

The concept of eating together is as old as humanity; several world religions stress its importance. Roopinder Singh talks about langar, the practice of volunteers contributing towards cooking and serving food and then eating it together, which is such an integral part of Sikhism.

People sitting in lines and partaking of food being served by volunteers is a regular sight for many Indians. Since time immemorial, providing food to those in need has been considered a noble endeavour. Humans want to be compassionate towards others, and we see that across various civilisations.

Communal eating, a practice with deep historical roots, has always provided a healing touch to the soul. It is no surprise that the founders of major world religions laid stress on it, making it a universal concept that transcends time and culture.

We see how food is served to devotees in *bhandaras* on major

Hindu festivals and other occasions. In Judaism, there is the concept of *tzedakah*, which emphasises providing for the needy. In ancient Christianity, there were the Agape (love) feasts shared by believers; now there are soup kitchens. In Islam, the welfare of the needy is undertaken according to the directives of *zakat* and *sadaqah*, both acts of charity: the former is obligatory, and the latter is voluntary. Buddhist monasteries feed the needy, and so on.

The concept is as old as humanity. Cultural norms, differences in interpretation of the teachings of faith leaders, and, of course, geographical settings all impact the way it comes alive in different settings. Baba Farid

and other saints of the Chishti Order of the Sufis used the word *langar* for the practice of feeding the poor and travellers in *khanqahs*.

For the Sikhs, the act of sitting together and of volunteers preparing, serving and eating the food for all became practical expressions of the spiritual and egalitarian teachings of the faith. The Sauch Sauda story is well known. When Guru Nanak's father gave him money to buy goods, which could be sold for a profit in the market, he set out towards the town. On the way, he came across hungry holy men. Feeling that the most profitable thing in the world is to feed hungry people, he bought food and clothes and distributed them to

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A painting by Jarnail Singh (1956-2025) installed in the langar hall of the Sikh Gurdwara, San Jose, California USA. It is an artistic representation of Guru Nanak's Sauch Sauda "Truthful Trade" incident.



A water colour painting of Harmandir Sahib, Amritsar, by Allan Jay Quesada, from the book Gurdwaras: Abodes of the Guru. The langar here is the largest in the world, serving over 1,00,000 souls daily.

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the mendicants. Some Sikh scholars regard this as the first instance of serving *langar*.

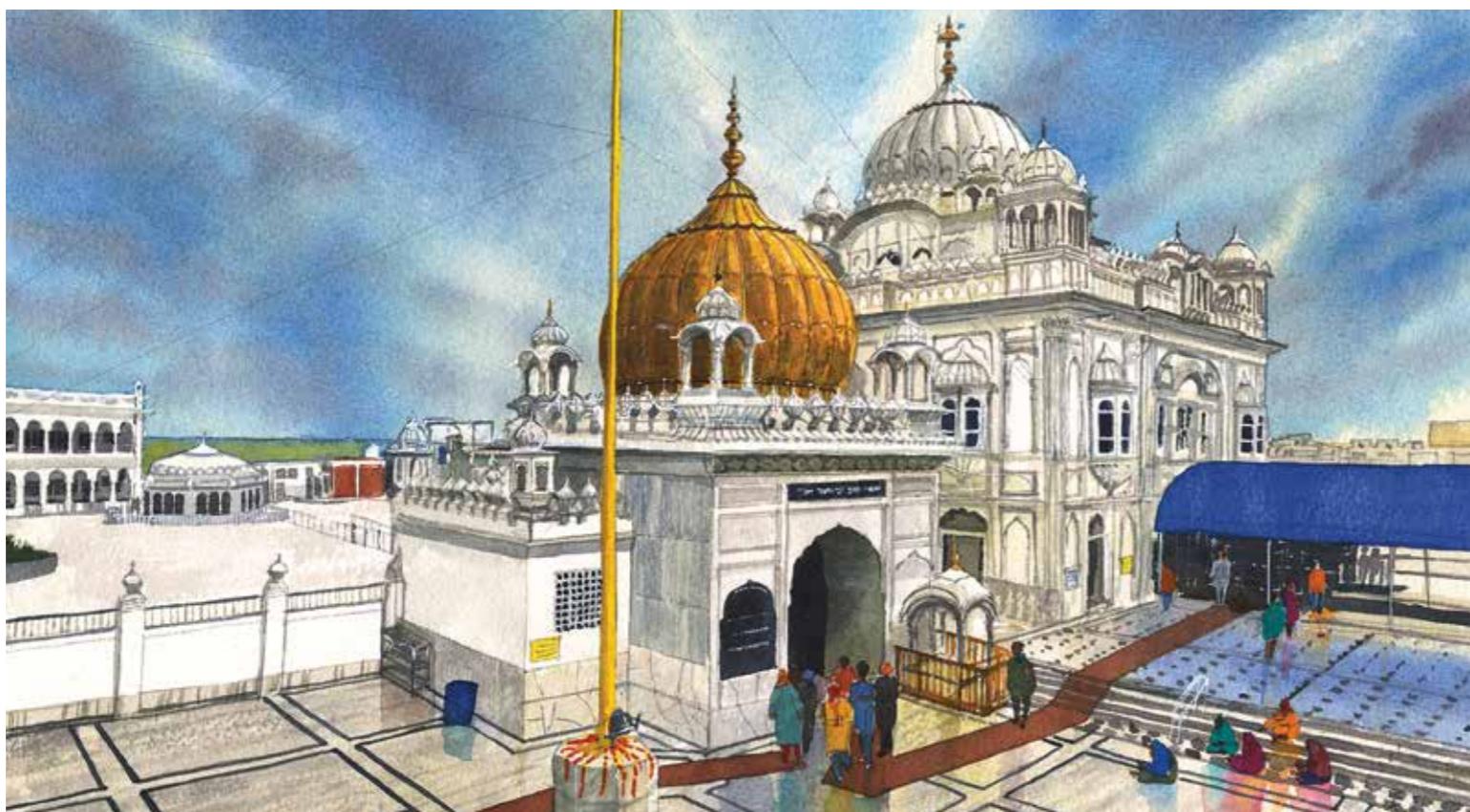
When Guru Nanak settled down at Kartarpur in the evening of his life, he brought his family to this village and built a community of like-minded spiritual individuals. The Guru composed Gurbani and lived with his family, attending to his worldly and spiritual duties, and encouraging his followers to do the same.

The devotees would sit together in a *pangat* (in rows) with everyone at the same level. The social symbolism was not lost on anyone. As we all know, breaking bread together is such a widely accepted way of expressing

fellowship among humans that it has become a metaphor now. In this demonstrably egalitarian setting, they ate food prepared by the volunteers among them, together.

The subsequent Gurus, inspired by the founder's teachings, refined the practices and institutionalized them. The unity and bonhomie among their followers after they sat together to eat and to feed others was palpable. It was a strong challenge to the divisive discourse that emphasised differences in faith and social standing among individuals. They transformed it into a powerful demonstration of equality and selfless service that has not just survived, but thrived, for over five centuries, inspiring generations.

Devotees follow Guru Amar Das's instruction to first partake of the langar at Gurdwara Darbar Sahib (Angitha Sahib), Goindwal Sahib, Punjab, which has a massive langar hall. Painting by Allan Jay Quesada, from the book *Gurdwaras: Abodes of the Guru*.



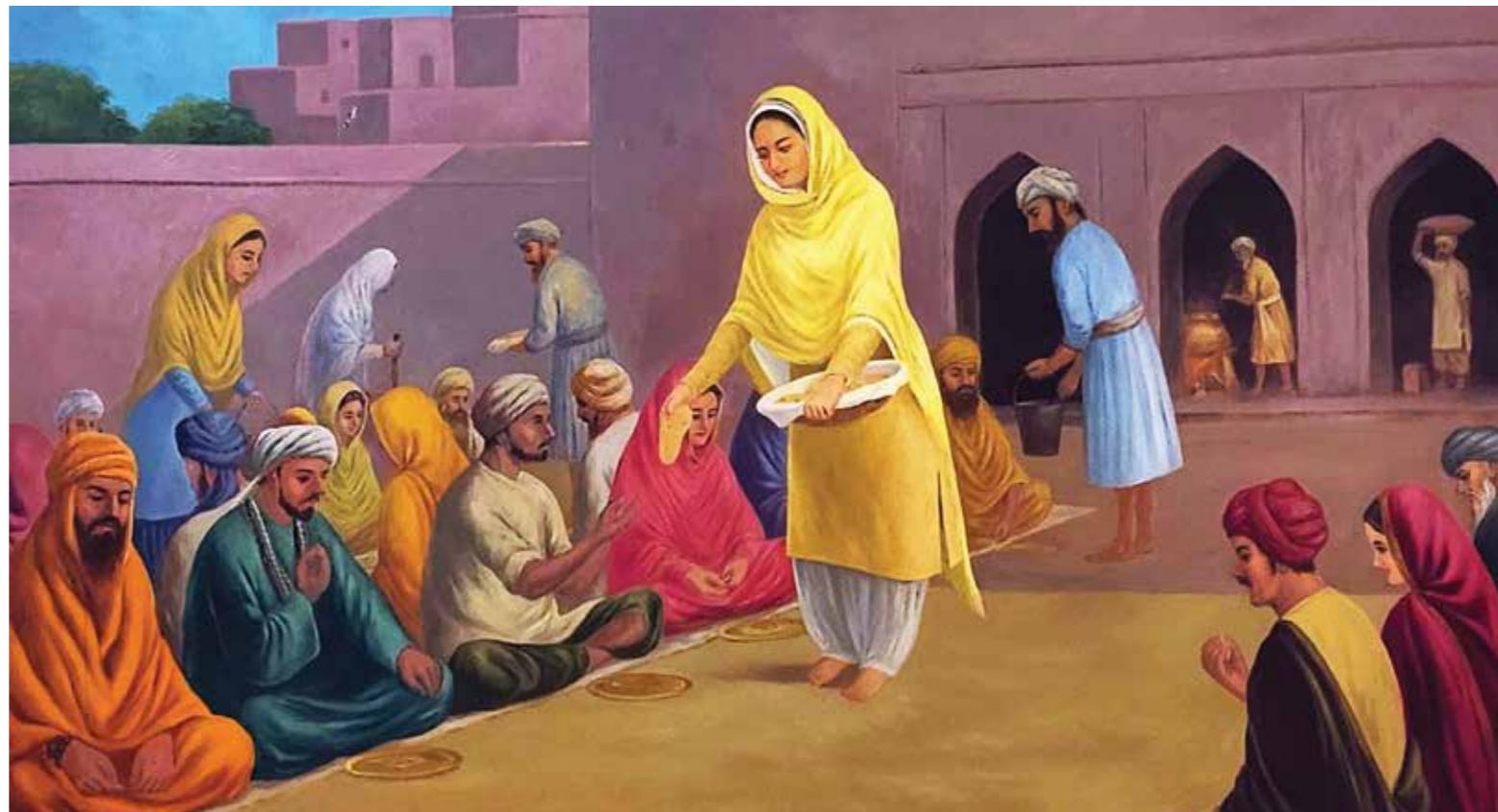
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Bhai Lehna, who was among the Sikhs at Kartarpur, would take part in the activities of the *langar*, as would his wife, Mata Khivi. Bhai Lehna came from a family of well-off traders. A follower of Guru Nanak, he was so accomplished and devoted that the Guru called him Angad and anointed him as his successor, choosing him rather than his sons.

Guru Angad made Khadur Sahib his headquarters. Here, he formalised the Gurmukhi script and continued the practice of *langar*.

Mata Khivi had been married to Bhai Lehna for two decades before he became Guru. She took on the responsibility of expanding and systematising *langar* around the core practice of volunteers contributing towards cooking and serving food and then eating it together.

Some historical accounts highlight her good humour and pleasant personality. She would continue her service to *langar* after her husband passed on, serving his successor Gurus till she passed away in 1582. She thus knew the first five Gurus. It



Mata Khivi, the wife of Guru Angad, propagated the langar tradition and enriched it. This painting by Jarnail Singh, (1956–2025) is installed in the San Jose langar hall.

is recorded that Guru Arjan Dev was present at her last rites.

In *Guru Granth Sahib*, the bards Bhai Satta and Bhai Balwant record her dedication in glowing terms. In *Ramikali ki Vaar* (p 966–968), they describe her as a virtuous woman whose 'shade is very leafy', i.e., abundant, alluding to her motherly nurturing that sheltered the devotees. They also say that *amrit* and *ghee* are distributed in the *langar*. The food served is thus described as delicious and rich in flavours, served with a mother's love towards her children.

The status of *langar* beyond being a mere kitchen to serve food to devotees is clear from the importance the institution is given here.

Goindwal Sahib became the spiritual centre of the Sikhs during the time of Guru Amar Das. Here, the Guru made it mandatory for anyone visiting him to first partake in *langar*. He famously declared: '*Pahlay Pangat, Peechhay Sangat*' (First partake of food in the *langar*; then attend the congregation). This further solidified its role in promoting equality and humility.

Guru Amar Das made it mandatory for anyone visiting him to first partake in *langar*. *Pahlay Pangat, Peechhay Sangat*
(First partake of food in the *langar*).

Goindwal Sahib is a significant place of pilgrimage for Sikh devotees, and the Guru built the Baoli Sahib, a step-well, there. At Goindwal Sahib, much stress is laid on the Guru's injunction. Indeed, the Gurdwara has a massive *langar* hall where people go first, with volunteers serving food. On one of our trips there, we observed many villagers busy bringing in produce, washing it, cutting it and cooking it. People tend to perform

the Gurus taught. As Guru Arjan Dev, who compiled the Adi Granth, says in *Sukhmani Sahib*: 'Sewa karat hoye nehkami tis ko parapat hot swami,' ('One who serves selflessly, without thought of reward, obtains the Lord', *Guru Granth Sahib*, p 286). The Gurus were conscious of the inherent capacity for connection that human beings have and the compassion that is there in all of us. They wove it into the Sikh ethos,

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sewa before eating anything. Emperor Akbar also partook of the *langar* food here, according to Sikh sources.

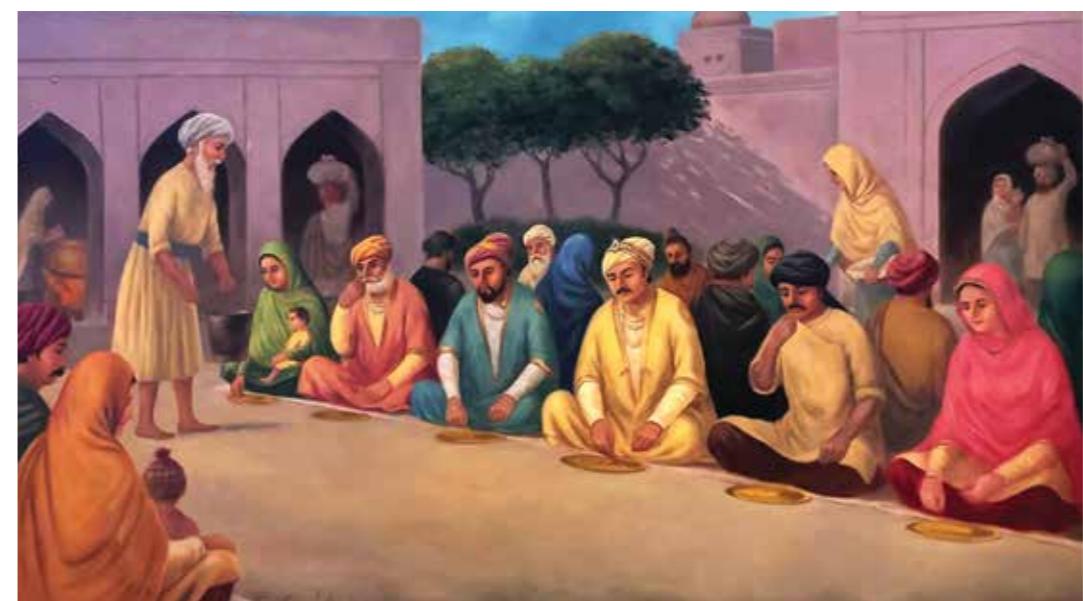
In general, while devotees bring the ingredients, the management committees get whatever else is necessary. Volunteers do the cooking within the *langar* premises, sometimes supplemented by staff.

Sewa is a profoundly spiritual experience and is rooted in what



The World Heritage Cuisine Summit and Food Festival was held in Amritsar in 2018. Chefs from over 40 countries participated in the event. The picture shows chefs trying their hand at cooking chapattis at Harmandir Sahib's langar.

The institutionalisation of langar tradition continued and Guru Hargobind gave a karchha (ladle) to Bhai Rup Chand...



Besides compassion and service, *langar* also signifies equality of all. Here everyone irrespective of caste, race, wealth or any other social status, sits at the same level and enjoys the same food. The third Guru, Guru Amar Das asked anyone coming to see him to have *langar* first. The painting by Jarnail Singh depicts Emperor Akbar, who visited Guru Amar Das in 1569 AD, partaking of *langar*.



... to start the langar at Bhai Rupa, Punjab, in 1635.

the resources and wealth they have. Thus, *sewa* is central to the Sikh ethos, and we often see it in the form of *langar*.

Cooked food being brought and served in *langar* is very rare, and in fact, I know of only one historical Gurdwara, Baba Atal Sahib in Amritsar, where this is done. The nine-storeyed octagonal tower near Harmandir Sahib was built between 1778 and 1784, when the Sikh

To a Sikh, *sewa* is a spiritual discipline inculcated on the pathway to the Divine; it is the offering of self and what one has to others.

showing us the path of *sewa*, which is much more than the notion of charity. To a Sikh, *sewa* is a spiritual discipline inculcated on the pathway to the Divine; it is the offering of self and what one has to others. *Sewa* can be of three types: *Tan*, *Man*, and *Dhan*. We see the expression being used together, with people saying that they will offer their *Tan*, *Man*, *Dhan* — stating that they will serve physically, mentally and by utilising

confederacies controlled Amritsar. The Gurdwara commemorates Guru Hargobind's son, the nine-year-old Atal Rai, who was cremated at this spot. It has beautiful frescoes that give a pictorial account of Sikh history. 'Baba Atal Pakian Pakaian Ghal' is a popular saying in which the followers request Baba Atal to send cooked food. Local devotees bring cooked food to be distributed among visitors.



Baba Atal has a special significance in the lore about langar, with the saying 'Baba Atal, Pakian Pakaiyan Ghal.' Painting by Allan Jay Quesada, from the book *Gurdwaras: Abodes of the Guru*.



Former Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, his wife and children, preparing chapatis at the Langar at Harmandir Sahib in 2018.

The Sikh diaspora spread out after the late 19th century. The British colonial authorities had found in them a formidable adversary in the two Anglo-Sikh wars. In the years that followed, they enlisted them primarily as soldiers in Malay and Hong Kong, from where they spread to Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji. Sikhs also emigrated to British East Africa, building and running railways. They were also engaged in other professions and soon became prosperous by making the most of the opportunities provided to them. The first emigrants to Canada and the USA can be traced to the first few years of the 20th century. The Gurdwaras in Stockton, California and Abbotsford, Canada, are the oldest existing places of worship.

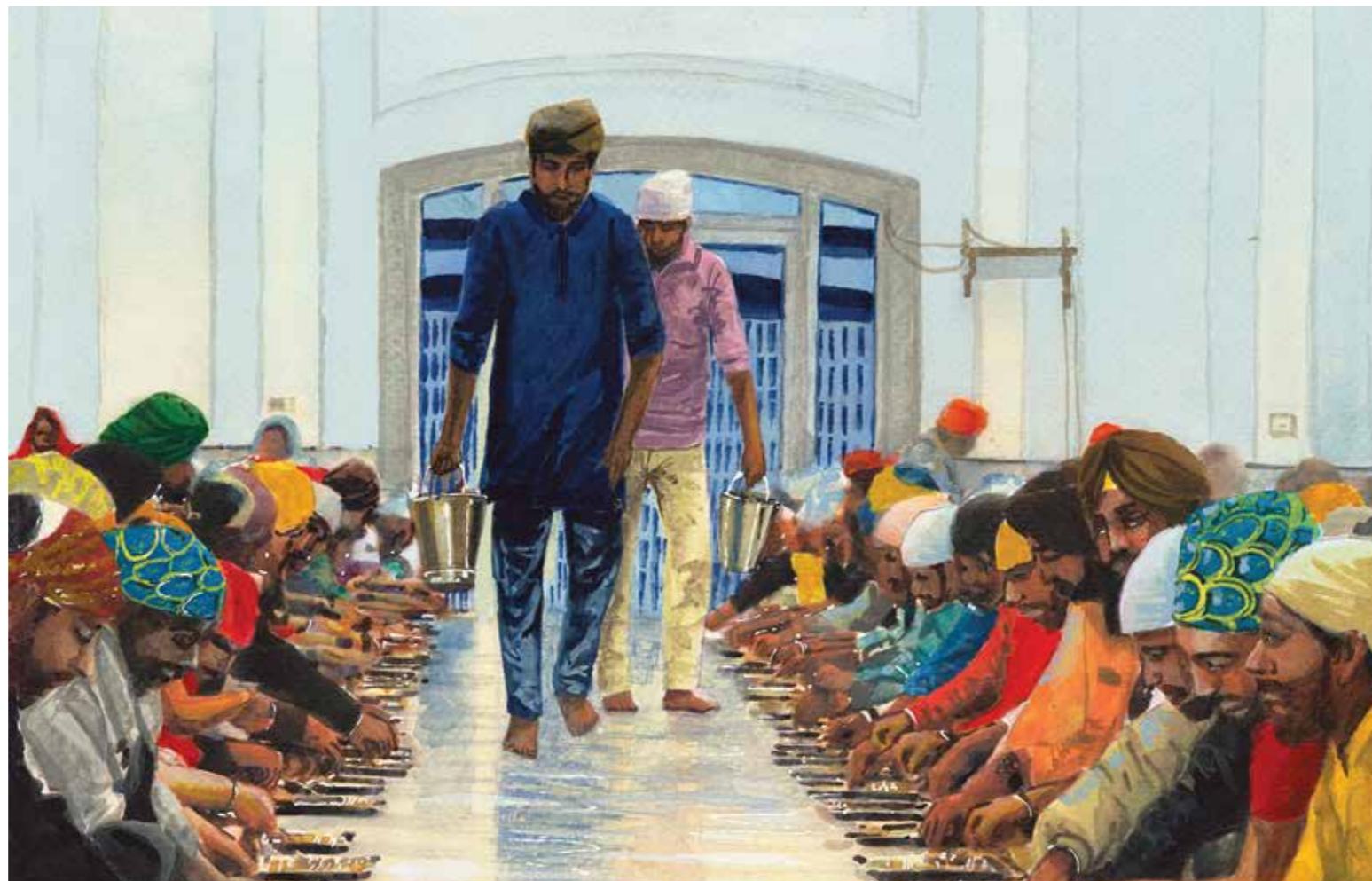
Wherever there is a group of Sikhs, they join to form a community that seeks to understand Gurbani and follow the Gurus' teachings. They become the *sangat* for whom *langar* is served. In smaller Gurdwaras and for developing congregations, especially in foreign countries where the number of Sikhs is less, devotees bring food and often coordinate with each other in planning and execution.

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Langars welcome all. Food is not denied to anyone, although there is a protocol that must be followed — clean hands and feet, no shoes, and head covered. The food in *langars* is vegetarian and wholesome. Typically served is the Punjabi fare of *rotis* or *chapattis*, accompanied by rice, lentils and vegetables prepared in a curry form or dry. Often a sweet dish is also served. At festivals, anniversaries connected with the Gurus and other significant occasions, celebratory fare is also served. In the West, one has

heard Coca-Cola being offered amidst cries of 'Coke ji' from the volunteers!

I was in California in 1989 when an earthquake struck San Francisco. There was widespread disruption, and soon enough, Sikhs organised a traditional *langar* to provide relief to the affected. The gesture floored people, but they found the food quite different from their staple fare. Sure enough, the volunteers were back the next day — with sandwiches and soup.



In New Delhi, Gurdwara Bangla Sahib, which commemorates the visit of Guru Harkrishan, serves the largest number of people daily.

Painting by Allan Jay Quesada, from the book *Gurdwaras: Abodes of the Guru*.

Khalsa Aid, a UK-based humanitarian relief charity, provides support around the world to victims of natural and man-made disasters.

The spirit remains the same even as amenities vary. Many Gurdwaras abroad like Sikh Gurdwara, San Jose, CA, USA, use commercial dishwashing equipment, walk-in cold rooms, etc. in langar kitchens.

Lately, organisations like Khalsa Aid, a UK-based humanitarian relief charity established in 1989, have rushed to provide support around the world to victims of natural and man-made disasters. They provide food and shelter, adapting to the needs of those in need. More often than not, concerned people spontaneously organise *langar* when they see others in need.

When the world closed down during the Covid-19 pandemic, health systems were overwhelmed by patients, and many support systems simply broke down under the pressure. Within India, two central Sikh bodies, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and the Delhi Gurdwara Management Committee, provided the leadership. Local management committees made tremendous efforts to help the afflicted. Selected gurdwaras were turned into quarantine and Covid-care facilities. Free meals, medical supplies, and financial assistance were given to the patients.

India faced the most challenging situation in April-May 2021 when Covid cases rose to over 4,00,000 a day. The Delta variant was aggressive.

There was a shortage of oxygen cylinders, and people struggled to breathe. Gurdwaras organised 'Oxygen Langars' to provide much-needed succour to pandemic victims in India and elsewhere. Volunteers would arrange cylinders and provide life-giving oxygen to patients. In many instances documented in Delhi, people drove the patients to designated spots where they could receive oxygen. Medicines were also provided along with food.

Simultaneously, great effort was made to procure and provide oxygen concentrators, which, while less effective, could also be kept at home or institutional spaces. Availability of food was another issue, and in many cities, especially Bombay, packed food was left outside the houses of those afflicted by the virus.

Oxygen Langars are just one manifestation of the expanded concept of *langar*. The idea is to provide help and support to people.

People from all walks of life perform *sewa* at the *langar*, as this picture from Gurdwara Bangla Sahib shows.

Top Centre
The numbers swell up, as does the spirit to do *sewa* in *langars*.



Oxygen Langars are just one manifestation of the expanded concept of *langar*. In Chandigarh, there is the Guru ka *Langar* Eye Hospital. Lodged in the Freemasons



Lodge, it provides free eye care (including cataract, retina, cornea transplant, glaucoma, etc.). People come from far-off places for treatment because of its reputation for quality



and care, which includes free food and lodging arrangements.

The spirit of *sewa*, performing selfless service to benefit others,

especially strangers, is one of the cardinal principles of the Sikh way of life. This is what motivates volunteers to serve chilled and flavoured water to people in the hot sun. It is what makes them cook food and clean the dishes of others; what makes devotees shine the shoes of those who have deposited them before going barefoot to the Gurdwaras. *Sarbat da Bhala*, well-being of all, is a guiding principle for the Sikhs, as is *Manas ke jaat sab ake pachenbo* or the essential oneness of all humanity. Such shibboleths have guided the Sikhs, and through the institution of *langar*, they have been able to feed the fellow human beings as well as their souls, which crave fulfilment through a sense of purpose and serving their fellow beings. ☺

{Gurdwaras: Abodes of the Guru, the writer's forthcoming book,

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Traditional food is often cooked in huge vats amidst the chanting of hymns.

Centre The concept of *langar* has now been extended to include other forms of service, including medical facilities like this Guru ka Langar Eye Hospital which performs free eye surgeries in Chandigarh.

formed the basis of this article. The watercolour paintings by Allan are courtesy the book, and the publisher, Gentry Press, Manila, Philippines.}