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Beyond Reciprocity: Sikh *Vand Chakna* and the Ethics of Shared Life

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Abstract

This article examines Sikhism's principle of *Vand Chakna* (sharing one's earnings) and its institutional manifestation in Langar (community kitchen) as distinctive configurations of religious giving that challenge dominant anthropological frameworks. Drawing on gift theory, moral economy, and comparative religious ethics, the analysis demonstrates how Sikh practices resist the hierarchical asymmetries and moral accounting that structure charitable systems. Rather than framing giving as oriented toward reciprocity, merit, or obligation, *Vand Chakna* positions sharing as a constitutive condition of collective life, grounded in relational ontology and enacted through embodied practice. Langar functions as an "ethical infrastructure"—a material, spatial, and institutional arrangement that stabilizes egalitarian ethics through routine participation. Comparative analysis with Hindu *dāna* and Islamic *zakāt* clarifies how Sikh ethics diverge from merit-accumulation and purification-oriented giving. The concept of ethical infrastructure proves analytically valuable for understanding how religious practices materialize moral orientations while negotiating persistent social hierarchies. This theoretical framework invites future ethnographic research on how egalitarian principles operate in lived contexts marked by caste, class, and gender inequalities.

Keywords: Sikhism; gift theory; religious ethics; Langar; moral economy; embodied religion; egalitarianism

1. Introduction: Giving, Religion, and the Problem of Ethical Hierarchy

Practices of giving occupy a central place in religious traditions across historical and cultural contexts. Almsgiving, sacrifice, offerings, and charitable redistribution are routinely framed as expressions of piety, moral obligation, or ethical self-cultivation. Across traditions, giving is often treated as a privileged site through which religious subjects enact virtue and through which social bonds are affirmed. Yet despite this apparent ethical universality, the dominant frameworks through which religious giving is conceptualized frequently reproduce asymmetrical relations between giver and receiver, merit and need, moral surplus and moral lack.

Anthropological and sociological accounts have long emphasized the role of giving in producing social cohesion, moral order, and collective life. From theories of exchange and reciprocity to analyses of redistribution and moral economy, giving has been understood as a mechanism through which societies regulate obligation, hierarchy, and belonging (Mauss 1925; Parry and Bloch 1989). Within religious traditions, these logics are often intensified. Acts of generosity are embedded within cosmological and ethical systems that link material circulation to salvation, purification, or divine favor. Giving thus becomes a means of moral accounting, a practice through which excess is expiated, virtue accumulated, or balance restored (Parry 1986, 1994).

Recent work in the anthropology of ethics has emphasized that practices of giving must be understood not only through the circulation of objects, but through broader regimes of value and ethical reasoning (Lambek 2010; Zigon 2014). From this perspective, generosity cannot be reduced to transfer or sacrifice but must be situated within wider ethical projects through which communities define what counts as a meaningful life (Zigon 2007; Laidlaw 2014). It suggests that the ethical force

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of giving lies less in the act itself than in the relational worlds it helps sustain, opening space for traditions in which sharing is normalized rather than morally exceptional (Lambek 2010).

Recent scholarship in the anthropology of ethics and religion has complicated this picture by attending to the ways religious practices form ethical subjects rather than merely expressing moral rules (Asad 1993; Mahmood 2005). From this perspective, giving is not simply a social transaction or a moral duty but a practice that shapes dispositions, sensibilities, and modes of relating to others. Yet even within these accounts, the ethical structure of giving often remains tethered to hierarchy. The giver retains moral agency, while the receiver appears as the site upon which generosity is enacted.

This article intervenes in these debates by examining Sikhism's principle of *Vand Chakna*, the practice of sharing one's earnings, labor, and resources with others. Rather than functioning through obligation, reciprocity, or merit, *Vand Chakna* articulates an ethical orientation grounded in equality, co-presence, and collective responsibility. Giving here is not oriented toward return, divine reward, or moral elevation. Instead, it constitutes participation in a shared moral world premised on the ontological unity of all beings and the refusal of hierarchical distinction.

By placing *Vand Chakna* in dialogue with anthropological theories of the gift and with scholarship on religious charity, this paper argues that Sikh practices offer a distinctive reconfiguration of religious giving. They challenge the assumption that generosity must be mediated through moral debt or asymmetrical obligation, and instead propose a form of ethical life in which sharing is neither sacrificial nor charitable but constitutive of collective existence itself.

A methodological note is necessary regarding the scope and approach of this analysis. This study proceeds primarily through engagement with Sikh theological texts, doctrinal formulations, and existing scholarly literature rather than original ethnographic fieldwork. The focus is thus on *Vand Chakna* and Langar as articulated ethical models—examining what these practices propose as principles and how they function as institutional forms within Sikh religious thought and historical tradition. This approach allows for theoretical analysis of the distinctive ethical grammar that Sikh practices articulate, while remaining open to the complex ways these principles are negotiated, contested, and lived in contemporary contexts. Critical scholarship has demonstrated that despite Sikh theological commitments to equality, social hierarchies—particularly caste and gender distinctions—persist within Sikh communities (Jodhka 2004; Jakobsh 2003). This gap between theological principle and social practice does not invalidate the claim that *Vand Chakna* articulates a distinctive ethical orientation; rather, it highlights that religious ethics operate as ongoing projects of aspiration and contestation rather than achieved states. The theoretical contribution of this paper lies in identifying and analyzing the ethical model that *Vand Chakna* and Langar propose, thereby providing a conceptual framework that future ethnographic research can build upon, complicate, and refine through attention to lived practice. Such ethnographic work would illuminate how these egalitarian principles are enacted, negotiated, and sometimes contradicted in specific social contexts, enriching our understanding of the relationship between religious ideals and social realities.

The analysis proceeds in six sections. Section 2 reviews dominant anthropological theories of the gift, demonstrating how reciprocity, obligation, and hierarchy structure most accounts of exchange. Section 3 examines Sikh *Vand Chakna* as an alternative ethical grammar that refuses these logics. Section 4 analyzes Langar, the Sikh community kitchen, as the institutional form through which *Vand Chakna* is materialized and sustained. Section 5 offers a comparative reframing that situates Sikh practices alongside Hindu *dāna* and Islamic *zakāt*, clarifying what makes *Vand Chakna* distinctive. Section 6 synthesizes these insights to reconsider how religious giving can be theorized beyond reciprocity and charity. The conclusion considers broader implications for understanding religious ethics as embedded in material and institutional practice.

2. Gift, Obligation, and the Moral Limits of Reciprocity

The modern anthropological study of giving is anchored in Marcel Mauss's formulation of the gift as a "total social phenomenon." In *The Gift* (1925), Mauss challenges utilitarian accounts of exchange by demonstrating that gifts in archaic societies are neither voluntary nor disinterested.

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Rather, they are embedded within systems of obligation that bind individuals and groups through the intertwined imperatives to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. These obligations are not merely economic but moral, juridical, and religious, sustaining social order through honor, debt, and the threat of rupture.

A central feature of Mauss's argument is the claim that gifts are never fully alienable. Drawing on Polynesian ethnography, he introduces the concept of *hau*, a spiritual force that attaches the giver to the gifted object and compels its return. Through this logic, the gift becomes a vehicle of personhood, carrying something of the giver's self into the social world. Reciprocity, in this sense, is not optional but necessary for maintaining moral equilibrium and social cohesion (Mauss 1925).

Subsequent anthropological work has both extended and complicated this framework. Annette Weiner's (1992) analysis of inalienable possessions demonstrates that not all valuable objects are meant to circulate, and that withholding can be as socially productive as giving. These interventions reveal that the Maussian emphasis on reciprocity, while powerful, does not exhaust the ethical possibilities of giving.

Weiner's analysis of inalienable possessions demonstrates that not all valuable objects are meant to circulate; withholding can be as socially productive as giving (Weiner 1985, 1992). Certain objects—such as Maori cloaks or Trobriand shell valuables—anchor identity and continuity precisely because they resist exchange. These 'keeping-while-giving' paradoxes reveal that value emerges not only from movement but from strategic immobility, complicating Maussian assumptions about circulation as the basis of social life.

At the same time, scholars have noted that Maussian exchange often reproduces hierarchy rather than dissolving it. Jonathan Parry (1986) shows that religious gifts in South Asia frequently aim to escape reciprocity altogether, particularly in contexts of renunciation and salvation. Yet even here, the refusal of return often elevates the giver's moral status, transforming generosity into a means of ethical distinction. Caroline Humphrey (1998) similarly observes that acts of religious giving may obscure relations of power by framing inequality as moral virtue.

More recent scholarship has further complicated gift theory by attending to the entanglement of gifts with commodities, markets, and capitalist exchange. While classical theory positioned gifts and commodities as opposed forms of circulation, contemporary work demonstrates their co-constitution and mutual transformation (Gregory 1982; Godelier 1999). Gifts can become commoditized through market incorporation, while commodity transactions may be re-embedded in personal relations that gift them social meaning beyond exchange value. This scholarship reveals that the moral economies of giving cannot be understood in isolation from broader political-economic contexts. However, even these interventions often retain focus on how exchange—whether gift or commodity—produces and reproduces social differentiation, leaving relatively unexamined the possibility of circulation that refuses distinction altogether.

Mauss himself gestures toward a historical transformation in which gift exchange oriented toward human relations becomes redirected toward gods, ancestors, and spirits. Sacrifice and ritual destruction of wealth emerge as means of securing divine favor and cosmic balance. Over time, these practices are moralized into forms of charity directed toward the poor and vulnerable, particularly within institutionalized religious traditions. Giving becomes associated with generosity, compassion, and moral responsibility, while retaining an underlying logic of surplus management and moral accounting (Parry and Bloch 1989; Fassin 2012).

Beyond classical gift theory, scholars have also interrogated how exchange and generosity are shaped by materiality and the social life of objects. Earlier interventions by Weiner emphasize that the value of giving cannot be separated from what is withheld, retained, or rendered inalienable, complicating assumptions that circulation itself is ethically primary (Weiner 1985). These insights underscore that moral economies are sustained as much by limits on exchange as by exchange itself.

Within these charitable frameworks, the ethical asymmetry between giver and receiver remains largely intact. The giver's capacity to give confirms moral agency, while the recipient's need legitimizes dependence. Even when charity is framed as justice or obligation, it often functions to

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stabilize hierarchy rather than transform it. The poor become objects of care, while generosity becomes a site of ethical self-fashioning for the affluent (Bornstein 2012).

While Bornstein's ethnography reveals how humanitarian organizations establish asymmetrical relations through gift-giving (Bornstein 2012), Fassin's broader theoretical intervention demonstrates how moral sentiments themselves—compassion, care, humanitarian reason—can mask structures of power and reinforce inequality (Fassin 2012). Together, these critiques expose how charity operates not merely through resource distribution but through the production of moral subjects and hierarchical relations.

It is against this backdrop that Sikh *Vand Chakna* demands analytic attention. Rather than modifying existing forms of reciprocity or charity, it articulates a mode of giving that actively resists moral hierarchy, calculation, and ethical distinction. To grasp its significance, one must move beyond dominant theories of the gift and toward a conception of religious ethics grounded in equality, shared sustenance, and collective life.

3. Vand Chakna and the Ethics of Shared Life

Sikh ethical life is conventionally articulated through the triad *naam japo* (remember the Divine), *kirat karo* (earn an honest living), and *Vand Chakna* (share what one has). While these principles are often presented as doctrinal summaries, Sikh scholarship has emphasized that they function less as abstract commandments and more as orientations toward lived ethical practice (McLeod 1997; Pashaura Singh 2014). Among them, *Vand Chakna* occupies a distinctive place, as it directly addresses the circulation of material resources, labor, and care within a moral community.

Unlike charitable models grounded in almsgiving or redistribution, *Vand Chakna* does not frame giving as a response to poverty alone, nor as an act directed downward from those who possess to those who lack. Instead, it presupposes a relational ontology in which resources are understood as collectively held and ethically obligated toward shared sustenance. Sikh teachings repeatedly emphasize that wealth and livelihood are not private possessions but entrusted gifts, to be used in ways that affirm social interdependence rather than individual accumulation (McLeod 2009).

By "relational ontology" I refer to the Sikh theological premise that all beings are fundamentally interconnected through divine presence, such that individual existence is always already constituted through relation to others and to the Divine. The Guru Granth Sahib's repeated emphasis on *Ik Onkar* (One Divine Reality) establishes that the same divine essence pervades all creation, dissolving ontological distinctions between persons. As Mandair argues, Sikh theology articulates a non-dualistic framework in which the sacred and the mundane, individual and collective, are not separate domains but mutually constitutive (Mandair 2009). This contrasts with ontologies that posit autonomous individuals who subsequently enter into relations. In Sikh relational ontology, the individual is ontologically posterior to relationship—one becomes a self through participation in networks of mutual sustenance and divine connection. This has direct implications for ethics: if separation is ontologically secondary and interconnection is primary, then sharing is not a moral choice made by autonomous agents but a recognition and enactment of fundamental interdependence. Consumption without sharing thus represents not merely moral failure but a denial of one's ontological condition.

This ethical orientation is grounded in a theological commitment to the unity of all creation. The Sikh scriptural affirmation that there is one Divine giver for all beings (*sabna jīā kā ik dātā*) dissolves ontological hierarchies between persons and destabilizes moral distinctions between giver and receiver. As Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh has argued, Sikh ethics rejects dualisms that separate sacred from social or spiritual merit from embodied practice, instead locating ethical life in everyday acts of participation, nourishment, and care (N. G. K. Singh 1993).

From this perspective, *Vand Chakna* cannot be adequately understood through the language of sacrifice, charity, or generosity. It does not involve the relinquishing of surplus in exchange for moral elevation, nor does it operate through expectations of return, gratitude, or divine reward. Rather, sharing is positioned as a prior obligation to the self, such that consumption without sharing

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constitutes ethical failure. One eats only after others have eaten, not because the other is needy, but because ethical life itself is constituted through co-presence and mutual sustenance.

Anthropological work on ethics and religious practice has increasingly emphasized that moral life is not exhausted by rules or doctrines, but unfolds through disciplined habits and embodied participation. Saba Mahmood's analysis of ethical self-formation demonstrates how religious practices cultivate moral dispositions through repetition rather than deliberation (Mahmood 2001). While her focus lies elsewhere, this insight resonates with Sikh sharing practices in which ethical orientation is produced through routine acts rather than explicit moral reasoning.

More broadly, scholars of religion have emphasized that ethical agency is not inherently liberatory but often operates through submission to shared forms, norms, and disciplined practices (Asad 1993; Mahmood 2005). In this sense, *Vand Chakna* aligns with approaches that view ethics not as individual choice but as collective formation (Mahmood 2005), while departing from traditions that emphasize discipline through hierarchy or ascetic distinction.

However, the relationship between *Vand Chakna* as theological principle and its social implementation requires careful attention. Critical scholarship on Sikhism has demonstrated that despite theological egalitarianism, caste hierarchies persist within Sikh communities, particularly in Punjab. Jodhka's research reveals that Dalit Sikhs continue to face discrimination in land ownership, marriage practices, and social interactions, often maintaining separate gurdwaras due to exclusion from dominant-caste institutions (Jodhka 2004). Similarly, Jakobsh's feminist analysis demonstrates that gender hierarchies shape Sikh practice despite scriptural commitments to gender equality, with women often occupying subordinate positions in religious authority and domestic arrangements (Jakobsh 2003). These gaps between theological ideal and social reality do not invalidate the analytical claim that *Vand Chakna* articulates a distinctive ethical grammar; rather, they highlight that religious ethics operate as ongoing projects of aspiration and contestation. The significance of *Vand Chakna* lies precisely in its persistent articulation of an egalitarian orientation that refuses to naturalize hierarchy, even when that hierarchy reasserts itself through other social mechanisms. Murphy's work on Sikh tradition demonstrates how religious principles function as resources for critique and reform precisely because they establish standards against which actual practice can be measured and challenged (Murphy 2012). Langar, as we will see, creates institutional conditions that materially enact this egalitarian orientation, though always in dynamic tension with broader structures of caste, class, and gender inequality.

This orientation marks a significant departure from Maussian models of reciprocity. While Mauss emphasizes obligation as the binding force of the gift, *Vand Chakna* minimizes obligation as moral pressure and instead foregrounds participation as ethical necessity. There is no debt incurred through receiving, nor honor accrued through giving. The act of sharing does not attach a part of the giver's self to the object, nor does it demand eventual return. What circulates is not personhood or prestige, but continuity of collective life.

Scholars of Sikh tradition have noted that this ethic emerges historically in explicit opposition to social stratification, particularly caste hierarchies embedded in South Asian religious practice (McLeod 1976; Oberoi 1994). By refusing distinctions of purity, status, and moral worth, Sikh modes of sharing reconfigure social relations not by redistributing honor, but by rendering it irrelevant. Giving does not establish superiority, and receiving does not signal deficiency. Both are subsumed within a shared ethical field.

This is why *Vand Chakna* is inseparable from *kirat karo*. Sharing is meaningful only when it is grounded in labor, and labor itself is ethically oriented toward the collective. Sikh ethics thus resists both ascetic withdrawal and accumulative philanthropy. One is neither called to renounce the world nor to manage wealth through charitable redistribution. Instead, ethical life unfolds through participation in economic activity that is continuously folded back into communal circulation (Pashaura Singh and Louis Fenech 2014).

Seen in this light, *Vand Chakna* does not simply modify existing theories of the gift. It proposes an alternative ethical grammar altogether, one in which giving is no longer a discrete act but an

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ongoing condition of social existence. To understand how this grammar is sustained and institutionalized, it is necessary to turn to its most visible and enduring manifestation: the practice of Langar.

4. Langar as Lived Theology and Ethical Infrastructure

If *Vand Chakna* articulates the ethical principle of shared life, Langar, the Sikh community kitchen, constitutes its most enduring institutional form. Established during the period of the Sikh Gurus and sustained across historical transformations, Langar is not merely an act of charity or hospitality but a ritualized practice through which Sikh ethics are enacted, embodied, and reproduced. Scholars have consistently emphasized that Langar must be understood as central to Sikh religious life rather than as a peripheral social service (McLeod 1997; Pashaura Singh and Fenech 2014).

Langar involves the preparation and consumption of food in a collective setting, where all participants, regardless of caste, gender, religion, or social status, sit together and eat the same meal. This practice has been widely interpreted as a deliberate challenge to caste hierarchy and commensality rules that structure South Asian social life (McLeod 1976; Oberoi 1994). Yet to treat Langar solely as a symbolic protest against inequality risks underestimating its ethical depth. Langar does not merely represent equality; it produces it through repeated bodily practice.

Anthropological approaches to ritual have long noted that ethical dispositions are cultivated not only through belief or doctrine but through embodied participation in patterned action (Asad 1993). Langar operates precisely at this level. By requiring participants to sit on the floor, share food prepared by collective labor, and eat without distinction, it collapses the moral distance between giver and receiver. There is no identifiable benefactor and no marked beneficiary. The ethical force of Langar lies in its refusal to separate those who serve, those who eat, and those who provide resources into stable moral categories.

This refusal distinguishes Langar sharply from charitable food distribution models. In many religious and humanitarian contexts, feeding the poor operates through asymmetrical relations of care, surveillance, and gratitude, reinforcing distinctions between those who give and those who are fed (Bornstein 2012; Fassin 2012). Langar, by contrast, dissolves these distinctions through co-presence and simultaneity. The act of eating together is not incidental but constitutive. Nourishment is shared not as relief but as fellowship.

4.1. Embodiment, Sensation, and Somatic Equality

Studies of embodied religion further support the claim that ethical orientations are cultivated through sensory and material engagement (Csordas 1990). As Mahmood demonstrates in her analysis of Islamic prayer, repeated bodily practices train perception and moral response, producing ethical orientations grounded in habit rather than intellectual commitment (Mahmood 2001: 827-830). Langar can be read through this lens as a practice that trains participants into equality through the body rather than through instruction.

Csordas's concept of "somatic modes of attention" proves particularly valuable for understanding how Langar cultivates egalitarian dispositions through bodily experience (Csordas 1990, 1994). Sitting on the floor in *pangat* (rows) creates bodily equality through shared physical position—no one is elevated above another. This is not merely symbolic. The experience of lowering oneself to the floor, of occupying the same physical plane as all other participants regardless of social status, produces a somatic awareness of equivalence. For individuals accustomed to hierarchical seating arrangements where position indicates rank, the enforced equality of floor-sitting operates as corporeal discipline, training the body out of habitual markers of distinction.

The sensory dimensions of Langar further reinforce this embodied egalitarianism. The smell of *dal* and *roti* fills the communal space equally for all; no one receives differentiated fragrances based on status. The sight of identical steel *thalis* (plates) arranged in long, straight rows materializes equivalence visually—the rows themselves suggest ordered equality rather than hierarchical

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gradation. The tactile experience of sitting close to others, shoulders potentially touching, breaks down spatial buffers that normally maintain social distance between differently positioned individuals. The taste of simple, shared food—typically vegetarian, made without expensive ingredients—locates all participants within a common gustatory field. No one receives specially prepared delicacies or portions; the democracy of shared flavor enacts equality through the most intimate sensory register.

These somatic experiences accumulate through repeated participation. Regular attendees at Langar develop habituated bodily dispositions toward egalitarian co-presence. The body learns, through repetition, to expect equality rather than distinction. This represents what Csordas terms the "cultivation of perception" through embodied practice—not cognitive learning of equality as concept, but corporeal training into equality as lived experience (Csordas 1994: 7-42). The practice thus operates at pre-cognitive levels, shaping sensory orientation and bodily habit in ways that persist beyond the Langar hall, potentially influencing how practitioners move through other social spaces.

4.2. Space, Architecture, and the Material Production of Equality

The architectural and spatial dimensions of Langar further demonstrate how egalitarian ethics are materially instantiated. The Langar hall (*langar hall* or *guru ka langar*) is typically designed to facilitate rather than merely symbolize equality. Low or absent furniture prevents hierarchical seating arrangements. The absence of tables means all participants engage with food at the same level, using hands or simple utensils rather than elaborate place settings that might denote rank. The spatial flow—from kitchen to dining hall to exit—creates a democratized circulation of bodies, with no designated areas for higher or lower status participants.

In many gurdwaras, the architectural relationship between the prayer hall (*darbar sahib*) and Langar hall is significant. Langar is not relegated to a separate, subsidiary building but integrated into the gurdwara complex, often positioned so that all worshippers pass through or near the Langar space. This spatial integration enforces the principle that religious participation includes eating together; one cannot easily participate in Sikh worship while avoiding Langar's egalitarian practice. The architecture thus creates infrastructural conditions for ethical participation rather than relying solely on voluntary choice.

The kitchen itself (*langar kitchen*) operates as a space where traditional hierarchies can be disrupted. Scholars have noted instances of high-caste individuals performing tasks—washing dishes, chopping vegetables, kneading dough—that caste ideology defines as polluting or low-status (Nesbitt 2016). The kitchen as sacred workspace revalues labor that is elsewhere degraded. The communal labor of food preparation, when framed as *seva* (selfless service), transforms the social meaning of cooking from subordinated domestic work to honored religious practice. However, as we will discuss, this revaluation operates unevenly across gender lines.

4.3. Gendered Labor and the Limits of Egalitarianism

Feminist scholarship on Sikhism requires attention to how Langar's egalitarianism operates differentially along various axes of hierarchy. While Langar powerfully challenges caste and class distinctions, its impact on gender hierarchy is more complex. Jakobsh's research demonstrates that despite Sikh theological commitments to gender equality, women's religious authority and social position remain circumscribed in many Sikh contexts (Jakobsh 2003). This manifests in Langar practice through gendered patterns of labor.

In numerous gurdwaras, women predominate in kitchen work—the labor-intensive processes of cooking, preparation, and cleaning—while men more often occupy visible serving roles or managerial positions overseeing Langar operations. This division reproduces broader patterns of gendered labor in which cooking is naturalized as women's work, even when reframed as sacred service. The valorization of kitchen work as *seva* does not fully counteract its association with domestic femininity. Simultaneously, the rotating participation in Langar preparation can disrupt

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gender norms: men engaging in cooking, an activity often relegated to women in South Asian domestic contexts, and women serving food in public religious spaces, claiming visible presence.

The picture is thus mixed. On one hand, Langar's framing of food preparation as spiritually significant elevates work typically devalued when performed by women. On the other hand, if women disproportionately perform this labor, Langar may reproduce gendered divisions while disrupting caste hierarchies. This suggests that ethical infrastructures may operate selectively, challenging some forms of inequality while leaving others intact or even reinforced. The analytical point is not that Langar fails at egalitarianism, but that egalitarian practices negotiate multiple, sometimes conflicting, hierarchical systems. Langar's power in dissolving caste distinction operates alongside, rather than automatically eliminating, gender hierarchies—a tension that invites ongoing ethical reflection and reform within Sikh communities.

4.4. Langar as Ethical Infrastructure

At the same time, critical scholarship on moral economies warns that practices of care can become sites of abstraction and depersonalization when they scale beyond intimate settings. Ticktin's analysis of humanitarian care regimes demonstrates how ethical relations are transformed into bureaucratic or symbolic gestures that dilute their material force (Ticktin 2011), while Povinelli shows how liberal governance abstracts intimate ethical obligations into depersonalized obligations of care (Povinelli 2011). Langar's insistence on co-presence and shared consumption resists this abstraction by grounding ethical life in face-to-face participation, refusing what Muehlebach identifies as the tendency of care practices to become 'morally symbolic' rather than materially transformative (Muehlebach 2012: 89).

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh has emphasized that Sikh ethics locates the sacred not in withdrawal from the world but in practices that affirm embodied interdependence (Singh 1993). Langar exemplifies this orientation by situating ethical life in acts of cooking, serving, and eating, activities often relegated to the margins of religious seriousness. Through these acts, Sikh theology becomes materially grounded. The Divine is encountered not through sacrifice or renunciation but through participation in collective sustenance.

Importantly, Langar is sustained through voluntary contributions of labor, time, and resources, yet these contributions are not framed as gifts directed toward specific recipients. They are offered toward the maintenance of a shared ethical infrastructure. In this sense, Langar institutionalizes *Vand Chakna* not as episodic generosity but as a durable social form. The continuity of Langar across gurdwaras worldwide demonstrates how Sikh ethics are reproduced through institutional arrangements that normalize sharing as an everyday expectation rather than an exceptional virtue (McLeod 2009).

4.5. Contemporary Extensions and Adaptations

Contemporary extensions of Langar practices into disaster relief, food banks, and public kitchens have often attracted scholarly and media attention. While these initiatives highlight the outward-facing dimensions of Sikh ethics, they remain anchored in the same moral logic that governs Langar within the gurdwara. The aim is not to alleviate suffering as an objectified problem, nor to accrue moral capital through visible generosity, but to extend the practice of shared sustenance into contexts of disruption and need. Even here, Sikh actors frequently emphasize *seva* as participation rather than benefaction, resisting narratives that frame their work as charity in the conventional sense.

The global spread of Langar through Sikh diaspora communities demonstrates both the durability and adaptability of this ethical infrastructure. In contexts from Vancouver to Singapore, from London to Nairobi, gurdwaras maintain Langar while adapting to local food cultures, regulatory requirements, and demographic compositions. Some diaspora gurdwaras serve meals that incorporate local ingredients while maintaining vegetarian simplicity; others have developed systematic food bank operations that extend Langar's logic of non-discriminatory food distribution

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into new institutional forms. Extensions of Langar principles into organized humanitarian efforts—such as Khalsa Aid's disaster relief work in conflict zones and natural disaster sites—demonstrate how the ethical grammar of shared sustenance can be mobilized in new contexts while maintaining core commitments to dignity, equality, and co-presence.

However, these contemporary adaptations also raise questions about how Langar's egalitarian ethics translate across contexts. Does a Langar-inspired food bank that clients visit to receive provisions maintain the co-presence and reciprocal participation that characterizes gurdwara Langar? How do professionalization and scaling affect the intimate ethics of shared meals? These questions warrant sustained ethnographic attention to understand how Langar's ethical principles are negotiated, transformed, and sometimes compromised across diverse social and political landscapes. The theoretical framework developed in this paper provides conceptual resources for such ethnographic inquiry, enabling future researchers to examine the relationship between ethical models and their varied implementations.

Seen analytically, Langar functions as what might be called an ethical infrastructure: a material, ritual, and institutional arrangement that sustains a particular moral orientation over time. It transforms *Vand Chakna* from a principle into a lived condition, ensuring that sharing is not dependent on individual moral disposition but embedded in collective practice. In doing so, it offers a model of religious ethics that neither relies on reciprocity nor reproduces hierarchy, but instead renders generosity inseparable from social existence itself.

5. Charity, Merit, and Obligation: A Comparative Reframing

Comparative discussions of religious giving often proceed by identifying functional equivalents across traditions, treating practices such as Hindu *dāna*, Islamic *zakāt*, and Christian almsgiving as variations on a shared moral theme. While such comparisons illuminate common concerns with redistribution, compassion, and ethical responsibility, they can obscure important differences in how giving is conceptualized, authorized, and experienced. Rather than asking whether Sikh *Vand Chakna* resembles or diverges from other traditions at the level of practice, this section reframes comparison around the ethical logics that structure giving itself.

5.1. Hindu Dāna: Purity, Merit, and the Moral Economy of Hierarchy

In classical Hindu traditions, *dāna* occupies a central place within the moral economy of dharma. Scholarly accounts emphasize that *dāna* functions as a meritorious act through which the giver accrues spiritual benefit, purifies accumulated karma, and contributes to the maintenance of cosmic order (Parry 1986). While the recipients of *dāna* may include the poor and vulnerable, the ethical efficacy of the act is oriented primarily toward the giver's moral and spiritual condition. Hierarchy is not incidental to this structure. The asymmetry between giver and receiver is often explicitly acknowledged, with giving framed as an upward moral movement for the donor and a downward flow of resources toward those positioned as dependent.

The contrast with *Vand Chakna* becomes sharper when examining specific contexts of *dāna* practice. Parry's ethnography of death rituals in Benares demonstrates how *dāna* to Brahmins functions to transfer inauspiciousness and pollution from donor to recipient. The Brahmin priest who accepts *mahadāna* (great gifts) at funerals bears the spiritual impurity of the deceased, enabling the donor family's purification (Parry 1986, 1994). This creates a paradoxical hierarchy in which recipients occupy simultaneously elevated (as Brahmins) and degraded (as pollution-bearers) positions. The transaction is explicitly non-reciprocal—the priest must not return anything, as return would negate the transfer of inauspiciousness. Yet this non-reciprocity does not produce equality; rather, it intensifies asymmetry by positioning the recipient as ritual means for the donor's spiritual ends.

Even charitable *dāna* directed toward the poor operates within frameworks of karmic accumulation and purity maintenance. Khare's analysis of Hindu food transactions reveals elaborate classificatory systems determining who can accept food from whom, based on caste hierarchy and purity status (Khare 1976). Appadurai's concept of "gastro-politics" demonstrates how food

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exchanges encode and reproduce caste distinctions—high-caste individuals can give food to lower-caste recipients, but the reverse is polluting (Appadurai 1981). Commensality rules prevent cross-caste dining precisely to maintain hierarchical boundaries. Against this backdrop, Langar's insistence that all sit together and consume identical food prepared in shared vessels represents not merely symbolic protest but material disruption of the classificatory systems through which caste hierarchy is enacted and reproduced.

The theological framework underwriting *dāna* further illuminates its difference from *Vand Chakna*. In Hindu cosmology, *dāna* generates *punya* (religious merit) that accumulates across lifetimes, affecting one's karmic trajectory and rebirth prospects. The intention (*sankalpa*) of the giver, the worthiness of the recipient, and the nature of the gift all factor into merit calculation. This creates what might be termed a "moral accounting system" in which giving functions as investment in one's cosmic balance sheet. The poor or suffering serve as occasions for merit-making rather than participants in shared ethical life. By contrast, *Vand Chakna* refuses merit accumulation entirely—sharing produces no karmic benefit for the giver because it is not understood as gift but as recognition of ontological interdependence.

5.2. Islamic Zakāt and Ṣadaqah: Obligation, Purification, and Divine Command

Islamic traditions of giving are structured differently but retain a comparable emphasis on obligation and moral accounting. *Zakāt*, as one of the five pillars of Islam, is a mandatory form of almsgiving prescribed for Muslims who meet specific criteria of wealth. Its recipients are clearly defined in the Quran (the poor, the needy, those employed to collect *zakāt*, those whose hearts are to be reconciled, captives, debtors, in the cause of God, and travelers), and its purpose is articulated as both economic redistribution and spiritual purification (Asad 1993; Mahmood 2005). Alongside *zakāt*, *ṣadaqah* operates as voluntary charity, extending the scope of generosity beyond formal obligation. Yet even here, giving remains closely tied to divine command, ethical self-discipline, and the accumulation of spiritual merit. The giver's intention (*niyya*) and obedience remain central to the moral valuation of the act.

The Arabic term *zakāt* derives from the root meaning "to purify" or "to cleanse," indicating that the practice purifies both wealth and soul. Wealth is understood as ultimately belonging to God, with humans serving as trustees (*khalifa*) rather than absolute owners. *Zakāt* purges wealth of the rights others hold in it and cleanses the giver's soul of greed and attachment (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003). This theological framework shares with Sikh thought the notion that wealth is held in trust rather than owned absolutely. However, the mechanisms differ significantly. Islamic *zakāt* operates through precise calculation—typically 2.5% of accumulated wealth above the *niṣāb* threshold, paid annually—creating a structured obligation with defined parameters. *Vand Chakna*, by contrast, lacks such specificity, operating instead through continuous sharing embedded in daily practice rather than periodic payment.

Moreover, *zakāt* maintains recipient categories that preserve distinctions between those who give and those who receive. While *zakāt's* redistribution function addresses economic inequality, and while Islamic theology emphasizes that the poor have a *right* (*haqq*) to the wealth of the rich rather than merely receiving beneficence, the practice still positions givers and recipients in distinguishable roles. One cannot simultaneously pay and receive *zakāt* in the same transaction. The eight categories of *zakāt* recipients specified in the Quran (9:60) create structured classifications that, even when framed as rights rather than charity, maintain the separation between those who possess obligated wealth and those who are entitled to portions of it.

The relationship between *zakāt* (obligatory) and *ṣadaqah* (voluntary) further illuminates Islamic giving's structure. *Ṣadaqah* can be given to anyone, including family members, and encompasses both material gifts and beneficial actions. Hadith traditions encourage *ṣadaqah* as means of accruing reward (*thawab*) in the afterlife. This creates a tiered system of giving: *zakāt* as minimum obligation, *ṣadaqah* as supererogatory virtue-accumulation. Both remain oriented toward divine accountability and the Day of Judgment when charitable deeds will be weighed. Fassin's analysis of Islamic humanitarian

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organizations reveals how this theological framework shapes contemporary practices, with charity functioning as both religious duty and means of spiritual cultivation (Fassin 2012). The giver's inner state—sincerity, humility, consciousness of God—remains central to the moral value of the act, locating ethical agency primarily in the individual's relationship with the divine.

5.3. The Distinctive Logic of Vand Chakna

In both Hindu and Islamic cases, giving is embedded within a framework of moral calculus. Whether voluntary or obligatory, charity functions as a means of managing ethical surplus and deficit, aligning material circulation with divine law or cosmic balance. The receiver's need legitimizes the act, but does not erase the asymmetry between benefactor and beneficiary. Indeed, the visibility of need often becomes the condition through which the giver's ethical agency is exercised.

Critical anthropological analyses of humanitarianism have further demonstrated how moral frameworks of care often rely on emotional economies that distinguish those who suffer from those who intervene. Didier Fassin's work on humanitarian reason shows how compassion can function as a technology of governance, shaping subjects through unequal moral recognition—victims are constituted as objects of care whose suffering justifies intervention, while caregivers are positioned as moral agents capable of response (Fassin 2011). This asymmetry operates even when motivated by genuine compassion. Ticktin's ethnography of humanitarian care regimes in France reveals how the politics of pity creates hierarchies between those who suffer (and whose suffering must be authenticated) and those who respond (whose capacity for compassion defines their moral standing) (Ticktin 2011). These insights help clarify what is at stake in Sikh refusals of charitable hierarchy. By insisting that sharing is not response to suffering but prior condition of ethical life, *Vand Chakna* sidesteps the constitution of suffering as spectacle requiring intervention and instead positions all participants as simultaneously givers and receivers within ongoing circulation.

Sikh *Vand Chakna* departs from these logics in fundamental ways. It does not operate through merit, purification, or divine accounting, nor does it depend on identifying eligible recipients. Sharing is not framed as a response to another's lack, but as a prior condition of ethical life. One does not give because another is poor, but because consumption without sharing violates the very premise of collective existence. In this sense, *Vand Chakna* is not charity at all, but an ethic of co-belonging.

This distinction becomes especially clear when considering the absence of moral hierarchy in Sikh sharing practices. There is no elevation of the giver through generosity, no purification achieved through relinquishment, and no expectation of gratitude from the receiver. The ethical value of sharing lies not in the act itself but in the relational world it sustains. Giving does not mark moral distinction; it dissolves it.

It is worth noting that Sikh practices are not entirely unique in refusing hierarchical charity. Buddhist *dāna*, despite sharing terminology with Hindu giving, operates somewhat differently in Theravada contexts, where lay donors gain merit by supporting monks, yet monks simultaneously provide the field of merit that makes donation spiritually efficacious—creating a mutual dependency that complicates simple hierarchies (Heim 2004). Similarly, some Quaker practices of simplicity and mutual aid articulate non-hierarchical sharing, though embedded within different theological frameworks emphasizing inner light rather than relational ontology. What distinguishes *Vand Chakna* analytically is not absolute uniqueness but the particular configuration it achieves: the integration of relational ontology, material practice, and institutional form (Langar) that together sustain egalitarian sharing as routine rather than exceptional. Comparative attention to these variations enriches our understanding of how religious traditions negotiate the tensions between redistribution, hierarchy, and community.

Anthropological critiques of charity have increasingly drawn attention to how humanitarian and religious giving can reproduce inequality even as they seek to alleviate suffering (Fassin 2012; Bornstein 2012). From this perspective, Sikh practices offer a different ethical possibility. By refusing the moral asymmetry that underwrites most charitable systems, *Vand Chakna* reframes generosity as

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participation rather than benefaction. The ethical subject is not the giver alone, but the collective sustained through shared life.

This comparative reframing does not suggest that Sikhism resolves the ethical tensions inherent in giving, nor that other traditions are reducible to hierarchical charity. Rather, it highlights how different religious traditions encode distinct assumptions about obligation, merit, and moral personhood. Sikh *Vand Chakna* contributes to this landscape by articulating a form of religious ethics in which sharing is neither sacrificial nor charitable, but constitutive of social being itself.

6. Rethinking the Gift through Sikh Ethics

Taken together, the foregoing analysis invites a rethinking of how religious giving is conceptualized within social theory. Dominant frameworks, whether anthropological accounts of reciprocity or theological models of charity, tend to treat giving as a discrete moral act oriented toward obligation, return, or transcendence (Mauss 1925; Parry and Bloch 1989). Even when framed as ethical or altruistic, giving is frequently tethered to asymmetrical relations between giver and receiver and to forms of moral accounting that elevate the ethical standing of the donor (Parry 1986, 1994; Bornstein 2012). Contemporary scholarship has complicated this picture by showing how gifts and commodities co-constitute each other within capitalist contexts (Gregory 1982; Godelier 1999), yet even these interventions often retain focus on how exchange produces social differentiation.

Sikh practices of *Vand Chakna* and Langar complicate these assumptions by offering an alternative ethical grammar in which sharing is neither transactional nor redemptive, but constitutive of social life itself. From the perspective of gift theory, this poses a challenge to the centrality of reciprocity as the organizing principle of exchange. While Maussian models emphasize the binding force of obligation and the circulation of personhood through gifted objects, later critiques have shown that gifts may also be withheld, rendered inalienable, or oriented toward non-return (Weiner 1992). Yet even these revisions often retain a focus on how giving produces distinction, whether through honor, renunciation, or moral elevation.

Vand Chakna diverges from this trajectory by minimizing the ethical salience of the individual giver altogether. Sharing does not create debt, prestige, or moral surplus. Instead, it sustains a collective condition in which ethical life is inseparable from co-presence and mutual nourishment. In this sense, Sikh ethics resonates with anthropological work that emphasizes ethical formation as embedded in practice rather than moral choice (Asad 1993; Mahmood 2005), while pushing this insight further by locating ethics in collective infrastructures rather than individual discipline.

This reorientation has implications for how religion itself is understood as an ethical project. Rather than locating ethical life primarily in belief, intention, or moral self-fashioning, Sikh practices situate ethics in ordinary, embodied participation. Cooking, serving, and eating become sites of theological action, not because they symbolize equality, but because they enact it repeatedly and materially through sensory experience and bodily habit (Csordas 1990, 1994; Mahmood 2001). The somatic dimensions of Langar—sitting together on the floor, consuming identical food, experiencing shared tastes and smells—cultivate egalitarian dispositions through corporeal practice rather than cognitive instruction. Langar thus functions not simply as ritual or charity, but as what might be called an ethical infrastructure: a durable institutional form that stabilizes a particular moral orientation over time through material, spatial, and sensory arrangements (McLeod 1997; Pashaura Singh and Fenech 2014).

The concept of ethical infrastructure proves analytically valuable precisely because it acknowledges both the power and the limits of institutionalized practice. As demonstrated in the analysis of Langar, ethical infrastructures may operate selectively—disrupting some hierarchies (caste, class) while leaving others (gender) partially intact or requiring ongoing negotiation (Jakobsh 2003; Jodhka 2004). The gap between Sikh theological egalitarianism and persistent social hierarchies does not invalidate the concept of ethical infrastructure; rather, it reveals that such infrastructures function as sites of aspiration and contestation, establishing standards against which actual practice can be measured and challenged (Murphy 2012). Ethical infrastructures are thus neither totalizing

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nor determinative, but provide material and institutional conditions that make certain ethical orientations routine and available, even when broader social structures pull in contrary directions.

The Sikh case also complicates anthropological critiques of charity and humanitarianism that emphasize the reproduction of inequality through moralized care (Fassin 2011, 2012; Bornstein 2012; Ticktin 2011). While such critiques rightly expose how giving often reinforces hierarchy—whether through Hindu merit-seeking *dāna* that positions recipients as means for donors' spiritual advancement (Parry 1994; Khare 1976; Appadurai 1981), Islamic *zakāt* that maintains distinctions between payers and receivers despite framing redistribution as right rather than beneficence (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003), or humanitarian aid that constitutes suffering as spectacle requiring intervention (Fassin 2011; Ticktin 2011)—these critiques frequently assume that asymmetry is an unavoidable feature of redistribution. Sikh practices suggest otherwise. By refusing to distinguish giver from receiver, service from consumption, or generosity from obligation, *Vand Chakna* articulates a model of religious ethics that does not rely on moral differentiation, even as it remains embedded in complex social worlds marked by persistent inequalities (Oberoi 1994; Jodhka 2004).

In reframing the gift through Sikh ethics, this paper does not seek to universalize *Vand Chakna* as a normative model. Rather, it demonstrates the analytic value of attending to religious traditions that resist dominant moral logics. Sikh practices of sharing invite scholars to reconsider foundational assumptions about generosity, obligation, and moral personhood, and to recognize that the gift need not bind through debt or elevate through sacrifice, but can instead circulate as the ordinary condition of shared life.

7. Conclusions

This article has examined Sikh *Vand Chakna* as a distinctive ethical configuration of giving that unsettles dominant anthropological and theological frameworks of the gift and of religious charity. By situating Sikh practices in dialogue with gift theory, moral economy, and comparative religious ethics, the analysis has shown how *Vand Chakna* departs from models grounded in reciprocity, obligation, and merit. Rather than framing giving as a moral act performed by individuals toward others, Sikh ethics locates sharing as a condition of collective life, sustained through embodied practice and institutional form.

Through a close examination of *Vand Chakna* and its institutionalization in Langar, the paper has argued that Sikh practices resist the hierarchical asymmetries that often underwrite charitable systems. Giving here does not produce moral elevation, debt, or gratitude. Instead, it dissolves the distinction between giver and receiver by embedding sharing within everyday participation. Ethical life emerges not through sacrificial renunciation or moral accounting, but through co-presence, labor, and shared sustenance. In this sense, Langar functions as an ethical infrastructure that stabilizes equality as lived practice rather than symbolic ideal.

The comparative reframing offered in this paper has emphasized that differences between religious traditions of giving are not merely doctrinal or functional, but ethical in a deeper sense. Hindu *dāna* and Islamic *zakāt* articulate moral logics oriented toward merit, purification, and obligation, even as they pursue justice and compassion. Sikh *Vand Chakna*, by contrast, reframes sharing as neither charitable nor salvific, but as participation in a shared moral world. This distinction matters not because it establishes moral superiority, but because it expands the analytic possibilities through which religious giving can be understood.

More broadly, this study contributes to ongoing debates in the anthropology and sociology of religion by foregrounding the role of material and institutional practices in ethical formation. It suggests that religious ethics need not be anchored primarily in belief, intention, or individual virtue, but can be sustained through collective arrangements that render ethical participation routine and unavoidable. In doing so, it invites scholars to reconsider how generosity, obligation, and moral personhood are theorized across religious traditions.

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The theoretical framework developed here opens multiple avenues for future empirical research. First, sustained ethnographic work on contemporary Langar practice across diverse contexts would illuminate how the egalitarian principles articulated in Sikh theology are negotiated, enacted, and sometimes contradicted in lived experience. Such research might examine: How do participants experience Langar's egalitarianism in gurdwaras where caste and class hierarchies persist outside the Langar hall? How do women navigate the tensions between Langar's theology of equality and gendered divisions of labor in food preparation? How do converts to Sikhism or non-Sikh participants experience and interpret Langar practice? Ethnographic attention to these questions would enrich our understanding of the relationship between religious ideals and social realities.

Second, comparative ethnographic research could explore how Langar practices travel and transform in diaspora contexts. How do Sikh communities adapt Langar in settings where caste hierarchy operates differently or is less salient than in South Asia? How do gurdwaras navigate local food regulations, dietary cultures, and spatial constraints while maintaining Langar's ethical commitments? How do contemporary extensions of Langar into food banks, disaster relief, and homeless feeding programs negotiate the tension between institutionalization and intimate co-presence? Such research would illuminate both the durability and plasticity of ethical infrastructures across contexts.

Third, this framework invites comparative study of other religious practices that may articulate similar ethical grammars. Are there traditions within Buddhism, Sufism, indigenous religions, or other contexts where sharing operates outside frameworks of merit-accumulation and hierarchical charity? How do different religious traditions institutionalize egalitarian ethics, and what material, spatial, and ritual forms do these institutionalizations take? Comparative research attending to ethical logics rather than surface similarities could reveal diverse ways religious communities organize collective life beyond charity.

Finally, the concept of "ethical infrastructure" developed here warrants application beyond Sikh contexts. What other religious, social, or political institutions function as ethical infrastructures—material and institutional arrangements that sustain particular moral orientations over time? How do ethical infrastructures differ from moral communities, and what analytical purchase does this concept offer for understanding how collective ethics are materially stabilized? Theoretical development of this concept could contribute to broader conversations in moral anthropology, religious studies, and social theory.

By rethinking the gift through Sikh ethics, this article argues that generosity need not bind through debt or elevate through sacrifice. It can instead circulate as the ordinary condition of shared existence, affirming an ethical vision in which religion is lived not through acts of charity, but through the practice of being together.

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