

9

Gender, Seva, and Social Institutions

A Case Study of the Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara and Charitable Trust, Birmingham, UK

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This chapter focuses upon Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara in Birmingham, UK, and its charitable trust. Founded in Handsworth, Birmingham, in the name of Bebe Nanaki, sister of Guru Nanak, it presents an interesting example of philanthropic activity through the vision of the founder, Bibi Balwant Kaur. From its establishment in the 1970s, the gurdwara and its trust have had a distinctive gender reading of religious philanthropy. The history of the gurdwara and its trust reflect a distinctive ethos that permeates the rhetoric of the organization, its management, and its activities. This chapter will highlight the ways in which such social and religious institutions act as mobilizing centres for social change while also transmitting and perpetuating institutions of gendered roles, norms, and hierarchies.

VISIONING PHILANTHROPY:

BIBI BALWANT KAUR

Bibi Balwant Kaur (hereafter 'Bibi Ji') is the founder and chairperson of the Bebe Nanaki Charitable Trust. Her philanthropic activities have spanned continents since the 1920s when she first began her activities in East Africa. Bibi Ji emigrated to Kenya from Punjab in 1925 as a young girl. Two decades later she became active in raising funds and

organizing for the building of a crematorium facility for the Indian communities there. Up to that point, a 'shanty' crematorium had been used by the various communities settled there, and she identified the need for the creation of a facility for these relatively new communities. This aim was accomplished in 1945 with the building of a crematorium in Nairobi. Bibi Ji continued her work in Kenya by mobilizing for charitable activities in gurdwaras and at religious events to help those in need and in cases of emergency. In 1948, in the aftermath of the upheaval of the partition, she went to the Indian Punjab and assisted in the refugee camps. Her decision to go to India inspired others to join her, while still others contributed resources for their trip and for clothes, funds, and medical supplies to distribute amongst the partition refugees. Bibi Ji also made statements at that time and afterwards about how such assistance should benefit all communities—including Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh—something she has upheld in her continued activity in Britain today. It was also around this time that Bibi Ji, who had been married with one son, became a widow.

In 1970 Bibi Ji again went to India from Kenya, taking with her a group of women. During this trip she noted that there was very little recognition in Sultanpur Lodhi of Bebe Nanaki's significance to Guru Nanak's life and to Sikh history more widely. Bebe Nanaki was the older sister of Guru Nanak. She was said to be the first person to recognize Guru Nanak's enlightenment, and she took care of her brother in her home in Sultanpur where he lived there with her for some part of his life. Guru Nanak's wedding took place at Nanaki's house and the site of Sultanpur Lodhi could be said to be significant for many reasons in its centrality to Guru Nanak's life. During her 1970 visit Bibi Ji expressed surprise and concern at the absence of any marker of Bebe Nanaki's life and began to mobilize for the establishment of a gurdwara in Sultanpur Lodhi, Kapurthala district. It was largely her vision that was the driving force behind this project, and she was personally involved in the fundraising for and construction of its building (see Figure 9.1).

In 1972 Bibi Ji emigrated from Kenya to Britain, settling in Handsworth, Birmingham. It is here that she established the Bebe Nanaki Charitable Trust in 1972. The trust has a clear set of principles and an established rhetoric around helping the 'less fortunate' around the world, irrespective of nationality, race, or religion, reflecting Bibi Ji's commitment to social welfare and emphasizing the need to help the elderly, handicapped, and mentally disabled.



FIGURE 9.1: Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara, Sultanpur Lodhi, Punjab
(photo courtesy of Verne A. Dusenbery)

PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES OF BEBE NANAKI CHARITABLE TRUST

Bibi Ji's charitable activities predated the establishment of the gurdwara in Handsworth, and also denote her diasporic location between India, Kenya, and Britain. The following is a chronology of some of these projects prior the gurdwara's establishment in Handsworth in 1980:

1. 1945: Establishment of a crematorium in Nairobi Kenya. 1948–50: Assistance in post-partition refugee camps in India. 1950–70: Fundraising for social causes within the Sikh community in Kenya, as well as to causes affecting wider communities (while based in Kericho) 1970: Establishment of the Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara, Sultanpur Lodhi, with an eye hospital and dispensary on the same premises. 1980: Free eye and polio camps four times each year from people from poor households either suffering from treatable/correctable eye conditions or in need of polio vaccinations.

The establishment of the gurdwara in Birmingham has given an institutional base for Bibi Ji's charitable activities. This institutional context has also been influenced by its diasporic connections. The gurdwara's existence in Birmingham and in Sultanpur Lodhi has come to represent her vision and activities on both a local and global level. Up to this point her continual identification of social need had operated

through her personal yet wide social networks. There was also a caste dimension to these networks, although clearly absent from the rhetoric and targeted activities. The base of the community networks she had in Kenya were from the Ramgarhia, and this would also be replicated in Birmingham. Much of the sense of ‘community spirit’ draws from an unspoken East African Ramgarhia consciousness, but does not explicitly invoke this. It could be said that this is part of the driving force behind the social base of Bibi Ji’s constituency of supporters. However, the gurdwara does draw some of its *sangat* (congregation) from other caste communities, and one of the trustee members is even a non-Ramgarhia.

Bibi Ji’s residence is on Rookery Road in Handsworth, and the site of the gurdwara was identified just opposite her home in what was formerly a cinema and then a West Indian community centre. In 1979–80 the Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara was established on this site, at first primarily catering to the local Handsworth community in offering a Sunday congregational service and wedding ceremonies (see Figure 9.2). Soon thereafter Punjabi classes, *kirtan* (hymn) lessons, and ladies *satsang* (hymn singing) evenings were instituted.



FIGURE 9.2: *Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara, Birmingham, UK*
(photo courtesy of the Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara)

Fundraising for the charitable trust's activities has been done through the gurdwara in Birmingham since its establishment in 1980. And this is via donations and kirtan singing. Prior to this there was no institutional base; rather, the activities operated through Bibi Ji's own personal networks and contacts. The gurdwara in Birmingham locates the charitable activities in a rather different way than was previously the case. The various nodal points of operation established in Birmingham and Sultanpur have not only given an institutional base to Bibi Ji's vision, but have also given an institutional dimension to her diasporic location, one which oscillates between Britain and India, and then further projects itself to whatever causes that are identified in other parts of the world.

Since 1980 the trust has focused its attention upon responding to various situations of 'need' that extend beyond the parameters of servicing the sangat. This has included:

1. 1982: Collecting food, medicine, and clothing for victims of the Ethiopian famine. 1989: Helping victims of the Armenian earthquake. 1991: Sending donations to the victims of the Bangladesh cyclone. 1991: Sending donations to victims of the Maharashtra earthquake. 2004: Sending donations to the victims of the tsunami in different parts of Asia. 2005: Sending donations and articles of clothing to the victims of the earthquake in Pakistan. On-going support to an orphanage in Kenya. Sending langar (communal meal) to inmates in Birmingham prisons at auspicious times of the year.

Today, the gurdwara in Sultanpur is self-managed, with its own trust registered in India. However, Bibi Ji and the Bebe Nanaki Charitable Trust in Birmingham continue to have connections with the gurdwara in terms of fundraising for the gurdwara, and its attached hospital and clinic. Each year on 2, 3, and 4 April the birthday of Bebe Nanaki is celebrated on a grand scale. Thousands of people go to Sultanpur each year, many from abroad, for the akhand path (continuous reading of the *Guru Granth Sahib*) and associated celebrations. Much of the financial backing continues to come from the UK and Kenya.

An inscription plate at the Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara in Sultanpur Lodhi acknowledges this connection and the activities supported by the Trust (see Figure 9.3). It reads as follows:

This gurdwara is managed by Bebe Nanaki Charitable Trust under the patronage of Bibi Balwant Kaur. Several projects for the

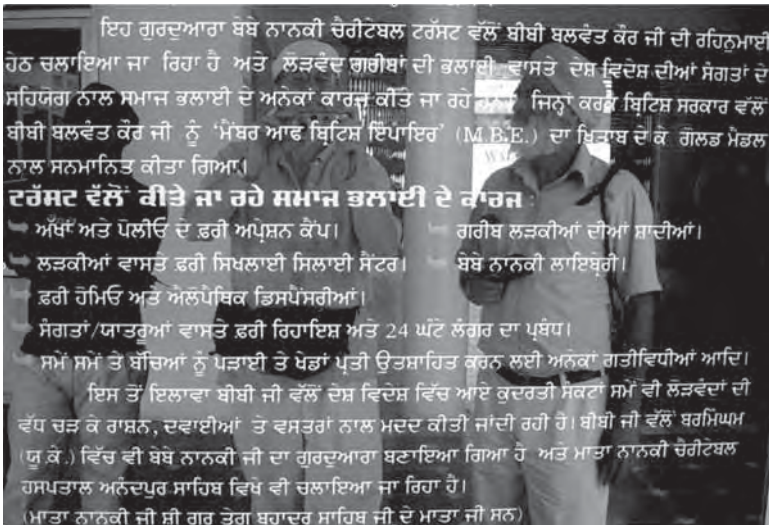


FIGURE 9.3: Plaque from Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara, Sultanpur Lodhi
(photo courtesy of Verne A. Dusenbery)

welfare of the poor and needy are in progress, drawing support and cooperation from Sikhs in Punjab and overseas.

Recognizing her commitment to these charitable causes, the British government has awarded Bibi Balwant Kaur an MBE. The social welfare projects supported by the trust are as follows:

1. Free eye and polio camps.
2. Marriages of poor girls.
3. Free training centre for girls.
4. Bebe Nanaki library.
5. Free homeopathic and allopathic dispensary.
6. Free accommodations and meals (langar) for pilgrims.
7. Educational awards for young children.

Besides a gurdwara in Birmingham, the Trust also runs Mata Nanaki Charitable Hospital at Anandapur Sahib.

On the grounds of the gurdwara at Sultanpur, there is a residential complex and langar building, a project that has cost several million pounds, although no official figures have been made available. The economic model of creating self-sustaining systems for future operations has been an important dimension of the trust's activities. In Birmingham this has been done through the use of surpluses from donations to

encourage skills of cooking, making jams/pickles, sewing, kirtan, etc. in training the next generation of *sevadars* (those who provide service). Most of these service opportunities are taken up by women, although many *sevadars* in the gurdwara outside and inside the langar hall are also men. While the cooking and preparation of langar is primarily done by women, many men also take an active role in it.

In Sultanpur the economic model has seen the establishment of a fixed deposit scheme that supports many of its activities. As a source of income in meeting the costs of the hospital and its dispensary, the fixed deposit scheme covers much of the expenditure of running the four free eye camps each year, and has a strong component of contribution from the sangat in Birmingham. When such deposits are opened, *ardas* is said in the name of the donors, who are informed of the future plans for their financial contribution with a specific project in mind.

GENDERING SEVA: PHILANTHROPY, SERVICE, AND NORMATIVE GENDER ROLES

In this section I am concerned with the gendered assumptions often made when speaking of philanthropy as a masculine act or activity. It is worth pointing out that most of the philanthropic work in Punjab, and indeed in many other parts of the world, done in the name of a person or family tend to assume a male leadership or agency in the act of giving. The 'family name' tends to be that of the male head of household, although there are also cases of a husband-and-wife couple being named for giving to a particular cause, or for donations to be made in the memory of a deceased man and/or woman. However, the patriarchal nature of contemporary Punjabi society views the public act of 'giving' *dan* as being in the male domain, while the private ongoing acts of *seva* within the household and community are largely done by women. The material and human resource dimensions of this are worth further consideration, whereby men tend to be viewed as productive actors and women as supporting, subsidiary ones. This is reinforced by the institution of marriage, by kinship ties, and by the organization of social resources. This extends from the household, community, state, and national levels, and dictates the terms by which men's and women's roles are viewed. In north India, and in Punjab in particular, there are gender patterns of unequal access to power, resources, and assets that present many obstacles to women's involvement in the public sphere.¹

It is worth considering whether there is a distinction to be made between how gender frames the way in which philanthropy and *seva*

are invoked as terms. A gender critique of philanthropy as an economic act of giving or donation seems to recognize a masculine notion of duty and service, while seva, although also inclusive of men's capacity to do service, can often implicitly include most women who contribute to the operation and functioning of the gurdwara or community activity. It is within this type of analysis that I would like to pose a question around how we should think about seva and philanthropy as gendered acts and processes. Do women's and men's contributions get viewed in equitable or comparable terms? If not, what are some of the qualitative differences between how seva acts of men and women are commonly understood? Is there a popular conception of seva as somehow in-built to women and, therefore, not worthy of recognition, and philanthropy as an act involving material, financial giving and, therefore, something that men do?

Without such an analysis, I would argue, the act of giving or service is reduced to a rather two-dimensional gendered frame. This frame generally assumes that women are de facto available to 'give' in the form of labour seva due to their already defined roles at home and then community, although men of course also participate in this type of seva. Financial seva, while also a practice that women engage in, still tends to have a masculine notion whereby men's roles tend to be highlighted as somehow more exemplary. In summation, seva done by women often either goes unrecognized or is uncredited, while men's seva (particularly when we look at the various examples of philanthropic work being done in Punjab today) is something that has a considerable dimension of formal recognition.

Why then should we assume that gurdwaras, as social institutions, would be any different? They are reflections of various aspects of the communities or sangats from which they draw. However, the case of the Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara provides a rather interesting example of both a challenge to the previously highlighted pattern of male agency and female roles of unacknowledged service, and a coalescence to the normative gendered practices of women being supposedly natural sevadars in an unrecognized formal capacity, while men's giving is recognized in a more public manner.

Bibi Balwant Kaur's activism and philanthropic activities over the past sixty-plus years have accumulated into a model of women's public philanthropy and seva within a diasporic, institutional frame. It could be argued that it is both the diasporic and institutional aspects of this that have enabled her philanthropy and social activism to have the impact

that they have had, reflecting upon some of the unique opportunities of the 'twice migrants' who engaged in active community activities in east Africa and then Britain.² There are, however, gendered structures and hierarchies of the gurdwara in more recent times, which also reveal how the wider culture of gurdwara management has not only seeped into the operations of the Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara, but has also perhaps been an underlying force since its inception.

First, the gurdwara is run by a trust and not a committee (as is the case in most other gurdwaras where elections are held to select members and officers). As a result, instead of elections, the trustees are appointed by Bibi Balwant Kaur who acts, it could be said, as a sort of matriarchal head. In recent times she has been more of an absent spiritual guiding figure. Bibi Ji who is now in her 90s is no longer visible in the gurdwara and currently resides in a care home near her son, now in his 60s, who lives in Wales and who himself plays a minimal role in the gurdwara's activities. The trustees, themselves somewhat divided, continue to operate as a governing body of the gurdwara, very much like the offspring of an elderly parent who is no longer able to directly oversee things, but who is also not in a position to completely let go of authority. Bibi Ji could be viewed as the archetypal matriarch or female head of household who relies heavily on the leadership, material contribution, and 'man-power' of her 'sons' and 'brothers' (that is, male trustee and sangat members), while also calling upon the dedication, commitment, and labour input of her 'daughters' and 'sisters' (in other words, the female sangat members).

Second, the rhetoric around women's central role in the gurdwara is worth highlighting. Contrary to another even more prominent gurdwara in the Handsworth area where women are not permitted to perform kirtan on the stage, the Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara welcomes women's public participation in the running and functioning of the gurdwara, from the preparation and serving of langar to the singing of kirtan during major religious events. The langar hall in this other, unnamed gurdwara is highly segregated and shows a stark contrast to the ethos of the Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara, where women's visible and public role/activity is celebrated rather than outlawed. In one publicity document produced about the Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara by the trust, the centrality of women's participation in its cultural, social, and religious functions is acknowledged: 'Ladies are an integral part of all activities of gurdwara—taking part in kirtan, akhand paths, the langar and a special ladies kirtan satsang on Monday afternoons.' The necessity of women's

involvement in the gurdwara to maintain a vibrant sangat culture has been one of the successes of the Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara in Birmingham and its charity activities in India and elsewhere. The recognition of women's activity, including Bibi Ji's, has been revered as an integral part of the gurdwara's ethos. However, the seemingly token representation of one woman on the current trustee body could be viewed quite cynically. That said, without elections, the gurdwara's sangat also maintains a considerable amount of direct involvement in the running of the gurdwara in Birmingham and also in maintaining the connections with the philanthropic work in India, with many sangat members going yearly to the April akhand path celebrations at the Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara in Sultanpur Lodhi.

Both women and men play an active role in the running of this gurdwara and its charitable activities in India. The vision of Bibi Balwant Kaur and the history of her philanthropic work over the past sixty years presents a model for women's public seva, for which she was made Member of the British Empire (MBE) in 2000 (see Figure 9.4). Over the years, her generation of female contemporaries who once were at the forefront of establishing gurdwaras in East Africa, Britain, and India, as



FIGURE 9.4: Bibi Balwant Kaur (Centre) Receiving the MBE in 2000 (photo courtesy of Verne A. Dusenbery, taken from photo on display at Bebe Nanaki Gurdwara, Sultanpur Lodhi)

well as in promoting the various charitable causes, have been replaced by a new generation of male trustees and sangat members, proud of her leadership as sons would be of a mother figure, yet not acknowledging how their presence alters the ethos of Bibi Ji's earlier vision, or, indeed, how their role may be an obstacle to the involvement of more women at an organizational/management level. Male trustee and sangat members tend to view themselves as spokesmen or sevadars of Bibi Ji's vision, while the earlier heightened presence of women's active role is slowly dissipating as the older generation withdraw from public life and the newer generation of sevadars are arguably adopting a more rigidly defined notion of gender politics in the gurdwara and trust, which rests upon a patriarchal notion of men as the public actors and women as those operating 'behind the scenes' in a less recognized role.

Bibi Ji, while not demanding recognition for her philanthropic activities, has received it in a manner that most other women's seva acts often do not. The perception that women's seva is more selfless and, therefore, more difficult to recognize than men's has been challenged by her use of the institutional context for mobilizing and organizing support and finances for the different charitable causes with which she has been involved. Over the years this provided many opportunities for her and the trust to maintain the diaspora links as well as to present an international profile to their philanthropic activities. The future of the Bebe Nanaki Charitable Trust lies with how the next generation of leaders, trustee members, and sangat members continue to interpret Bibi Ji's work, and how the reworking of women's and men's seva gets reflected in the gurdwara.

NOTES

1. See Aggarwal (1994) and Sharma (1980).
2. See Bhachu (1985).

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