

Khalsa Aid International: A Report on the Range of its Activities

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The project work tries to situate '*Sarbat da Bhala*', (welfare of all) a cardinal Sikh tradition and its practice in the contemporary world by exploring Khalsa Aid International, a UK based NGO that claims to be inspired by Sikh philosophy and follows it. It is the first ever cross-border international aid organization based on the Sikh practices and traditions that helps and provides humanitarian aid in zones of civil conflict and natural disaster across the globe at multiple locations. The report traces the evolution of Sikh philosophy, and explores its journey to distant lands with the Khalsa Aid team, studies the evolution of community kitchen, the institution of *Langar*, as per the need of place and time, and analyzes how the religious space of the faith is expanding garbed in humanitarian message. Our findings reveal that this Sikh faith-based organization is giving modern dimension to the collective identity of the Sikhs settled in different corners of the world.

Introduction

This report is the result of a project undertaken to introduce and train undergraduate students of history to conduct research and learn the process of research methodology under the guidance of two faculty members. The project team made an effort to explore Khalsa Aid International; a non-profit NGO started by Sikh migrants in the United Kingdom. It has generated positive media coverage at national and international levels by its humanitarian activities. The founder of Khalsa Aid International, Ravinder Singh, and his associates claim to be inspired by core values of Sikh religion, especially the concept of

'welfare of all'. Hence, the project also attempted to trace the evolution of various practices and traditions of Sikhism associated with the concept of 'welfare of all', popularly called *Sarbat da Bhala*, and situate them in the contemporary consumerist capitalist world with the diminishing welfare role of the state.

The report is divided broadly in two sections. The first section of the report deals with evolution of the distinctive ideas and values of Sikh religion. The historical evolution of *sarbat da bhala* and its associated practices of *Sewa* and *Langar* have been examined. The study also tried to observe if the changing globalized and capitalist socio-economic setup is affecting these practices in any way. The second section presents the results of the study conducted on the activities of 'Khalsa Aid International' which provides humanitarian aid in disaster-affected areas and civil conflict zones around the world. Through the case study of Khalsa Aid, an attempt is made to map the current realization of the traditions and practices of Sikhism. This section deals with three areas to understand the new notions that Sikhism has acquired worldwide. Firstly, the humanitarian deeds of the organization have been explored to comprehend the link it may have with the practice and traditions of Sikhism. The second area examined are the operational methods through which Sikh ideas are being disseminated and, thirdly, the findings looked at the responses of the society at large, and the making of a collective Sikh Identity globally.

The project and its findings are an important contribution to the body of knowledge on social sciences. The importance of the work emanates from the fact that this project is the first work on the Sikh-faith based humanitarian agency "Khalsa Aid International". This work makes a significant new contribution to the existing corpus of studies on Sikh identity since the activities of Khalsa Aid are acknowledged and admired; moreover, they are a source of inspiration for several other Sikh individuals as well as organizations. This has played a role in constructing and shaping of a philanthropic image in the popular perception which, in turn, has assisted in carving out a new identity for the community in modern times. Moreover, in the present times of conflicts, where religions are perceived as evolved or cause of conflicts, it is important to highlight the aspects of religion which are creating ties of brotherhood and love among the people of the globe, irrespective of the religion they belong to.

Research Methodology

Since one of the main objectives of the project was to train undergraduate history students the techniques of research, methodology constituted an important aspect. The project was primarily qualitative in nature and, thus, an analytical method was adopted, which involved a detailed comparative as well as analytic study of the sources. The students needed to understand concepts, analyze experiences and opinions that could be utilized to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas. The methodology consisted of different consecutive stages. The project began by exploring a comprehensive range of secondary sources related to Sikhism and the work of numerous NGOs. On one hand, this exercise provided a deeper understanding of the key ideas of *Sarbat da Bhala*, *Langar* and *Sewa* in Sikhism, and the historical context in which these ideas developed, while on the other hand, the students got acquainted with the nature and operating mechanisms of NGOs.

The second stage included reading primary sources like *Sikh Rehatnama*, *Dasam Granth* and some portions of *Guru Granth Sahib*, which explain and ponder over the idea; need and significance of the idea and practice of *Sarbat da Bhala*, *Langar* and *Sewa*. An entirely different genre of sources was consulted for exploring and understanding the activities of Khalsa Aid. It included new kinds of contemporary digital sources, like the Khalsa Aid website, Instagram, online news, YouTube videos, and various TV news channels. These sources provided valuable first-hand information regarding the nature of Khalsa Aid's assistance in India and other countries of the world. It also offered evidence of responses in the recipient country, the perception and role of media, and the criticism of the organization. Thirdly, considerable interactions were held with the members of Khalsa Aid, including interviews conducted at their head office at Patiala. For secondary literature and collection of some primary sources, libraries like National Archives of India, New Delhi; Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi; Library of Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, New Delhi; and library at SGTB Khalsa College and its Sikh study center, were consulted.

Review of Literature

The theme of the project is new and it has been adopted with a fresh approach. Hence, secondary literature pertaining directly to Khalsa Aid and its role in constructing a new Sikh identity globally couldn't be located. Nonetheless, the task of studying and situating activities of Khalsa Aid International within the context of Sikh traditions led the researchers to the perusal of different genre of sources.

This study delves upon primary and secondary sources dealing with the understanding and pragmatic view of various constructs of Sikhism. Guru Granth and Dasam Granth have been frequently referred to, in order to understand the concept of *Sewa*, *Langar*, *Sangat* and the emphasis on values like equality of all. The study of Guru Granth has helped develop an understanding about these socio-religious ideas and practices as presented and conceived in the Sikh tradition, during the Guru Period. The study of these texts led to framing of a comparative understanding of the changes that have taken place in the philosophy and its practice in the colonial and post-colonial period.

Sikh *Rehatnamas* have been used to understand the standard code of conduct prescribed for the Sikhs; where do these *rehatnamas* place the ideals of *Sewa* and *Langar*, what is the significance and role of *sangat* in the life of a Sikh. For the present study two *rehatnamas* have been used. First is the Chaupa Singh *Rehatnama* which is believed to be the earliest *Rehatnama* available to us, established to be written in the early decades of the eighteenth century. The second one is Sikh Rehat Maryada' published by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee in 1945, which is an amalgam of the available *Rehatnamas* written in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The secondary sources for understanding Sikh traditions have been used to develop an understanding how the contemporary literature reads and evaluates these primary texts and what conclusions have been drawn from these with regard to the eminence of Sikh philosophy and the role it plays in the lives of contemporary Sikhs.

Harjot S. Oberoi's *A World Reconstructed: Religion, Ritual and Community among the Sikhs, 1850-1909* (Doctoral Thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, March, 1987) beautifully carves out the Sikh way of life and places it in the history and evolution of the Sikh tradition. He deconstructs the idea of 'world religions' and 'isms', like

Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, etc., as created by the colonial historiography.

In continuance, to develop an understanding on how the colonial period has challenged and changed the representation of the Sikh tradition and Sikh identity, the article by Akriti Kohli (2016) entitled “‘Militarization of Sikh Masculinity’ has been referred to. It discusses how emphasis was laid on the making of Sikhs as a martial race. How the identities of a martial masculinity and a brave soldier have been reconfirmed and strengthened by the colonial forces to use the Sikhs as breakwaters against the other Indian sects and groups rebelling against the British.

Nicola Mooney (2013), in *“The Yeoman Jats of Punjab: Time, Expertise and the Colonial Construction of Jat Sikh Identity”*, establishes the making of the Jat Sikhs as the yeomen farmers in India, equating them to the those of England, a newly emerging upper-middle class farmer community, known for their hard working and enterprising abilities. The paper traces how conscious attempts were made in the colonial period to carve out an identity of a brave, hardworking and enterprising community of Sikhs, specially Jat Sikhs, and how they were used to reclaim the lands in the newly established canal colonies in West Punjab, thus creating revenue for the rulers. Secondary literature by J.S. Grewal, J.S. Neki, W.H. Mcleod have also been studied to develop a deeper understanding of Sikh philosophy and traditions.

For exploring the activities of Khalsa Aid International, information was collected from their own website, which records in detail the operation of different projects they undertake. News, in print as well as electronic media, has provided vital information on various aspects of their project. Study of the coverage of their work by different T.V. channels – regional, national and international – supplied vital information regarding their work, their perception, and people’s responses and reactions to their humanitarian intervention. Their notions, ideologies and several insights are revealed through their interviews in different media and the documentaries made on their work by media houses.

Although the findings focus on and highlight the activities of only Khalsa Aid, as that was the objective of the project, a range of literature was consulted to develop an understanding of the nature of NGOs and their functioning in India, as well as in the world to get a better perceptive on the organization under study. The work by Laura C. Thaut

contributed immensely to understand the Christian-based humanitarian agencies and the functioning of major international humanitarian organizations. The piece by Donald K. Swearer on the Buddhist virtues of compassion, and on the Hindu concept of Dharma by Suresh Chandra and Anna Karen Trollope, as well as work on the importance of humanitarianism in Islam by Fazlur Rehman, helped gain an appreciation of the concepts of charity in different religions. William Fisher's observations on NGO's involvement in a diverse range of activities, and addressing them as 'quiet' revolution, helped in getting an idea of the present functions of NGOs. An understanding of the manner in which NGOs have become an integral part of the civil society, especially with the decline of State welfare, has been well developed by B.S Baviskar in the Indian context and by Tina Wallace regarding UK. Trent Brown draws our attention to several pertinent aspects related to the nature of NGOs, ranging from financial grants by the World Bank to the neglect of grass root concerns in several organizations – by focusing on projects that assist market integration and commodification. At the same time he also traces NGOs which are seen as the people's movement. A reading of Harry Blair, Bruno Decordier and Saroj Jaya Singhe has contributed immensely in understanding that NGO's are neither uniform, nor do they indulge in similar kinds of work, and many NGO's merge aid with political, social, and religious agendas. Although none of these researches were directly linked to the present project, except the article by Navkiran Pal Kaur which looked at the volunteering experiences of second generation Sikhs from religious centers in South eastern Michigan, these studies have certainly contributed to developing an understanding of the functions and nature of NGO's in India and abroad which further assisted in developing a perspective on Khalsa Aid.

Structure

The report does take note of the tradition of benevolence, charity, philanthropy and humanitarianism by individuals, by groups of people, or by religious sects throughout history, and more so in contemporary times. Other major religions in India also have this tradition, if not as far-reaching as espoused by Sikhism. Hitherto, most research on humanitarian aid is dominantly focused on Western and Christian faith-based agencies. This project is the first work on a Sikh faith-based NGO,

Khalsa Aid International, which is serving helpless human beings irrespective of any religion, race, caste, and community.

Reasons behind volunteering for religious organizations has been the subject of much deliberations, with scholars speculating on the motivation – whether individuals are encouraged by their religious beliefs, or by spiritual leaders, or from their place of reverence – as well as on the *modus operandi* – is there any kind of weekly announcements or e-mails to encourage volunteering (Navkiran Pal Kaur 2018). The present research observed that the founding members and team of Khalsa Aid International have been claiming about their inspiration being drawn from the Sikh traditions, especially the tenets of ‘welfare of all’, commonly referred to as *Sarbat da Bhala*, and is believed to be practicing them, making them relevant. Hence, the project situates the tradition of *Sarbat da Bhala* in the activities of Khalsa Aid for the study.

Section A

Owing to the wide range of activities of Khalsa Aid, people all over the world are eager to know more about this organization. There is a curiosity to trace the source of the ideological and philosophical roots of this organization and to understand the core values of Sikhism which have inspired Ravinder Singh (the founder of Khalsa Aid) and many others to help the suffering humanity.

The first part of the report has explored *sarbat da bhala*, a core idea in Sikh tradition, its historical evolution, and associated practices. The Sikh practices of *Sewa* and *Langar* are to be understood in the light of contemporary socio-economic and political determinants. It would not be an exaggeration to say, that today, a Sikh is identified with his acts of *Sewa* – service to the humanity – and *Langar*, which has been taken out of the four walls of a Gurudwara to the doorstep of those who are in need. Khalsa Aid draws its inspiration from putting these ideas together, lead one to work towards the well-being of the entire humanity. Also, there is a need to focus on how through the teachings and practice of Sikhism, a (Sikh) individual’s relation with the society is constructed.

The idea of *Sarbat da bhala*, as per Sikh tradition, can be understood from the tenet *Nam Japo, Kirat Karo, Vand Chhako*. Given by Guru Nanak, this ideal explains the journey of an individual which begins with realizing one’s own self and finally leads one to serve the society in a selfless way. The first emphasis is laid upon the recitation of *Nam* and

then the need to do labor to earn one's living in a righteous way is highlighted, all labor being given equal dignity. An individual's role reaches its culmination, when he is seen in relation to his society and social needs. The idea of *vand chhako* emphasizes on the tenet that while fulfilling all the household duties (*grihast*), it becomes an individual's moral duty to contribute towards the welfare of the society. This may be rightly done by sharing the fruits of his labor with others thus ensuring *sarbat da bhala* in its real sense. *Vand chhako* is deeply enshrined with the idea of *Sewa* in Sikh tradition. *Sikh Rehat Maryada* mentions *Seva* (as spelled in Sikh Rehat Maryada) as a prominent part of Sikh religion. *Sewa* includes sweeping and plastering the floors of the Gurudwara, serving water to or fanning the congregation, offering provisions to and rendering any kind of service in *Langar*, dusting the shoes of the people visiting the gurudwara, etc. (*Sikh Rehat Maryada*, 1945). *Sewa* is not restricted to the premises of a gurudwara. Sikh tradition inspires its followers to help others. This can be in the form of serving water to the injured soldiers in the battlefield as Bhai Kanhaiya did, or it can be in hospitals, on roads, and in the calamity stricken and war-torn areas. It seems that, over the decades, as the Sikh exposure to resources and other facilities of transport and communication have improved, the meaning and scope of *Sewa* has been widened. Now, helping someone in need, in any part of the world, irrespective of the spatial demarcations, whether one is in a gurudwara or not, is considered as an act of *Sewa*. This can be done either in monetary or material form or in the form of service. It exemplifies the practice of working for the welfare of others and to help them in any form which is required. The practice of *Langar*, contribution of *daswandh*, voluntary jobs performed in the gurudwara, are all considered as *Sewa*; which emanates as the practical representation of Guru Nanak's ideal of *vand chhako*.

Nam Japo, Kirat Karo, Vand Chhako is a phenomena which challenged the longstanding orthodox customs of the society which rested upon inequality, exploitation of the poor and helpless. Instead, Nanak's philosophy stood for 'dignity of labor' and 'equality for all kinds of works' – every contribution being a respectful contribution which will finally lead to the betterment of the society. It strongly rejected any practice validating caste in any form and offered a model of society based on equality and love for all.

Guru Nanak's compositions justified a radical departure from the existing social order (Grewal, 2017) and carved a unique place for itself,

as he also suggested a new way of life to his followers. At Kartarpur, Guru Nanak gave practical expression to the ideals which matured during the period of his travels and combined a life of devotion with worldly activities, set in the context of normal family life and a regular *satsang* (McLeod, 1968). The institution of *Langar* promoted the spirit of unity and mutual belongingness, and struck at a major aspect of caste, thereby advancing the process of defining a distinctive Sikh identity. The idea of equality before God found expression in the congregational worship of the community at Kartarpur, and in a common kitchen maintained by voluntary contribution in cash, kind, or service (Grewal, 2017). The Sikh brotherhood that evolved at Kartarpur was, thus, marked by faith, equality, affirmation, mutual trust, help, and service.

Langar, strengthening the Sikh notion of 'equality for all', recognizes the whole human race as one. *Sikh Rehat Maryada* mentions that the philosophy behind *Langar* is to help banish all distinctions of high and low, pure and impure, from the minds of the Sikhs. The practice of *Langar* trains them in voluntary service along with teaching them to imbibe humility and selflessness (*Sikh Rehat Maryada*, 1945).

The idea of equality is deeply enshrined in the text of Guru Granth, the sacred book of the Sikhs. It denounces any discrimination on the basis of ritual purity and pollution, and redefines the same, making it absolutely dependent on the purity of thoughts and actions. Guru Nanak, with his basic perception of the unity of God, made it categorically clear that in the execution of the religious ideals of the worship of 'One God' and 'equality of man,' any form of prejudices against caste, creed, gender, and surrender to exploitation or oppression are wrong acts. He compared himself with the low caste, like a disinherited folk denied of the path of liberation. He wished to remain with the men of low caste as the place where they are cared for and cherished, and are always blessed with the grace of God (*neecha andar neech jat neechee ho at neech, nanak tin kai sang saath vadiaa si oki aa rees. Jithai neech samalean tithai nadar teri bakhsees*, M1, Guru Granth, 15). Guru Gobind also urged his followers to recognize and accept people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds (*manas ki jat sabia ekai pahichanbo...ek hi sarup sabia ekai joti janbo*, Akal Ustat, 85). The passage has a strong plea – humans need to recognize that we all belong to the same caste. Despite our racial or regional differences, we all have the same body, and the same spiritual light dwells in us all. At the same time, Sikh tradition also acknowledges the differences owing to

variations in regional and cultural belongings (*niare desan ke bhes ko prabhao hai ekai nain ekai kan ekai deh ekai ban*, Dasam Granth, Akal Ustat, 86). The differences in one's physical and behavioral ways are accepted as a representation of pluralism which is appreciated and valued in Sikh tradition (Kaur, 2012). Thus, it becomes the prime duty of a Sikh to love and accept every human being and to do his bit to contribute towards the welfare of all.

Sikh tradition not only indulges in encouraging its followers to work for the welfare of all, it also emphasizes the need to pray for the same. This is ensured through the medium of prayers by the *sangat* and in *ardas*. *Ardas* concludes with the lines *Nanak Naam Charhdi Kala. Tere Bhane Sarbat da Bhala*. Thus, the whole *sangat* prays for the welfare and prosperity of all. In Guru Granth, there is a frequent observation that those who love God in the real sense, love his creation too, unconditionally. So, praying for the well-being of all is a natural outcome flowing from one's love for God and his creation (Neki, 2012). Guru's philosophy sees none as an alien or an enemy (*naa ko bairee na hee baigaanaa sagal sang ham kao ban aae*, M5, Guru Granth, 1299; *sabhay jee samaal apnee mihar kar*, M5, Guru Granth, 1251; *Ardaas sunee daataar hoee sisat thar*, M5, Guru Granth, 1251). Throughout Guru Granth, there is frequent mention in the verses to pray for the welfare of all.

Sangat is another institution which acts as a strong pillar supporting the edifice of Sikh philosophy. No idea or practice of Sikhism stands complete without the participation of *sangat*. In the compositions of Guru Nanak, there is a good deal of appreciation for *sadh* and *sant*, and association with them is praised and commended. In due course of time, the congregation of Sikhs came to be known as *sadh-sangat*. Sikh Gurus have always attached a greater importance to the *sangat* in comparison to the individual disciple. The idea that the positions of the guide (*Guru*) and the disciple (*chela*) are interchangeable is emphasized by Bhai Gurdas, which clears that Sikh philosophy does not support any form of hierarchies either in theory or in practice (Hazara Singh, 2017). The majority decision of the *sangat* has always been given primary importance in Sikh tradition. In Chaupa Singh's *Rehatnama*, it is recorded that a *gursikh* should regularly join the *sangat* to hear the sacred scripture, sing and deliberate in the name of God and the Guru's message. Chaupa Singh's *Rehatnama* states that when Sikhs participate in *sangat* they read and sing the scriptures, deep issues of the Sikh faith are explored, a better understanding of *rehat* (code of conduct) is acquired,

and each Sikh is motivated to give his contribution (in monetary form or in the form of service) according to his means (Chaupa Singh's Rehatnama). Thus, participation in *sangat* is not just a practice but an institution of primary importance, which acts as a core to the whole structure of Sikh tradition and social practice.

While tracing the source of inspiration behind the activities of Khalsa Aid, the focus lies on understanding these high values of equality, mutual love and acceptance, *Sewa* and *Langar*, which form an inseparable part of Sikh tradition. Another question of pertinent importance here is to locate if the works of Khalsa Aid and other such Sikh philanthropic organizations, in the recent times, have brought in any change as to how Sikhs are perceived worldwide. Has it contributed in any way in bringing a change or a shift in the perceived identity of a Sikh?

The perception regarding Sikhs has changed from a community of men of saintly temperament during the times of Nanak, to the saint-soldiers when Guru Hargobind adopted two swords, *Miri* and *Piri*, which represent his worldly and spiritual might, respectively. This image of Sikhs was further strengthened with the creation of Khalsa – the Khalsa was now perceived as martial, brave, and courageous people willing to sacrifice their life to uphold the faith and survival of the helpless. Sikhs are thus seen as a community of brave and fearless men in the popular culture at large.

The dominant understanding of a Sikh and his traits of bravery, courage, and valor, trace its origin to the martial identity of Khalsa. This identity was further strengthened as a result of the relationship between the British and the Sikhs in the colonial period, and due to the conscious act of making the Sikh as a brave and martial race through the medium of literature written in the colonial period (Kohli, 2016).

In the early decades of post-colonial India, Sikhs continued to hold the same identity as prescribed by the colonial regime. In 1965, the slogan *Jai Jawan. Jai Kisan* (hail the soldier, hail the farmer) was raised in the nation which was involved in war with Pakistan and was facing droughts, food shortage, and riots. Lal Bahadur Shastri's choice to present these two occupations as the fundamental pillars of security and prosperity, highlighted their roles in the making of a strong and self-dependent post-colonial nation (Mooney, 2013).

The slogan suited the Jat Sikh community in a perfect manner. Owing to the overpowering nature and identity of the community, and

their huge numbers in the total Sikh population, generally what is perceived of a Jat Sikh is also accepted true for the whole Sikh community (though exceptions and disparities are very much there). In contrast to the favorable attitude of the colonial government towards Sikhs, the post-colonial regime in India has remained at odds with the Sikhs. This has led to a considerable marginalization of the community within the nation (Mooney, 2013).

The shift from colonial advantage to the post-colonial disadvantage can be located in the factors which are operative at regional, national, and global level, and which have socio-economic, political, and historical underpinnings. Partition and its resultant migration considerably reduced the landholdings of many Jat Sikhs. The Green Revolution brought with it many economic and ecological pressures for the agriculturists, especially for farmers with marginal or small land holdings who had to suffer the most. Division of Punjab on linguistic basis in 1966 added to the perceived woes of the Sikhs. The Khalistan Movement of 1980s presented the Sikhs as national suspects, with the attack on Golden Temple and the anti-Sikh homicide of 1984 confirming their national marginalization. These factors have led to alienation and increasing discontentment amongst the Sikhs in independent India.

Post 1990s, Sikhs have managed to carve out a new identity for themselves as educated and well-read people (specially the urban Sikhs) and have served at various key positions in administrative and bureaucratic services in India. Sikhs have migrated to almost all the countries in the world, and everywhere they chose to settle they have created a respectable place for themselves in the society. Sikhs, though a very small percentage of the total population, are now a known community throughout the world. They are known for their acts of charity and philanthropic works, especially through the act of serving *Langar* to the hungry, and assistance with other things of their need. Thus, the trait of *Sewa* and acts of *Langar* have helped Sikh to create a niche for themselves in the world society.

It is interesting to note that Sikhs today are seen and perceived not as agriculturalists or soldiers, but as ones who are filled with love for humanity and are passionate to serve the suffering, fueling their passions from Sikh ideas and philosophy. We are, presently, at the right juncture in history, where we may witness the unmaking of the existing colonial identities designed for a community by the colonial rulers, giving way to the making of a new identity, quite different and contrary

to the earlier one but unique in its own sense, getting its inspiration from its roots.

Section B

This section critically analyzes the range of activities undertaken by Khalsa Aid, their program of *Langar* Aid, donation management and volunteer's network, and the hurdles they face. An effort has been made to comprehend the perceptions of the recipients, and issues of whether the recipients in foreign lands get associated to and identified with the religious and national identity of Khalsa Aid, or whether they are influenced in any manner by the organization.

The organization which is rescuing and feeding scores of helpless people all over the world, which is crafting a new identity for the Sikhs and spreading messages of humanity, is not very old. It was founded in 1999 by Ravinder Singh and a few other Sikhs in the United Kingdom. It is said to be a spontaneous act and not a planned initiative. Two events, the crisis in Kosovo and the celebration of the 300th anniversary of Khalsa *Panth* at Slough and Berkshire in the UK in the year 1999, seems to have been the background to the formation of Khalsa Aid (Khalsa Aid website). 1999 was the year when the 300th anniversary of the foundation of the Khalsa *Panth* was being celebrated around the world. During the same time Kosovo was going through a civil war and thousands of innocent victims were fleeing to neighboring countries (Javier Solana, 1999). Ravinder Singh, the founder member, says that he and his friends were concerned about Kosovo and at the same time realized that lots of food was available at these Sikh events and at the Gurdwara community kitchen. They decided that food could be given to the refugees of Kosovo who needed it desperately. At the same time Ravi and his friends made an appeal to the Sikh community in particular to give generously. Without asking for specific amount they raised funds between £20,000 and £25,000 in ten days in Southall and Slough alone from the Sikh community (Khalsa Aid website).

It started off as a volunteer project for which Ravinder used to take time off from work, but he eventually decided the only way he could move the humanitarian organization forward was to dedicate all of his time to it (Hanna Crouch, 2014). Thus, Khalsa Aid International was born.

Coming to the issue of naming the outfit as Khalsa, Gurpreet Singh, an administrator of the organization in the Patiala main office, revealed that the term 'Khalsa' means pure and pious, and at the time of formation of the organization, the word 'Khalsa' was under condemnation due to the movement for Khalistan by a section of Sikhs. According to Gurpreet, it was decided to adopt the name Khalsa Aid to change the narrative of blame on Sikh populace, and to bring forth the concept of brotherhood and purity associated with it.

I

The range of activities undertaken by Khalsa Aid (hereinafter mentioned as KAI) and their humanitarian intervention in the ethnic conflict zones and in regions affected by natural calamity, reveals the enormous spread and the diverse nature of aid as well as the development of a vital network of a support system globally. From the year 1999 to 2020, in twenty-one years, it has reached many regions of the globe, irrespective of the nature of the crisis, not fearing for the life of its members and volunteers.

Although the report presents a survey of most of their important projects, accounts of several projects could not be included due to the constraints of space in this research report. An attempt has been made to include the nature of their rescue operations and the supplies they provide because in the course of this project it became clear that a deep assessment and study of ground reality formed the basis of their help. The feedback of the volunteers on their website also points to a deep study of the extent of damage and nature of requirements that forms their first step towards handling any crisis.

In the year of its inception, it started providing aid in India as well as in areas abroad, simultaneously. The first project was to deliver aid to the Kosovo refugees which originated with the background of celebration of Khalsa *Panth*. Ravinder writes and frequently refers to how the Sikh idea of *Sarbat da Bhala* came to his mind while reading about a small group who were organizing an aid convoy to Albania. Thus, he claims publicly that he draws his strength from Sikh traditions. Consequently, in this manner, he creates awareness about Sikhism and states his identity as a Sikh.

In the same year more projects were undertaken. Ravinder Singh initiated a relief project to Turkey where a devastating earthquake

measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale had struck. It killed thousands, official damage estimates were placed at 17,127 killed and 43,953 injured. It left over 120,000 houses damaged beyond repair and over 2,000 buildings collapsed. Khalsa Aid sent thousands of pairs of socks and tens of thousands of water purification tablets to the offices of the Turkish Red Crescent in Istanbul via Turkish Airlines, and they were distributed to affected people in temporary shelters.

In 1999 itself, the Indian State of Orissa experienced a devastating cyclone, which is believed to have killed between 30,000 and 40,000 people. The KAI team sent two volunteers to assess the situation, and then a decision was taken to support children with educational supplies and to work with the local community. They helped around 6,000 children of the affected areas with educational supplies. In 2019, KAI launched another rescue operation in Orissa when it was hit by Cyclone Fani. This time, a team of 15 volunteers coordinated their operation with local Gurudwaras and the district administrations. They arranged clean water and food for 5,000 people on a daily basis (Think India, 2019). In the past two decades, the KAI has come a long way in terms of its manpower, provisions and, most crucially, it has established a strong credibility allowing it to work and coordinate with State machinery and community support.

The initial years witnessed intervention in multiple spots with fewer volunteers, but their work was intense and of diverse nature. By 2003, they had earned a name in humanitarian activism and that resulted in being approached by local organizations of the affected regions. One of the instances was the contact by local NGOs to provide assistance to minority communities in Afghanistan in 2003. The KAI provided support to the Sikh and Hindu communities of Kabul by supplying them with school educational items, several personal computers, and monetary help in running a local primary school in the region.

The Andaman Islands were hit by an undersea earthquake in 2004 that caused a series of devastating tsunamis along the coasts of many states bordering the Indian Ocean. It was one of the deadliest natural disasters in history hitting many other islands badly, killing more than 225,000 people. A shipment containing tons of flour, lentils, salt, and onions was dispatched along with hundreds of mosquito nets and mosquito repellents within hours by KAI. They operated a warehouse of building materials for the people trying to rebuild their homes. On the request of the district commissioner at Port Blair, Ravinder Singh visited

Hut Bay, at little Andaman, with 20 sewing machines and two technicians for installation. The aid and concern at multiple levels suggest their detailed observation and meticulous assessment of the requirements. They supported the local community who had requested to aid them in becoming self-sufficient. Another team of KAI focused on the project setup to help relief camps in the Port Blair area and worked for providing sanitation facilities to counter the spread of diseases. Later shipments carried more mosquito nets, books, notepads, stationary, undergarments, and clothing including turbans.

In 2005, a major earthquake (7.7 on the Richter scale) occurred in Azad Kashmir (Pakistan-administered Kashmir) and North West Frontier Province (NWFP, presently Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) of Pakistan. The official death toll was 79,000 and nearly 1,400 people died in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir (Indian administered Kashmir) as well. KAI relief teams led by Ravinder Singh visited Balakot, and provided sanitation facilities in camps around the local area. The immediate priority they felt was to stop diseases spreading through lack of sanitation and hence, toilets, washrooms, and cleaning facilities were built for the local town. They received support from the Sikh community from Lahore, who cooked food for hundreds in Muzaffarabad on a daily basis, with the KAI providing ingredients and fresh fruit for this community kitchen. In addition, Ravinder Singh bought 2,000 pairs of socks for children and helped individuals working for the cause with food stuff and medicine. Khalsa Aid helped refugees of this disaster once again in 2009, by providing relief to the Sikh and Hindu refugees at Panjab Sahib Gurdwara, Pakistan. A family in London made the donation to help the refugees in getting their essential items. The study of this particular operation brought into focus the wider network that was forming, especially amongst the Sikh community, who wanted to contribute in the humanitarian relief actions. Working with each other seems to have helped them as well as the operations, bringing better results.

The network that was building around the world reflects on the increased acceptability, admiration, and trust in KAI by other organizations. This coordination was seen even in the operation at Philippines. In November 2013, a major project took the KAI team to San Dionisha in Philippines which was badly hit by a typhoon and, due to its peculiar geographical location, had not received much help. Working closely with local organizations it had set up short term relief programs

of engaging skilled carpenters to repair and build boats, which also gave employment to the locals.

An exploration of the KAI projects shows their *modus operandi*, to avail clean water and manage water in a situation of shortage, has been one of the most successful aid in different parts of the world. One of their success stories has been that of Maharashtra, which suffered a drought in 2013 due to extremely low rainfall in 2012, and was severely affected by the shortage of water in 2015, 2016, and 2019, leading to drought again in 2019. As the people of Maharashtra struggled to survive in such extreme conditions, KAI team reached Nasik, which was one of the worst-hit places during both times, and provided water to those affected in the region. Amanpreet, managing director of the organization, along with his team of volunteers from Ludhiana and Patiala, camped in the parched town of Latur for days, supplying nearly one hundred thousand liters of drinking water, the team stayed on for a month. He recounts, *"We spend nearly Rs 30,000 per day on purchasing water, supplying nearly 3,000 households. Normally a water tanker is available for Rs 600, but we have to pay Rs 1,500 for one. We are sourcing water from a place which is located 25-30 kms away. Sadly, water is now being sold on the black market, as such, the poor cannot afford it."* In Maharashtra, members of the Sikh community assisted tremendously, the Tank Lorry Owners Association headed by Gurmeet Singh Bal was bearing a cost of Rs 1.25 lakh daily to run 10 vehicles ferrying water in Nanded and Prabhani. *"Our association is open for all. It is not just Sikhs, but people from all religion are contributing to the noble cause. It will continue for 45 days till the onset of monsoons. The total project will cost us Rs 50 lakhs or more,"* said Bal. Volunteers helped in sanitizing the village wells with purification tablets. Their aid was immensely admired by the people and the Sikh community as a whole, and created a new benevolent image in their minds. Amanpreet Singh told the Times of India, over phone from Latur, that people would say, *"You are from Punjab and have come all the way to help us with drinking water? We never knew Punjabis are so great, the people of Latur will be first to help in case of any crisis in Punjab."* (The Times of India, 2019). The responses of the recipients are very significant in order to understand the new image of Sikhs that is being forged, and not to forget, the message of their religion also gets disseminated with their work and words, which are transmitted through their interviews on various mediums.

The visibility of KAI actions on the international level brings in other dynamism about them. Some of their international projects reflect their management skills. The organization contributed in relief operations in the aftermath of the Bosnia floods in 2014. A huge devastation occurred due to catastrophic flooding in the Balkan region with the addition to heavy rains for a few days which resulted in wreckage of local towns and homes. Floodwaters led to over 2,000 landslides across the Balkan region, spreading damage across many towns and villages, affecting 1.6 million people in Serbia and Bosnia. KAI rebuilt flood defenses and renovated homes along with local NGOs.

By 2015, KAI seems to have acquired great skills and management strategies dealing with natural calamities. This was exemplified and lauded immensely during their operation after the UK floods of 2015. It was held by the U.K Media at that time that the KAI could do what even the local authorities could not do because of their lack of experience. Areas in Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cumbria were adversely affected by the terrible flood, entire communities were destroyed, and people evacuated from their homes. KAI launched a relief operation when news broke out of flooding in the region, with a team providing hot meals (more than 3,000 hot meals were provided) to the victims immediately after calamity, working closely with the Sikh community in the local area. Provisions of flood defense items like sand bags and cleaning materials were distributed to residents. KAI caught the eyes of the UK and the world due to this project, more so, as the volunteers worked throughout the festive period in 2015 and also the New Year to bring back normality as soon as possible (Khalsa Aid, 2015; BBC News; Sun).

Furthermore, the year 2015 witnessed the biggest refugee crisis in Europe, with more than one million migrants and refugees crossing into Europe. KAI relief teams had been working across Europe in multiple locations to support refugees with vital food and water supplies. Around the same time, KAI volunteers reached Yemen to extend their aid to the internally displaced persons (IDPs) made homeless due to the civil war. In addition, in the same year KAI dispatched an emergency relief team to Nepal to help with relief efforts after the devastating earthquake that killed over 8,000 people and injured 21,000. The volunteers of Khalsa Aid joined from all over Punjab, Jammu, Delhi and the UK. *Langars* prepared fresh vegan meals, which included warm soups, flat breads, and vegetable dishes daily (morning and evening) for the victims at the national army managed displacement camp. The team along with the

Nepalese Army distributed these meals effectively to those that needed it the most. The team also built over 500 temporary shelters by utilizing materials from the local area to support this project. Other assistance included medical supplies and infant formulas. It worked with United Nation's Nutrition Cluster and local families and in the post-earthquake relief two Sikh organizations from New Delhi and Amritsar sent food relief to the victims (Business Standard). Apart from contributing 25,000 food packets a day, they sent out teams of cooks and volunteers to set up community kitchens, serving hot meals to over 10,000 people a day.

It is really worthwhile to examine multiple operations of KAI that functioned simultaneously. In 2015 itself, the team reached Queensland in Australia to provide aid after Cyclone Marcia caused massive destruction, estimated to be \$590 million, in the local area. The operation reflected the solidarity among the Sikhs, that organizations such as KAI, has successfully built up over the years. Khalsa Aid worked with local organization 'Turbans For Australia' along with the Salvation Army of Rockhampton to deliver vital relief items like non-perishable food, water, nappies for children, and medical supplies to the victims.

Another relief action in this particular year explains the importance it has garnered around itself by working with international organizations, like UNICEF. The relief operation in the flood affected region of Malawi brought the KAI team, working along with UNICEF and the Government of Malawi. The Phalombe region in the North East Constituency of Malawi was hit with heavy rains in February 2015, flooding the river banks. This created havoc for the local communities, 230,000 people were affected and total damages were estimated at above \$50 million, according to the UNICEF and the Malawi government. People were relocated to different regions since villages were completely uprooted and homes destroyed. Basic shelter and healthcare was provided by the UNICEF and the Malawi government. In such a scenario, Khalsa Aid played a significant role by making arrangements for drinking water, the most essential requirement. Through its ground work, the team found that many people no longer had access to clean drinking water, especially after the recession of flood since access to drinking water was increasingly difficult due to the damaged infrastructure. The Khalsa Aid volunteers, along with local communities, government and contractors, created a permanent water source for the community; they also built platforms on top of the wells to include hand pumps. Their 'Project Langar Aid' aided with provision of "food drops"

to 500 families for a month, and also installed eco-friendly clean water pumps (Borgen Project Report).

Similarly, Khalsa Aid's humanitarian relief efforts for Syrian refugees, ever since the conditions got worse in Syria and people started fleeing their homes, is admired worldwide. They are rescuing refugees and helping them resettle. In January 2016, Khalsa Aid launched a major project on the coast of Greece for the refugees arriving from Middle East by boats. By partnering with multiple local organizations, it delivered provisions of food, water, and clean clothing in addition to medical assistance over a seven month period. The major task was organizing food by community kitchen for 1,100 refugees daily in Chios and Ioannina. Another place of its activity has been Lebanon, which is host to 1.5 million Syrian refugees. KAI engages itself in unassuming areas of aid also, like they funded 2 teachers in a school for Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. Similarly, a breakfast club was funded by them for 300 Syrian refugee children who would otherwise remain hungry during school.

One of the largest refugee-hosting countries in the world is Turkey. Massive influx of refugees fleeing the war in Syria have taken shelter in the Turkish city of Adana. In 2017, KAI worked there with its team and have assessed the needs of these refugees living in unofficial camps scattered across the region. It has distributed food aid packs for 200 refugee families, each bag contained 3 kg rice, 3 kg bulgur, 1 kg white beans, 1 kg red lentils, 1 kg sugar, 2 kg flour, 2 kg pasta, and 2 liters cooking oil (monthly food ration for an average family). As per its assessment, it worked for the improvement of sanitation and hygiene in the camps. Along with local landholders, it has built clean water points in a number of Syrian refugee camps. It has also established a semi-permanent education facility for primary-age school children complete with resources. The team provided medical assistance, vital winter supplies and firewood to each refugee camp area. It needs to be noted that they worked towards facilitating prayer facilities for Muslim refugees, so they could continue practicing their faith.

By 2018, KAI had spread its wings extensively, some of the activities included huge quantities of provisions and manpower. The coast of Sulawesi, Indonesia was struck by a powerful earthquake (7.5 magnitude) leading to a tsunami devastating areas of Palu and Donggala in October 2018. Here again, along with the local organizations, it delivered 500 tarpaulins, set up a free community kitchen at both areas,

and provided blankets to the victims. KAI team has been continually working in African countries, especially in the area of arranging drinking water. They are credited for their success installing water facilities. It needs to be noted that they were contacted by local communities in Kenya, who were affected by famine and had no access to clean drinking water. KAI partnered with a local organization, Ramgarhia Youth Association (RYA) to build water facilities after their field operatives made an initial assessment regarding its need. Over 1,000 local people benefitted from the water pump (Twitter).

One of the most controversial operations of theirs has been in Bangladesh in recent times, due to which they have faced some criticism. It is the case of Rohingya Refugees, which is one of the worst international humanitarian crises, as more than 300,000 people fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh in just two weeks. Volunteers from Khalsa Aid reached Teknaf, a town located at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border to provide fresh water and arranged free transportation to take Rohingya refugees to the relief camps in Bangladesh set up by them. Villages were burnt down and extrajudicial killings were committed in the state of Rakhine in Myanmar. It attracted maximum attention as Indian government was not supporting the Rohingya refugees. Khalsa Aid was helping those people whom the Indian government was considering security hazards. Many others were trolling them for helping Muslims. They were being reminded of the violent history between Sikh Gurus and Muslims. Manpreet Singh and Amanpreet Singh of Khalsa Aid said in an interview that, *"if we look at religion how will we do sewa, our religion is sewa and Guru Granth Sahib has included teachings of saints irrespective of any religion and caste, so if our Gurus have not differentiated on the bases of religion, how can we"* (NDTV 2017).

Similar notions are shared by Amardeep Singh when taunted on helping Muslim victims. He says *"Hum Musalmano ki madad nahi kar rahen* (we are not helping Muslims), we are helping humans" and stresses that they take a message to humanity (The Times of India). It is important to recognize that they completely reject any kind of discrimination. A broader secular perspective without holding on to any sectarian interest is one of the important elements which characterizes Khalsa Aid. However, it needs to be understood whether the message of humanity draws its source from teachings of Guru's only. As this study explored their journey, it was found that the teachings of the Sikh Gurus are a great influence on Khalsa Aid, nevertheless their collective

experience of suffering and marginalization time and again plays an important role in shaping their humanitarian notions. This becomes clear with the perceptions reflected by the core members – Amardeep Singh, who had seen hatred from very close quarters, tells about the struggle his family underwent, having to flee their home in Haryana during the 1984 riots. But he doesn't believe in holding on to the past and perceives it as an opportunity to help. Similarly, Ravinder Singh said, "*we know what is like to suffer as a minority*". These perceptions are the result of a higher level of consciousness and sensitivity and it has been observed that the volunteers are sensitive to the issues.

One needs to take into consideration the historical traditions as well as historical experiences in the making of the notions that are determinants of the nature of their activities. If one ponders, one would realize that the Sikh community has always enjoyed the image of being a courageous and fearless race even by the colonial regime as mentioned in the first section. It got further accentuated with their contribution in the freedom struggle, especially with Bhagat Singh. Post-partition phase and later phases of recovery from catastrophic devastations prove that, like a Phoenix, time and again the community has shown resilience to rise and build their life from destruction. A community that has built up a new life arising from ashes, definitely believes in this notion, and Khalsa Aid and numerous other Sikh organizations work tirelessly towards such goals of rebuilding. Thus, the element of fearlessness needs to be considered important for the kinds of intervention that Khalsa Aid makes, and it is reflected in many of their rescue operations.

There are several instances of their aiding relief and rescuing efforts in conflict zones which has invited criticism and displeasure from a section of Indian society and Government. In recent times, during the February-March 2020 Delhi riots, they rescued Muslim men, women, and children from riot-affected North-East Delhi. Their volunteers served *Langar*, feeding over 500 families every day since 27 February (The Times of India, 2020). Similarly they earned wrath and were called names, when they rescued Kashmiri students at a time when they were forced to vacate their hostels and rented accommodation due to the uproar created in the aftermath of the Pulwama attack that killed 40 paramilitary personnel. Khalsa Aid offered help and were able to evacuate more than 300 students who were studying in Uttarakhand and Haryana safely to the Kashmir Valley via Chandigarh and Jammu. (The Asian Age, 2019). They arranged buses and vans to get 600 Kashmiri

students to Punjab first and then, sent them to Kashmir under the protection of Punjab Police (Sonia Sarkar, 2019). Similarly, Khalsa Aid, along with other Sikh organizations like the US-based United Sikhs, Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee, and Shriomani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, had set up 24-hour *Langar* at various places across Srinagar City for the flood victims in 2014. Besides *Langar*, they distributed packaged food for 70,000 people. Flood victims in Jammu and Kashmir were given shelter at various Gurudwara (First Post, 2014). This rescue and aid project was also severely criticized by a section of Indian society. A cartoon illustrating a Sikh saving a drowning victim had become viral.

Another instance of aid which made them the target of accusations of being “anti-national” was the help extended to students of Jamia Millia Islamia, a minority educational institution in Delhi, who suffered injuries inflicted by the police during their protests in December 2019. Members of the organization, Amarpreet Singh along with four volunteers, made the efforts to understand the ground reality and then helped the injured students as well as offered tea, water, and breakfast to around 2,000 students at protest in the cold days (Sonia Sarkar, 2019). Currently, in spite of criticisms, it is lending all kinds of help to the Farmers movement, starting from 1 December 2020 at the borders of Delhi, arranging food, water, a 400-bed waterproof tent, toilets and, interestingly, arrangements for foot massages for the old farmers as they get tired protesting for long hours (Bobins Abraham, 2020). Their help has been covered by reporters of National News outlets like NDTV and several regional ones as well.

One needs to take into account that Khalsa Aid has not shied away from working at dangerous locations, Iraq being one such example. When the whole world was scared of the terrorist outfit ISIS, KAI had gone ahead helping their targets. Northern Iraq is home to the Yazidi community (Project Dignity, Khalsa Aid, 2017). ISIS targeted the Yazidis, killed men, and took young boys as child soldiers as well as enslaved women and girls. The team worked with Yazidi girls and women, who had returned from ISIS captivity in a project called ‘Project Dignity: Essential Clothing for Yazidi Women’. It is collaborating with the local staff at the office of the Kidnapped and Rescue Department in Duhok to ensure that each recently registered returnee is included in Project dignity (BBC, 2016). The terror of ISIS impacted even the migrants from Punjab in Iraq, who worked as manual laborers; they were forced to flee

the country. Moreover, these workers did not receive any support from their employers; as a result they did not have any financial means to leave the country. The MD of Khalsa Aid personally met officials from the High Commission in Kuwait to guarantee the welfare of the Indian Nationals and arranged flights from Iraq back to Punjab.

A noteworthy aspect of Khalsa Aid is that it works in different genre, which marks a departure from the usual trend of most NGOs. Although it gained popularity through its contribution in the regions affected by natural calamities and ethnic conflicts, the new areas of its involvement are worth mentioning. It has several permanent projects; like in the field of education it runs the Dashmesh Public School in Sangrur, Punjab as well as free tuition centers in rural Punjab. They fund medical treatment of people who cannot afford it. Khalsa Aid has been providing support to 250 families, and a monthly pension is sent to the 1984 riot victims (Khalsa Aid Brochure). 'Focus Punjab', a long term project has been initiated to help people in all aspects in Punjab (Khalsa Aid website). In addition, a new project 'Pad the Path' has been launched in Malawi which is intended to educate women on menstrual health and hygiene and supply them with durable and reusable sanitary products. This is seen as a way to empower women with knowledge and pave way to their dignity (Khalsa Aid website).

It is worth noting that the activities and projects of Khalsa Aid invariably display symbols associated with Sikh religion invariably. It is noticeable that the team and the volunteers are dominantly members of the Sikh community, as is clear from their turbans, and they wear T-Shirts imprinted with the famous saying of Guru Gobind Singh "*recognize the entire human race as one*". All volunteers and members of Khalsa Aid, and often the members of other local NGOs and people assisting them, can be seen wearing shirts with the bold images of this teaching. The appeal in the phrase tends to connect people worldwide effortlessly; it has a secular and universal appeal, it also carries a message of peace and equality. More importantly, it is a very famous saying of their Guru – Guru Govind Singh. This phrase is travelling to distant lands to populace in crisis, amongst other humanitarian agencies, and most of the times under the glare of media. Hence, it will not be wrong to say that the Sikh identity travels along with the team to long distances binding the community together in their journey.

During interactions for this study, Amarpreet Singh said that "*our humanitarian activity was started before Red Cross*", referring to the fact that

Sikh religion has been observing humanitarian practices since medieval times. Since the Red Cross is globally recognized as a humanitarian organization, it was indeed significant that the Khalsa Aid team wanted to inform that the principle of humanitarianism is not borrowed from the West or the Christian world, instead it was intrinsic to, and original idea, of Sikhism. (The ICRC, International Committee of the Red Cross was created in 1863, emerging as an important humanitarian actor in conflict conditions and as guardian of a much sacrosanct and much violated humanitarian law during late second half of the nineteenth century), (David P. Forsythe, 2005:13-51).

In fact, most of the big relief agencies are mostly faith-based. In his article, Bruno de Cordier (2009) quotes a European diplomat, *"Abandon the idea that aid is neutral. Aid is already a statement and an identity. Often, it's of Western identity but it can be another one too"*. The formation and guiding notions of Khalsa Aid are apparently influenced heavily by Sikhism. Ravinder Singh and his team always situates the deeds of Khalsa Aid within the paradigm of the practices and teaching of Sikhism which we have dealt with in the first section. He feels proud to be a Sikh and considers its ideals as the main source of his inspiration. Ravinder Singh is considered a British Sikh so his identity stays with him, and he asserts this identity and belonging in all interviews and in the interaction with the society at large. He and his team carry this identity to all regions it goes for providing aid.

II

The services of volunteers, donations, and *Langar* are the pillars as well as mechanisms of the functioning of Khalsa Aid International. They are intrinsically connected to the values of Sikh religion, as discussed in section A. The practice of volunteering is as old as humankind, with scholars working on NGOs opining that philanthropists, missionaries, and even laymen were among those who have shown compassion to their fellow beings at times of misery and unforeseen events (Sooryamoorthy and Gangrade, 2001). Navkiran Pal Kaur (2018) observes that volunteering involves giving time generously and freely for the benefit of another individual group or cause. She quotes other authors (Sundeen, Garcia and Wang 2007: 243) who opine that the number of hours which people volunteer in any nation indicates the vitality of its civil society. She has explored the religious involvement in

volunteering experiences of second generation Sikhs by studying twenty-nine participants from Sikh religious centers in Southeastern Michigan. The participants had experiences of voluntary work in blood donation camps, free medical consultations to the elderly, free dental and eye surgical camps, or any kind of community services. Her work is closer to the present study of the nature of volunteering in Khalsa Aid, as both deal with Sikh faith-based volunteering. She postulates that most volunteering occurs at religious centers and religious adherence is the foremost reason for volunteering among Asian immigrant populations (Kaur 2018). Writing about the Sikhs, she opines that volunteering is an important technique to educate Americans about the Sikh faith. Moreover, as dealt in Section A, *Sewa* is an integral part of Sikh religion since the inception of the faith.

In an interview, Amardeep Singh, CEO of the organization, revealed that it has about 10-15 full-time staff and is powered by 2,300 volunteers spread across the country (Times of India, 2020). Their projects, running simultaneously in multiple regions and with varied needs, are based on the services of volunteers, who take leave without pay from their jobs and contribute in the service to humankind with the team. Khalsa Aid has a procedure of selecting volunteers which is sincerely and carefully conducted because of increasing enthusiasm in getting associated with the organization, due to its growing popularity. It has online forms which anybody can fill out, and then applicants are given different tasks like raising funds for, and awareness about, Khalsa Aid. They are invited for induction, and their dedication, as well as skills, are assessed on the basis of the tasks performed and then they are given an opportunity to volunteer. No stipend or salary is paid to the volunteers; who belong to different walks of life (Gurpreet Singh Interview).

Sources indicate that the employees and volunteers are all well-educated and usually professionals. Amardeep Singh is a trained commercial pilot and had been involved full-time with charity work for several years (The Times of India, 2020). The KAI website is replete with the real experiences of volunteers, which is an ample proof of hardship they endure with enthusiasm and dedication. Numerous videos made on their projects capture the volunteers involved in various kinds of chores. They can be seen cooking meals, serving the *Langar*, playing with orphaned children, cleaning flood-affected regions, drilling holes for clean water, providing medical care, lifting sand bags, sacks of grains, and other materials. They are involved in carrying out assessment of the

region where Khalsa Aid plans to help, research as to the most needed service, and whether any local help is available, and try to find out about Gurudwaras or members of Sikh community in the vicinity.

Along with the volunteers, KAI works with the assistance and co-ordination of local NGOs and, in many cases, with the support of the concerned government. They coordinate with several international organizations, including the UN Refugee Agency, World Food Program, International Red Cross, Red Crescent Movement, and Medicines Sans Frontiers. However, on most occasions, the organization receives support from the local Gurudwaras of the region, the team uses infrastructure provided by them including temporary shelters and *Langar* (The Times of India, 2020).

Embracing the practice of community kitchen has given a fresh lease of life to the humanitarian interventions of KAI. Gurpreet Singh (administrator of the organization at Patiala) stated that *Langar* is a very important part of Khalsa Aid and it was introduced to bring a feeling of oneness, not mercy toward the victims. The practice of *Langar* has also changed with time and space. It has travelled from the confines of the Gurudwara to any available space in distant lands, with the tradition of sitting in line being relaxed, use of disposable cutlery, and the meal components decided according to availability and local food habits. The embracing and practice of the tradition of *Langar*, by the Khalsa Aid, has attracted immense attention. For example, the KAI relief mission in Bangladesh prepared daily *Langar* service for 30,000 to 50,000 Rohingya refugees. Amarpreet Singh stated in an interview that they received sacks of rice and lentils in Bangladesh while helping the Rohingyas and the people were keener to donate food grains than money (NDTV 2017). It was admired by the affected populace as well as the ordinary people. The sight of strangers in turban preparing hot meals in big utensils for the victims has the potential to touch the heart of human beings. It is not simply serving cooked hot meals, but it is an institution which is an integral part of Sikhism which ensures practice of *Sewa* to mankind. The manner of providing the aid, where community kitchen became one of the essential mechanisms, brought in the relevance of the tenets of Sikhism.

Khalsa Aid International sustains itself on donation, unlike most NGOs which receive funds from national and international bodies, in order to implement developmental projects. Since, they depend on donations, their activities are not controlled by any big funding body.

However, during interactions for the purposes of this study, not much information could be gathered from the KAI team regarding the details of such donations. Whatever little information could be gathered has been sourced from a few websites. In interviews and websites, the members and volunteers claim that funding is generated mainly from Sikh individuals, Gurudwaras and, on several occasions, through organizing various events, like skydiving. The brochure of the organization, collected from the main office in Patiala, provides details of how to make the donation. It gives information regarding direct debit, through cheque, electronic bank transfer and donating via digital payment and e-commerce platforms, like Paytm, and these information sheets are distributed at awareness camps. Further, their website (khalsaaid.org/donate) appeals for support and directs those interested in donating. Recently, Khalsa Aid announced that it received 185,000 Pounds, the single largest donation ever, from a world financial group and planned to use it for their Punjab Floods Relief *Sewa* (Instagram, 2019). Those inspired by KAI's rescue missions and wishing to contribute are the most common sources of donation. During interactions for this study, researchers came across Puneet Kumar, aged 35, a bank manager in Patiala who had donated seven thousand Rupees to Khalsa Aid online as he was inspired by their work. Looking at the reach of Khalsa Aid in foreign countries and the kind of provisions they supply, the amount of donations must be substantial. Amarpreet Singh reveals that Khalsa Aid India's planned budget for the Punjab flood relief was Rs 15 million, but they received donations worth Rs 180 million (Sonia Sarkar, 2020). Data for financial year 2017-2018 shows an amount of 330.2 thousand Pounds as income of KAI and 51.2 thousand Pounds as expenditure (Charity Commission, UK). These data speaks for the kind of support it garners worldwide, there is no shortage of money when needed, in fact in one interview, Ravinder Singh commented that as soon as they are informed about any disaster they start working immediately on it, not bothering about the expenses since money always comes and there has never been any shortage. Singh also stated that Khalsa Aid has been questioned on funding and utilization of funds on several occasions (Punjab Television 2019).

III

This part of the report examines how the contribution of Khalsa Aid is received, and what kind of responses they garner in India and in other countries where Sikhism might be an alien religion altogether. In the Indian subcontinent, their work has earned admiration, barring some criticism for help provided to the Kashmiri Muslims, but have also been hugely criticized if they lend their support to any protest against Government policies, like the currently ongoing farmers' movement or the case of Rohingyas in Bangladesh or projects in Pakistan. It can be maintained that in spite of criticism by some sections, the KAI has gone ahead with its aid projects. Such actions have earned both praise and ire. For example, while the actions taken to help Kashmiri students in 2019 was welcomed in the state of Kashmir, where Kai volunteers were offered free hotel stays and vehicle repairs (Safwat Zargar, 2019; Asian Age, 2019), they faced harassment in other parts of India. Amardeep Singh stated that the volunteers were mocked and insulted by people for helping Muslims, both on the ground and in social media. Such unfavorable attention was at its peak when the Indian government was not supporting the Rohingya refugees and Khalsa Aid was providing them aid. It was portrayed as Khalsa Aid helping the people that the Indian government considered security hazards. However, they did receive the admiration of several media outlets.

In general, Khalsa Aid has received massive support from the public, with volunteers attesting to the overwhelming public support, especially in India. In the case of Kerala flood relief, the KAI rescue operation, with a team of 30 volunteers from across India and abroad, received huge amounts of provisions donated by the public from Patiala, Jalandhar, Delhi, Raipur, Gwalior, Kolkata, Mumbai, Hyderabad, and other cities. In an interview, the team revealed the huge help they received from residents of Bangladesh as well as from Indian cities (NDTV 2017). The help at Somerset in UK, after the huge damage caused due to heavy winds and rains, was admired immensely, and it got wide coverage on media (BBC 2015). A British television program, called 'Surprise Surprise', which highlights extraordinary stories, invited Ravinder Singh on their national hit TV show and thanked him for his help during the UK floods and gifted a new car and family holiday (ITV 2014). Furthermore, the BBC has covered his work and also made a film, 'The Selfless Sikh' (2016), about him, documenting his journey to

Northern Iraq to provide help to Yazidi families. Ravinder Singh has been honored many times because of his humanitarian work and for promoting Sikh traditions. He has been awarded 'Sikh of the Year' 2014 by Sewa International, Amritsar. He has also been honored with 'Bhagat Singh Thind Community Empowerment Award' at a national gala dinner in the US (Saldef 2017). The media coverage of Khalsa Aid team in Punjab, including regional, national and international media outlets, has reflected on their popularity and relevance.

The KAI's way of assistance has helped in dissemination of Sikh teachings in foreign countries among the indigenous population; its activities in Haiti being an apt example. The Khalsa Aid worked at Haiti for many years since 2010, when the devastating earthquake left 220,000 people dead, destroying 50% of the schools and adversely affecting 3,500,000 people. The aid involved various kinds of assistance, taking care of orphanages, rebuilding houses, drilling holes to have access to clean water, and providing basic amenities and food. There are several videos on their work in Haiti where the team members are seen playing with the children of orphanages. Manraj Othi and Gurkiran Kaur, volunteers, in an interview noted that playing and participating in activities leads to direct contact with the people and lessens the social and cultural barrier. Mere dropping of food packets does not help the victims psychologically and emotionally. In a short film 'Himmat' (Courage, 2016) directed by Kiran Rai, a volunteer, an employee of Khalsa Aid of Haitian origin – Marcsan Balan – is heard saying the salutation "Waheguru ji ka Khalsa: Waheguru ji ki Fateh" (The Khalsa belongs to the Lord/God! So the victory belongs to God) and the children aged between 2 to 9 years also repeat the Sikh slogan "Jo Bole So-Nihal: Sat-Sri-Akal" in unison with the Khalsa team (shout of victory, triumph or exaltation; "Whoever utters the phrase should be happy, shall be fulfilled, Sat Sri Akal means eternal is the Holy/ great timeless lord"). The rendition of Sikh salutation by the local people of Haiti reflects that Sikh traditions are carried by the team as their identity and it gets disseminated. In fact one of the volunteer, Indy Hothi, mentions that Khalsa Aid is getting popular in Haiti, since the moment the kids see them, they come running saying 'Khalsa has come'. In the twenty one years of its humanitarian assistance, Khalsa Aid has been able to win the appreciation and acceptability of a large section of people globally.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to explore the relevance and functionality of main traditions of Sikhism in this contemporary globalized era. For this purpose, evolution of the basic concepts of Sikhism was revisited. Further, a UK based non-profit NGO, Khalsa Aid International/India was explored to understand their endeavor to carry on the idea of *Sarbat da Bhala* and recognizing the whole human race as one by aiding people caught in crisis created by nature or mankind. The idea was not just to examine Sikh traditions being carried forward by the organization, but to reflect on the construct of various kinds of possibilities of humanitarian work, new perspectives of the faith, and constructing new notions of collective identity of Sikhs.

The objective was also not to glorify the work of Khalsa Aid, but add to the knowledge domain the nature of a Sikh faith-based NGO's global intervention as a humanitarian agency. There is no dearth of NGOs in India and elsewhere, however the character, acceptability, support and reach of Khalsa Aid calls for serious thought on nature of civil society institutions. Studies on Christian faith-based agencies shows advantage of religious agencies as they are competent in providing humanitarian support through channels not essentially open to secular outfits. Further, faith-based agencies are in a position to coordinate the relief and development efforts through locally based church and religious communities in the countries of operation (Taut Laura C, 2009). The operation of Khalsa Aid reveal similar kinds of advantages. During interactions with the administrator in Patiala, Gurpreet Singh, it was mentioned frequently that when the team plans for a project in a new region, they try to first locate a Gurdwara, or families of Sikh community. Besides these advantages, could it be that a faith which believes in dignity of labor and takes pride in manual task are better skilled in serving mankind in distress? This research ascertains that the mission of Khalsa Aid has taken Sikhism to far off places, has helped in spreading and promoting Sikhism, but it has also connected compassionate souls of the world physically or through donations and through touching their heart. It has given new meaning to aid by being compassionate, and has provided new dynamism to collective identity of Sikhs.

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