



Sangat & Pangat - The Base of Sikhism

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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.

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.

The basis of these system was not Hindu philosophy instead *Guru Nanak Dev's* 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, *Gurudwaras* should be established everywhere, all Sikhs should recite kirtan and pray together.¹ *Sangat* had become significant means of propagation of *Guru Nanak Dev*. In the same way, in *Pangat* other (*langar*), people of each caste, religion, tribe could eat food by sitting along with each. 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. Whereas 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. It reflected the view that *Guru* tried to abolish the pride or ego created by caste-system.²

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 and ego created from caste system. It was abolished by *Guru Nanak Dev* by opposing and condemning caste-system in vigorous words and by causing severe blow to institution of Hinduism, proved him 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*.³ 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.⁴

The Hindu society of *Guru Nanak Dev*'s time was divided not only into four main castes- Brahmins, 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 only one's deeds would decide one's fate.⁵ *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* preached the principle of universal brotherhood of mankind. *Guru Nanak Dev* 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.

He started the institutions of „*Sangat*“ and „*Pangat*“ during this period. „*Sangat*“ means the congregation held daily to listen to the Bani of *Guru*. 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*.⁶ With that Sikhism

got much help in forming separate sect. *Langar* system created unity among the Sikhs and much help in organizing 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 to 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.⁷

Langar became a shelter food for poor and destitutes. *Langar* always kept alert about their duties about *Guru*.⁸ 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 as 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 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.⁹

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* Amardass 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

Guru Nanak Dev started the institution of *Langar*. *Guru* Amardass 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 Haripur had partaken the *Langar* in the

Pangat before meeting *Guru Amar Dass*. 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.¹²

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*. There he met *Guru Amardass*. 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*.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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.

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* 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 vanished the unlogical and unethical trend of higher and lower castes.

The early history of the Sikh Panth shows that the Sikh religious establishment called the gurdwara, gradually evolved from its earlier counterpart known as *Dharamsala*. Early Sikh sources are replete with accounts that the *Dharamsala* stood at the very centre of the community life of the Sikhs. Moreover, historical experience of the community confirms that it proved to be such a perfect precursor to the gurdwara and so easily slipped into its role that transition from *Dharamsala* to the gurdwara is hardly noticeable in the Sikh literature. Hence, the study of the institution of the *Dharamsala*, its origin and functioning with reference to its role in early Sikh history has become imperative for better understanding of the gurdwara and its legislation.¹⁵

Theologically speaking, for a Sikh whole of this earth is veritably a *Dharamsala*, a place to practise dharama. However, the origin of *Dharamsala*, where the early Sikhs used to meet for worship and devotion, can be traced back to the times of *Guru Nanak*, the founder of Sikhism. A cursory glance at the Sikh sources reveals that during the itineraries of *Guru Nanak* quite a New people felt attracted to his faith. Wherever (turn *Nanak* his disciples, he not only organised them into congregational circle (*Sangat*) but motivated them also to build a religious centre, the dh.aramsala. Obviously, the *Dharamsala* presupposes a Sikh *Sangat* which was infact a pre-requisite for its emergeiice at a particular place. We come across instances in Sikh history where neophyte Sikhs took upon themselves to found the dharanisala, so that the mission of the great *Guru* may be carried on. *Bhai Gurdas* remarks about its origin:

Wherever *Guru Nanak* visited that place became a place of worship. The most important cenoes including those of the jogis visited by the *Guru* became spiritual centres. Even houses have been turned into *Dharamsalas* where kirtan was sung on the eve of Baisakhi.¹⁶

After his sojourn in different lands and people, *Guru Nanak* settled at Kartarpur (now in Pakistan) where people from different walks of life belonging to different denominations, coming from far and wide gath- ered around him to hear his sermon. Subsequently, he founded a religious centre known as dharamsalu which became a nuclcus of his ministry. Evidently the origin of dhoramsfo is not obscure but a well- known th of Sikh history the Sikh sources confirm that the dharum.vales initially came into being at the instance of the Sikh Gums. In fact to organise the Sikhs into well-knit units such centres were of an utmost necessity. Towards the close of 16th century, besides Kartarpur there were Khadur, C oindwal, Ramdaspur, Tann Tamn. Kartarpur (Doaba) and Sri Hargobindpur which developed into important Sikh centres primarily because they had been founded by the Sikh *Gurus* themselves. With the introduction of the institutions ot munji and later on the masund system, the Sikhs appointed on these institutions played significant role to build up *Dharamsalas* in their respective areas and zones. There is every likelihood that some of the devout and spirited Sikhs might have had performed yeomans' services to found Hharamsalas at different places of Punjab and country as well. With the return of k!dctxis into the fold of mainstream, *Guru Hargobind* and the Sikh *Gurus* following him, deputed them to preach the Sikh mission to distant lands.

It seems, the Udasi preachers proved particularly useful to rejuvenate the *Dharamsalas* established by *Guru Nanak* outside the Punjab which perhaps had become dysfunctional due to lack of contact with the cen- tral Sikh religious authority. Unfortunately, scholars are not aware of the fact that in spite o1 the hostile attitude of the Mughals, *Guru Hargobind* had a remarkable success to expand the network of dhararnsalas not only in the Punjab region but also in other parts of India. *Guru Tegh Bahadur's* missionary tours in the Malwa region of Punjab and North-eastern India proved very fruitful to add a few more centres to the already existing centres in these regions. Besides, the Punjabi who embraced Sikhism arid had nied a the major trade centres of the country, especially situated on the trade routes, also contributed in a very significant manner to establish *Dharamsalas* at their respective places. In modem times, the diaspora Sikhs who migrated to settle in different parts of the world are performing the same job to spread the message of Sikhism among the immigrant Sikhs and natives as well through the instituton of gurdwra.¹⁷

As it was expected, the *Dharamsala* pre-supposes a Sikh congregation. In other words to conceive it without a Sikh sangot, is hard to believe. The *Dharamsalas* might have come up at those places where the Sikhs had a sizeable number. Most of the *Dharamsalas* came up at those places which had been sanctified by the Sikh *Gurus* themselves. They were built up either to commemorate their sacred memory or to enshrine the holy relics associated with them. Hence, such *Dharamsalas* were attraction of special reverence and subsequently got prominence over the local or community *Dharamsalas*. If we look into the history of various *Dharamsalas* we will not be surprised to find that every *Dharamsala* is a living testimony to the glorious saga of Sikh tradition and has much in store to inspire the future generation of the Sikhs.

Though, the institution of *a/o* flourished in time and space yet to ascertain its purpose and status, observations of the D. 40 Janamsakhi are very significant. While describing *Guru Nanak's* interview with God, the author of above *Janamsakhi*, writes how God has revealed Himself to the *Guru*:

You are Nanak and your Panth will flourish. Your followers shall be called Nanak Panthis and their sultan shall be, I shall bless your Panth. Inculcate men's devotion towards me and strengthen their obedience to dharma. As the Vaishnavas have *ramsul* (temple), the Jogs have their *asans* (seats) and the Muslims their mosques, so your followers shall have their *Dharamsala*.¹⁸

Two very significant points emerge out of this. Firstly, for the Sikhs the *Dharamsala* was a divinely ordained institution. Resultantly, to build it or contribute towards it in any manner was to participate in a divine mission. Secondly, it provided the Sikhs an alternative locus for worship which was quite distinct from those of the other denominations. But, to evolve as well as preserve the Sikh identity at an earlier stage of Sikh history, the institution of *Dharamsala* had played an important role which is equally needed now in the *gurdwaras*.¹⁹

The evidence at our disposal suggests that the institution of *Dharamsala* was introduced in Indian sub-continent almost simultaneously with the foundation of Sikhism. In the century that followed with the active involvement of the Sikh *Gurus* and the hard work put into by the Sikh missionaries the *Dharamsala* became an essential and distinctive symbol of Sikhism. Within a short span of time the entire country, especially the Punjab and trade routes running between Chitagon and Kabul on the one hand, Agra and Burhampur on the other, were found studded with the Sikh *Dharamsalas*.

Notwithstanding the phenomenal success to found the *Dharamsala* in different regions and cities of the country, the Sikh mission had to face strong opposition from some vested interests. "traditionally, the Sikh *Gurus* were least interested to establish their *Dharamsalas* with assistance of any kind from the Mughal State. The *sakhi* relating to *karoriu* opposing *Guru Nanak*, clearly depicts that some of the local Mughal officials working at the lower rungs of the administration are not favourably inclined towards the *Dharamsalas* coming up in the areas falling under their jurisdiction. Similarly", Goinda Marwaha, of Goindwal wanted to drive away *Guru Amar Das* simply because the *Guru* had declined his demand to part away with a share from the offerings of the *Dharamsalas*.²⁰ Noorudin's attempt to forcibly take away the construction material meant for the *Dharamsala* of Tarn Taran depicts well the jealous and hostile attitude of the Mughal officials. For Emperor Jahangir the Sikh *Dharamsala* was no more than a *duhin-i-batil* (shop or falsehood) which he desired to shut down at the earliest. "the desecration of Sikh *Dharamsala* to erect a mosque in its place at Lahore, is a clear

testimony of religit us vandalism of the times of Emperor Shah Jahan. Even the general order of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb of 1669, to demolish the temples of infidels, had no less on the Sikh religious places of worship.²¹

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