

# Langar Sewa: An Altruistic Ethic of Sikhism for Life Satisfaction

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**Abstract:** *Langar Sewa has been a subject matter of study for the Sociology of Religion, History, and Philosophy. Langar Sewa means volunteering for serving food to those in need and everyone else who seeks food. Langar Sewa is not just a religious ethic but a thought that summarises the way of life preached by Sikhism. Langar Sewa is a thought that integrates Sikhs globally by bringing them on an equal footing as Pangat. The present study examined the socio-psychological impact of Langar Sewa on the lives of the Sikh respondents and how these respondents who engaged themselves in Langar Sewa derived life satisfaction. Findings of the study revealed that the respondents who frequently engaged in the Langar Sewa, i.e., four times a month, experienced more contentment and extreme satisfaction in their lives. Langar Sewa was seen to be contributing a positive socio-psychological impact on the lives of the respondents.*

**Key Words:** *Satisfaction with Life Scale, Langar Sewa, Life Satisfaction, Altruistic Ethic, Sikhism.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

A renowned sociologist Prof. Dipankar Gupta famously exclaimed in his article, “A Sikh who does Sewa is worth Sawa Lakh.” He emphasized that the generosity of Sikhs is unparalleled because the *routinisation of the everyday acts of Sewa primes Sikhs to help others in need* (Gupta, 2021). The entire world witnessed and applauded how Sikhs helped the underprivileged, diseased, and sufferers who were isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine-Russia war. Sewa has several connotations. In Sikhism specifically, Langar Sewa is indispensable, a dutybound ethic that was commanded directly by the Sikh Gurus. Langar is a Persian word that refers to serving place for the underprivileged and destitute. Langar Sewa (volunteering for serving food to those in need) in Sikh tradition is performed through community kitchens of Gurudwaras. In Sikhism, religious ethic of Langar is embedded in the virtue of sharing food with everyone irrespective of their caste, class, religion, and gender with a sublime thought of revering all partaking Langar as Guru’s guests (Kaur, 2020). Sikhs hold Langar Sewa in the highest regard because Langar teaches generosity and equality. The visitors and disciples after offering obeisance to the Guru, i.e., Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji are referred to as Pangat. It is important to note that Langar is served to the Pangat. Anyone who is part of Pangat is requested to sit in a disciplined manner in rows made on the dining area’s floor of the Gurudwara. Pangat is humbly served Langar (vegetarian food) by the disciples of the Guru. It is important to note that there are no restrictive dietary practices in the Sikh community. As a result, not all Sikhs are vegetarians. However, the Langar prepared in the Gurudwaras is always vegetarian to ensure that everyone can partake Langar irrespective of their dietary practices (Kaur, 2020). Through, the present study an attempt has been made to investigate the socio-psychological impact of Langar Sewa on the level life satisfaction of the Sikh respondents.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

In an effort to formulate the research problem relevant sources of literature were reviewed, which included books, newspaper articles, magazines, and research papers from journals. In order to examine the research problem, it was important to elaborate the concept of Langar Sewa besides understanding the concept of life satisfaction. The review of literature has been categorized under the following two themes:

1. Langar: An Ethic of Sikhism
2. Life Satisfaction

## 2.1 LANGAR: AN ETHIC OF SIKHISM :

Langar is an indispensable ethic of Sikhism. Langar is served to all those who are in need, irrespective of their caste, class, gender, race, and ethnicity. Langar is a legacy of the revered Gurus that is being carried on till date by the devout hardworking Sikhs not just in India but around the globe. An unparalleled case of Sewa shined through the generosity of Nisharat Kaur Matharu, a 97-year-old Sikh woman who served Langars by cooking healthy meals for a homeless shelter in Southhall, London, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Khanna, 2021).

Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DSGMC) provided healthy meals to four thousand COVID-19 patients who were quarantined at home (Ahuja, 2021). When India got hit by the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, then the Sikh community in India not only served healthy meals but also donated oxygen cylinders, medicines, and volunteered for free ambulance services (Kahma, 2021).

In Ontario, the *Seva Food Bank* is doing excellent work by addressing fundamental issues of poverty, especially the challenge of food security. The *Seva Food Bank* is an initiative by *Sikhs Serving Canada*, a not-for-profit organization with a major objective to *ensure equitable access to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food for people experiencing or at risk of poverty in the communities served*.

British Sikh Report 2016 received massive recognition for making the world aware of the positive contribution of Sikhs in the UK. Key findings of the British Sikh Report 2016 are:

1. Immense civic contribution by Sikhs in all spheres of life.
2. British Sikh community donated £125 million annually.
3. British Sikh community volunteered for 65 million hours per annum in totality.
4. 93 percent of the Sikh respondents said they donated money to charity every month. Out of them, 86 percent of the Sikhs said that they donated £1 to £20 every month whereas 7 percent of Sikhs donated more than £100 per month.
5. 80 percent of the Sikh respondents considered caste to be irrelevant.

Research commissioned by BBC substantiated that Sikhs in the UK have been the most philanthropic among all other religious people living in the UK (Bingham, 2014). Sikhs have time and again proved to be spiritual warriors that Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji envisioned during his lifetime. Living up to the Khalsa ideals laid down by Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji, Sikhs have proved that Sewa is their sword for fighting the socio-economic challenges posed by contemporary social problems. Sikhs are also leading when it comes to following the maxim of *Sacha Sauda, True Bargain* that was preached by Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji often proclaimed that *Sacha Sauda* of one's life is only in sharing a part of one's hard-earned money with those in need. It is this uniqueness and practicality of the religion, that intellectuals who identify themselves as Marxists express their interest in studying Sikhism. The approach of many social thinkers starts from a rational bent of mind intending to present a balanced and unbiased finding about Sikhism but that rationalistic approach ends up in a discovery of pragmatic spiritualism hidden in the core practices of Sikhism. In Sikhism, lies all the answers of seekers, researchers, and intellectuals.

## 2.2 LIFE SATISFACTION :

Life satisfaction is often referred to as individual's experience of happiness or the pleasure that an individual derives from their social actions but this is not the pure meaning of life satisfaction. According to Telman and Unsal (2004), life satisfaction is the assessment of one's life as a whole rather than just their present state of happiness. The term 'life satisfaction' describes the deliberate cognitive judgement process by which people evaluate the quality of their lives using a specific set of standards that are particular to them (Shin & Johnson, 1978; Pavot, & Diener, 1993).

According to Veenhoven (1991), "Life satisfaction is the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his life-as-whole favourably." Good and strong relationships with friends, neighbours, parents, children, and spouses are a primary source of life happiness, according to research by Haller and Hadler (2006).

Mroczek and Spiro (2005) discovered a correlation between a high degree of life satisfaction and physical well-being. Life happiness and religiosity are positively correlated, claim Dorahy, Lewis, Duze, and Sibiya (1998). There are instances in which having a more religious life makes one happier. People with comparatively higher levels of education are happier because they seem to have a more positive attitude about their lives (Hestsgaard & Martin, 1985). Income too plays an important role in one's life satisfaction. Research studies have confirmed that high income levels are positively correlated with high levels of personal well-being and life satisfaction (Seghieri, Desantis, & Tanturri, 2006).

Previous studies have found that the respondents had high level of life satisfaction and happiness when they perceived themselves as the member of their local community (Vinson & Ericson, 2012; Bettencourt & Molix, 2023).

### 3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY :

The present study focused upon the following objectives:

1. Examining how the Sikhs doing Sewa derived life satisfaction
2. Examining the socio-psychological impact of Sewa on the lives of the Sikhs

### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY :

#### Area of Study

The present study was conducted in the cities of Chandigarh and Birmingham for global representation of Sikhs.

#### Rationale for selecting the area of study

Such a study has feasibility in Chandigarh and Birmingham considering that the population met our criteria. There are many studies on the 'Life satisfaction' in rural and urban areas but such a study exploring religious principles that affect life satisfaction have not been conducted in the two countries of Chandigarh and Birmingham. Furthermore, the Sikh population of both the cities met our criteria.

#### Sampling Frame and Sample of Respondents

For drawing the sample, Chandigarh and Birmingham were purposively selected keeping in mind the modern educated Sikh population. Thus, 150 respondents were selected as part of the sample; i.e., 75 Sikhs from Chandigarh and 75 Sikhs from Birmingham were personally interviewed.

#### Techniques of Data Collection

Respondents were personally interviewed to understand their thoughts on the Langar Sewa. Besides the interview, *Satisfaction With Life Scale* was used to assess respondents' satisfaction with their life. Satisfaction With Life Scale was developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin in the year 1985. Scale comprises of 5 statements (items) to measure global cognitive judgments of one's life satisfaction (not a measure of either positive or negative affect). Respondents indicated how much they agree or disagree with each of the 5 statements using a 7-point scale that ranged from 7 strongly agree to 1 strongly disagree:

- 7 – Strongly Agree
- 6 – Agree
- 5 – Slightly Agree
- 4 – Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 3 – Slightly Disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 1 – Strongly Disagree

Below were the five statements in the scale that were administered to the respondents:

- In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
- The conditions of my life are excellent.
- I am satisfied with my life.
- So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
- If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

### 5. MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY :

**Life-Satisfaction Score of the Respondents:** As per data collected from 150 respondents, it was found that 8 percent of the respondents (12 respondents) who had *score of 10-14* were dissatisfied from their lives, 44 percent of the respondents, i.e., 66 who had *score of 26-30* were found to be satisfied with their lives, and 48 percent of the respondents, i.e., 72 who had *score of 31-35* were extremely satisfied. Interestingly, none of the respondents reported extreme dissatisfaction.

**Frequency of Langar Sewa impacted the Respondents' Level of Satisfaction:** It was found that respondents who engaged more frequently in the Langar Sewa experienced a high level of satisfaction in their lives.

The 48 percent of the respondents who expressed extreme satisfaction in their lives were those who volunteered for Langar Sewa three to four times a month. These respondents were found to be very passionate about Langar Sewa.

Furthermore, Sewa had a positive socio-psychological impact on their lives with many of these respondents confiding that they experienced peace and bliss after performing Langar Sewa.

A male Sikh respondent from Birmingham said, "I can miss anything but cannot live without Langar Sewa. It is not just any volunteering service but it is my life-force." Many other respondents also reflected similar thoughts expressing how Langar Sewa is an inseparable aspect of their lives. A female Sikh respondent from Chandigarh said, "Langar Sewa is a virtue that Sikhs have to reflect by action. Serving gives us purpose filled lives with a sense of achievement."

Some of the respondents expressed that their lives transformed tremendously after taking up Langar Sewa and this was specifically true in terms on mental and physical health of the respondents. A middle-aged female respondent from Birmingham said, "I experienced lot of anxiety before taking up Langar Sewa. Earlier I used to serve needy occasionally. Now, I serve poor on every weekend of the month. I didn't know that this small act of serving food to the needy would transform my whole being and restore my inner-peace." A young male respondent from Birmingham said, "I wake up early in the morning on these days when I have to perform Langar Sewa. Throughout the day I can feel that positivity engulfing me to be good and do good for fellow humans. Serving Langar to needy and hungry fuels my experience of positivity."

A woman from Chandigarh shared that her husband didn't have a good job before they committed themselves to engage in Langar Sewa. However, their optimism and confidence in themselves increased after committing themselves to Langar Sewa which in turn affected the overall quality of life of her husband and helped him in getting a good job. She said that her husband cleared Punjab Civil Services Exams within two years of performing Langar Sewa for four times a month. It would be ignorant to analyse the statement given by this woman in the religious context alone because an individual's positive psychological state of mind helps them in achieving many of their goals. Volunteering selflessly breeds positivity and socio-psychological state of an individual naturally improves which also ensures their holistic well-being. This finding confirms findings of the previous studies that volunteering improves life satisfaction by increasing chances of one's career success and income growth (Kahana, Bhatta, Lovegreen, Kahana, & Midlarsky, 2013; Shantz, Banerjee, & Lamb, 2019; Tullier, 2005).

44 percent of the respondents who were satisfied with their lives were the ones who agreed to volunteering for Langar Sewa for once or twice a month.

Only a small percentage of the respondents, i.e., 8 percent were found to be experiencing dissatisfaction in their lives. The respondents who experienced dissatisfaction in their lives were the ones who rarely or never engaged themselves in the Langar Sewa.

## 6. CONCLUSION:

Findings of the present study highlighted positive socio-psychological impact of Langar Sewa on lives of the respondents. Previous studies have also found positive impact of volunteering on the lives of the respondents.

Piliavin and Siegl (2007: 461) found that volunteering enhances psychological well-being of the respondents by socially integrating them to their society by making them value their social role and existence in the society.

Lum and Lightfoot (2005) also studies the effects of volunteering on the physical and mental health of older people. They found that self-reported health issues decline with volunteering with decrease in the levels of depression.

Heo et al. (2016) found that high level of optimism often persuades individuals to volunteer which further improves levels of life satisfaction and well-being.

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