

Development of Sikh Institutions From Guru Nanak Dev to Guru Gobind Singh

Dr. Sukhjeet Kaur Bhullar Talwandi Sabo assistant professor Guru Kashi University Talwandi Sabo
Baldev Singh M.Phill Research Scholar

Guru Nanak Dev established new institutions of *Sangat* and *Pangat*. Men and women of any caste could join the *Sangat*. The *Sangat* used to gather to listen to the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev. The *Pangat* meant taking food in a queue. Everybody was entitled to partake *Langar* without any discrimination of caste or status (high or low). Those two institutions proved revolutionary for the Hindu society. *Langar* system was introduced by Guru Nanak Dev and Guru Angad Dev expanded it. Guru Angad Dev organized the institution of *Sangat* more effectively founded by Guru Nanak Dev. The '*Sangat*' means 'sitting together collectively'. There was no restriction of any kind in joining the *Sangat*. All people could take part in it. The *Sangat* was considered to be a replica of God. The *Sangat* met every morning and evening to listen to the *Bani* of Guru Angad Dev. That institution not only brought the *Sikhs* under one banner but it also helped a lot in the success of *Sikh* missionary work. Thus, the contribution of the institution of *Sangat* to the development of *Sikhism* was extremely great. Guru Nanak Dev started the institution of *Langar*. Guru Amar Das Ji expanded it greatly. Guru Amar Das declared that no visitor could meet him unless he had taken the *Langar*. He rigidly implied that rule, even, Akbar *Mughal* emperor had to follow it. This tradition brought the people together and the vanished the unlogical and unethical trend of higher and lower castes.

Pangat taken from Sanskrit *pankti* stands in Sikh terminology for commensality or sitting together on the ground in a row to partake of food from a common kitchen regardless of caste, creed, sex, age or social status. *Pangat* is thus a synonym for Guru ka Langar, an institution of fundamental importance in Sikhism. It is customary for diners in the Guru ka Langar to sit side by side in a *pangat* or row when food is served to them by sevadars or volunteers. The institution of Guru ka Langar itself thereby came to be referred to as *pangat*. Another reason for the popularity of the term probably is its alliterative and sonorous affinity to *sangat* or holy congregation, another basic institution of the Sikhs.¹

As, later in Sikh history, *Deg* came to stand for Guru ka Langar because it rhymed with *tegh*, so did *pangat* for rhyming with *sangat*. The earliest use of *pangat* in Sikh literature appears in *varan* of Bhai Gurdas, poet and exegete, XVII. 12, where it matches sangat to produce resonant effect, *hans vansu nihchal mati sangati pangati sathu bananda* — firm believers of the tribe of swans made appropriate company in sangat and *pangat* — in *sangat* they pray together, in *pangat* they eat together. Guru Amar

Das attached particular importance to *pangat*. He expected every visitor to partake of food in it before seeing him. This gave rise to the popular saying: *pahile pangat pachhe sangat* — eating together.

Sangat is a Sikh term with its origin in the Sanskrit word '*sangh*', which means company, fellowship and association. In Sikh vocabulary, the word has a special connotation. It stands for the body of men and women who meet religiously, especially in the presence of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Two other expressions carrying the same connotation and in equally common use are *sadh sangat*. The word *sangat* has been in use since the time of Guru Nanak.² In his days and those of his nine successors, *sangat* referred to the Sikh brotherhood established in or belonging to a particular locality.² *Sangat* is used in the *Janamsakhis*, or traditional life-stories of Guru Nanak, as well as the *hukamnamas*, or edicts issued by the Gurus to their followers in different parts of the country.

1. A.C. Banerje, *Guru Nanak and His Time*, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1984, p-174.
2. J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*, Unistar Book, Chandigarh, 1979, p-209.

In the *hukamnamas* there are references to *Sarbatt Sangat Banaras Ki. Patna ki Sangat* and *Dhaul ki Sangat*. In the common and current usage, the word signifies an assembly of the devotees. Such a gathering may be in a gurudwara, in a private residence or in any other place, but in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib. The purpose is religious prayer, instruction or ceremony.

The *sangat* may collectively chant the sacred hymns, or, as it more often happens, there may be a group of musicians to perform *kirtan*. At *sangat* there may be recitals of the holy writ with or without exposition, lectures on religious or theological topics, or narration of events from Sikh history. Social and political matters of interest for the community may as well be discussed. *Sangat* is a Punjabi word it means company. In Sikh faith, the highest merit is assigned to meeting of the followers in *sangat*. This is considered essential for the spiritual edification and progress of an individual. It is a means of religious and ethical training. Worship and prayer in *sangat* count for more than isolated religious practice.³

The holy fellowship is morally elevating. Here the seeker learns to make himself useful to others by engaging in acts of seva, or self-giving service, so highly prized in Sikhism. The *seva* can take the form of looking after the assembly's shoes for all must enter the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib barefoot; preparing and serving food in Guru ka Langar; and relieving the rigour of a hot summer day by swinging over the heads of the devotees large hand-fans. It is in the company of pious men that true religious discipline ripens. Those intent on spiritual advantage must seek it. Guru Nanak was the first guru. Though *sangat* has the freedom to discuss secular matters affecting the community, it is its spiritual core which imparts to it the status and authority it commands in the Sikh system.⁴

Guru Nanak said that *Satsangat* is where the Divine Name alone is cherished. This is where virtues are learned. *Satsangat* is the Guru's own school where one practises godlike qualities. Attendance at *sangat* wins one nearness to God and release from the circuit of birth and death. Sitting among *Sangat* one should recite God's Praise and thereby swim across the impossible ocean of existence.⁴

3. W.H. Mcleod, *Guru Nanak and Sikh Religion*, Oxford University Press, London , 2003, p-63.
4. Hari Ram Gupta, *History of Sikh Guru*, Munshiram Monoharlal, New Delhi, 1979, p-81.

As *satsangat* is obtained through the Guru's grace, the Name blossoms forth in the heart. Amid *sangat* abides the Lord God. God resides in the *sangat*. He who comprehends the Guru's word realizes this truth. Deprived of *sangat*, one's self remains begrimed. Without *sangat* ego will not be dispelled. Guru Arjan said in *Sukhmani* that highest among all works is joining the *sangat* and thereby conquering the evil propensities of the mind. Again, one lost in a thick jungle rediscovers one's path, so will one be enlightened in the company of the holy. *Sangat*, fellowship of the holy, is thus applauded as a means of moral and spiritual uplift; it is as well a social unit which inculcates values of brotherhood, equality and *seva*. *Sangats* sprang up in the wake of Guru Nanak's extensive travels. Group of disciples formed in different places and met together in *sangat* to recite his hymns. As an institution, *sangat* had, with its concomitants *dharamsal*, where the devotees gathered in the name of Akal, the timeless Lord, to pray and sing Guru Nanak's hymns, and Guru ka Langar, community refectory, where all sat together to partake of a common repast without distinction of caste or status—symbolized the new way of life emerging from Guru Nanak's teachings. At the end of his *udasis* or travels, Guru Nanak settled at Kartarpur, a habitation he had himself founded on the right bank of the river Ravi. There a community of disciples grew around him. It was not a monastic order, but a fellowship of ordinary men engaged in ordinary occupation of life.⁵

A key element in this process of restructuring of religious and social life was the spirit of *seva*. Corporal works of charity and mutual help were undertaken voluntarily and zealously and considered a peculiarly pious duty. To quote Bhai Gurdas: "*dharamsal kartarpur sadh sangati sach khandu vasaia*", in establishing *dharamsal* at Kartarpur, with its *sangat* or society of the holy, Guru Nanak brought the heaven on earth. Those *sangats* played an important role in the evolution of the Sikh community. The social implications of the institutions were far-reaching. It united the Sikhs in a particular locality or region into a brotherhood or fraternity. The member of the *sangat*, every Sikh was known as *Bhai*, little brother, signifying one of holy living. The *Sangat* brought together men not only in spiritual pursuit but also in worldly affairs, forging community of purpose as well as of action based on mutual equality and brotherhood.⁶ Though *sangats* were spread over widely separated localities, they formed a single entity owning

5. T. B. Banerjee, *Exclusion of the Khalsa*, Mukhrejee Calcutta, 1975, p-109.
6. Sohan Singh Seetal, *Manukhta De Guru* (Guru Nanak Dev Guru Teg Bahadur Tak) Mai Sewan, Amritsar 1967, pp-150-151.

loyalty to the word of Guru Nanak. *Sangat* was thus the Sikh community in formation.

In those *sangats* the disciples mixed together without considerations of birth, profession or worldly position. Bhai Gurdas in his Var XI, mentions the names of the leading Sikhs of the time of Guru Nanak and his five spiritual successors. In the first 12 stanzas he had described the characteristics of a Guru Sikh, or follower of the Guru. In the succeeding stanzas occur the names of some of the prominent Sikhs, in many cases with caste, class or profession of the individual. In some instances, even places they came from are mentioned. In those stanzas, Bhai Gurdas thus provided interesting clues to the composition, socially, of early Sikhism and its spread, geographically.⁷

Out of the 19 disciples of Guru Nanak mentioned by Bhai Gurdas, two were Muslims—Mardana, a *mirasi*, or *bard*, from his own village, and Daulat Khan Lodi, an *Afghan* noble. Bura, celebrated as Bhai Buddha, who was contemporary with the first six Gurus, was a Jatt of *Randhava* sub caste. So was Ajitta, of *Pakkhoke Randhava*, in present-day Gurdaspur district. Phirna was a *Khaihra* Jatt; Malo and Manga were musicians; and Bhagirath, formerly a worshipper of the Goddess *Kali*, was the Chaudhari, Revenue official of Malsihan, in Lahore district of the several *Khatri* disciples, Mula was of *Kir subcaste*, Pritha and Kheda were *Soinis*, Prithi Mall was a *Sahigal*, Bhagta was *Ohri*, Japu a *Vansi*, and Sihan and Gajjan cousins were *Uppals*.

The Sikh *sangat* was thus the melting-pot for the high and the low, the twice-born and the outcaste. It was a new fraternity emerging as the participants' response of discipleship to the Guru. *Sangat* were knit into an organized system by Guru Amar Das who established *manjis* or preaching districts, each comprising a number of *sangat*. Guru Arjan appointed *masand*, community leaders, to look after *sangats* in different regions. *Sangat* was the precursor to the *Khalsa* manifested by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. That was the highest point in the evolution of the casteless Sikh commonwealth originating in the institution of *sangat*.⁸

The concepts of *Sangat* and *Pangat* are two of the most important and significant aspects of Guru Nanak's teachings of Sikh faith. He successfully used these two aspects to

7. M. A. Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, State Mutual Books, New Delhi, 1985, p-35.
8. Khuswant Singh, *A History of The Sikhs*, Princeton University Press, U.S.A., 1963, p-57.

spread his idealism among his disciples and also to establish his thoughts effectively. He mainly used *Sangat* and *Pangat* to establish his thought of One God and equality of all the human beings, something that was almost unthinkable in his period of time. *Sangat* is actually an elaboration of the concept of large

gatherings and discussions, which were once organised by the great Emperor Ashok to spread the light of Buddhism among the common people. Guru Nanak took the idea and enlarged it. Ashok used to held discussions after a long gap of time and Nanak made the *Sangat*, a daily occurrence.

Guru Nanak met a large number of people during his travels; he asked all of them to hold regular *sangat* that meant getting together for a good purpose. Guru Nanak used the *Sangat* to fight against the caste system that was common in the Hindu faith and Islamic society. In *Sangat*, everyone used to sit in the same room on equal Seats and there were no divisions made between anyone, who joined the *Sangats*. The Sikhs used to gather for reciting *Gurbani*. According to Guru Nanak, "*Satsangat* is one in which One Name is discussed". Apart from the intent and the focus of *Sangat* being spiritual, Guru Nanak also used the *sangat* at a temporal plane for dissolving differences between members of the same society.⁹

Guru Nanak made the *Sangat* a regular feature of the new city of Kartarpur that was set up by himself to stay permanently and spread his idealism. There were around three daily prayers recited at Kartarpur everyday - during the sunrise, sunset and just before going to sleep. The Sikhs used to recite the first two prayers in a group and the last, individually. The venue of the *Sangat* was called as a *Dharamsala* and it was actually the precursor of *Gurudwaras*. The people who joined the *Sangat* were made to sit together in the same row and the row was named as the *Pangat*. They also used to eat together, regardless of their caste. Guru Nanak got significant success in breaking one of the most potent taboos of class discrimination through the concept of *sangat* and *pangat*.¹⁰

The concepts of *Sangat* and *Pangat* are two of the most important and significant aspects of Guru Nanak's teachings of Sikh faith. He successfully used these two aspects to spread his idealism among his disciples and also to establish his thoughts effectively. He mainly used *Sangat* and *Pangat* to establish his thought of One God and equality of all the human.

9. Surjeet Singh Gandhi, *History of The Sikh Guru*, Atlantic, New Delhi, 1978, p-103.

10. S.S. Kohli, *Philosophy of Guru Nanak*, Unistar, Chandigarh, 1980, p-66.

Guru Nanak Dev was not any ordinary philosopher. He was a philosopher of high level. He had realized that it was not only enough to condemn caste-system, hollow customs, ritualism and idol-worship instead it was also essential to construct a new healthy society by abolishing and that such type of institutions should be established which might help in constructing a society without caste-system, without idol-worship. For the fulfillment of that objectives, he had started two systems 'Sangat' and 'Pangat' means 'langar'.

The basis of these system was not Hindu philosophy instead Guru Nanak Dev own teachings. In *sangat* everyone high or low though belonged to any caste, could do *Bhakti* or Worship sitting along with others, According to his teachings, Gurdwaras should be established everywhere, these all should recite *kirtan* and pray together.¹¹ *Sangat* had become significant means of propagation of Guru Nanak Dev. In the same way, in *pangat* means *langar*, people of each caste, religion, tribe could eat food by sitting equally. The basis of both those institutions was not Hindu philosophy and therefore Guru Sahib proved that he wanted to bring changes in already approved institutions of the society. His those steps were revolutionary.

According to Hinduism caste-system was a solid structure of their society. According to that principle of Hinduism due to good deeds, man is born in pious castes means higher castes. Due to evil deeds, man is born in low castes. Therefore caste-system is fundamental principle of Hinduism. By condemnation of it, fundamental principle of Hinduism was condemned.

Guru Nanak Dev had preached his followers to oppose and condemn caste-system boldly. It is right that before Guru Sahib many reformers also had condemned caste-system. But none other had taken any solid step to eradicate that custom as much taken by Guru Nanak Dev. By starting custom of *Sangat*, *Langar* etc, he eradicated caste-system. When his followers got assembled in *Sangat* and ate food in *Pangat* then all were equal. The view that Guru tried to abolish pride or ego created by caste-system.¹²

About that same views may be presented that to abolish pride created on basis of caste-system. If we by renouncing pride, live with love with one another, if we establish relations with one another then where caste-system did go? So to abolish pride ego created from caste-

11. Mohinder Gulati, *Comparative Religious and Philosophies*, Atlantic Delhi, 2008, p-328.

12. Dalbir Singh Dhillon, *Sikhism Origin and Development*, Atlantic, New Delhi, 1988, p-156.

system caste-system. Itself should be abolish Guru Nanak Dev by opposing and condemning caste-system in vigorous words and by causing severe blow significant institution of Hinduism , proved himself revolutionary. Guru Nanak Dev established new institutions of *Sangat*, *Pangat* and Guruship. Men and women of any caste could join the *Sangat*. The *Sangat* used to gather to listen to the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev.¹³ The *Pangat* meant taking food in a queue. Everybody was entitled to partake *Langar* without any discrimination of caste or status.

Guru Nanak Dev appointed Guru Angad Dev as his successor and thus established a new institution of Guruship. These three institutions proved revolutionary for the Hindu society. The Hindu society in those days was based on caste system. The people of the upper castes not only hated the people of lower

castes but also humiliated them in various ways. This caste system had separated man from man and had given birth to great social inequalities. Guru Nanak Dev vociferously condemned caste system. He preached universal brotherhood of mankind. He gave a shattering blow to the caste system, when he established '*Sangat*' and '*Pangat*' institutions. Thus, Guru Nanak Dev attempted to destroy the social structure of Hindu society by destroying the caste based discrimination.¹⁴

The Hindu society of Guru Nanak Dev's time was divided not only into four main castes- *Brahmans*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras* but into many sub-castes also. The members of the upper castes were very proud of their castes. They hated the people of the lower castes and treated them very badly. The practice of untouchability was very common.

Guru Nanak Dev condemned the caste system and untouchability in unequivocal words. He preached that nobody would ask about one's caste, in the court of God is only one's deeds would decide one's fate.¹⁵ Guru Nanak Dev gave a severe blow to the caste system by establishing the institutions of '*Sangat*' and '*Pangat*'. In this way Guru Nanak Dev Ji preached the principle of universal brotherhood of mankind. Guru Nanak Dev Ji founded a town named Kartarpur at the banks of the Ravi river in 1521 A.D. and spent the last 18 years of his life at this place.

13. Paramjit Kaur, *Guru Angad Dev Ji, Jiwan te Rachna*, Punjabi University, Patiala, 2009, p-10.

14. Prof Harbans Singh, *The Heritage of The Sikhs*, Munshiram Monoharlal, New Delhi, 1983, p-24,31.

15. W.O. Cole and P.S. Sambhi, *The Sikh, Their Religious Beliefs and Practias*, Routedgespaul, England, 1978, p-121.

He started the institutions of '*Sangat*' and '*Pangat*' during this period. '*Sangat*' means the congregation held daily to listen to the *Bani* of Guru Ji. Everybody could join it without any consideration of caste or sex. The Name of only one God was recited in it. Similarly '*Pangat*' meant to sit in a queue and to partake *langar*. No discrimination of any kind regarding caste or religion, high or low was made in the *Langar*. These two institutions proved very helpful in spreading the message of Guru Nanak Dev. *Langar* system had been founded by Guru Nanak Dev. Guru Angad Dev expanded, consolidated that system and reformed it. Service of *Langar* was done by Mata Khivi wife of Guru Angad Dev.

Donations given by Sikhs was spent on *langar* for helpless, orphans, poor. *Langar* was also for those who came for *darshan* (seeing) of Guru Sahib. Guru Angad Dev learned livelihood for his life by twining '*Munj*'. *Langar* system helped a lot in popularising religion started by Guru Nanak Dev.¹⁶ With that Sikhism got much help in forming separate sect. *Langar* system created unity among the Sikhs and much help in organization them. Among Hindus individuals donating institutions were many but *langar* of Guru was first institution whose expenditure was met by common donation of whole nation.

Langar system caused severe blow to ties of caste-system. The cause of it was that everyone had to eat *langar* by sitting in same row. Sikhs stopped donating institutions of Hindus and they began to put whole donation in *Langar*. Sikhism became famous upto far and wide. Whoever ate food in *Langar*, wherever he went, he praised Sikhism. That's why Dr.Banerjee regarded that institution as useful means of propagation.¹⁷

Langar became a shelter food for poor and destitutes. *Langar* always kept alert about their duties about Guru.¹⁸ The Cause of it was that Sikhs considered it as their duty and their attention was always centralized in their Guru. For propagation of Sikhism, Guru Angad Dev performed significant deed that he ordered his followers that they should assemble at some place in their village or city from time to time and should discuss over their mutual interests and should recite name of the omni-potent according to teachings of Guru Nanak Dev. That sitting together is called as '*Sangat*' in Sikh history. That institution created qualities like

16. H.S. Soch, Mandanjit Kaur, *Guru Nanak ideals and Institution*, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, p-124.

17. Mukhtyar Singh, *Dus Patshahian*, Charitable society, Amritsar, 2012, pp-106-107.

18. Jagraj Singh, *A Completed Guide of Sikhism*, Unistar, Mohali, 2009, p-285.

brotherhood and emotional unity among the people.

All people ate food in *Langar* collectively without any consideration of sex, caste or creed. Money for the *Langar* was given by the Sikhs to Guru Angad Dev. This institution strengthened feelings of co-operation and fraternity among the Sikhs. It also gave a shattering blow to the caste system among the Hindus. The Habit of charity was developed by it among the Sikhs. It provided a powerful aid in propaganda work. It helped a lot to make Sikhism popular. Guru Angad Dev organized institution of *Sangat* more effectively pioneered by Guru Nanak Dev. The *Sangat* means *sitting together collectively*.¹⁹

There was no restriction of any kind in joining the *Sangat*. All people could take part in it. The *Sangat* was considered to be a replica of God. The *Sangat* met every morning and evening to listen to the *Bani* of Guru Angad Dev. This institution not only brought the Sikhs under one banner but it also helped a lot in the success of Sikh missionary work. Thus, the contribution of the institution of *Sangat* to the development of Sikhism was extremely great.

Langar system in Sikhism had been already lasting but Guru Amar Dass expanded it. It was order of Guru Amardas that any person who wanted to see him, first he would sit in *pangat* and eat *langar* of Guru, then he could meet Guru. Guru applied that rule much rigidly.²⁰ It is said that king of Haripur emperor like Akbar also had to eat *langar* by sitting in *Pangat* before meeting Guru. *Langar* of Guru was run on much

large-scale. *Langar* was open for people of each religion and every caste. It lasted upto three hours after the sun set. *Brahmins*, Princes, *Kasahatri*, *Vaish* and *Shudars* all ate food prepared in same Kitchen by sitting in same row. No item of food was wasted. Left food was given to birds and animals. Whatever was offered to Guru in the form of wealth or gain, all was spent on *Langar*, Guru himself earned his livelihood through some hard work.²¹

Guru Nanak Dev started the institution of *Langar*. Guru Amar Dass expanded it greatly. Guru Amar Dass declared that no visitor could meet him unless he had taken the *Langar*. He gave the injunction, "*Pehle Pangat, pachhe Sangat*". Mughal emperor Akbar and the ruler of

19. Ratan Singh Bhangu, Prachin Panth Prakash, Khalsa Samachar, Amritsar, 1962, p-30.

20. Ratan Singh Jaggi, Sikh Panth Vishawkosh, Part-1, Guru Ratan Publisher, Patiala, 2005, p-206.

21. Ganda Singh, Nanak Mission, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1963, p-95.

Haripur had partaken the *Langar* in the *Pangat* before meeting Guru Amar Dass Ji. It was open for people of every religion and caste. The *Langar* was served till late at night. The remaining food was thrown to birds and animals. The institution of *Langar* proved much helpful in the propagation of Sikhism.²²

It gave a shattering blow to the caste system and developed a feeling of brotherhood among the Sikhs. The *Guru Ka Langar* was a means of emphasizing unity and equality of mankind. Another significant event of the pontificate of Guru Amar Dass was Akbar's visit to Goindwal Sahib. It is said that Akbar had asked Guru Amar Dass for *Ardas* for his success in the campaign of *Chittor* in 1567 A.D. As he succeeded in that campaign, he wanted to have *Darshan* of Guru Amar Dass. So, he visited Goindwal Sahib in 1568 A.D. In accordance with the practice then established by the Guru the emperor first took the *Langar* before he met Guru Amar Dass's. He was deeply impressed by the *Langar* system and Guru Amar Dass personality. He offered some villages as *jagir* to meet the expenses of the *Langar*.²³

Guru Amar Dass refused that offer saying that the Sikhs contributed a lot for the *Langar* and therefore, he did not need any such help. Akbar gave the *Jagir* to Guru Amar Dass daughter Bibi Bhani. Later on, the town of Amritsar was founded on that land.²⁴ That visit of Akbar was of special significance in the history of the Sikh religion. People were greatly impressed by it. They joined Sikhism in large numbers. The Sikh *Panth* gained much popularity.

22. Sangat Singh, Itihas 'ch Sikh, Publisher Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 2003, P-40

23. Sajir Pritam Singh, *Ten Gurus and Their Teachings*, Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee, Delhi, 2002, p-85.

24. Harjinder Singh Dilgir, *Sikh Tawarikh ch Akal Takhat Sahib da Role*, Sikh University Prees, Belgium, 2005, p-35.