen was delayed owing to a dust storm. Jiva, a cook in the kitchen, said that

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33. Teja Singh and Ganda Singh, Dr, A Short History of the Sikhs, pp.17-18.
the meals could be served only if the Guru could tame the storm. The Guru gave him instructions to be satisfied and contented with the will of the Lord and serve in the kitchen as the humble servant of the Sangat. Jiva felt apologetic and, henceforth, willingly obeyed the Guru's instructions. 34

Manah, a Sikh of the Guru, who used to work in the kitchen, became haughty with the passage of time and started quarrelling with the people. He told them that he was to serve the Guru only and he was not the servant of the people. Even when the Guru asked him to serve the saints, he refused to do so. The Guru was annoyed and he asked him to get out of sight and to burn himself. Manah went to the jungle, collected the firewood and prepared a pyre but could not relish the idea of death. Perchance, a thief arrived at the scene with a basket of gems and asked him to take the basket of gems from him in exchange for the opportunity of expiating his sins by obeying the Guru's order and jumped into the fire. Manah was arrested later on the charge of theft by the authorities and was hanged. 35 The Guru gave his example to the people and instructed the Sikhs that the perverse would lose both the worlds. Manah's tragic tale, thus, reveals that he suffered simply because he refused to serve the people.

The Guru distributed everything to the needy and all the offerings were sent to the 'langar' where the food was served to the poor, travellers and pilgrims without any distinction. The Sikhs cooked and served the food and cleaned the utensils in the kitchen. Balwand and Satta, the rebeck-players of the Guru composed the Tikke-di-Var or Ramkali-ki-Var in which there is reference to the Guru's langar and philanthropy.

The langar was presided over by Mata Khivi, who used to look after all the details of the langar personally and served the Sikhs who came to see the Guru. The langar was named after her as 'Mata Khivi ka Langar'.

The langar developed into a regular institution at Goindwal during the time of Guru Amar Dass. The Guru made it a rule that whosoever came to see him must partake of the food in the Guru's kitchen and only then could he see him. There were supplies of butter, refined flour and sugar in plenty in the Guru's kitchen, where delicacies were daily served to the visitors. But the Guru himself took coarse food like boiled rice and lentils. The Guru's kitchen remained open till late in the night and the left-overs were thrown to the beasts and birds, and to the fish in the river.

The Mughal Emperor Akbar and Raja of Haripur who came to see the Guru had to take meals in the langar. The Guru refused to see them unless they took food sitting in the common kitchen with other people. Akbar requested the Guru to allow him to make grants of land to meet the vast expenses of feeding hundreds of men and women who were fed daily from the 'Guru-ka-Langar'. The Guru politely refused his offer by telling him that his Sikhs brought the supplies to the langar and whatever was collected daily was spent the same day for the langar and for the next day he left everything to the Almighty. Whereas he rejected the offer of the Emperor, he instructed his Sikhs to make the regular offerings for the langar and to serve and feed the Sikhs.

Once, the Sikhs wanted to offer a good dress and ornaments to the Guru's daughter Bibi Bhani, so that she could dress herself graciously. She returned the ornaments to the Sikhs and told them that the silver and gold were all a mere tinsel and hence useless. She asked them to spend the money on the Guru's kitchen.

The Guru was happy and pleased with the devotion of Jodha, who served in his kitchen and fed the hungry at all times. The Guru bestowed on him Na"i and spiritual bliss. Lalu, Durga, Jiwanda, Maya, Ugarsen, Ramu, Dipa and Gangu, Sohan and Bhangu, Saharu (a washerman) and Bulah who requested the
Guru for instructions, were told that there was nothing like
doing good to others, and sharing one's earning with others,
giving food, and clothes to the poor, and asked them to get
together on 'Baisakhi' and 'Diwali', prepare and distribute
the food to the assembly. He asked them to shed social
prejudices and the superstition of the 'chowka' and made them
sit in the same row and eat together.

According to Teja Singh, it was for the first time
that no sanctity was observed about eating and drinking. This
is testified to by a story mentioned in Dabistan-i-Mazahib
that a learned Pandit Partap Mal, told a boy who was inclined
towards Islam to join Sikhism, as there were no restrictions
on food in that religion. 39

Guru Ram Dass had received practical training in
service while working in the kitchen of Guru Amar Dass. He
used to cook, bring firewood from the jungles and draw water
for the Sikh Sangat. He never looked for comfort and was always
busy in serving the people or the Guru. He used to earn his
bread by selling boiled lentils and gave away one-fourth of
his earnings in charity. He was married to Bibi Bhani, the
daughter of Guru Amar Das. Both husband and wife continued
to serve the Guru and worked in the kitchen day and night.

39. Mohsin Fani, Dabistan-i-Mazahib, p.239.
Guru Ram Dass started his langar at Ramdaspur (the present City of Amritsar) under his direct supervision. The supervision of the langars at Kartarpur, Khadur and Goindwal was entrusted to different devout Sikhs. People from far-off places came to see the Guru and helped him in digging the tank of Ramdaspur. The langar was also started there and free food was supplied to everybody. Since money was needed for carrying on the Guru's kitchen as well as for meeting the cost of labour engaged in the digging work. Bhai Budha and other Sikhs waited upon the Guru for this purpose. It was decided to send his agents everywhere to collect funds as well as to spread the True faith. These agents were known as Masands.  

On being regularly organized, the Guru's langar was placed under the supervision of Prithi Chand, the elder son of the Guru, and Bhai Budha and other Sikhs. The Guru stressed the need for fanning, serving water and meals to the travellers and helping the poor and the needy.

One day when the Guru went to visit his kitchen, Handal, a man of submissive habits but of firm faith in the Guru, was kneading the flour at that time. His hands were covered with wet flour. He threw himself at the feet of the Guru by putting his hands at the back so that the Guru might not see them. The Guru was very happy to see his devotion to duty and

40. Mohsin Fani, Dabistan-i-Mazahib, p.233.
blessed him for his selfless service.

The Guru instructed Dharam Das, Dugar Das, Dipa, Jetha, Sansari, Bulah and Tirath to give up pride, remain humble and earn their bread by the sweat of their brows and to serve the Sikhs.

Guru Arjan organized the system of contributions to the common pool by laying down that every Sikh should contribute one-tenth of his income for the common welfare. The money, thus collected, was to be spent on running the free kitchen. A number of Sikhs would bring corn and wood for the kitchen.41

The Guru and his wife, Mata Ganga, set personal example of service by serving in the langar, and also by sitting along with the people to take the food. Tired pilgrims coming from distant places used to take rest at the Temple of Amritsar, where the Guru and his wife attended to them every night by massaging their limbs and fanning them, serving them with cool water and food. The Sikhs voluntarily contributed to the fund of the kitchen in the form of cash, corn and wood and those who could not give anything contributed labour with love and there was never dearth of anything for the Guru's kitchen. Once, the provisions in the Guru's kitchen fell short.

Ganga Ram, a Sikh of the Guru, who came from Bhatinda to sell his corn contributed everything to the Guru's langar. The Guru persuaded Ganga Ram to stay till Baisakhi and the offerings of the day were proffered to Ganga Ram, but he declined to accept them. The Guru was happy at his selfless devotion, and blessed him.

The Mughal Emperor Akbar visited the Guru at Amritsar and wanted to make contributions to the running of the Guru's langar, but the offer was politely declined by the Guru. As the Emperor insisted on doing something, the Guru asked him for the remission of the land revenue to the famine-stricken farmers. This the Emperor gladly accepted. 42 The Raja of Mandi visited the Guru at Amritsar along with Kallana, a devout Sikh of the Guru. The Raja, his queens and the army received religious instructions from the Guru and stayed with him for three days and took meals from the Guru's langar. Similarly, the Hill Rajas of Kulu, Haripur, Suket and Chamba visited the Guru at Amritsar, stayed with him for a few days and took meals from the Guru's kitchen.

Guru Hargobind introduced the langar in the army which he kept at Amritsar. The breakfast was distributed to the Guru's troops as well as to his followers after the morning

42 Abu-ul-Fazal, Akbar Name, p.514.
prayers and meals were served to them seated in rows, twice a day. The Guru started two big langars at Hargobindpur and Kiratpur. He also kept a mobile kitchen for his army because of his constant movement from place to place. Meals were served from the Guru's kitchen to the regular army stationed at various places. At Kiratpur, three hundred horsemen and sixty artillery men daily took their food from the Guru's langar. This attracted a large number of men to join the Guru's troops. People wondered how he could maintain such a large army. The Guru quoted to them Guru Arjan's version that God provided food even to insects in rocks and stones.43

During his visit to Kashmir, he went to Srinagar to meet Sewa Das and his mother who had prepared a dress for the Guru. Crowds of Kashmiris, both Hindus and Muslims, flocked to see him and he preached to them the virtues of serving others, sharing one's food with others, by feeding them from his free kitchen. A company of Sikhs brought fresh honey for him. Kattu Shah requested them to give him some honey, which they refused, saying that they could not serve the Guru with the left-overs of Kattu Shah. When the honey was presented to the Guru, it was rotten and full of worms. The Guru told them that the honey was spoiled as it had been refused to a devout Sikh. He ordered his Sikhs to return to Kattu Shah

One day, the Guru ordered his Sikhs to fetch firewood from the jungle. The next day, the Guru saw Jhanda, a rich man, bringing a bundle of firewood on his head to the kitchen. The Guru asked him why he was doing such a menial job. He replied that there were orders for the Sikhs to bring firewood and he was as good a Sikh as others.

Guru Hargobind sent Bhai Garhia to Kashmir for preaching the True faith to the Kashmiris. Bhai Garhia spent all the offerings in the Guru's name and gave a great feast in honour of the Guru and distributed the rest of the money among the famine-affected people and brought back only a rupee and a quarter as a token of collection and offered that to the Guru. He requested the Guru to excuse him for spending all the amount collected by him in feeding the poor people and the people affected by famine. The Guru told him that he had done the right thing and blessed him. He told Bhai Garhia to go back to his village and start a langar there. The Guru observed the principle of sharing food with others. While in prison at Gwalior, he distributed the rations among the needy prisoners and took very little for himself. He enjoined upon his Sikhs to earn their bread with honest labour.

45. Mobsin Fani, Dabistan-i-Kazahib, p.238.
Such bread was like ambrosia.

Once, two of his devout Sikhs, Sadhu and his son Rup Chand, had hung a leather-bottle on a tree and had vowed that unless the Guru took water, they would not touch it, despite the weather being hot. The Guru came and drank water, blessed them, advising them to keep their kitchen always open to the travellers.47

When Baba Atal, a son of the Guru, died, and was to be cremated, the Sikhs suggested to the Guru that his body should be cremated near his habitation. The Guru told his Sikhs that the City of Amritsar would grow in population and this place would be known as 'Annapurna'. There stands now in the memory of Baba Atal, a nine-storey building at Amritsar, where everybody sings, 'Baba Atal pakki pakki shall'. Even now people bring cooked food to this place which is distributed among the poor and the needy.

The author of Dabistan-i-Mazahib, a Muslim historian of that period, wrote that during the time of Hargobind whosoever, with the Guru's name on his lips, entered the house of any Sikh was received with warmth and served with food. By now, the langar grew into a regular institution and devout Sikhs started running regular free kitchens in their houses. Everybody was served with food and nobody was refused food or allowed to

47. Parkash Singh, The Sikh Gurus and the Temple of Bread, p.76.
starve. The Sikhs were served with love and devotion. Big congregations of the Sikhs were fed by pooling provisions and contributions in the name of the Guru. Individual charity normally leads to personal ego, whereas the collective contributions and a system of collective distribution helped the Sikhs in rising above their petty selves.

Guru Har Rai continued and further developed the institution of langar even to other countries. Bhai Gonda, who was a sincere and devout Sikh, was sent to Kabul by the Guru with instructions to start the 'Guru-ka-Langar' there, and preach the True faith and feed holy men and pilgrims with the offerings. He built a Sikh temple there and also started a free kitchen.48

The Guru made no distinction between the rich and the poor. He himself lived on coarse food as did all his predecessors. All valuable offerings received by him were spent on the welfare of the guests and on the running of the free kitchen, distribution of clothes and other necessities of life to the needy. Even the corn of the Guru's land at Kiratpur was used in the free kitchen. Bhai Bhagtu supervised the cultivation of the land at Kiratpur. He was very kind to the workers. Once,

the workers complained to him that sufficient 'ghee' was not put on their 'chapatis'. Bhai Bhagtu immediately purchased 'ghee' from Bhai Sangatia, who happened to pass that way and distributed it among the labourers and workers.

Once, on the Baisakhi festival, where the Sikhs had gathered in large numbers, the Guru enquired from them whether they were sharing their food with others and maintaining langars or not. Some of the Sikhs replied with pride that they were running the langars. The Guru asked them to let him know how they were running their langars; whether they were serving all the Sikhs and visitors at all times. The Sikhs gave different replies. One of them said that he distributed food first among the visiting Sikhs, provided they arrived at the time of the distribution of food. Another replied that he cooked and distributed food with his own hands. The third replied that he washed the feet of the Sikhs and drank that water. Another replied that he served not only food to the Sikhs, but also dusted their shoes before they departed. The Guru told them that he wanted to know if they served food to the hungry who came to their door when all food was served and nothing was left. All replied in the negative. The Guru told them to keep extra food ready to feed the guests so that none went away disappointed.

He emphasized the fact that such an act was of great merit and further said that they who performed it would enjoy happiness here and hereafter. Whoever sends away anybody disappointed from his house would get no benefit of his past good actions which would be futile.

Guru Har Kishan, though appointed Guru at the tender age of five, continued the practice of running a free kitchen at Kiratpur which was visited by a large number of Sikhs, who came from far and wide to see him. Some of the Guru's Masands became vain, corrupt and rebellious, and embezzled a large portion of the offerings and contributed very little to the langar. As a result of the scanty contributions, it became difficult to prepare the required dishes in the langar, but none went without food. When he started for Delhi, he halted at the village of Panjokhara, where a langar was arranged to feed the Sikhs who accompanied him. He left some Sikhs at Panjokhara before proceeding to Delhi. They kept the free kitchen running in the name of the Guru and a temple was built there later in the memory of his visit. When the Guru reached Delhi, his langar also moved with him and provided food to the crowds of the Sikhs who had come to see him. 52

Guru Teg Bahadur laid the foundation of Anandpur in 1665, A.D. and started a free kitchen. 53 During the course of

his tours also, he started the langars. The Guru stopped at Dhamdhan in Tehsil Narwana (District Jind, now in the new State of Haryana) in the Bangar tract, where there was scarcity of water. He supplied funds to the people for sinking a well and building a dharamsala at Dhadhan and similarly got wells sunk and dharamsalas constructed at different places. The Guru also got a well sunk at Aarha for the welfare of the travellers. He had a very high sense of service and told the people that there was nothing higher than serving others with dedication and sincerity.

Mihan, a devout Sikh of the Guru, used to perform many duties for the Guru, e.g. like bringing of water, cooking and serving food and cleaning the utensils. As he constantly carried the water-pots, his head developed sores. One day the Guru's mother happened to see the condition of Mihan's head. She was moved and reported the matter to the Guru. The Guru was deeply impressed with the sincerity and devotion of Mihan and asked him to remove the cushion from his head and blessed him and gave him a robe of honour. 54

The Guru gave instructions to the Sikhs to serve others at the cost of their own selves. He told them that wealth should be given in charity and shared with others, and one should try to accumulate the wealth of God's Name and give up all pride.

People came from far and wide to see the Guru at Anandpur. The Guru gave them audience three times a day — in the morning, at midday, and in the evening. All of them ate from Guru's langar. 55

As a great apostle of democracy, Guru Gobind Singh stood for the equality of all Sikhs and abode the observance of caste distinctions among the Khalsa. His langar was open to all who came to see him. Besides the Guru's free kitchen, there were other Sikhs of the Guru at Anandpur who ran their own langars on a smaller scale. He came to know that the Sikhs were not running their langars according to the standing instructions and he decided to test them. He disguised himself as a pilgrim and went to the langars of the Sikhs. He found that at all the langars, the pilgrims stood and waited for food, which was not ready. The Guru visited the langar of Bhai Nand Lal, who had managed it well and had served food to everybody, willingly and quickly. He would ask the pilgrims to stay longer in case they required anything more. The langars of Bhai Ram Kaur, Bhai Dewan Chand and Munshi Sahib Chand were also found functioning properly.

The Guru narrated the story of his visits to the langars to the Sikhs and said that he was greatly disappointed in many cases, and the most blessed one was Bhai Nand Lal who gave food to everyone. He told them that Bhai Nand Lal had realized the secret of true service and had learnt the true meaning of service to the Guru and the Sangat. He ordered his Sikhs that food, cooked or uncooked, must be served at all times and without delay to those who came to their doors. There was no greater virtue than the serving of food at all times without any consideration of the social status or position of the visitor. The turning away of the hungry amounted to turning away of the Guru himself. Whosoever served the poor and the needy served the Guru.

When the Guru went to Ponta, his langar also moved with him. Fifty-two poets and scholars along with the Sangat and the Pathan soldiers, who had been introduced to him by Syed Badr-ud-Din, alias Budhu Shah, as well as the 'Udasis' were also fed. The fact that the 'Udasis' also took the sacred food from the Guru's langars is borne out by the fact that on the eve of the battle of Bhangani, the Guru sent orders to the 'Udasis' to take up arms and prepare for the defence. All of them, except Mahant Kirpal, fled away. The Guru told him that his disciples had been taking food from his langar but in the hour of need they had run away.

The institution of langar had grown into an essential accompaniment of the Sikh temples by that time. The 'parshad' from the langar, where devoted persons of all castes and creeds served, was looked upon as something very sacred. Besides the free kitchens attached to the temples, and run by many devout Sikhs, the 'Guru-ka-Langar' supplied free food to big congregations.

Guru Gobind Singh's last words at Nander to his Sikhs were to keep the kitchen always open and to receive offerings for its maintenance.