

Langar of Akhund of Swat: Assessment of its Different Facets.

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Abstract

Akhund Abdul Ghafur belonged to the Safi tribe of Mohmand. The colonial Britishers and the local writers have extensively written on him. He was the ascendant of the Mianguls who ruled Swat State from 1917 to 1969. The shrine/mosque of Akhund of Swat at Saidu Sharif is held in great reverence by the masses till today. A langar was attached to the mosque that remained operational for more than a century. The community kitchen was a place where the food was distributed daily to the need and the travelers. In the public kitchen, every individual could enjoy food irrespective of his religion, nationality, race and ethnicity. The langar has a significant historical value as it not only augmented the influence of Akhund of Swat and his descendants but also had a significant impact on the lives of the people residing in the area. This paper aims at tracing the historical background of the langar, its continuation in different periods of history, the resources that were required for it, analysis of its socio-economic aspects and its value for the general masses.

Keywords: Langar, Akhund, Swat, State, food, Saidu, Mianguls.

1. Introduction

Akhund Abdul Ghafur is popularly known as Akhund of Swat, Saidu Baba, Akhund Sahib, Sahib-i-Swat, Swat Sahib, pope of Swat and Swat Babaji (hereafter mentioned as Akhund of Swat and Saidu Baba). He attained the title of *Akhund* by virtue to his religious learning and mastery in *tariqa* (Haroon 2011: 37). His father Abdul Wahid belonged to the Safi tribe and was from the Mohmand area. After travelling far and wide to acquire religious education, Saidu Baba finally settled in Saidu Sharif, a small and insignificant village at that time. By virtue of his character, wisdom and his religious knowledge, he soon became a distinguished person in the area. The masses used to visit him in huge numbers and he was recognized as the Akhund of Swat (Barth 1985: 14). The then

Assistant Commissioner of Yousufzai area¹, Captain T.J.C Plowden wrote during the lifetime of the Akhund that “People from Arabia, Turkey, Persian, Hindustan, Afghanistan and Bokhara, with occasional Englishman and Russian, partake his hospitality and obtain his blessings, and often more than 300 people used to visit him in a single day” (Plowden 1932). In 1934, Major W.R. Hay provided an account of the Akhund of Swat, whose origins trace back to a Safi tribesman who migrated from Bajaur to settle in the hamlet of Jabrai in Upper Swat. Around 1794, his son, Abdul Ghaffur, was born. At a young age, Abdul Ghaffur tended flocks and cattle, but as he grew older, he moved to Peshawar to seek religious knowledge and studied under different scholars. Afterward, he lived as a hermit in a village for some twelve years, where he gained a reputation for his sanctity, laying the foundation for his future influence in the region (Hay 1934: 237).

The grandson of Akhund of Swat and the first Wali of Swat², Miangul Abdul Wadud (1881-1971) opined that the Akhund after acquiring religious education in different areas outside Swat returned to the valley in the year 1835. Subsequently, after wandering for about ten years in Swat, he eventually settled in Saidu Sharif in 1845 (Khan 2009: 60). He resided at the same place till his death in 1877. As a prominent figure in the valley, under his leadership, the various tribes fought against the colonial British in the Ambela campaign of 1863. The prime objective of Akhund of Swat during his lifetime was to maintain the independence of Swat and adjoining areas from the British. He never opted for worldly power or authority and led a simple life (Hay 1934: 238).

Historically, the shrines have remained an integral part of the lives of the people in Indian Subcontinent. The well-off people give donations in the shape of money while some offer time as a symbol of devotion and reverence for the holy place (Iftikhar 2021: 34). Innumerable pilgrims used to visit the Akhund at his mosque at Saidu Sharif (Hay 1934: 238). The mosque soon became the hub of both worldly and celestial guidance. The leading men in area paid regular visit to the Akhund during his lifetime and after his demise to his shrine. According to a British Fortnight

¹ It is worth mentioning that in 1895, the office of Political Agent was formally created and posted at Malakand, to serve as a bridge between the colonial British Government and the princely States of Dir, Swat and Chitral.

² ‘Wali was the title under which the rulers of Swat State were recognized by the colonial Britisher.

Confidential Report of July 1918, the Sandaki Mulla³ came to Saidu, a day before the *Eid* and was lodged in the shrine of Saidu Baba. Miangul Sherin, the younger brother of the then ruler of Swat State, hosted him in the mosque (File No 47-55, Confidential Diaries, 19th July 1918, Directorate of Archives & Libraries, Peshawar).

The Passani *Mullah* was the *Mutawali*⁴ of the shrine of the Akhund for many years. Passani *Mullah* being the *Mutawali* of the shrine was held in such great esteem by the descendants of the Akhund that he was asked to wound the first fold of the symbolic *puggari*⁵, round the head of Miangul Abdul Haq Jahanzeb as Wali Ahad (Heir Apparent) of the ruler of Swat in May 1923 (30th May 1923, File No 47-55, Confidential Diary, Bundle No. 4, 192-1918, DC Files, Directorate of Archives & Libraries, Peshawar). In the 1883 Gazetteer of Peshawar, it is noted that the Akhund of Swat lived as an ascetic and religious leader, earning deep reverence from the people. His influence extended beyond his own valley to much of North-Eastern Afghanistan, where he gradually gained widespread power. The Gazetteer emphasizes that he used his influence for positive purposes, such as promoting truth, peace, and morality, reducing local feuds, and enforcing the principles of Muhammadan Law in a way that respected the entrenched customs of the Pathan people (Peshawar Gazetteer 1883-84: 179).

With his permanent settling down at Saidu Sharif, the Akhund acquire the position of the leading man among the Yusufzais of Swat and adjoining areas. It is also worth mentioning that no man was called Akhund (a Persian word meaning a teacher with much the same meaning as Guru) unless he was greatly revered. The tales of Akhund of Swat, his simplicity of life, how he sat in meditation under the shade of a tree to draw near to the Great Soul are frequently narrated his *murids* (disciples). He acquired acceptance and reverence of the masses and of the “Yusufzais who felt his spell, forgetting even their blood-lust” (Caroe 1984: 363). British Administrator Olaf Caroe remarked that a shrine was constructed over the Akhund’s grave, which became a popular pilgrimage site, rivaling that of Pir Baba in Buner. He noted that during the Akhund’s lifetime, there was no intention for him to take on any temporal power. The Akhund himself proposed that the authority of Swat of ‘Badshah,’ be

³ Sandakai *Mulla* popularly known as Wali Ahmad was an influential religious person in the affairs of Swat, in the second decade of 20th Century.

⁴ *Muttawali* means incharge or caretaker of a mosque/shrine.

⁵ *Puggari* (*Puggaree* or *Pagri*) is a hindi term meaning a traditional turban.

given to Sayyid Akbar Shah, both because Akbar Shah was a Sayyid, and in recognition of his role in the armed struggle against the Sikhs (Caroe 1984: 383).

During his lifetime, his mosque turned into one of the most important religious sites in Northern India. After the death of Saidu Baba, his grandsons inherited part of his spiritual influence. The offerings at the Akhund's shrine and subscriptions received from their religious followers were then afforded to the Mianguls (the descendants of Akhund of Swat) that resulted in augmenting their influence even further and enhanced their sources of income (Imperial Gazetteer 1908: 220-221). Major Henry George Raverty, who sent a secret agent to Swat in 1858, reported that although he had been led to believe the Akhund possessed some wealth, he found very little. He observed that the Akhund was not involved in worldly affairs as rumored but had renounced them, living as a recluse, independent of everyone, and devoted to the worship of God. Occasionally, the Akhund would leave his house for a few hours a day or even every other day, during which time sick individuals would visit him for remedies and prayers. If disputes arose between two parties, and both agreed to have the matter settled according to Sharia, the Akhund would explain the relevant legal principles from Arabic law books. Outside of these activities, he was not involved in other matters (Raverty 1862: 244).

2. Langar of Akhund of Swat

Langar (a Persian word) means a community kitchen. Sana Haroon has translated the *langarkhana* as almshouse and public kitchen (Haroon 2011: 37-38). Fakhr-ul-Islam has also interpreted it as public kitchen (Islam 2014: 98). *Langar* is a place where the food is distributed daily to the needy, the poor and the travelers. In *langar* everyone can enjoy food irrespective of his religion, nationality, race and ethnicity. There exist no distinction on the basis of caste and creed. Historically, the *langars* have existed in one form or another since ancient times. It is still celebrated at the shrines of Muslim Sufis on *Urs* (a ceremony held at the shrines of Sufi saints) and other special occasions. The tradition of serving *langar* was initiated by Guru Nanak Dev Ji among Sikh⁶ community as well. The

⁶ "Guru ka langar, The Golden Temple".

Retrieved from <https://www.goldentempleamritsar.org/best-places-to-visit/india/golden-temple/guru-ka-langar.php> on April 2024.

Mughal ruler Jalal Uddin Akbar used to come and sat among the ordinary people to share *langar*. The public kitchens were in vogue in the Ottoman Empire, from the fourteenth century to the nineteenth century as well (Singer 2005: 481). In the Islamic world, some holy shrines have cooking facilities where pilgrims can prepare their own food, while in others, food is provided by the attendants. For instance, in the early sixteenth century, Safavid Shah Ismail established a trust to fund the distribution of food at the shrine of his ancestor Safi al-Din in Ardebil. Similarly, during the seventeenth century, it was reported that over a thousand people were fed daily at the shrine, although this practice ceased in the eighteenth century when the shrine's patrons lost their power (Beattie 1983: 91). Hugh Beattie also stated that offering food to the poor, regardless of its simplicity, is one of the most common ways for individuals to fulfill a vow, as it is accessible to nearly everyone. In Afghanistan, cooked food is brought to the shrine and shared with those needy. Due to its cost, slaughtering an animal for pilgrims is considered one of the most valued donations. This act of food distribution is referred to as *khayrat* or a charitable act (Beattie 1983: 143).

The *langar* or the system of feeding the *zairan* is a significant feature of every saint during his lifetime or after his demise. People flock there in great numbers and mostly are served with meals twice a day, free of cost. In Pashtun belt, such saints receive large piece of land to provide grains to the *langar* (Shahab 2020). Besides, the purvey of free food, the shrines also provide shelter to needy and free religious instruction (Iftikhar 2021: 34).

The spiritual influence of the Akhund of Swat attracted in big numbers, the non-Muslims as well (Hussain 1962: lxiii). These visitors needed a viable and efficient feeding system at the mosque of Akhund at Saidu Sharif, an isolated place at the point of time lacking modern communication system, let alone any workable system of dinning. With the increase of his followers and rapidly gaining popularity in a few years' time, the people donated a portion of land for him and his disciples' (Khan 2009: 82). At Saidu Sharif, the Akhund was encircled by his disciples, who lived in the same village and accomplished his various instructions, attend to and feed the devotees who visited their *Pir* (Bellew 1864: 105-106). The *langar* of Saidu Baba was locally known as *da Saidu Baba Langar*⁷ and soon turned into a major feeding centre. The distinguished British author, H.W. Bellew asserted in 1864:

⁷ Some local pronounces the *langar* as *nangar*.

“It is said that the Akhun daily feeds hundreds of visitors, cures them of all sorts of diseases, and grants their desires in all their multitudinous variety, and all this without the aid of any visible means; for in outward appearance he is very poor, takes no tithes or taxes from the country, and steadily refuses the offerings of Poverty, the devotees flocking to him from all the adjacent countries. Funds or food and clothing are never wanting to meet the necessities of any number of devotees who may gather at his threshold.” (Bellew 1864: 106)

Similarly, Major Henry George Raverty commented on the feeding system at the langarkhana, during the lifetime of the Akhund of Swat, that about two to three hundred poor people are fed daily in the Akhund’s guest chamber. Despite paying for all the provisions, the Akhund appeared to have no income. The offerings made by those who visit him were used by his servants for this purpose. Apart from a few buffaloes, which were occasional gifts, he owned few worldly possessions, let alone land or revenue to pursue imperial ambitions. Raverty added that the Akhund does not accept money from chiefs or nobles, but he does accept small offerings from the poor visitors to make them feel comfortable and confident (Raverty, 1862, 245).

The most authentic details about the *langar* of Saidu Baba have been provided by Captain T.J.C Plowden. Captain Plowden was serving as Assistant Commissioner and was in charge of Yusufzai territory. He wrote to Deputy Commissioner, Peshawar on 8th February 1876:

“The arrangements of the Akhund’s kitchen are in the hands of Gul Ahmad, and it is calculated that he feeds some 500 persons daily. As the Akhund never receives offerings from the many devotees who flock to him, he gives out that the food and pensions served out are supplied to him by supernatural means from heaven, and asserts that every morning on rising from his prayers a sum of money, sufficient for his daily expenditures is found under his praying carpet. There is no doubt, however, that he personally, or through his Shekhs, receives, in private, money and costly offerings from those who come to visit him. He has also considerable tracts of glebe land voluntarily set apart for him, in Independent and British Territory, as well as large flocks and herds, whilst it is also asserted that he possesses treasure to the amount of several thousands of rupees. The offerings he receives from wealthy and well-to-do pilgrims he frequently sells at high prices to other pilgrims, who regard them as talismans. Many of them also store up portions of the loaves of bread served out to them by the Akhund’s cook, as they

believe them to possess talismanic powers – an idea which the Akhund encourages by styling his kitchen “langar bazurgana” or “the Holy Refectory.” The house he lives in is also regarded by them with the utmost veneration.” (Plowden 1932: 12).

The produce of Akhund’s glebe lands, or the money for which it was sold, was brought to the *langarkhana* by his disciples. The people also gladly supplied firewood for the *langar*. Captain Plowden asserted that the grasses for the horses, ponies and mules of Akhund’s guests, as well as timber when required by him were brought to him. While supplying all these items, the suppliers considered themselves highly privileged by being allowed to perform such services for Akhund of Swat (Plowden 1932). A present given to one of the *Shiekhs* (followers) of Akhund meant an extra good meal to a hungry visitor. In order to prevent inconvenience to the visitors and to keep down the expenses of the *langar*, no pilgrim was retained by the Akhund for more than three days (Plowden 1932).

3. *Langar* of Akhund in Swat State’s Era

Interestingly, the renowned archeologist Aurel Stein, when he visited Swat State for the first time in 1926, to explore the archeological sites in the State, also enjoyed the food offered at the *langarkhana*. He later wrote that it was a tradition and policy that all those seeking justice from Miangul Abdul Wadud must be hosted as his guests for up to three days. This particular practice appeared to be wise, as it both hastened decisions and softened the feelings of disappointed litigants. When Aurel Stein asked the Wali of Swat, to pay for the supplies provided to his group, the ruler with a smile on his face, remarked that the cost was negligible compared to the hundreds of guests who was served in his kitchen daily (Stein 1929: 70).

Ashraf Altaf Hussain who translated the autobiography of Miangul Abdul Wadud into English language in 1962, remarked that the alms-house which also functioned as a public kitchen for the hundreds of devotees and poor people was functioning on daily basis without any break. Food for five hundred men⁸ was cooked daily as the town had become a centre of social and spiritual reforms and was visited by people in big numbers. Ashraf Altaf further added that all the visitors were regarded as the guests of Saidu Baba without any distinction of rank or

⁸The figure of five hundred has been frequently quoted by the researcher like Muhammad Ali Dinakhel, Ashraf Altaf, Akbar S. Ahmed, Asif Khan and others.

status. When the grandson of Akhund of Swat, Miangul Abdul Wadud became ruler of Swat State in 1917, he provided the finances to run the *langar* as before, despite the fact that in the beginning of his reign, there was no public treasury of the State (Hussain 1962: lix). The writing of Abdul Ghafoor Qasmi in 1939 reveals that the ruler of Swat State not only operated the *langar* of Saidu Baba but also financed other *langars*. The expenditure and the expenses on these *langars* including the royal guest house reached many lacs in a span of a year (Qasmi 1939: 182).⁹ Interestingly, in the state era, when the general masses came to the capital in connection of some work or court proceedings, they were also served with food from the *langar* (Qasmi 1939: 222).

It is pertinent to mention here that the Akhund opened his initial *langar* at village Barkalay, Saidu Sharif (Khan 2009: 60). After settling down at the present site, he constructed a residence for himself, a masjid and a *langar* (Khan 2009: 62). The grandson of Akhund and ruler of Swat State asserted that the expenses of the *langar* were meted out by the Akhund himself, out of his own resources and the lands that he possessed, to feed the needy (Khan 2009: 82-83). Interestingly, Miangul Abdul Haq Jahanzeb popularly as Wali Sahib, remarked that the “people started to come to him [Akhund of Swat] for advice, and he used to give them food also. For this reason, people with property would contribute to his kitchen, and after a while he became very well off because every tribe gave him some land, to support his charity” (Barth 1985: 14). Sana Haroon opines about the financial sources that were required for the running of the *langar* in these words:

“In return for his assistance to Amir Dost Muhammad Khan, Abdul Ghaffur was awarded lands in Swat, Lundkhwar and Mardan among the Yusufzai. These rewards were considerable the Akhund’s langarkhana (a combination of an open community kitchen, entertaining quarters and almshouse) at Saidu in Lower Swat fed 500 men a day and his wealth was sufficient to provide for the running the State established 70 years later by his grandson Miangul Abdul Wudud. Abdul Ghaffur’s reputation attracted devotees from great distances, turning Saidu into a thriving city whose economy revolved around the langarkhana. The langarkhana and the Akhunds reputation were supported by the sale of ghee from the Akhund’s herds of livestock. During these years Abdul Ghaffur conferred

⁹The figure of many lacs, however, seems exaggerated.

on a scheme for a united throne of Swat and selected a candidate for it.”
(Haroon: 38-39).

Abdul Shakoor (2012) suggests that the Akhund gained prominence during Afghan Amir Dost Muhammad Khan’s campaign against the Sikh Kingdom of Ranjit Singh. The Akhund responded to the call for jihad by organizing an armed lashkar and engaging the Sikhs in Peshawar. In recognition of his efforts, the Amir granted him land in Swat and Mardan, which provided the Akhund with sufficient wealth to support his generous langarkhana. In the year 1878, a famine struck Swat and it was reported to be so sore throughout the land that the weekly “dole established by the late Akhund was almost the only means of subsistence for many of the Swatis”.¹⁰

Remarkably, the *langar* did not come to a closure on the death of Saidu Baba in 1877 and it was kept operational by his sons, Miangul Abdul Hanan and Miangul Abdul Khaliq as they were now the custodians of the Akhund’s shrine. After their death, the four grandsons of the Akhund sustained the legacy (McMahon and A.D.G Ramsay 1981: 26). In their times, the number of people who were fed at the *langar* reached two thousand on certain occasions (Khan 2009: 92) and it remained operative (Hussain 1962: lxix).

With the accession of Miangul Abdul Wadud (Badshah Sahib) as the ruler of Swat State in 1917, the *langar* was given more impetus. Now, the locals in the capital would carry the mixed peas broth and corn cakes twice a day for their families (Shahab 2020). Similarly, the litigants from the far-flung areas of the State were served with meals in the palace of the ruler of Swat State as well (Yousaf 2019: 134-135). The *langar* continued as usual, for a certain length of time, in the ruling era of Miangul Abdul Haq Jahanzeb as well (Shahab 2020).¹¹ It is worth mentioning here that during the reign of both the Walis of Swat, a certain amount of money was provided from the revenues of the State for the effective functioning of the *langar* (Qasmi: 129).

¹⁰ Allen’s Indian Mail and register of Intelligence for British, Aug. 31, 1878, 829. Retrieved from <http://books.google.com.pk/books> on 11th April 2024.

¹¹Fazal Raziq Shahab (aged 80 and an employee during state era) in an interview with the author further added that the grain store situated on Aqba Road (Saidu Sharif, Swat) was used to supply flour for the *langar*. The poor women worked on daily wages under the supervision of a Subedar (State official). Further a state owned small truck was used to carry the clean maize to the water mills. The registration number of the vehicle was 10.

The elders of the area narrate that thousands of corn cakes were prepared in large ovens and whosoever desired to have free meals, they were served from the *langar*. Interestingly, the prisoners in the State Jail and the *sepoys* working in Saidu Sharif were also fed the same corn cakes that were locally termed as ‘*nangari*’. These ‘*nangari*’ were one to two inches thick and four inch diam. meaning quarter of a circle (Shahab 2020). These ‘*nangari*’ were made of corn flour that was supplied from the store of the State. The Assistant Commissioner, Captain T.J.C Plowden also made an interesting remark about the food that was served in the *langar*. He wrote during the lifetime of Akhund of Swat:

“Food is served out to pilgrims twice a day, morning and evening. At both meals cakes of unleavened jowar bread are given, accompanied, in winter, by a bowl of “aogra” (a sort of porridge and the national dish of the people of Swat, made of rice boiled to a dry state, but mixed with butter milk) at breakfast, and of “dal” at supper. In the summer, unleavened loaves of wheat or barley take the place of the jowar cakes. Meat too is not infrequently given to the guests.” (Plowden 1932).

4. Socio-Economic Aspects of *Langar*

The *langar* of Saidu Baba played a vital role in the socio-economic life of the residents of the area. The locals could save the money that they earned. Due to lack of financial burden on those who resided in the newly founded capital of the state, their children acquired modern education that was mostly free. Subsequently, those who acquired education were given jobs in the various institutions of the newly founded state, as manpower was needed for its smooth functioning (Uddin 2022: 75-76). Thus, a new segment of society that was well-off, emerged in the state, particularly in the capital, though they were not related to any of the dominant clans in the State. With the passage of time, that new emerged class got more educated, became more social and more civilized than some of the influential families of Swat (Shahab 2020). With the increase of population in the capital of the State, the settling of newly migrated people in search of jobs in the new setup of the State and the increase in number of court cases, the supply of meals to the parties of cases was stopped from the *langar*. Now only the staff of the ruler of the state and the distinguished guests was provided food in the ruler’s palace. Interestingly, even women worked in different categories in the *langar*. They were

engaged in cleaning grains for water mills that was subsequently consumed in the *langar* of Saidu Baba (Shahab 2020).

According to Muhammad Ali Dinakhel, the *langar* of Saidu Baba played an important role in the well-being of people. The *langar* served the people irrespective of any ethnicity and geographical restrictions (Dinakhel 2020: 361). Interestingly, a prisoner who was imprisoned in the jail at Saidu Sharif wrote a couplet (in Pashtu) about the *langar*:

“*da sta gham ke maa jabeni langari khwarm,
Khudai shahid dai salor ghat salor nari khwarm.*”
(Dinakhel 2020: 361)

Translation (by the authors):
My appealing beloved, in your grief, I eat ‘*langari*’. Allah Almighty be a witness
that I eat four big and four small ‘*langari*’.

The author could not ascertain the exact year of the commencement and closure of the *langar* due to insufficient documentation. Sher Mohammad Mainosh, a poet who wrote a booklet on Swat in 1950s, stated that the *langar* was operational in the capital of the State (Mainosh: 21). The researcher conducted interviews with the elders in order to dig out the exact year of the closure of the *langar* but was unable to obtain any authentic information. However, it is beyond any doubt that it continued to serve for more than hundred years, starting from the mid of 1840s or the early 1850s. Akbar S. Ahmed emphasizes on the interesting aspect of the langars, noting that the exchange of material gifts from the wealthy in return for spiritual merit, and to the poor, contributed to a shift in traditional patron-client dynamics. This practice added a new element to the existing patron-client relations and thus created two distinct and mutually exclusive circles. The functioning of these circles had significant consequences on the breakdown of traditional patron-client ties in Swat (Ahmed 1976: 96).

Therefore, the *langar*, as an institution, is distinct from the conventional *hujra*. In the *hujra* those who frequently attend the guest house of a tribal *Khan* or *Malak* are ultimately considered the companions or retainers of them. Historically, those who attend the *Khan*’s *hujra* were called upon, when needed and were supposed to serve him as benefactors and to come to the aid of the *Khan* and *Malaks*. David B. Edwards also suggested that the *Khan*’s retainers maintain a façade of autonomy and even equality in their interactions with the *Khan*. However, only on rare

occasions, one can note that there exist a status difference between the Khan and those around him (Edwards 1996: 152). Fredrik Barth has further shed light on this particular aspect and stated that the political actions of a tribal Khan or a Malak are aimed to maintain or increase his influence. For keeping this rationale in mind, the men's house of the chief plays a vital role. At that *hujra*, "the political, economic and recreational life of the men of the ward revolves around this common centre" and that allegiance to the tribal chief is articulated by an act of visiting his *hujra*. This loyalty towards the chief is reinforced by the acceptance of his hospitality. Thus, the chief gives food, and other valuables to enhance dependence on the part of the persons, who sit in his men's house (Barth 1985: 11).

In contrast, this is not the case for those who become disciples of a Pir. By receiving teachings from the Pir, sharing food at his langar, and receiving blessings, the followers implicitly acknowledge a different status in relation to the Pir compared to any other individual (Edwards 1996: 152). In this relationship with the *Pir*, a new sort of ethos takes hold that has no ties or worries of reciprocal obligations (Edwards 1996: 155). The *Pir* has a staff of attendants called *Sheikhs* that fulfills his needs and handles the daily management of the *langar*. He did not have a force to call these attendants in his support, in the way when a *Khan's* group of retainers could be called on to assist him. Likewise, the non-resident disciples who visit the shrine of the *Pir*, resume their own commitments once they are out of the *Pir's* presence. There are rare cases when the non-resident may be enlisted en-masse to realize a political objective (Edwards 1996: 156). According to Akbar S. Ahmed, the Akhund of Swat formed an informal economic network centered around his influential position, which augmented his spiritual authority and provided material support for his reformist message. The wealth and offerings from his affluent followers contributed to his prosperity, but much of it was directed towards helping the poor. He established *langar* for the needy, which also served as a public kitchen, providing meals for up to five hundred people daily. In exchange, the donors and followers gained socio-spiritual merit through this exchange, thereby forming personal, spiritual connections with the him (Ahmed 1976: 95-96).

The *langar* also provided to the *Pir* a formal base, from where he extended his sway over the society. In the societies, where most of the tribal *Khans* and *Malaks* (Ahmad 1963: 127-137) extended their generosity to a small range of relatives, retainers, and guests, the *langar* fulfilled the necessities of a broader community. The langar served not

only as a dining hall for those, who were close to the *Pir* but also as a way station for the travellers. It also served as a meeting place for nearby tribes to mediate conflicts when they were involved in hostilities, as well as a sanctuary for society's outcasts. Some of these individuals later gained the status of Sheikhs (followers) and remained as the *Pir*'s servants. Fredrik Barth (1985) has discussed an important aspect of Pashtun society, emphasizing the system of economic dependence and political clientage that existed both before and during the State of Swat. In this system, landless tenants and craftsmen secured land and labor contracts from landowners, with both these groups, along with smaller landowners, forming the political followings of the larger Khans. To maintain their influence, the tribal Khans used a combination of protection, coercion, hospitality, and generosity, focusing on feasts, companionship, and group control within the Khan's hujra. The Khans were evaluated based on qualities such as "weight," "solidity," "forcefulness," "hospitality," and "manliness." The relationship between a common man and a Khan was voluntary, and a follower's benefits were contingent upon the Khan's effectiveness and goodwill. As a result, followers were quick to abandon ineffective leaders in favor of more successful ones, creating a dynamic where strong leaders were often supported by fluctuating followings. (Barth 1985: 162-163).

The *langars* also provided for a partial corrective to the rigid tendencies of the frontier tribes and helped in bringing the tribes into contact with each other and with the world beyond their borders. The existence of *langars* meant that people could travel more easily and with ease because there existed a place where the individuals from different, sometimes warring, groups could sit together without anyone having the upper hand. As visitors, all were equals and equally bound to respect the ethical principles that governed the sacred limits of the *Pir*'s centre (Edwards: 152). The *langarkhana* also served the centre of activity for all those who visit the guest-house-cum-dinning-hall. It served as the key institution through which the *Pir* connected with both his close disciples and the community at large.

At the present day, very few active *langars* are available and most to such *langars* are non-operational. Such *langars* needed a number of *Sheikhs* (followers) and an elaborate organization to function properly. There were people who were put in charge of bread making, meat slaughtering, distributing the food, tending to the guests, and cleaning the mosque. In the far-flung areas, where there was no governmental presence and lacked any major urban areas in the immediate vicinity, there were

hardly any places where the attendants could go. In such circumstances, the *langar* served as place that provided food to such a community, who had nowhere to go (Edwards 1996: 149). Similarly, the Akhund's reputation and his *langarkhana* enticed and tempted the devotees from great distances that turned Saidu into a thriving town whose economy initially revolved around his *langarkhana* (Haroon 2011: 38). The *langar* of Saidu Baba had a separate structure that included separate area for preparation of food, storage place for utensils and area for storing of the supplies. The structure has been demolished recently and is replaced by a market.

5. Conclusions

Langar refers to community a kitchen that provides free food to the people regardless of their background or social status. It provides community service, free food, economic support to certain extent and social bonding among the participants. In case of Swat, the settling down of Akhund of Swat in Saidu Sharif resulted in the transformation of the village, Saidu Sharif. His mystical influence led arrival of visitors in big numbers. These visitors required a workable feeding system at the mosque of Akhund that was a remote place at the point of time. Thus, the *langar* that was locally known as 'da Saidu Baba langar' turned into a major feeding centre. The *langar* remained operational for more than one hundred years. Owing to its value for the Mianguls and the masses, it was ensured that the *langar* remained operational without any break and with equal fervor. It ran smoothly in the pre-state era (pre 1915 era) and in the state era (1915-1969) for a considerable length of time. However, it ceased to remain operational in the later years of the reign of the last Wali of Swat. The *langar* served the masses in general and residents of Saidu Sharif in particular.

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