

Synthesis of the Social and Political Rules of Sikh Gurdwaras

Karamjeet Kaur and Dr. Harpinder Kaur

Department of Arts and Social Sciences,

Guru Kashi University, Talwandi Sabo, Bathinda

Email:- kamaldeep12245@gmail.com, harpindersidhu44@gmail.com

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Correspondence:

E-mail: kamaldeep12245@gmail.com,

harpindersidhu44@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the social and political roles of Sikh Gurdwaras in the Bathinda district of Punjab, highlighting their contribution beyond religious worship. Using historical analysis supported by fieldwork, including interviews with Gurdwara management committees, sewadars, devotees, and local residents, the study explores how institutions such as Takht Sri Damdama Sahib, Gurdwara Peer Haji Rattan Sahib, Gurdwara Qila Mubarak Sahib, and Gurdwara Maisarkhana Sahib promote social welfare, community development, and political awareness. The findings reveal that the traditions of Langar and Seva strengthen social equality, communal harmony, and humanitarian service while supporting people during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The study further demonstrates the role of Gurdwaras in education, cultural preservation, youth awareness, interfaith harmony, and civic participation. It concludes that Sikh Gurdwaras function not only as centres of faith but also as dynamic institutions that contribute significantly to social transformation, public welfare, and democratic consciousness in contemporary Punjab.

Introduction:

Sikh Gurdwaras have played a significant role not only as places of worship but also as centres of social service, public welfare, and political awareness. Prominent Gurdwaras of the district, including Takht Sri Damdama Sahib, Gurdwara Peer Haji Rattan Sahib, and Gurdwara Qila Mubarak Sahib, have made valuable contributions to promoting social unity and political consciousness while fulfilling their religious responsibilities. Throughout Sikh history, these Gurdwaras have remained people-oriented institutions dedicated to serving society.

The tradition of Langar, established by the Sikh Gurus, challenged social inequalities based on caste, religion, and social discrimination. In the Gurdwaras of Bathinda district, the practices of Langar and Seva (selfless service) continue to strengthen social equality, communal harmony, and the spirit of collective responsibility. These institutions actively support the poor, assist travellers, and provide relief during times of crisis. Consequently, they function not only as places of worship but also as important centres of social welfare that have significantly influenced the social and political life of the local community.

Sikhism is founded on the principles of equality, selfless service, truth, and justice. The Sikh Gurus did not restrict religion to spiritual practices alone; they also emphasised social reform, humanitarian service, and the welfare of society. Their teachings encouraged the establishment of institutions that promote compassion, justice, and the well-being of all people, regardless of caste, creed, or social background.

Langar is one of the most distinctive and significant social institutions in Sikhism. It was initiated by Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of Sikhism, to promote the ideals of equality, sharing, and selfless service. According to Sikh tradition, Guru Nanak Dev Ji used the twenty rupees given to him by his father to feed hungry saints and needy people, demonstrating that serving humanity is the highest form of devotion. The primary purpose of Langar is not merely to provide food but also to foster equality, communal harmony, and social inclusion. During the time of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, society was deeply divided by caste distinctions and rigid social hierarchies. Through the institution of Langar, he conveyed the message that all human beings are equal and that no individual should be regarded as superior or inferior on the basis of caste, wealth, religion, or social status.

In Sikh Gurdwaras, Langar is much more than a community meal; it represents the Sikh commitment to equality and social justice. People belonging to different castes, religions, and social backgrounds sit together in a single row (*Pangat*) and share the same meal without any distinction. This practice promotes mutual respect, social harmony, and a sense of collective belonging. Even today, the Gurdwaras of Bathinda district continue this tradition with great dedication and devotion. At Takht Sri Damdama Sahib, in particular, the Langar system reflects the humanitarian values and social principles of Sikhism. During the course of the present study, it was observed that thousands of pilgrims and visitors partake in Langar every day.

People from different parts of India as well as from abroad, representing diverse religions and communities, sit together and share food without discrimination based on caste, religion, or economic status. The Langar service is sustained through the collective efforts of the Sikh congregation. Members of the community contribute donations, prepare vegetables, cook meals, serve food, clean utensils, and perform various other voluntary duties. Such collective participation strengthens cooperation, community spirit, and social responsibility. The study further revealed that Langar serves as a dependable source of food for economically weaker sections of society. Many respondents stated that it provides essential support to poor and needy individuals.

During the COVID-19 pandemic and the Farmers' Movement, the Langar services organised by the Gurdwaras expanded considerably to meet the needs of affected communities. Besides providing free meals, these institutions organised medical camps, distributed medicines and essential supplies, and

extended various forms of humanitarian assistance to those in need. These efforts demonstrate that Sikh Gurdwaras continue to play a vital role in public welfare and community service during periods of social and economic crisis.

Seva (Selfless Service) occupies a central place in Sikh philosophy and practice. It refers to the selfless service of humanity without any expectation of personal gain or reward. The Sikh Gurus regarded Seva not only as a religious obligation but also as an essential principle of daily life. Consequently, the tradition of Seva has become a defining characteristic of Sikh Gurdwaras. Members of the congregation participate voluntarily in a wide range of activities, including caring for visitors' shoes, preparing and serving Langar, cleaning the Gurdwara premises, providing drinking water, and performing many other tasks. These acts of voluntary service reflect the Sikh ideals of humility, equality, compassion, and collective responsibility while fostering a strong sense of social unity within the community.

The Gurdwaras of Bathinda district regularly organise blood donation camps, free medical camps, and assistance programmes for underprivileged students. Young people actively participate in these initiatives, which strengthen their sense of social responsibility and commitment to public welfare. The present study also revealed that the tradition of Seva in the Gurdwaras of Bathinda has fostered trust, mutual support, and a sense of security among local communities, particularly during times of crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when many individuals lost their jobs and struggled to meet their basic needs, Gurdwara management committees distributed food supplies and other essential items directly to affected households. These activities demonstrate that the tradition of Seva continues to play a significant role in promoting social unity, humanitarian values, and public welfare in Bathinda district.

In addition to social service, Sikh Gurdwaras have made significant contributions to education and public awareness. Through the recitation of Gurbani, Kirtan, religious discourses, and community gatherings, they promote spiritual, moral, and ethical values among the people. These institutions encourage individuals to uphold the principles of truth, justice, selfless service, and humanity.

Takht Sri Damdama Sahib, popularly known as the "Guru Ki Kashi," occupies a prominent place in the educational history of Sikhism. It is believed that Guru Gobind Singh Ji stayed here for approximately nine months and supervised the preparation of copies of the Guru Granth Sahib with the assistance of Bhai Mani Singh Ji. Consequently, this sacred site developed into an important centre of Sikh religious learning and historical scholarship. Interviews conducted during the present study revealed that classes in Punjabi, Gurmukhi script, Gurbani recitation, and Sikh studies are regularly organised for children. In addition, online classes are conducted to help the younger generation remain connected with Sikh history, language, and traditions. Religious camps and educational seminars are also organised to promote Sikh

culture and discourage substance abuse. Awareness campaigns against drug addiction, combined with religious discourses and motivational lectures, encourage young people to adopt moral values and lead responsible lives. These educational and awareness programmes play an important role in connecting the younger generation with their cultural and religious heritage.

Sikh Gurdwaras also contribute significantly to strengthening social harmony and community relationships. They serve as common meeting places where people from different villages, towns, and cities come together irrespective of their social or economic backgrounds. During religious festivals, Gurburabs, and annual fairs, large numbers of devotees gather at these institutions. Such gatherings promote social cohesion, strengthen interpersonal relationships, and help reduce discrimination based on caste or social class.

In this regard, Gurdwara Peer Haji Rattan Sahib holds special significance as a symbol of interfaith harmony and shared cultural heritage. The shrine is associated with Peer Haji Rattan, a respected Muslim saint whose teachings and personality have earned widespread admiration among people of different faiths. Every year, large religious fairs and community gatherings are organised at this shrine, attracting visitors from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. Shared activities such as Langar and religious celebrations foster cooperation, mutual respect, and a sense of collective responsibility. Many visitors believe that the shrine reinforces the message that all religions ultimately promote peace, love, and human unity.

The major Sikh religious institutions of Bathinda district, including Takht Sri Damdama Sahib, Gurdwara Peer Haji Rattan Sahib, Gurdwara Qila Mubarak Sahib, and Gurdwara Maisarkhana Sahib, also play an important role in promoting social and political awareness. Through social service, public welfare programmes, educational activities, and awareness campaigns, these institutions empower people both socially and politically.

For example, at Takht Sri Damdama Sahib, regular religious gatherings, Kirtan programmes, and discussions on Sikh teachings encourage social awareness and community consciousness. These activities help people understand contemporary social issues and develop informed perspectives on matters affecting society. From a political perspective, the Gurdwaras also provide opportunities for discussions on Sikh affairs and issues concerning the wider community. Religious gatherings encourage individuals to become aware of their rights, responsibilities, and civic duties. During major festivals such as Baisakhi, discussions often extend beyond religious teachings to address social and community concerns. Such programmes strengthen communal unity and encourage greater participation in social and public life.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the social and political roles of Sikh Gurdwaras are closely interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Their social service activities promote unity, trust, cooperation, and collective responsibility, while these values contribute to greater political awareness and community participation. As a result, Sikh Gurdwaras continue to function as important centres of social development, public welfare, and civic consciousness.

From a historical perspective, the Sikh Gurdwaras of Bathinda district have made significant contributions to both social reform and political mobilisation. During the Gurdwara Reform Movement and the Akali Movement, these institutions played a vital role in uniting the Sikh community and promoting collective action. These movements laid the foundation for subsequent social and political struggles, including the Farmers' Movement. Through such initiatives, Gurdwaras helped develop political awareness among Sikhs and encouraged people to become conscious of their rights while standing for justice, equality, and democratic values.

Thus, Sikh Gurdwaras should be understood not merely as places of worship but also as institutions of social transformation and community development. They have consistently provided platforms for discussion, organisation, collective action, and public service. Through their diverse religious, educational, and humanitarian activities, these institutions continue to contribute significantly to the welfare and development of society while preserving the rich heritage, values, and traditions of Sikhism.

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Primary Data collected through interviews with committee members, sewadars, devotees, and local residents of Takht Sri Damdama Sahib, Gurdwara Peer Haji Rattan Sahib, Gurdwara Qila Mubarak Sahib, and Gurdwara Maisarkhana Sahib during fieldwork.