

Meaning and Importance of Langar

Meaning of Langar:

Langar is a Persian word meaning: an alms house (A house built originally by a charitable person for poor people to live in). In Sikhi this word has acquired the meaning of kitchen and Guru-Ka-Langar conveys the message that the kitchen is being 'run in the name of the Guru'.

According to Mahan Kosh; Langar is defined as ਰਸੋਈ ਦਾ ਘਰ – place where food is cooked.

Langar originally meant such a place where food is prepared, but now a days, this word is also used as a way to describe the food itself that is prepared in the kitchen.

Gurus direct Contribution

The concept of Langar was inspired by the first Guru, Guru Nanak Dev Ji's act of serving food to wandering holy men when given money by his father to strike a good bargain. Insisting that true profit is to be had in selfless service, Guru Nanak established the principal of *langar*. The practice of serving food to all was started at Kartarpur.

Guru Angad Dev Ji, the second Guru, further extended the scope of the institution. Guru Ji helped with cooking and serving in the Langar at Khadoor Sahib. Guru Ji's wife; Mata Khivi Ji, looked after the pilgrims and visitors with the utmost attention. Such was her dedication to work in the langar that it came to be known after her name as Mata Khivi ji ka Langar.

Guru Amar Das Ji, the third Guru, formalized the institution of langar, the Guru's free kitchen, uniting the Sikhs by establishing two key concepts:

Pangat – One family - all of humanity, regardless of caste, colour, or creed, sitting together cross legged in lines, forming rows without discrimination or consideration of rank or position.

Sangat – The ennobling influence of people, who aspire to truthful living, and congregate with like-minded company for the purpose of uttering the name of one God in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji.

Partaking of food in Guru ka Langar was made a condition at Goindwal for disciples and visitors before they could see the Guru. Even when the Emperor of India, Akbar came to see Guru Amar Das Ji, he too was made to partake in Langar before Guru Ji would see him. Hence the mighty ruler of India also sat amongst the common people as an equal and had the same simple food. Langar thus gave practical expression to the notion of equality.

Guru Ram Das, the fourth Guru, served food in langar and brought firewood from the forest and drew water from the well.

With the development under Guru Ram Das and the fifth Guru; Guru Arjan Dev Ji in Amritsar as the central seat of the Sikh faith, the capacity of the local Guru ka Langar increased manifold. Sikhs came from far-off places to see their Guru and do seva with the construction work. They were all served Guru ka Langar.

The sixth Guru; Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji and the ninth Guru; Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib Ji travelled extensively in north and northeast India. This led to the establishment of many new sangats and langars.

In the reign of Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the tenth Guru, the institution of langar acquired further significance. One of the lines in Guru Gobind Singh Ji's Sri Dasam Granth reads:

Deg Teg Jag Mai Doo Chalai | |

O Lord with Thy Grace, let the free kitchen and Sword ever flourish

The first Sikh coin minted in the eighteenth century carried the Guru's maxim in Persian:

Deg-o-Tegh-o-Fateh Nusrat-i-bedirang, Yaft az Nanak Guru Gobind Singh.

Kettle (the means to feed the poor), Sword (the power to protect the weak and helpless), Victory and Unhesitating Patronage (are) obtained from Nanak Guru Gobind Singh

The Langar Hall:

Every Gurdwara, no matter how humble, or how lavishly elegant, has a langar hall - an area set aside for the preparation and service of food which is either screened or detached from the place of worship. Langar has distinctly separate areas for:

- Storage of provisions.
- Storage of service utensils.
- Preparation and cooking.
- Service of prepared food.
- Sitting place to dine.
- Washing of used utensils.
- Disposal of waste.

Langar and Seva:

The guru's free kitchen profits in feeding both the body and the spirit of the soul. Seva is the Sikh word for voluntary, selfless service, done without compensation. All expenses are covered completely by voluntary contributions from the members of the congregation.

The Langar is run by sevadars 'volunteers doing selfless service' and others who wish to help. It is a community kitchen and anybody can help in its running. This function of Sewa results in a '*community feeling*' in peoples' minds as they drop their mask of ego. The feeling of "I" or "me" is forgotten as they perform this valuable service to humanity.

The institution of Langar has served the community in many ways. It has ensured the participation of women and children in a task of service for mankind. Langar also teaches the etiquette of sitting and eating in a community situation, which has played a great part in upholding the virtue of sameness of all human beings; providing a welcome, secure and protected sanctuary.

Everyone is welcome to share the Langar; no one is turned away. The food is normally served twice a day, every day of the year. Each week a family or several families volunteer to provide and prepare the Langar. All the preparation, the cooking and the washing-up is done by Sewadars.

Examples of seva one can do in Langar:

- Mix atta dough in machines needed every day for making rotis, a kind of flat bread.
- Roll out the roti by hand and cook it on hot iron plates.
- Cut and fry onions, spices, and vegetables.
- Boil a variety of daals (lentil soups).
- Distribute food and water to worshipers who dine sitting side by side in rows.
- Wash used plates and spoons.
- Clean up of the kitchen and dining hall.
- Take care of the disposal of all waste.

The Protocols

Since Sikhs believe that it is wrong to eat meat, fish or eggs, non-vegetarian foods are neither served nor brought onto the Gurdwara premises. Alcoholic and narcotic substances are stringently against the Sikh diet, hence these, with any meat products, are strictly prohibited on Gurdwara premises.

When the Langar is ready, Ardas is performed where permission is sought from the Guru for its distribution to the Sangat. The Ardas for Langar can be done anywhere, in case the Langar needs to be served before the completion of the Gurdwara ceremony. The Langar is not eaten until the Ardas has been recited.

Undoubtedly, langar is an important part of the ceremonies at any Gurdwara Sahib. But despite it having such importance, the tradition is often hurt or neglected as basic rules are not followed.

When preparing or serving food, the basic rules;

- All volunteers (preparing or serving) **must** ensure their head is always fully covered.
- All volunteers must ensure they wash their hands properly.
- Any kind of jewellery or other artefacts leading to dirty hands (such as flour in rings) should be removed or properly cleansed.
- When preparing food, the mouth and nose should be covered by a piece of cloth.
- Also during the preparation, due regard should be made to purity, hygiene and cleanliness.
- Talking should be limited and preferably one should recite Gurbani or Gurmantar during preparations and serving of langar.
- Never tasting the food while cooking
- Never eating or drinking where food is being prepared or served.

When serving the food, the servers must observe strict rules of cleanliness and hygiene.

- Servers should not touch the serving utensils to the plates of those they serve.
- When serving foods by hand, such as chapatis or fruit, the servers' hands should not touch the hand or plate of those they are serving.
- Those serving should wait until all others have been completely served before they sit down to eat themselves.
- When serving in lines, the server should not be wearing shoes or socks.
- Those who have the food should not to leave any leftovers. The food has had ardas done and leftovers are thrown in the bin – this is disrespectful.
- Food should be eaten in congregational pangat, on the floor.

All Sikhs should ensure that they follow the edict of Akal Takhat Sahib, the highest temporal authority in the Sikh religion that bars eating or serving food on tables and chairs. Some Gurdwaras in the West have violated this code of conduct, but as humble followers of our Gurus, we should ensure that we are not indulging in blasphemous acts. Eating langar while sitting on chairs refutes the whole idea of 'pangat' which promotes equality. Anyone violating the langar hukamnama of Akal Takhat Sahib is going against the basic principles of the Sikh religion.

Why should Sikhs sit on the floor whilst having Langar?

The basic principal of langar is equality and humility; the ideas behind Sikhism stress practicality and logic. It is a sign of humility for the rich to sit with the poor, and make everyone equal, but it is not fair to expect the poor to raise themselves to the level of the rich just for one meal. All sitting in a pangat are eating a meal together, setting aside all differences and pretentions and by sitting on the ground, you are literally lowering your self which subconsciously lowers one's ego.

Serving langar to the pangat sitting on the floor looks hard only because we are not accustomed to doing that. If we go to Amritsar or Anandpur Sahib, we will see thousands of people being served langar while sitting on the floor. We too have to learn the technique and get used to it. It gives a greater feeling of unity and equality while sitting together like that and eating langar.

In some Gurdwaras in the West, they have introduced chairs and tables for eating food. It is not a restaurant where eating food is the objective and chairs are needed to sit on. We go to the Gurdwara for spiritual lessons, not for a buffet meal.

Sitting on the floor has its own charm and pleasure; it sends the proper message to all that being humble in the presence of the Guru is paramount. Where else would you see a corporate CEO, doctor, taxi driver and poor person, or in earlier times a Maharaja and a Guru, all sitting together and not on chairs, or cushions or thrones but on the floor like the poorest of the poor. It is a slap-in-the-face reality check that no matter how rich, powerful or self-important you may think of yourself, in the eyes of Waheguru we are all human beings and we are all equal.

For those who think sitting on tables and chairs in langar is about 'modern times', or eating a meal in comfort and convenience, you are completely missing the whole point of this extraordinary gift to us.

On April 20, 1998, a HukamNama from the Supreme Temporal Authority of the Sikhs, Akal Takhat Sahib, was issued to the entire Khalsa Panth in regards to Guru-Ka-Langar. The HukamNama issued by Jathedar Singh Sahib Bhai Ranjit Singh Ji, after intense consultations with other Singh Sahibs, Sikh intellectuals, historians, and respected Sikh priests, directs all Sikh Gurdwaras to follow the centuries old Panthic tradition of partaking Guru-Ka-Langar in the form of a Pangat (on the floor). The HukamNama directed all Gurdwaras worldwide to remove any chairs and tables used for consuming Langar by the Shaheedee Gurpurab of Sri Guru Arjan Dev Sahib Jee in 1998.



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ਹੁਕਮਨਾਮਾ

ਅੱਜ ਮਿਤੀ 20-4-98 ਨੂੰ ਪਾਵਨ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਅਕਾਲ ਤਖਤ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਵਿਖੇ ਪੰਜ ਸਿੰਘ ਸਾਹਿਬਾਨ ਦੀ ਇਕੱਤਰਤਾ ਹੋਈ ਜਿਸ ਵਿਚ ਪਿਛਲੇ ਲੰਮੇ ਸਮੇਂ ਤੋਂ ਦੇਸ਼-ਵਿਦੇਸ਼ ਵਿਚ ਗੁਰੂ ਘਰ ਦੇ ਲੰਗਰ ਵਿਚ ਕੁਰਸੀਆਂ 'ਤੇ ਬੈਠ ਕੇ ਲੰਗਰ ਛਕਣ ਜਾਂ ਜ਼ਮੀਨ 'ਤੇ ਬੈਠ ਕੇ ਲੰਗਰ ਛਕਣ ਪ੍ਰਤੀ ਚੱਲ ਰਹੇ ਵਾਦ-ਵਿਵਾਦ 'ਤੇ ਵਿਆਪਕ ਵਿਚਾਰ-ਚਰਚਾ ਹੋਈ। ਉਪਰੰਤ ਇਹ ਫੈਸਲਾ ਲਿਆ ਕਿ ਗੁਰੂ ਸਾਹਿਬਾਨ ਵੱਲੋਂ ਕਾਇਮ ਕੀਤੀ ਗਈ ਸੰਗਤ ਤੇ ਪੰਗਤ ਦੀ ਮਰਯਾਦਾ ਨੂੰ ਸ਼ਰਧਾ ਸਤਿਕਾਰ ਨਾਲ ਹਰ ਹੀਲੇ ਕਾਇਮ ਰੱਖਿਆ ਜਾਵੇ। ਸਮੂਹ ਧਾਰਮਿਕ ਸ਼੍ਰੇਣੀ ਵਿਚ ਸੇਵਾ ਨਿਭਾਉਣ ਵਾਲੇ ਰਾਗੀ, ਗ੍ਰੰਥੀ, ਢਾਡੀ, ਪ੍ਰਚਾਰਕ ਤੇ ਸਮੂਹ ਸੰਸਥਾਵਾਂ ਦੇ ਪ੍ਰਬੰਧਕਾਂ ਪ੍ਰਤੀ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਅਕਾਲ ਤਖਤ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਵੱਲੋਂ ਇਹ ਆਦੇਸ਼ ਹੈ ਕਿ ਇਹ ਯਕੀਨੀ ਬਣਾਉਣ ਕਿ ਗੁਰੂ ਕੇ ਲੰਗਰ ਦਾ ਪ੍ਰਸ਼ਾਦਾ ਕੇਵਲ ਪੰਗਤ ਵਿਚ ਜ਼ਮੀਨ 'ਤੇ ਬੈਠ ਕੇ ਹੀ ਛਕਣ ਤੇ ਛਕਾਉਣ ਦੀ ਮਰਯਾਦਾ ਕਾਇਮ ਰੱਖੀ ਜਾਵੇ।

ਸ੍ਰੀ ਅਕਾਲ ਤਖਤ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਜੀ ਦੇ ਇਸ ਆਦੇਸ਼ ਨੂੰ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਗੁਰੂ ਅਰਜਨ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਜੀ ਦੇ ਸ਼ਹੀਦੀ ਗੁਰਪੁਰਬ ਤਕ ਲਾਗੂ ਕਰਨ ਦਾ ਉਚਿਤ ਪ੍ਰਬੰਧ ਕਰ ਲਿਆ ਜਾਵੇ। ਇਸ ਉਦੇਸ਼ ਦੀ ਉਲੰਘਣਾ ਹੋਣ 'ਤੇ ਸੰਬੰਧਤ ਰਾਗੀ, ਗ੍ਰੰਥੀ, ਢਾਡੀ, ਪ੍ਰਚਾਰਕ ਤੇ ਪ੍ਰਬੰਧਕ ਬਰਾਬਰ ਦੇ ਜ਼ਿੰਮੇਵਾਰ ਹੋਣਗੇ ਅਤੇ ਉਨ੍ਹਾਂ ਸੰਬੰਧੀ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਅਕਾਲ ਤਖਤ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਵੱਲੋਂ ਪੰਥਕ ਮਰਯਾਦਾ ਅਨੁਸਾਰ ਕਾਰਵਾਈ ਕੀਤੀ ਜਾਵੇਗੀ।

ਸ੍ਰੀ ਅਕਾਲ ਤਖਤ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਵੱਲੋਂ ਸਮੂਹ ਗੁਰਸਿੱਖ ਸੰਗਤਾਂ ਪ੍ਰਤੀ ਨਿਮਰਤਾ ਸਹਿਤ ਸੰਦੇਸ਼ ਹੈ ਕਿ ਇਸ ਮਰਯਾਦਾ ਨੂੰ ਲਾਗੂ ਕਰਨ ਤੇ ਕਰਵਾਉਣ ਲਈ ਹਰ ਤਰ੍ਹਾਂ ਦੀ ਧੜੇਬੰਦੀ ਤੇ ਪੱਖ-ਪਾਤ ਤੋਂ ਉਪਰ ਉਠ ਕੇ ਸਹਿਯੋਗ ਦੇਣ।



ਗੁਰੂ ਪੰਥ ਦਾ ਦਾਸ,

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Conclusion:

Guruji designed an institution in which all people would sit on the floor together as equals, to eat the same simple food. It is here that all people high or low, rich or poor, male or female, young or old, all sit in the same pangat to share and enjoy the food together.

W.O. Cole, a well known author on Sikhism, said "..., the unique concept of universality and the system of Langar (free community meal) in Sikhism are the two features that attract me towards the study of Sikhism. Langar is the exclusive feature of Sikhism and found nowhere else in the world. Sikhism is the only religion which welcomes each and every one to its langar without any discrimination of caste, creed, colour, or sex."