

What is sewa? Going beyond the langar



Background knowledge for the teacher

- Remembrance of God, the transcendent One, is important to the Sikh faith. The Sikh word for ‘remembrance’ is *simran*. The Guru Granth Sahib affirms: ‘True worship consists in the meditation of God’s name.’ However, the Guru Granth Sahib is also clear that ‘there can be no worship without performing good deeds’ (GGS 4). For Sikhs it is necessary to combine *simran* with *sewa* – selfless service, acts of generosity, kindness and service done for no personal reward.
- As Sikhs believe that God is within every person, acts of selfless service are also acts of service to the One.
- The centrality of service within Sikhism arises out of its origins within the Punjab region of India in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At the time, serving others was something poor people did for the rich. There were divisions between Muslims and Hindus. The caste system in Hinduism meant that lower-caste people served higher castes, and some were outside the caste system and rejected by society.
- Although Guru Nanak’s teachings did not abolish the caste system, they established the idea that people are equal regardless of wealth, gender and religion. The emphasis on *sewa* meant that everyone had a duty to serve everyone else without divisions or hierarchy – a revolutionary message.
- Guru Nanak’s early community at Kartarpur showed this commitment in action. The institution of the *langar* (community kitchen) also ensured that these ideas of service and equality were at the heart of Sikh practice from the start.
- *Sewa* does not just happen at the *langar*. Three aspects of *sewa* are **tan** (physical service), **man** (mental service) and **dhan** (material service). These can be undertaken in many aspects of living.

This unit explores how Guru Nanak put *sewa* and equality at the heart of his community in Kartarpur. It offers a range of examples of ways Sikhs perform *sewa* and considers the value of this way of living.



Assessment for 7–11s

The statements below suggest ‘emerging’, ‘expected’ and ‘exceeding’ outcomes from this unit. Adapt them for the age of pupils you are teaching. If necessary, adapt the ‘e’ words to the assessment language of your school.

Emerging

- Say what *sewa* is in Sikhism and give some examples.
- Describe what difference *sewa* can make in the life of Sikhs.

Expected

- Identify and describe what *sewa* means and give examples of a range of ways Sikhs perform *sewa*.
- Explain why *sewa* is important to Sikhs.
- Make links between Sikhs’ practice of *sewa* and their own ways of living.

Exceeding

- Explain how *sewa* arises from Sikhism’s origins and beliefs about equality.
- Make clear connections between Sikh beliefs about God and the practice of *sewa*.
- Consider and weigh up the impact of selfless service for Sikhs, for pupils and for wider society.

This unit helps pupils in Scotland to achieve RME 1–05a, 2–04b and 2–06c.



Essential knowledge for the pupil

Pupils will know:

- Sikhism started in a context where there was a lot of inequality
- *sewa* is the practice of selfless service, i.e. serving God and others with no thought for personal reward
- *sewa* is important in Sikhism because it helps to promote equality
- one important opportunity for performing *sewa* is at the *langar* – the free kitchen connected to the gurdwara



eResources



Go to www.natre.org.uk/inspiring-re/ to access the resources below.

- A whiteboard animation of different types of *sewa* in the gurdwara.
- Several additional images showing *sewa* in the *langar*.
- A helpful film showing *sewa* in the *langar*.
- A film of Birmingham City University’s *langar* on campus. This may be useful for teachers’ subject knowledge and clips can be used with pupils.
- Links to some charities founded on the Sikh principles of *sewa*.

Activity
1

Setting the context for sewa

After travelling for a number of years, telling people about his message from God, in the early 1500s Guru Nanak set up a new community in a village called Kartarpur. Get pupils to find out about this *sangat*, or community, using the *Kartarpur Times* newspaper article on p. 25. Give pupils the relevant background information from p. 22. Talk about the context in which Sikhism grew, and ask pupils to explore how revolutionary Guru Nanak's community was. You could use the information with pupils to:

- imagine a DVD telling the story of Guru Nanak and the founding of the Sikh community at Kartarpur. Ask pupils to design a DVD cover with suitable images and a blurb of up to 150 words. This will explain some of the key features of the content and why all should watch it
- devise a tourist information guide to attract people to this town: what is there that might appeal, and to whom might Kartarpur be most appealing?
- simplify the information into a format suitable for a 6-year-old, to introduce them to Sikhism

Activity
2

The importance of sewa

Page 26 gives a selection of quotations about *sewa* from the *Guru Granth Sahib*. One grid is for 7–9s, the other for 9–11s.

Look carefully at the quotes. Ask pupils to read them through and highlight any words or phrases that puzzle them or that they do not understand. Working in pairs or small groups, see if they can help each other to make sense of the quotations and what they mean. Gather any questions groups have about the quotations and talk them through as a class, to help pupils' understanding.

Divide the quotations between groups of pupils and ask them to work out:

- what *sewa* is
- how *sewa* can help those who carry it out
- why Sikhs should perform *sewa*
- what Sikhs should do other than *sewa*

Talk about what they have found out. How has this helped their understanding of the quotations? See how many reasons they can give to answer the question 'Why is *sewa* important to Sikhs?'

Activity
3

Examples of sewa

Show pupils pictures of Sikhs at the *langar* (see eResources on p. 22). Ask them to suggest ways in which people might perform *sewa*. What kinds of activities need to be done at the *langar* to serve people?

Introduce pupils to the categories of *sewa* that are found in Sikhism:

- *tan* (physical acts of service to the community, such as helping to clean the gurdwara)
- *man* (serving through your mental capacity – using your talents, listening to others, learning about Sikhism and sharing your knowledge with others)
- *dhan* (using your material resources, donations, philanthropy)

Give a large sheet of paper and a copy of p. 27 to each pair or small group of pupils. This page includes a selection of acts of *sewa*. Pupils should sort them and put them in categories, writing the categories on the paper and then putting the examples next to them. Pupils could come up with their own categories, or you could suggest some categories, such as acts of *sewa* ...

- in the *langar*
- outside the *langar*, in everyday life
- that are for Sikhs only
- that could be for anyone
- that are *man*
- that are *tan*
- that are *dhan*

Note: some acts of *sewa* can be in more than one category.

Ask pupils to come up with other examples of ways people can serve others.

Give small groups some of the verses from p. 26 and examples of *sewa* from p. 27. See if they can match any of the texts and the actions. What do they now say in answer to the question, 'Why is *sewa* important to Sikhs?' Ask pupils to consider what difference it might make to Sikhs to be carrying out *sewa* like this.

Activity
4

From self to selfless

Explain that Sikhs talk about trying to move from being self-centred (*manmukh*) to becoming God-centred (*gurmukh*). Sikhs see that being self-centred can cause them all kinds of difficulties, such as lack of care for others, being too attached to wealth, and being more worried about what people think of you than what you can do for others or for God.

Ask pupils to begin thinking about how *sewa* helps Sikhs to become less selfish and more God-centred. What difference do they think *sewa* makes to helping people become less focused on themselves?

Remind pupils about the context of the birth of Sikhism – where some groups were more important than others, and some groups were treated very badly. Talk about how in Sikhism someone might be the *granthi* in the morning – reading the Guru Granth Sahib as part of the worship service – and then peeling onions and washing up in the afternoon!

You could get pupils to do some role-play about coming to the *langar*. Imagine a rich person who thinks they deserve a special table comes to the *langar*. Imagine a poor, homeless person who cannot afford to buy any food arrives at the *langar*. How would the Sikhs treat them and serve them? How would both of them feel about their experience?



Next steps in learning

Invite a Sikh visitor into your classroom and find out more about *sewa*. What types of *sewa* does your visitor do? Does your visitor think that every Sikh practises *sewa* in the same way and as the teachings say? Is there a difference between the ideal and reality? This could prove a good opportunity to explore the idea that not everyone practises their religion in exactly the same way.



For younger pupils

Talk about all the ways people help each other at school. Then ask: 'What would it be like if no one helped anyone else?' Ask pupils to perform a short role play to explore what it would be like and how it would make people feel. Use this to introduce the value and importance of doing things for others – a way to introduce *sewa* for Sikhs.

Activity
5

Why is sewa important to Sikhs?

Use a short writing task to allow pupils to demonstrate their learning. Choose from the following:

- Write a response to the question 'Why is *sewa* important to Sikhs?' They should build on the ideas they have learned earlier in the unit, and should try to use some of the Sikh texts and give examples of *sewa* a Sikh might perform.
- Read the *Kartarpur Times* on p. 25. Ask pupils to imagine that the reporter from the sixteenth century time-travels to today and visits a Sikh community. If pupils have not yet encountered the films and websites in the eResources (p. 22) that focus on Sikh life today, they may benefit from being introduced to some of these resources now. Write the reporter's account of what they see, based on the example and teaching of Guru Nanak. How pleased would Guru Nanak be with what is happening?

Activity
6

From sewa to school

Drawing on their learning in this unit, ask pupils to identify the kinds of actions that show equality, using the ideas studied here as well as any other ideas they have. Ask them to choose examples of actions they could carry out themselves to show service and equality in school and in other parts of their lives. What effects would there be on themselves and others if they focused on serving others?

Devise a manifesto for equality, because the world is still not equal. Drawing on their learning about Sikh *sewa* as well as their own thinking, ask pupils to come up with a set of guidelines to make their class and school a place of equality. This should not just be a set of rules, but should include ideas about how to demonstrate the belief that people are equal. Extend their ideas to making a difference to the local and global community. How should people behave? What simple actions would make the most difference? How willing would they be to act in this way? If appropriate, get pupils to choose at least one way to serve others this week, and then talk about their experiences next week in RE.

Kartarpur Times

Bringing you all the news and all the views!

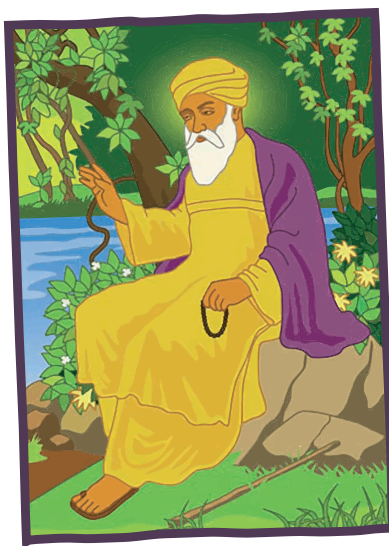
KARTARPUR IS GROWING!

Guru Nanak created our wonderful town of Kartarpur and many people from all over the Punjab have come to live here. 'Kartarpur' means the 'Seat of the Creator'. It is also the home of the Guru, as Guru Nanak lives here with us now that he has finished travelling.

SETTING AN EXAMPLE

By living this simple life, the Guru shows us what is important. He sets us all an example of how to stop being self-centred (*manmukh*). We follow him by taking care to serve others. Guru Nanak has shown us that when we serve others we should never want or expect anything in return. By following the Guru's example, we can become more God-centred (*gurmukh*).

LIVING AND LEARNING WITH GURU NANAK



© Phil Vernon

Everyone in Kartarpur is inspired by the Guru and his companions, who are called Bhai Mardana and Bhai Duni Chand. All three of them take part in prayers and singing to God. Guru Nanak teaches us the ways of the Divine Guru. He shows us how to live. He has a small farm with his wife and two sons. With his wife, sons and disciples, he works hard on the farm so that they can produce enough food to live on. He gives any extra food grown to the *langar* to share with everyone.

Every day Guru Nanak gets up very early, long before dawn, to meditate. He then joins Bhai Mardana for *kirtan*, singing hymns to God together. Everyone is invited to join in with *kirtan*. Some people write down his talks, and the

hymns we sing, to collect them. This means that we will be able to share the talks and hymns with Sikhs who do not live in Kartarpur. In the afternoon he teaches anybody who wants to learn.

Guru Nanak also serves in the *langar*, collecting water or finding wood for the fire, serving food or sweeping the floor. No person is too important to serve in the *langar*. Guru Nanak sits and eats with all who come to the *langar*, as all are equal members of one great family: Muslim or Hindu, male or female, rich or poor.

EQUALITY, FAIRNESS AND SERVICE

We caught up with some of the recent arrivals at Kartarpur to find out what it is like living here.

Ajay says: I moved to Kartarpur because I heard that Guru Nanak was living here. I used to live in a village, but life was very hard. My job there was to clean toilets, so everybody thought that I could be treated with disrespect. Here in Kartarpur I am treated as an equal – no one disrespects me. I can eat with the others in the *langar*. I can sit with everyone else without upsetting people. At Kartarpur, nobody gets angry when I serve them. People here do not look down on me like they did in my village. I serve God and the Guru for this freedom!

Avneet says: I love the fact that women and men are equals here in Kartarpur. Guru Nanak treats us all with great respect. He says that the future of humans depends upon women, as every person is born from a woman. Before I came here, I would not be allowed to do community service because I am a woman. I love it here.

Baljit says: I have heard Guru Nanak teaching. He said: 'There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim; I will follow God's path.' That is so simple and yet so difficult! It means that here at Kartarpur we do not treat anyone differently or badly because of their religious backgrounds. We try to treat each other with respect. We serve each other. We do not need lots of rituals to please God. We do not need to go on pilgrimage. We do not need to give up everything and become holy men – we can stay looking after our family. This is the path to God.

No wonder people want to come and join us here in Kartarpur!

The importance of sewa

Here are some of the key ideas about service based on words from the Guru Granth Sahib. They talk about the importance of *sewa*. *Sewa* means selfless service.

7-9-year-olds

You will get close to God if you serve people without wanting anything in return.

By serving other people, you will find peace.

Focus on serving others and on God.

Follow the Guru. Serve God and repeat the name of God.

It is hard to serve God. You must not be selfish. You must focus on God's name. If you do this, God will accept your service.

Serve others and serve God, and you will be given a place of honour in God's Court.

You cannot worship God without serving God and other people. If you do not worship and serve, you cannot know God.

Serve God and you will get what your heart wants.
Serve something else, and your life will be wasted.

If you try to please God, when you serve others you will find peace and joy.

9-11-year-olds

Here are some of the key ideas about service based on words from the Sikh holy book – the living Guru, the Guru Granth Sahib. They talk about the importance of *sewa*, or selfless service.

One who performs selfless service [*sewa*], without thought of reward, shall attain his Lord and Master [God].
GGS 286

You shall find peace, doing *seva* [selfless service].
GGS 25

Centre your awareness on *sewa* – selfless service – and focus your consciousness on the Word of the Shabad [the Name of God].
GGS 110

Perform the Lord's service [*sewa*], and repeat God's Name under the Guru's guidance.
GGS 176
(Bhai Manmohan Singh)

It is very difficult to serve the True Guru. Surrender your head; give up your selfishness. Realising the Shabad [the Name of God], one meets with the Lord, and all one's service is accepted.
GGS 27

In the midst of this world, do *sewa* [selfless service], and you shall be given a place of honour in the Court of the Lord.
GGS 26

Without serving the Guru [*sewa*], there is no devotional worship. How can anyone [on their own] know the Lord?
GGS 1013

Serve the Lord; do not serve anyone else.
Serving the Lord, you shall obtain the fruits of your heart's desires; serving another, your life shall pass away in vain.
GGS 490

He who is turned towards the Guru finds repose and joy in *sewa*.
GGS 125

Extracts from www.srigranth.org, translated by Dr. Sant Singh Khalsa unless otherwise indicated.

Examples of service to others in Sikhism

Here are some examples of ways that Sikhs can perform *sewa*. Remember, the idea is that Sikhs should perform service without looking for reward or gain for themselves. It is meant to be service for God.



Volunteering at a home for the elderly – talking to people, making tea, helping to clear up	Painting the gurdwara, weeding the car park, repairing anything in the gurdwara that gets broken	Clearing away plates and washing up
Inviting people to our home for a meal	Peeling onions, cooking <i>dal</i> (lentils) and turning chapattis in the <i>langar</i>	Serving food to everyone who comes to the <i>langar</i> , no matter who they are
Donating money to charity, such as Khalsa Aid, to help people in disaster areas	Helping provide food for homeless people – we go out to distribute free warm meals on the streets to those in need	Practising and performing <i>kirtan</i> in the gurdwara
Reading Guru Granth Sahib at the gurdwara	Collecting and looking after people's shoes when they come to the gurdwara for services	Representing the community on the local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education
Listening to children read at my local primary school	Learning to read Gurmukhi so that I can study the Guru Granth Sahib	Acting as treasurer of the local gurdwara, helping everything to run smoothly and looking after costs to make sure we have enough money
Teaching in the youth club, to help children and teenagers know more about being Sikh	Hospital visiting, to talk to people recovering from illness and operations	Going to summer workshops to find out more about Sikh history
Painting pictures of the Gurus, to help people think about God, the Creator	Helping to run Cubs and Brownies in my local area	Joining my mum and taking part in the local Race for Life, raising money for Cancer Research

Sikh teaching includes three types of *sewa*:

- *Tan* (physical). This means serving practically, such as helping to look after the gurdwara or serving in the *langar*.
- *Man* (mental). This means serving through your mental capacity, such as using your talents, being creative, organising things and listening to others when they are upset.
- *Dhan* (material). This means using your material resources, such as giving donations to charities or giving your time to people in need.