

Cross-contamination of Langar food served at Gurdwaras

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For those who are not familiar with food allergies and intolerances, we need to first understand how cross-contamination in foods can occur, the health issues that can arise, the misunderstanding that has occurred among the Sikh sangat regarding a verse in the Guru Granth Sahib and a possible solution that can be implemented within the Gurdwaras to eliminate cross-contamination.

Allergy is the most common chronic disease in Europe. Up to 20% of patients with allergies live with a severe debilitating form of their condition, and struggle daily with the fear of a possible asthma attack, anaphylactic shock, or even death from an allergic reaction.

- The European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (EAACI)

Food allergy is described as an increasing disease over time. It is generally accepted that food allergy affects approximately 2.5% of the general population

- World Allergy Organization

There has been a big rise of food allergies and intolerances amongst the general population and the awareness amongst the public has never been more than it is at present time. The Internet, television and social media have played a huge role in bringing awareness to the public. In recent times there have been fatalities amongst the unsuspecting public who were allergic to certain ingredients contained within a meal. The foods that can cause allergies may not always be included within the list of ingredients of the meal. Some of the most allergenic foods are: milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, sesame seeds and wheat (gluten). Although many supermarkets, restaurants and food manufacturers have taken steps to list and print all ingredients within a meal on the labels or menus, sadly there are many institutions that serve food to the general public that do not have any awareness of the issues that food allergies can cause to certain members of the public. This is certainly true of most Sikh Gurdwaras where the awareness is non-existent.

With the amount of various foods that are prepared within the Sikh institutions, it is alarming to think that an accident is just waiting to happen. Sikh Gurdwaras are in need of overhauling their policies and procedures (if any) for the langar (various vegetarian dishes) served in their kitchens. The need to establish a set of rules is required for the tradition of doing Kirpaan bhet to the langar and Karraah Parsaad (sweet pudding) during the Ardaas (Sikh prayers) in the Darbar hall (prayer hall). The Kirpaan bhet involves dipping or touching the same Kirpaan (small sword) into the Karraah Parsaad and the langar. This causes cross-contamination of the foods and can subsequently be an issue to people who have an allergy or intolerance to certain type of foods. The Karraah Parsaad is made from wheat (gluten), butter (milk) and sugar. The langar can consist of various vegetarian dishes including roti (wheat (gluten) flat bread), dhaal (lentils) etc. Desserts can consist of Kheer (sweet rice milk pudding) and various mithai sweets. Mithai sweets can have various nuts added to them, which are not always easily seen. Some Gurdwaras carry out the Kirpaan bhet separately to the langar, within the kitchen rather than the Darbar hall, but this can also be vulnerable to cross-contamination between the various foods on the platter. It is also within the tradition that after the Kirpaan bhet is carried out, each type of food is added back into their

respective larger containers, resulting in the rest of the foods becoming cross-contaminated. It is from these larger containers that langar is then served to the sangat.

Anaphylaxis allergic reactions, also known as anaphylactic shock, can be critical or even fatal from certain foods e.g. nuts, wheat (gluten) etc., and can develop rapidly into a life-threatening situation. Even very small quantities of the allergens can be fatal. Allergic reactions affect the immune system, as opposed to food intolerances that affects the digestive system and are less serious, but can nonetheless be debilitating to the sufferer. Life-threatening allergic reactions such as itchy skin, swelling of the lips and eyes, and breathing difficulties due to swelling of the throat and tongue, can also occur. These reactions can be fatal if emergency treatment is not administered in time. Food intolerance, on the other hand, occurs when the digestive system is unable to break down certain foods or ingredients. Symptoms of intolerance to food can be diarrhoea, stomach cramps, gas etc. Although intolerance to food is not life-threatening, it can be very difficult to live a normal life. It can be stressful at times as the choice of foods is limited, particularly when eating away from home.

Whilst some people have dated the tradition of Kirpaan bhet to Karraah Parsaad back to the times of the Gurus, the phenomenon of Kirpaan bhet to the langar is relatively recent. So how did this Sikh tradition of Kirpaan bhet to langar get introduced?

The verse that the Sikh sangat have related this tradition to is within the Shabd of GGS p. 1266:

ਅਨਿਕ ਪ੍ਰਕਾਰ ਭੇਜਨ ਬਹੁ ਕੀਏ ਬਹੁ ਬਿੰਜਨ ਮਿਸਟਾਏ ॥
Anik prakaar bhojan bahu ke'ee bahu bi(n)jan misaTaae ॥
I have prepared all sorts of foods in various ways, and all sorts of sweet deserts.
ਕਰੀ ਪਾਕਸਾਲ ਸੋਚ ਪਵਿਤ੍ਰਾ ਹੁਣਿ ਲਾਵਹੁ ਭੇਗੁ ਹਰਿ ਰਾਏ ॥੨॥
Karee paakasaal soch pavitraa hun laavahu bhog har raae ॥2॥
I have made my kitchen pure and sacred. Now, O my Sovereign Lord King, please sample my food. ॥2॥¹

The above translation is by Sant Singh Khalsa MD, which is widely available on the Internet and is commonly used by many scholars, academics, translators etc. It's even used in almost all the Gurbani apps that are available online. But the translations are highly erroneous, giving a completely false meaning.

Sant Singh Khalsa's translation of the above verse does not make any sense within the context of Gurbani. He has applied literal meanings to the verse, portraying that the food has been prepared in a purified, sacred kitchen and then asking Karta Purakh to come and eat (sample) the food.

To get the correct context of the Shabd we need to first analyse the verse set out in the Rahao verse:

ਬਰਸੈ ਮੇਘੁ ਸਖੀ ਘਰਿ ਪਾਹੁਨ ਆਏ ॥ ਮੇਹਿ ਦੀਨ ਕ੍ਰਿਪਾ ਨਿਧਿ ਠਾਕੁਰ ਨਵ ਨਿਧਿ ਨਾਮਿ ਸਮਾਏ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥
barasai megh sakhee ghar paahun aae ॥ moh dheen kripaa nidh Thaakur nav nidh naam
samaae ॥1॥ rahaau ॥

Meaning: **with showering of virtues** (ਬਰਸੈ ਮੇਘੁ), **and bestowing realisation** (ਪਾਹੁਨ ਆਏ) **in my mind** (ਸਖੀ ਘਰਿ), **Karta Purakh** (ਨਿਧਿ ਠਾਕੁਰ), **grace** (ਕ੍ਰਿਪਾ) **me, the destitute** (ਮੇਹਿ ਦੀਨ), **with staying absorbed** (ਸਮਾਏ) **in the nine treasures of Naam** (ਨਵ ਨਿਧਿ ਨਾਮਿ).

¹ Srigranth.org, p. 1266, Sant Singh Khalsa MD

ਬਰਸੈ ਮੇਘੁ (literal meaning: *showering of clouds*. Spiritual meaning - **showering of virtues**),
ਸਖੀ ਘਰਿ (literal meaning: *saheli's (friend's) house*. Spiritual meaning - **my mind**),
ਪਾਹੁਨ ਆਏ (literal meaning: *Karta Purakh has come*. Spiritual meaning – **bestowing realisation**),
ਮੇਹਿ ਦੀਨ (literal meaning: *poor, destitute*. Spiritual meaning – **unrealised, without virtues (jewels) of Naam**),
ਕਿਪਾ (grace),
ਨਿਧਿ ਠਾਕੁਰ (bestower of the treasures of Naam, Karta Purakh),
ਨਵ ਨਿਧਿ (literal meaning: *nine treasures*. Spiritual meaning – **collective term for Naam**),
ਨਾਮੀ (Naam),
ਸਮਾਏ (literal meaning: *absorbed*. Spiritual meaning – **become absorbed within the treasures of Naam**).

The meaning of the verse is to stay absorbed in the treasures of Naam and always have realisation of *Karta Purakh* by making the mind pure and sacred with the internalisation of the graced virtues.

We need to take note here regarding **ਨਵ ਨਿਧਿ** (nine treasures). The nine treasures is a terminology from the Vedas, which refers to materialistic temporal treasures belonging to the god of wealth. The Gurus used terms that were prevalent in their time to relate and portray their messages, so that the people could understand the Shabds. Such terms were redefined by the Gurus to be in line within the contexts of Gurbani.

Since the people at the time would have been acquainted with the term **ਨਵ ਨਿਧਿ** being used within the Vedas, the Gurus had redefined it to collectively mean the treasures of Naam.

Throughout the Guru Granth Sahib, these redefinitions of terms have been aptly applied by the Gurus and Bhagats, and need to be understood within the context of the Shabd and translated in terms of spirituality. The Shabds should not be translated literally, which would give an incorrect meaning.

These redefinitions of terms can usually be found within Gurbani. For example, the term **ਨਵ ਨਿਧਿ** can be easily understood if we look at the following line:

ਨਉ ਨਿਧਿ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤੁ ਪ੍ਰਭ ਕਾ ਨਾਮੁ ॥
 Nau nidh a(n)mrit prabh kaa naam ||²

ਨਉ is the same as **ਨਵ**, which is the numeral nine, so the meaning of the above verse is: The nine treasures (**ਨਉ ਨਿਧਿ**) are the jewels (**ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤੁ**) of (**ਕਾ**) Karta Purakh's (**ਪ੍ਰਭ**) Naam (**ਨਾਮੁ**).

So, the meaning of the verse in question (**ਅਨਿਕ ਪ੍ਰਕਾਰ ਭੋਜਨ ਬਹੁ ਕੀਏ ਬਹੁ ਬਿੰਜਨ ਮਿਸਟਾਏ ॥ ਕਰੀ ਪਾਕਸਾਲ ਸੋਚ ਪਵਿੜਾ ਹੁਣਿ ਲਾਵਹੁ ਭੋਗੁ ਹਰਿ ਰਾਏ ॥ ੨ ॥**) is as follows:

Many (ਬਹੁ) **different** (ਅਨਿਕ) **types** (ਪ੍ਰਕਾਰ) **of virtues** (ਭੋਜਨ - various foods, ਬਿੰਜਨ ਮਿਸਟਾਏ - desserts) **have been prepared** (ਕੀਏ), **making** (ਕਰੀ) **my mind** (ਪਾਕਸਾਲ) **pure and sacred** (ਸੋਚ ਪਵਿੜਾ), **Karta Purakh** (ਹਰਿ ਰਾਏ), **now bestow acceptance** (ਹੁਣਿ ਲਾਵਹੁ ਭੋਗੁ).

² GGS, p. 293

ਭੋਜਨ, ਬਿੰਜਨ ਮਿਸਟਾਏ - literal meaning is various foods, desserts, but in the context of Gurbani it means many virtues of Naam (kindness, humility, compassion, empathy, acceptance, tolerance, patience, etc.), which are the foods for the hungry mind to achieve realisation.

ਪਾਕਸਾਲ - literal meaning is kitchen, but in the context of Gurbani it means the mind.

ਭੋਗੁ - literal meaning is offering, consumption (sampling) of food to sanctify, but in the context of Gurbani it means acceptance of purity of the mind. This would signify the bestowing of grace for realisation.

The analogy used is that of an *Istri* (woman) lovingly preparing many types of foods in the purity of the kitchen for her husband to come and accept (bless) the various foods.

Referencing this analogy in terms of the spirituality of Gurbani, it would be the mind preparing many different virtues of Naam (to satisfy the hunger for realisation), making the mind pure and sacred so that realisation is achieved with the grace of *Karta Purakh*.

We can see from the following verse how the quenching of hunger for the mind has been linked to many virtues of Naam:

ਦੇਹਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਸੰਤੋਖੀਆ ਉਤਰੈ ਮਨ ਕੀ ਭੁਖ ॥

Dheh Naam Sa(n)tokheea utarai man kee bhukh ||³

Meaning: **Karta Purakh** (ਸੰਤੋਖੀਆ) grace me with (ਦੇਹਿ) the virtues (ਨਾਮੁ) to quench (ਉਤਰੈ) the hunger (ਭੁਖ) of (ਕੀ) my mind (ਮਨ) for realisation.

The above verse is about seeking the grace from *Karta Purakh* to satisfy the spiritual hunger for realisation by internalising the virtues of Naam, which are the *foods* for the spiritually hungry mind.

Gurbani is for the mind to become *sachiaara* (*Akaal Purakh* – realised) - ਕਿਵ ਸਚਿਆਰਾ ਹੋਈਐ ਕਿਵ ਕੁੜੈ ਤੁਟੈ ਪਾਲਿ ॥ ਹੁਕਮਿ ਰਜਾਈ ਚਲਣਾ ਨਾਨਕ ਲਿਖਿਆ ਨਾਲਿ ॥੧॥⁴

ਕੁੜੈ - this is commonly translated as falsehood, which is incorrect. Keeping within the context of Gurbani, it should be translated as unrealisation i.e. how to break the wall of unrealisation. In Sikhi, the aim is to achieve realisation within (to become a *sachiaara*). So, as the opposite is unrealisation, then we can say that humanity is in an unrealised state. Or in other words, humans are not in an awakened state, but are in a spiritually 'dead' state.

The realisation of *Karta Purakh* within the mind is achieved by becoming the Naam (virtues) with the enlightenment through Shabd Guru (message of the Guru). So, Gurbani is in effect a spiritual guidance to awaken the spiritually 'dead' mind.

This misunderstanding of the verse ਅਨਿਕ ਪ੍ਰਕਾਰ ਭੋਜਨ ਬਹੁ ਕੀਏ ਬਹੁ ਬਿੰਜਨ ਮਿਸਟਾਏ ॥ ਕਰੀ ਪਾਕਸਾਲ ਸੇਚ ਪਵਿੜਾ ਹੁਣ ਲਾਵਹੁ ਭੋਗੁ ਹਰਿ ਰਾਏ ॥੨॥ has misled people to assume that the Kirpan bhet should be carried out to the langar as well as the Karraah Parsaad. When the meanings to the verse are applied within the spiritual context of Gurbani, it gives the correct message. Throughout Gurbani the Gurus have made extensive use of *metaphors* and *idioms* in their poetry to portray their message. But to use literal meanings of these *metaphors* and *idioms* without understanding the spiritual context of the Shabd will give incorrect meanings.

³ GGS, p. 958

⁴ GGS, p. 1

Sant Singh Khalsa's use of *antiquated idioms*, such as 'O my Sovereign Lord King', does not do any justice to Guru Nanak's Sikhi. Use of such idioms are not only incorrect, but makes the translation '*anglicised*', which distorts Guru Nanak's unique theology. The use of Sant Singh Khalsa's online translations and apps should be avoided; otherwise there is a danger of losing the originality of Guru Nanak's message.

The ritual of sacrificial offering of food to a deity is a practice that has been performed by many religions for thousands of years. The offerings are made to *please* the deity so that in return the individuals are expecting their temporal needs to be fulfilled by the deity. This is certainly true in the Hindu religion; the preparation of the foods is carried out in a '*purified sacred*' kitchen. Portions of the foods are placed on a platter, along with a glass of water, and placed in front of an image or statue of the deity. A prayer is then performed for the deity to accept the food and be *pleased* with the offering in return for fulfilment of temporal wishes. The *sampled* food is then re-mixed back into the larger containers and served to the congregation. Certain foods such as onion, garlic and mushrooms are forbidden for the offering.

Unfortunately, by misunderstanding the above verse, this ritual is also being widely practiced by the Sikh sangat; expecting *Karta Purakh* to partake in *sampling* the food prepared for the langar. There is no place for rituals in Sikhi and have been totally rejected by the Gurus.

So, what is the spiritual significance of Sikhs carrying out Kirpaan bhet to the Karraah Parsaad? The significance of it is analogous to the Guru bestowing grace to each individual member of the sangat by placing a hand on his or her head. The word Kirpaan means to be *graceful*. With the touching of the Karraah Parsaad with the Kirpaan, the Karraah Parsaad should be thought of as the grace from the Guru. In other words, the Guru's grace is conveyed by way of the sangat receiving the Karraah Parsaad.

The Karraah Parsaad is not an offering of food to a deity and must not be thought of it as such. And it should not be thought of as just food. It is the Guru's grace being received by the sangat.

Conclusion

In light of the current rise in allergens affecting a large number of the worlds population and the recent deaths that have occurred due to allergic reactions, it is imperative that Gurdwara committees take the necessary steps to safeguard the Sikh sangat that are partaking in langar. The risk increases further as the langar is also freely served to any member of the wider public. A list of ingredients contained within the food being served should be clearly displayed in both English and Punjabi. A cautionary sign should also be displayed informing the sangat of the possibility of allergens being present within the langar served.

The solution to eliminate the problem of cross-contamination of foods is to not carry out the Kirpan bhet to the langar. According to the Sikh Rehat Maryada, the Kirpan bhet is only to be carried out to the Karraah Parsaad. The Kirpan bhet of the langar is not mentioned.

Certainly, it would be very challenging to implement this as the sangat are 'set' in their '*traditional*' ways, but the committees in each individual Gurdwaras also have a duty to protect the sangat's safety and wellbeing.