

The Langar: People's History of Hunger

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Abstract

Offering free food at sacred spaces is a unique ritual in South Asian communities. In recent years, *langar* in residential and commercial areas marks a radical shift in food and charity distribution. Within this context, hunger emerges as a paradigmatic visceral reality, articulated and managed in varied ways at the local and state levels. It solicits emotional response in gift-giving from the wealthy and shapes the collective imagination of development and progress. Although the state efforts to incorporate *langar* in the gambit of the developmental program may have a national appeal, the spirit of feeding the hungry exceeds governmental reason of 'food security'. This paper investigates how the lived experience of hunger of the indigent and downtrodden fits the broader nationalist historiography.

'The *langar khana* (food banks) make daily wage earners lazy'. A middle-class person often complains of charities feeding the destitute in the city. Set up at almost all the major street's intersections and roundabouts, local welfare organizations, often faith-based, operate makeshift roadside *dastarkhwan* to feed hundreds of thousands of poor people who can barely earn a daily provision. Saylani Welfare International Trust, the Karachi-based charity, recently joined hands with Prime Minister Imran Khan to inaugurate the country-wide Ehsaas-Saylani Langar Scheme. For the first time, *langar* now makes its way as a state-driven national program in poverty alleviation.

Keywords: charity, development, *dastarkhwan*, *langar*, food security, poverty alleviation.

'Hunger is a reality (*haqiqat*)', said Parveen Saeed, who operates a food kitchen known as *Khanaghar* (Food home) in a low-income neighborhood of *Khuda ki Basti* (God's Colony) on the outskirts of Karachi. By *haqiqat*, she meant an experiential truth that often manifests in horror. In 2002 she heard a woman had killed her two children in the

community. Saeed asked the woman why she had killed the children. The woman replied you would kill your children too if they are hungry for two days.¹ According to Saeed, the answer changed her life. She decided to open a kitchen for the hungry. 'I fed only two people twenty years ago; *Khanaghar* now serves more than 5,000 people every day,' said Saeed. Every year in Ramadan, the organization distributes 4,000 bags, offers free clothes and shoes to the poor, and gives a cash amount to the families. *Khanaghar* is a pioneer in providing free food to the hungry. It is an unusual story of a woman who neither had economic standing nor cultural capital to begin a charity organization. Often welfare groups such as Edhi, Saylani, Chhipa, Alamgir, with huge operation costs, serving millions throughout the country, comes from mercantile backgrounds of Gujrati Memon or Delhi-Punjabi Suadgaran communities. As a woman, Parveen Saeed started alone with no cash or funds at hand.

This article seeks to illuminate how people feed the hungry. It explores a little-known history of a ritual that has served as a system of food distribution. The paper moves away from the policy and state perspective and brings new insights into citizens' efforts to handle the crisis. It argues that the ritual of *langar/dastarkhwan* exceeds the secular-historical approach of 'food security'. The discourse of food security, as is generally understood, provides legal-technical solutions to food crises. For example, it focuses on maintaining a supply and demand balance of wheat in a country. However, traditional food distribution practices such as *langar* carry meaning driven from divinity. It is the gift of food given in the name of God. Since it inscribes meaning to the transcendental authority, the ethical and moral stakes of distributing food are higher than secularized giving. The imperative to feed the hungry in this world also translates into good for the afterlife. *Langar* fuses immanence and transcendental into a singular experience. The questions raised are; Is it possible to find solutions, technical and ethical, for eliminating hunger from customary practices of food sharing? How does ethical and moral imagination shape the people's response to eliminate hunger? These questions open up silenced and ordinary experiences marginalized under the secular discourse of food security.

This article explores the shifts in the practice of *langar*. Offering free food at sacred spaces is a unique ritual in South Asian communities. Sufi shrines, in particular, serve as a space for communal feasting. The

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¹ The most extensive Nutritional Survey 2018 discovered that forty percent of children under five suffer from malnutrition in the country (Nutritional Survey 2018).

langar is free food distributed as an act of generosity in the service of God. The gift of food offered to the public in the name of God or saint holds no proprietor nor imposes obligations on the receiver. Within Sufism, the *langar* 'objectifies the moral community embodied by the saint himself as a figure of infinite generosity'.² However, the way the gift of food is growing in size, variety, and intensity indicates a shift in the practice in present-day Pakistan. For example, offering food all year round in main commercial areas out of saint shrines marks a radical break from the older tradition. The change is also visible in the variety of meals distributed. The traditional *daal-roti* (lentils and bread) is replaced with sumptuous meat dishes. One also witnesses a change in the imagination of feeding the poor. Rather than calling it *langar*, the gift of food under a religiously inspired motivation now also combines a civic sense of sharing an economic burden of precarious class. However, it continues to carry on the Islamic imperative of sacrifice and generosity.

The first section conceptualizes hunger, the way it has been historically articulated. It covers states' response in dealing with starvation and food crises. The second section presents the ethnographic field where the research took place. It gives a sense of place to contextualize the phenomenon in historical condition. The third section illuminates the narratives of *langar*. It shows the motivations of stakeholders involve in distributing free food to the poor. The fourth section highlights the people receiving free food. It gives account of suffering and hardship experience by the ordinary people in Karachi. The final section presents the shifts in practice of *langar* from a *daal-roti* to lavish meals. It also situates Pakistan in a larger context of political economy of hunger.

The Langar

An alternate history of food exists beyond a secular history of food security. Feeding the poor has a special place in gift-giving practices. According to Mary Douglas, 'gifts of food are flows of life-giving substance'.³ It operates within 'multiple symbolic systems at the same time to convey a combination of material, moral, social, and spiritual messages'.⁴ In Islamic tradition, the gift of food is valued highly.

² Pnina Werbner and Helene Basu (eds), *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality, and Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults* (UK: Psychology Press, 1998).

³ Mary Douglas, *Food in the Social Order* (UK: Routledge, 2014), 12.

⁴ Jon Keune, *Shared Devotion, Shared Food: Equality and the Bhakti-Caste Question in Western India* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 108.

Repeatedly emphasized in the Quran to feed the indigent, Islam made it imperative to acquire a phenomenological experience of the hungry by prescribing fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. The spiritual exercise of fasting cultivates a sense of starvation – an everyday reality for the millions of oppressed. It motivates a person to feel the pain of others, to develop empathy for the hungry, and cultivate an ethical sensibility. The Quran strongly encourages believers to feed the indigent in the name of God and do not expect a return either in reward or gratitude. A pertinent verse from the Quran summarizes the ethics of giving. 'We feed you for the sake of Allah alone: no reward do we desire from you, nor thanks (Quran 76: 9). An individual feeding the destitute feels immediate gratification for recovering a body from suffering. It gives a sense of joy and satisfaction – a singular experience that other acts of goodness do not offer. Giving life to a person in need by feeding the starved generates a feeling of greatness and warmth.

Langar has a long history in the Indo-Islamic milieu. In Sufi, the gift of food to the impoverished functions as a trope. Dervish often defers gratification by sacrificing his meal, especially the only piece of bread. Within Sufism, the Chishti Sufi order under the patronage of Khawaja Moin Uddin Chishti, also known as Gharib Nawaz, Benefactor of the Poor, institutionalized the *langar* in early thirteenth-century India. He made *langar* an integral part of the Sufi practice. Later Sikh religion made it central to the core belief.⁵ In pre-modern India, *langar* was a revolutionary practice. It allowed people to eat free from the fear of polluting the meal annihilating the centuries-old caste hierarchies. *Langar* liberated low-caste people from the guilt of contaminating food – a perception that had held the upper caste in a constant higher moral status. Hence, food and sharing meals functioned as identity makers, created community and solidarities.⁶

Bashir Farooqi, the founder of one of the country's largest charity organizations, Saylani Welfare, told the author that *langar* was started by the second Caliph Omer, who fed thousands of drought-affected people in Medina. Farooqi included some prominent saints such

⁵ Guru Nanak a son of a merchant on his way to purchase grain from a bazaar saw starved and afflicted in the village. He distributed the grain among the poor and went empty hand back to his father. Upon asking he replied, I did a true bargain, *sacha sauda*, by taking away the hunger in exchange of food. The place in District of Sheikhpura in Pakistan's Punjab is known as Sacha Sauda.

⁶ Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Du Bois, 'The Anthropology of Food and Eating', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31:1 (2002): 99-119.

as Abdul Qadir Gilani, Ali Hujwari, Moin Uddin Chishti, and his patron saint, Muhkam Uddin Serani.⁷ Speaking of the grandiosity of Sufis, Farooqi stressed, 'We ask people for money for the *langar*. But Ali Hujwari never asked for a donation. People gave him and continue to give.' Saylani operates hundreds of food banks across the country. It has pioneered the *dastarkhawan*, named after an eighteen-century Sufi Muhkam Uddin Serani from south Punjab. Farooqi believes the blessing of Serani or Saylani continues to care for the people. Another rapidly growing welfare organization, JDC, runs Dastarkhawan-e-Imam Hasan in crowded city's spots shares a different view. 'Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Hasan, had set up a dastarkhawan outside of Medina for travelers. JDC continues to follow the tradition'. That is why it is challenging to separate cosmology from food or the gift of food.

Langar is not just any kind of food. It is not secular yet. Instead, *langar* operates horizontally – at the community level – and vertically – aspiring for God's will. Both vectors shape the ritual of feeding the hungry. God nourishes the hungry – an axiomatic truth – that everyone understands in Pakistan. Hence, *langar* is cosmologically authenticated – 'how material resources and social practices link individuals and groups with an authority that transcends present social and political action'.⁸ An individual who provides for the poor has no agency or serving as a mere mediator between God and the destitute. Hence, ethical actions do not arise from the secular world of 'moral sentiments' - 'emotions that direct our attention to the suffering of others and make us want to remedy them'.⁹ Rather God as an ontologically prior determines people's response of caring for the other. 'Placing God in the foreground, and the suffering other in the background, disrupts both the liberal conceit of compassion and the neoliberal imperative of self-help'.¹⁰ The same thought echoes by Parveen Saeed, 'Allah created us, and He has written the purpose of our life. We cannot do anything good for anyone unless it is God's will'.

⁷ Saylani Welfare International is the biggest charity network in Pakistan. It operates in all the major cities across the country. Beginning from a modest dastarkhawan in Karachi, Saylani now offer services from skill development to schools.

⁸ Annette B. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-while Giving* (California: University of California Press, 1992), 4.

⁹ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (California: University of California Press, 2011), 1.

¹⁰ Amira Mittermaier, *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times* (California: University of California Press, 2019), 4.

Placing God as the master signifier assigns cosmological authenticity to their deeds, and also, God essentially becomes the 'constant spectator'.¹¹ People like Parveen Saeed do not ask for a counter-gift. They do not expect anything in return from the poor or any reward from God. Doing without an expectation of return does not create any obligation, nor does it create generalized reciprocity. The drive to form a community stays in the background. Feeding the hungry, hence, embodies cosmological aspirations and ethical concerns. Both vectors mutually co-constructs each other. Feeding the hungry is a moral and religious imperative.¹²

The Hungry

One notices a shift in the practice of feeding the hungry. It does not solely operate within the physical confines of saint shrines. People have developed multiple ways of distributing free meals to the poor. The first category is a commercial enterprise. For example, a city's famous restaurant, Sabir Nihari, has reserved a portion of its business operation to cater to the people who want to buy food for the hungry sitting outside the restaurant. The owner showed me a notebook with two columns, one representing the amount and the other showing the number of people. 'It is 11:00 am, and we already have four people paying money (Rs. 2,000) which would feed 80 people (Rs. 25/person)', said Yunus. 'All day long, we have people coming and donating money to feed the hungry (*bhukhe*)', Yunus added further. In Sabir Nihari, there are two sets of operations; one is selling food for a regular price to customers. The second is also offering the option to the people to buy food for the hungry sitting outside.

The second category is of *langar khana* in residential neighborhoods and bazaars. Located in Jama Cloth, one of Karachi's main shopping areas, Gharib Nawaz¹³ Hotel is a popular restaurant among the city's poor waiting in a queue every day for free food. Despite appearing as a traditional restaurant in Karachi, the eatery is not a

¹¹ Ayman Reda, 'Islam and Markets', *Review of Social Economy*, 71:1 (2013), 20-43.

¹² The Quran emphasizes feeding the poor. 'And they feed, for the love of Allah, the indigent, the orphan, and the captive' (Quran 78:8). The Prophet (ﷺ) said, 'Feed the hungry, visit the sick, and set free the captives'. The heavy emphasis on providing the hungry in religious tradition thus gives cosmological value to acts of charity.

¹³ Gharib Nawaz is an epithet given to 12th century Sufi, Moin Uddin Chisti. He was known for helping the poor. The formalized ritual of *langar* among Sufi circles and networks is usually associated with Sufi Moin Uddin Chisti.

restaurant. It does not cater to ordinary citizens, though it did in the past; it became a *langar khana* (free food center), one of the oldest in the city. A man with a white beard, wearing a cap and sitting cross-legged, greeted me inside. His name was Malik Aziz; the owner of the restaurant. I sat beside him on one of the benches. 'This is our family business for seven generations', announced Aziz. 'There was a time when ordinary people (*aam log*) and poor people (*gharib log*) would come and eat together in this restaurant. But now only the oppressed (*majbur*) come to eat', sighed Aziz. When I asked how he sustains himself from business revenues, the owner responded, '*bus guzar ho jati hai*' (it helps us survive). In a way, these places are neither pure charity nor commercial. They are in the middle, mixing charity principles and a commercial ethos. The combination of both within a single enterprise ends up generating material 'profit', enough to survive, and symbolic capital of charity, enough to attract money from the gift-giver. To attract gift-givers/customers, these enterprises play down the commercial side appearing more charitable. The lines between the two operations are hard to draw because of how they are mixed.

The third category is the fastest-growing charity run, *dastarkhawan* (literal tablecloth). These *dastarkhawan* provide free food to people from all backgrounds of life. Thousands of people satisfy their hunger through these *dastarkhawan*. Some organizations charge a token amount to avoid guilt associated with eating charity food. Parveen Saeed's *Khanaghar* provides a meal for a meager Rs. 3. 'We do not want people to feel guilty about eating free food. Often, we do not even charge Rs. 3', said Saeed. One of Pakistan's largest welfare organizations, Saylani, feeds 125,000 people nationally every day.¹⁴ Another major charity, Chhipa Welfare, claims to offer food to more than 50,000 daily.¹⁵ The JDC Welfare provides meals for 95,000 people every day.¹⁶ The state recently jumped into the trend to open hundreds of *langar khana* across the country.

People eating at the *dastarkhawan* come from precarious backgrounds. I interviewed and observed individuals who often visit these places. The vast majority belongs to male wage laborers and the unemployed classes. In some places, secluded benches cater to women

and children. But they are primarily in residential areas offering a sense of community instead of main streets open widely for the public gaze. Women prefer to take away rather than to eat at the *dastarkhawan*. One of the persons waiting in a queue for lunch at 24-hour Saylani food bank told me he was fired as a private security guard five months ago. 'I have been searching for a job, but every time, I am told to come later', says the guard. Looking disheveled, the security guard mentioned that he ate one time at the *dastarkhawan*.

At the JDC *dastarkhawan*, a forty-four-year-old Christian man came to get free *rotis* for his family. 'It is my first time to come here. I had a marketing job at a bank in Dubai. The pandemic forced us to come back to Karachi. I live with my two sons and a wife in a small house', says Ronnie in fluent English. 'Life has become tough. I do not have any job nor any family support network. My brother and sisters do not help me, nor I go to them for assistance', continued Ronnie. 'I regret now that I don't have any savings', he further added. 'I heard JDC feeds everyone who is needy and does not ask express prejudice against any religious denomination', continued Ronnie. The founder of JDC, Zafar Abbas, also stressed serving humanity. 'I tell people if your community needs help, then bring it in writing on a church, temple, or gurudwara letterhead. JDC will be happy to give you ration bags'. The distribution of monthly ration bags to deserving families is additional support to help low-income households.

A young man named Raheel from Orangi Town came to collect monthly ration from Saylani. 'The company I worked for fired me last year. I registered my name with the Saylani. The staff came to our house to do the background check, and now every month, we receive a ration bag. It lasts a month for a family of four', explains Raheel. 'Some people do not come here because of *ghairat* (shame)', he continued. But not everyone who applies for a ration supplement gets a positive response. A rickshaw driver who earns for a family of six expressed dissatisfaction with how the ration system functions. 'I have gone twice to apply for monthly ration. But have not received a reply from the organization', says the driver. Another person standing in a queue for lunch told me that the welfare organization had rejected his application for a ration bag because he owned a house in which he lived. The people living on rent are more deserving. Providing monthly rations to poor households is also rapidly gaining ground as an essential service among welfare organizations. Because of the popularity of ration bags, major grocery stores carry packed bags for customers interested in giving to low-income families.

¹⁴ Saylani Welfare International spends Rs. 10 million (1 crore)/daily on food, slaughters 30,000 goats every month, cooks 80,000 naan bread/daily in Karachi. It aims to install 1200 clean drinking water plants across Pakistan. <https://www.saylaniwelfare.com/Saylani-Dastarkhwan>

¹⁵ <https://www.chhipa.org/services/chhipa-dastarkhawan/>

¹⁶ <https://jdcwelfare.org/campaigns/jdc-dasterkhawan/>

The stories told at the *dastarkhawan* indicate widespread poverty and deprivation. People feel emotionally broken, distressed, desperate for work, and physically weak. The struggle is to survive, to stay afloat on the surface, in precarious conditions. They feel uncertain of economic conditions; whether they will have a job the next day remains a constant worry. This laboring class lives on the whims of everyday life. Yet surprisingly, many pay gratitude to Allah, who continues to provide them food despite challenging economic conditions. The idea behind serving ready-made meals is if a daily wage earner earns Rs. 17,000 per month (US\$107/month) can save Rs. 200 (US\$1.29) every day. He can add extra financial support to his family. The founder of JDC and Saylani rationalized *dastarkhawan* by giving economic justification. Zafar Abbas of JDC expressed that 'we are only sharing the burden'. 'An ordinary person cannot afford to spend thousands of rupees per month on *roti* alone', says Abbas.

The shift in the practice of *langar* is more visible in the types of food and meals offered. The traditional *langar* at the shrines consists of modest food items such as lentils and bread, satisfying hunger and not inciting gluttony. Today's *dastarkhawan*, however, mainly provides sumptuous dishes of meat. Varieties of meat dishes made of mutton and beef are now freely and routinely served to the poor while giving options to take as much food as they can for their family. A chef at the kitchen expressed his desire, 'If you like to feed the poor, then do it lavishly. Why serve biryani made of potato and rice only?' The country's most extensive welfare network Saylani introduced meat, especially mutton, into the *dastarkhawan* menu. The mutton is the most expensive in Pakistan. 'We feed varieties of meat dishes. Something that we cannot afford to eat at home', says Bashir Farooqi, the founder of Saylani. The welfare groups are becoming increasingly competitive in providing extravagant food to the indigent. The course indicates a change in consumption patterns from jam, butter, and milkshakes to mutton, beef, and camel meat.

Some *langar khana*/food banks categorize food in different slots depending on the value system within which it operates. For example, a food bank in an old city known as Gharib Nawaz offers people choices to buy meals for the poor in three categories; *sadqa*, *kuffara*, and *Allah wastay*. The owner of Gharib Nawaz, Malik Aziz, told me, 'Very few people eat the food of *sadqa*'. I asked what the reason is? He said, 'People offer *sadqa* to avert misfortune or sickness. Before we serve *sadqa*, we must tell them what kind of food it is'. People believe if a person eats the food of *sadqa*, he may get the same misfortune or sickness from the food. The word *sadqa* comes from the Arabic word

sidq, meaning truth. Offering food to ward off the falsity in the form of misfortune or sickness reveals the true self. *Kuffara* is another type of food offering given when a person misses a religious obligation such as fasting in the month of Ramadan for some legitimate reason. *Kuffara* redeems a person by paying an amount in the name of God. However, the last category of '*Allah wastay*' (for God's sake) is free food given in the name of Allah, and thus it is imagined to be the most alienated of all.

The competition among the welfare organizations in providing varieties of food also reflects in the etiquette of food distribution. How *dastarkhawan* is arranged becomes a question of dignity. For example, the founder of Karachi-based JDC, Zaffar Abbas, emphasized that 'JDC does not serve people on the ground at the sidewalks. We have set up tables and benches where people can sit and eat with dignity and respect'. Saylani has also installed tables rather than serving food in a traditional manner of multiple people eating from a single dish or plate seated on the ground. These *dastarkhawan* slowly transforming into restaurants. It irks middle-classes who accused Saylani and other charity groups of creating a whole group of free riders.

Framing the Hunger

In his classic work on the making of the English working class, E.P. Thompson shows the 18th-century hunger 'riots' were the first instance of the emergence of class consciousness among the public.¹⁷ Hunger drove masses to agitation, overturned oppressive structures, ignited class consciousness, and resulted in state formation. Often labeled as 'riots' in colonial archives, caused by natural 'famines', people's struggle for a fair share of food continues to shape state political and economic structure. However, scholars debunk the famine narrative and have shown how the colonial injustice policies of food distribution have led to the deaths of millions of people across the world.¹⁸ For example, the Bengal famine of 1943 directly resulted from British failure to give legal entitlement over food.¹⁹ Instead, the colonial era 'famine policy' of British India put forth philanthropy as an immediate response to hunger.

¹⁷ Edward P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, 50 (1971), 76-136.

¹⁸ Mike Davis, *Late Victorian holocausts: El Niño famines and the making of the third world* (New York: Verso Books, 2002).

¹⁹ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford University Press, 1982), 45.

However, philanthropy reproduced power relations and left millions of people impoverished.²⁰

The state response to hunger crystallized as a contested political terrain during the Bengal famine of 1943 when 'Indian nationalists tied the promise of independence to the guarantee of food for all'.²¹ The ration system was implemented to ensure adequate food supplies to the general population suffering from food shortages caused by World War II. The ration shops provided wheat, tea, yarn, and matches.²² Millions of families benefited from the government-subsidized stores. Each family was assigned a portion of flour from the ration stores. The state sponsor program of food subsidies coupled with the arrival of the Green Revolution in the 1960s exacerbated the hopes of abundance. The political pressure to provide basic sustenance to the public also increased manifolds with the spread of socialist and communist ideologies in the world. In Pakistan, Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, made food part of a slogan of '*roti, kapra, aur makan*' (bread, clothes, and housing) to highlight the plight of ordinary people. The bread, *roti*, became an objective signifier of the visceral experience of hunger. Further, Bhutto created Utility Stores Corporation (USC) to offer food items at a subsidized rate to the lower classes. As of now, 6,000 stores cater to the public across the country.²³ However, a healthy population remains a dream in South Asia. Despite ration stores and agricultural production, millions continue to live in starvation. Each successive government struggles to find a solution to rapidly growing food shortages. While the burgeoning population coupled with the structural adjustment program proved disastrous, the efforts to mitigate risks arising from global food crises remain inefficient at best.

The state's response to make food accessible to the poor and eliminate hunger comes with its challenges. In 2008, the Government of Punjab initiated a Sasti Roti Scheme to offer bread for Rs. 2 to the masses. However, the financial mismanagement led to the closure of the program.²⁴ The Government of Pakistan established the Ministry of

²⁰ Ravi Ahuja, 'State Formation and "Famine Policy" in Early Colonial South India', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 39:4 (2002), 367.

²¹ Benjamin Robert Siegel, *Hungry Nation: Food, Famine, and the Making of Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 5.

²² Yasir Islam and James L. Garrett, 'IFPRI and the Abolition of the Wheat Flour Ration Shops in Pakistan: A Case-study on Policymaking and the use and Impact of Research', *International Food Policy Res. Institute*, Vol.1. 1997.

²³ <https://www.usc.org.pk/>

²⁴ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/82936/bitter-truth-about-sasti-roti>

National Food Security and Research (MNFSR) on 26th October 2011. The purpose was an equitable distribution of food and to make food accessibility easier for the poor. However, price inflation keeps food away from the marginalized classes. Under the Benazir Income Support Program, the state injects extra financial support in cash handouts to millions of low-income families across Pakistan. Numerous hunger elimination schemes remain in the government plan. For example, the provincial Government of Sindh proposes *Bhook Mitao Program*, which includes food credit, food vouchers, ration bundles, cooked meals, women-run kitchens, and school meals.

At the global level, the discourse of 'food security' calls for a mandate for 'ensuring, to the utmost, the availability at all times of adequate world supplies of basic food stuffs'.²⁵ In Pakistan, the primary focus of food security has remained on the supply side that mainly revolved around wheat self-sufficiency only.²⁶ The state ensures that an ample amount of wheat reserves remain in the country.²⁷ However, billions of dollars worth of grains smuggled to Afghanistan result in the loss of food supplies in Pakistan. Several other factors impinged directly on how the state deals with food security. While the technical solutions may help reduce smuggling and increase production, it fails to address the root cause of poverty and hunger.

Sadia Toor stresses radical land redistribution to address food (in) security and poverty.²⁸ Millions of acres of land remain in the hand of the big landlord feudal class. Land distribution or reforms face significant hurdles from the landed classes in Pakistan. No political or military ruler has ever successfully conducted land distribution to address the fair distribution of food in the country. Instead, the military took over peasants' land and endangered the livelihood sustenance of

²⁵ D. John Shaw, 'World Food Summit, 1996', In *World Food Security* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2007), 150.

²⁶ Munir Ahmad and Umar Farooq, 'The State of Food Security in Pakistan: Future Challenges and Coping Strategies', *The Pakistan Development Review*, 2010. 912.

²⁷ The wheat sufficiency limits the food production in less arable land of the country. The National Food Policy states three objectives, 'adequate production of food, stability of food prices and access to food' (Hussain & Routray 2012: 165).

²⁸ Saadia Toor, 'The Structural Dimensions of Food Insecurity in Pakistan', in *Hunger Pains: Pakistan Food Insecurity*, edited by Michael Kugelman and Robert M. Hathaway, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (2010).

poor people.²⁹ The same trends of corporate greed and military farms can be seen across the world. Some form of resistance is beginning to take shape, mobilizing peasants, farmers, and activists globally.³⁰ The activists are calling for the radical restructuring of food regimes and demanding states to incorporate people's inherent right to food in the constitution. The right to food movement calls for 'food sovereignty that gives them the 'power over food'.³¹ The discourse of food sovereignty challenges the state and corporate greed and seeks to place all food matters directly in the hands of people.

This article seeks to intervene in an ongoing debate on food (in)security by uncovering an alternate history of ordinary people. It is a history either dismissed as marginal to bring a meaningful social change or ignored as mundane everyday life. However, seemingly quotidian often holds a radical potential within itself that escapes experts' view. These marginal activities are 'ways of making' that people perform in their ordinary lives and can destabilize hegemonic governmentality.³² The paper explores a ritual of *langar* – a gift of food – as an embedded cultural institution that feeds people across the entire spectrum of South Asian society. *Langar* does not involve the state as a sovereign, nor does it recognize any secular authority for food distribution. It evades the liberal-secular reason of food security as well as the humanitarian reason of suffering others. *Langar/dastarkhawan* is metaphysically driven by the idea of God as the Bestower of sustenance. The suffering other stays in the background. Hence, *langar* also challenges a secular history of food security and philanthropy by invoking transcendence as the ultimate gift-giver in the immanence.

The situation feels palpable on the ground. Hoards of hungry women, children, and unemployed men queue outside restaurants, food banks, and shrines, waiting for a daily meal. In the last twenty years, feeding the unemployed and daily wage laborers on makeshift roadside *dastarkhawan* has increased exponentially. Urban poverty has skyrocketed. In Karachi alone, thousands of poor eat daily at *dastarkhawan*, run by local charities. Every year, welfare organizations set up *dastarkhawan* in new locations, add new dishes to the menu,

²⁹ Mubbashir A. Rizvi, *The Ethics of Staying* (Stanford University Press, 2020).

³⁰ For example, see <https://viacampesina.org/en>

³¹ RC Patel, 'Food Sovereignty: Power, Gender, and the Right to Food', *PLoS Med*, 9:6 (2012): e1001223

³² Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Volume 1 (California: University of California Press, 2011).

introduce novel ways of feeding, and design new marketing strategies to attract funds. In many locales, charities host separate *dastarkhawan* side by side, offering wider choices to the indigent. The food kitchen serves as an integral part of its operations. Given the widespread popularity among the masses and the cosmological weight it carries, the state also jumped into the competition and seeks to open up hundreds of *langar khana* (food kitchen) across the country. Within this context, hunger emerges as a paradigmatic visceral reality articulated and managed at various local and state levels. It solicits emotional response in gift-giving from the wealthy and shapes the collective imagination of development and progress. Although the state efforts to incorporate *langar* in the gambit of the developmental program may have a national appeal, the spirit of feeding the hungry exceeds governmental reason of care for the other.

The Field

The research took place in Karachi – a city of more than twenty million people, a large section mostly live in informal housing. From the urban outskirts in the city's north to the hustle-bustle of historic quarters in the city's center, I interviewed a range of people to understand the motivations of feeding the poor. I interviewed the poor and laborers who frequently visit *langar khana/dastarkhawan* to gather stories of suffering and hardship. As an anthropologist, listening to people's narratives of hunger and poverty affects subjectivity in ways not imagined before. The old city areas, in particular, attracted the ethnographic gaze. The space functions as a confluence of religion and economy, making the ethnographic reality dynamic and complex. Some field sites, such as Gharib Nawaz and Sabir Nihari, are located on Muhammad Ali Jinnah (M.A. Jinnah) road in the old commercial area known as Jama Cloth – a popular shopping center area for clothes among the middle and low-income families. The locale appears as a confluence of religious and commercial activities. The bazaar's spatial arrangements indeed bear this out. The shops surround the historic Eid Gah – a vast ground and mosque, with a Qutb Alam Shah Bukhari shrine, known by the saint's name. The country's well-known family-run enterprises of traditional goods such as perfumes, herbal medicine, sweets, and restaurants make the bazaar a popular commercial space of Karachi. A few yards away, in the Mirza Adam Khan Market, stone workers carve tombstones for the graves, calligraphers design religious posters and pamphlets, and artisans create decorated glasswork.

A spatial reading of the market quarters demonstrates British imperial practices inscribed in the built environment. The sovereign

colonial image is visible in Karachi's larger urban landscape divided into native and colonial quarters; the former's growth was organic, with narrow capillaries of alleys suitable only for pedestrians and animal carts, while the latter was developed rapidly and laid out on a grid iron-street pattern and designed for low density. Moreover, the traditional sections of the city were relegated as 'backward' or inferior parts, while the new cantonments and Staff and Civil Lines areas became the 'progressive' sections, synonymous with the modern city.³³ The native quarters house religious belief – a dwelling place for numerous shrines and mosques, which still provide a serene and peaceful space for merchants and laborers alike amidst the hustle-bustle of Karachi's most dense marketplace. These sacred places also foster esoteric Islamic practices and rituals that feed into commercial bazaar activities in various ways. Thus this market is a multilayered space with shared identities, boundaries, and affiliations.

The sacred geography resembles an intimate relationship between markets and religious spaces. Many shrines, mosques, temples, and Sufi *zawiyyah* scatter through the old commercial district of Karachi. Often it is not easy to separate the two sites. Both sacred and profane spaces grow together. As the business flourishes, the shrine expands, becoming more palatial and baroque. The city center perhaps may be equated with the medieval European cities in which crafts and guilds were built around patron saints. However, changes brought by the protestant reformation transformed the societies into more rationalized spatial arrangements. Scholars discover similar shifts in spatial patterns and social formations in medieval Muslim societies. In today's South Asian and Middle Eastern cities, a shrine attracts merchant capital within its fold and distributes it into the lower economic classes. For instance, in his work on African cities, Abdou Maliq Simone describes how the Sufi lodging of '*zawiyyah*' serves as a neutral free space, offering new economic opportunities and ways of cooperation in-coming migrants into the city.³⁴ Hence, sacred geographies are essential aspects of the spatial and economic arrangements of Muslim cities. Thus, it becomes essential to consider sacred spaces such as shrines and mosques as crucial power players in generating and reconfiguring economic and spatial practices in Karachi's marketplaces. The mystical order of shrines and the *langar khana* intertwine in an intimate relationship at multiple levels. For

³³ Yasmeen Lari and S. Lari Mihail, *The Dual City: Karachi during the Raj* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

³⁴ Abdou Maliq Simone, *For the City yet to Come* (Duke University Press, 2004).

example, the two most significant *dastarkhawan*, operated by Saylani and JDC, are aligned with the sacred symbols and personalities. The food itself has a cosmological symbolism and carries God's mandate. Therefore, the secular history of food distribution will be insufficient.

Political Economy of Hunger

The rapid increase in *dastarkhawan* indicates an accelerating unemployment rate and inflation. Both issues are critical and make food inaccessible for the poor. The situation is dire in the country. In the 2020 Global Hunger Index, Pakistan ranks 88th out of the 107 countries.³⁵ According to the Food Security Assessment Survey (FSA), in 2016, 18% of the population in Pakistan is undernourished.³⁶ Inflation stood at a staggering level of 9.04% in March 2020. The price for perishable food items has increased exponentially in recent years.³⁷ Millions are unemployed. The number of unemployed people in the country has reached 6.65 million during the fiscal year 2020-21.³⁸ The statistics paint a grim picture. The situation becomes visceral on the ground, where we witness starvation on the streets.

Urban poverty is widespread and chronic in Pakistan. Huge informal settlements are known as *kutchi abadi* spring frequently on the city's outskirts. In Karachi alone in the last decade, the anti-poor bias towards housing has displaced 30,000 families from the city to the periphery.³⁹ The arrival of refugees from the tribal and border areas further increased the pressure on the debilitating city's infrastructure. The conditions seem much worse for working-class women and children adversely affected by the wars and violence, exacerbated with the profoundly destructive US-led War on Terror. Most of the food banks in residential areas are crowded with poor women and children. The poor working-class women traversing hostile and gendered spaces are usually more prone to violence and poverty than the working-class men.⁴⁰ The pressure to feed the indigent becomes intensified with the rise of poverty. At the same time, the number of people who feed reduces.

³⁵ <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/pakistan.html>

³⁶ [http://www.mnfsr.gov.pk/userfiles1/file/National%20Food%20Security%20Policy%20202018%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.mnfsr.gov.pk/userfiles1/file/National%20Food%20Security%20Policy%20202018%20(1).pdf)

³⁷ https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/press_releases/2021/Press%20Release.pdf

³⁸ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1564053>

³⁹ <http://arifhasan.org/articles/the-anti-poor-bias-in-planning-and-policy>

⁴⁰ Kamran Asdar Ali, 'Voicing Difference: Gender and Civic Engagement among Karachi's Poor', *Current Anthropology*, 51:S2 (2010), S313-S320.

Aziz blamed inflation for the lack of resources needed to feed everyone. 'There was a time when many people fed the poor but now very few offer money', said Aziz. The owner of another *langar khana* in Bombay Bazaar near Bolton Market also repeated the exact phrase when I visited his restaurant. He said, 'Many people used to give, but now the situation is financially challenging'. People on the receiving end are fast expanding. At the same time, a large sum of money only buys a small portion of food. A condition often expressed as 'money has no grace (*barakat*)'.

The direct response to hunger came recently when the present government decided to open up *langar khana* across Pakistan. Under the premiership of Imran Khan, the government has signed a contract with the private Saylani Welfare Trust to set up food kitchens for the indigent. The Ehsas Langar Scheme boosts establishing hundreds of *langar khana* for people not to go hungry to bed. While the state's response to incorporate *langar* in the gambit of development marks a significant shift in poverty alleviation at the national level, it falls short of the spirit of feeding the hungry. Whereas the government sees it as a safety net devoid of metaphysical significance, individuals, on the other hand, invoke God's will as the determining force. Since it is not 'cosmologically authenticated', there is a risk, like the previous government's scheme of social protection, this one will fade away too in a few years. However, the people's spirit of eliminating hunger for the sake of God and taking care of the poor will continue to live as long as faith in God exist.

Conclusion

The state's ability to control the crisis remains an effective way of distributing resources widely and evenly across the country. Some of the social protection programs have proven quite effective in supporting millions of low-income families. For example, the Benazir Income Support Program is an outstanding example of reaching far and wide in disbursing cash funds. The recent state intervention in eliminating hunger in some ways will benefit the starved bodies. However, the state's welfare programs often face crises and become stalled due to the change of government, corruption, and fiscal deficiency. Often in scholarships, the focus on the state as the sole provider produces the fetishized form of the state. The critique of charity to alleviate poverty or *dastarkhawan* to eliminate hunger arises under the liberal assumption of the state as the only sovereign. The omnipotent character of the modern state does not allow people to think of life that enjoys relative autonomy from the government reason. Indeed, the state's efforts to control

inflation and unemployment can drastically effect welfare and reduce the number of gift-receivers. Nevertheless, the state and policy-driven perspective often hide a rich terrain of actors and practices working towards ethical care.

In this paper, I have illuminated the practice that exceeds governmental reason. *Langar* operating outside the liberal-secular framework forces us to rethink the notion of 'food security'. When welfare organizations share the burden of the poor by providing them cooked meals in the name of God as the sole sustainer, it undermines the state authority as the provider of food. At least normatively, *langar/dastarkhawan* operates under the assumption different from the *raison de'ter* of the modern state. It is a fact that Muslim communities operate under two different temporal frames, emanating from the Prophetic tradition and the other determined by the historical forces. The practice of *langar* combines the two mutually inclusive poles; the transcendental aspirations of the afterlife and the ethical concerns in the speculum. It operates inside the spectrum, shifting more towards civic sense at times and sometimes pushing towards elsewhere. That is why we see *langar* shifting from shrines to streets. The shift from a shrine ritual into a civic duty signals a break from the traditional moral economy. Sharing the burden of the poor is the driving spirit of serving free meals. Therefore, a history of hunger begins from an empathetic account of feeling the pain of others. How is one even start to feel the pain of others? The question demands not an analytical approach but experiential knowledge.