



Azadist Critique of *“Langar in Transition: A Sikh Socialists Reflection”*

Recently, a group known as “Sikh Socialists” published an article in a journal called “Interfere” on the topic of Langar. Available here:

<https://interferejournal.files.wordpress.com/2022/12/7-langar-in-transition-a-sikh-socialists-reflection-sikh-socialists.pdf>

Upon reading the article, I felt it was a great opportunity to fulfil one of the objectives of the Azadism project in countering economic illiteracy in the Panth and “fighting bad ideas with better ideas”.

Therefore this “counter-article” will be going through many of the claims and statements made by Sikh Socialists and offer an alternative perspective.

Structure: The headings in this article mirror the headings used in the original piece, the quoted text in bold with a red border is pasted directly from the Sikh Socialist article. Below each quote is the Azadist responses. Any bold quotes with a blue border are quotes from elsewhere.

I suspect Sikh Socialists will read this, therefore most of the responses are addressed directly to them. Please do reach out if you would like to discuss this further as I believe we can reach a solid middle-ground despite our differences.

Introduction

“We are Sikh Socialists, a collective of Sikhs (meaning ‘learners’) who identify with socialist politics broadly conceived.”

Sikh doesn't just simply mean “learner”. The word “Sikh” has its roots in the Sanskrit word “Shishya” which is closer to “disciple”. Whilst the terms seem similar, they do have different connotations. The Guru-Shishya relationship varies from that of a teacher-pupil since the former incorporates a level of devotion that the latter does not necessitate. The devotional aspect is worth highlighting since for a Sikh the primary path to liberation is through devotion (prem bhagti), hence why so much of the teachings in the Guru Granth Sahib are formatted in a way to reveal wisdom whilst also providing an avenue to express love (hence the raags). It isn't a textbook or a manual, it is treated as the living embodiment of non-dual wisdom. Personified in this way due to that same love.

This may be pedantic and I appreciate the focus of this article is not about this, however, I believe it is relevant if your aim is to offer a decolonised worldview.

“We formed to create a space to reflect on, think about, and engage with radical anti-colonial and anti-capitalist politics...”

The irony with this statement is that capitalism is already antithetical to colonialism. Especially the kinds that have affected Sikhs and many others under European imperialism. To be both anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism is a bit redundant and highlights a confusion the authors have, which we will be revealed throughout this article.

To understand the reason why capitalism is already anti-colonialism, let's first lay out both definitions as per the Oxford dictionary:

Capitalism

“An economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit.”

Colonialism

“The policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically.”

Whilst the definitions may be limited, they are nonetheless good starting points. To further expand on these definitions, capitalism is all about promoting the private sector and markets in which private individuals can freely exchange goods and services voluntarily. The private sector is referring to all those in the economy that are not under state control. It is the opposite of the public/state sector where the government centrally plans resources and economic activity on the people's (private sector) behalf.

Colonialism has historically (and particularly with the European example used here) been conducted on the behalf of the state, not the private sector. This is a common misconception because socialists point towards things like the East India Company (EIC) and claim it is an example of capitalism. However, this couldn't be further from the truth.

The EIC enjoyed an exclusive monopoly on trade in India, granted by the British monarchy. They also colluded with the government through lobbying and received bailouts when financially troubled. All this invalidated any “private” status of the EIC as it became essentially a branch of the British government acting on behalf of the state's political interests. Later on, it was even

absorbed by the government entirely and used to secure British Raj in India. It can no longer be classified as a capitalist effort when literally the trade and industry are being controlled by the public sector (the state), not private owners!¹

Capitalism is about ensuring private property rights for each individual so that they can exchange voluntarily in a *market*. If any one private individual wishes to acquire something, they need to trade something for it (or receive a donation). In order to make money that you can use to trade with, you must provide something that other people are willing to pay *you* money for – *voluntarily*. This takes the form of businesses that produce and sell goods/services for a profit (which is then used to buy other things in the market) or employment with them to receive a salary.

Conversely, colonialism as it has been expressed in recent centuries, allows governments to take what it wants through violence, not markets. If there is trade, the colonial power sets the terms and centrally-plans economic activity so that their side of the negotiation exploits the other. The other side can not simply refuse to transact (as they can in capitalism if not given a mutually beneficial trade offer) since they would be killed.

This is why lumping capitalism and colonialism together is not only oxymoronic but also moronic. It just highlights the level of misunderstanding on the author's behalf and something that I have seen in common with these publications. They slap on the word capitalism then never define it or explain the link. Instead, they rely on the widespread

¹ The distinction between capitalism and socialism has been explored in depth from the Azadist point of view in the essay "Battle of the isms", available to read here: www.azadism.co.uk/isms

demonisation of the term and hope the people reading are subconsciously predisposed to having a negative reaction to the term. Unfortunately for them, as someone who was formerly socialistically inclined, I am not those people and actually took the time to look at both sides of the debate.

If you are interested in reading more about how Azadism understands the (supposed) debate between capitalism versus socialism and what they really mean, please read: "Battle of the Isms".

www.azadism.co.uk/isms

Who is seeking to define Langar and how/why is it happening?

History

This section was a great overview of the history of langar and its purpose... until they said this:

"During the development of violent European colonialism from the sixteenth century across South Asia and its global world system founded on racial capitalism which remains hegemonic today..."

As already explained above, capitalism is already against colonialism. European-style colonialism in particular is a great example of what happens when you go against the free-market principles of capitalism. It is so antithetical to the core principles of capitalism, it really puts into question whether the author knows what they are talking about.

The claims become even more absurd when you realise the reality here. Since European

colonialism was a government-led effort to subjugate and exploit other territories, they heavily employed the use of socialistic central planning and heavily regulated any markets that were subjected to it. As we have seen, they even used state-backed monopolies like the EIC to aid these efforts. All of which are completely antithetical to capitalism but completely within the mandate of state socialism. It may have been a pre-marxist conception of socialism being employed here, but it was (state) socialist nonetheless. Marxists would, later on, implement their own attempt at colonialism such as that with the Soviet Union and Maoist China too which further highlights the hypocrisy of Sikh *Socialists* calling out capitalism when their own ideological framework is doing what they are falsely claiming another ideology is doing.

As socialists, you do not have any grounds on which to criticise the colonial systems economically. But you do have a case as Sikhs and even from a leftist perspective. It is the social justice narrative present within the wider leftist movement that has a far more substantial moral argument to contest the political activities of those empires. Despite its flaws, the political left has positioned itself to speak openly against social inequality and that is the real value argument against colonialism that should be highlighted instead of this misguided attack on capitalism. Which is unfortunate because the anti-establishment attitude present amongst leftists is best realised when you understand that capitalism is all about reducing the power and scope of the state and giving freedom for the people to flourish. You just end up confusing yourselves by using the same mode of thinking for every problem, hence why you get cases where people can not tell the difference between social inequality and economic inequality².

² Something that is evidenced by a debate between a Marxist and an Azadist, available to

This is also the first time I've heard of "racial capitalism". Upon looking into it, it became apparent that this is a politically charged slur against capitalism rather than a sound understanding of what it is.

A government can not implement capitalism per se, it is what remains when the government stops interfering with private exchange in an economy. Capitalism and free markets are what you are left with when the government reduces its influence. Hence also why colonialism being a direct governmental action completely negates any claim that they were also implementing capitalism. The reason why this doesn't seem to register for socialists is because all they see is the money and trade and not the conditions in which they occur. The conditions are the sole point of contention in the whole debate between capitalism and socialism. Capitalism seeks to create conditions where the state stays out of markets, and (state) socialism seeks to increase its involvement. The way we can assess this is simply by looking at the types of policies socialists wish to implement:

- Nationalisation = **State** monopolies
- Minimum Wages = **State** price controls on labour
- Increase Regulations = **State** also enacts this³
- etc...

If you are unaware of the economics underlying these sorts of policies, you would in all likelihood actually support them too just looking at it on the surface level. Socialist leverage this and have seemed to delude

read here: [Azadist Vs Marxist. A Debate \(Argument\) between an Azadist... | by Azadism | Oct, 2022 | Medium](#)

³ Although it does get help from lobbying organisations – which isn't an example of capitalism either! I will cover this more later

themselves and others into thinking they are anti-state, yet promote all the policies that consolidate it and grant the government greater power by making more people reliant on the state.

Lastly, capitalism in its purest form is really not as prevalent today as this article is making it seem. Most of the countries that get attributed that label by socialists are actually *mixed economies*. This means that governments employ a degree of central planning whilst also allowing for a level of market activity to run independently from them. What we see in reality then is varying degrees of state-regulated systems being falsely attributed as examples of capitalism. This is a really important distinction to make as we will see them making this same error repeatedly throughout the article.

“...many Sikh practices and understandings have been erased or warped by those who seek power and domination over others – including from within our own communities...”

I wonder who they are referring to. Because I can think of a few examples myself. We should meet and do some joogliyan about them sometime perhaps.

“The Sikh understanding of Langar now typically manifests mainly as a form of ‘free food’, understood and reduced through the lens of charity. “

This isn't a reduction. Langar is indeed a form of charity by definition. Of course, it has deeper spiritual significance too, but that doesn't invalidate its status as a form of charity.

“Much like charity, Langar is increasingly being used as a surface-level, temporary

sticking plaster to cover over the structural effects of the global economic and political systems we live and operate under. Rather than seeing our current complex social, economic, and political problems as failures of a system designed for the common good which can be reformed with charitable actions, it is important to reflect that our present system is functioning exactly as intended.”

Azadism completely agrees. It too wants all charity efforts to exist in an environment where very few people (if any) actually need it or rely on it. However, instead of pushing the blame on a vague notion of capitalism that you don't define and instead combined with a racial slant to make it even more scary, Azadism recognises the real reason why so many are in these positions. Government. It is the poor policy planning of oversized, bureaucratic states that function only to serve large corporate interests and enrich politicians at the expense of the poor. The government monopoly on the money supply and manipulation of interest rates fuel artificial booms and busts that further harm the poorest the most and consolidate the wealth of rich politicians and their friends.

The socialist narrative would probably agree with much of what I just said, but they stumble on the final hurdle when they blame capitalism randomly:

“Specifically, these problems are inbuilt into the fabric of global racial capitalism; its logic relies on exploiting, oppressing, and disciplining people and resources...”

The issue is you don't realise what the problem actually is in its entirety; just bits and pieces of it to suit your narrative. The very lens you use to assess problems blinds you and leads you to throw away potential solutions because it does not conform to your

demonised and misrepresented descriptions of the alternative.

Capitalism doesn't rely on exploitation, it relies on the ability of private individuals to transact freely and voluntarily in a market. If any particular trade doesn't meet the satisfaction of both consenting parties, then the transaction can not go through. What you're actually describing are governments and states throughout history. If you are not satisfied with the service of your government, you can not choose not to pay tax towards a particular policy or scheme. Instead, the government forces you to pay up regardless of whether you agree or not and uses the constant threat of violence to ensure you comply. If you resist they will escalate the situation to kill you if necessary.

Markets are the opposite. No private individual can force another private individual to pay them or work with them. Otherwise, it wouldn't be a market transaction, it would be exploitation. What capitalism promotes then is more options and alternatives through economic competition. This ensures that there are many choices that private individuals can choose from, which prevents exploitation since no one provider can hike up prices too high, or keep working conditions too low since people have other alternatives. When you compare this with the situations citizenry around the world is in with their governments, you will quickly realise that the state is the only choice permitted. Being forced to pay to keep the organisation of the state running is the real exploitation. Capitalism isn't the logic of "exploiting, oppressing, and disciplining people and resources" – *governments* are!

However, don't be mistaken. Azadism is not completely Anarchist (although this position is covered in the long-run vision of Azadism) as it recognises the impracticality of getting rid of centralised governments overnight.

Many people rely on welfare and various government schemes, so without an alternative already in place ready to transition them, you will condemn them to suffer greatly.

Instead, Azadism wishes to reduce the state's role gradually and refocus its efforts on solely ensuring the voluntary nature of markets is protected. Anyone forcing another to enter a transaction they do not consent to must be stopped as a threat to the functioning of a free and fair market system, and a violation of a person's property rights. This also extends to putting an end to any transactions that harm a non-consenting third party. The only exception to this in the short term is *taxes*. Azadism does not wish to remove taxation overnight either, despite its ethical failings. Instead, it seeks to offer an effective and fair tax reform combined with universal basic income which requires far less bureaucracy and minimises the ability to exploit loopholes. This is all detailed further in the Azadist Manifesto⁴. Over time, an Azadist government would phase out taxes altogether for a *dasvandh*-based approach once necessary preconditions are met. This is the compromise Azadism establishes with state socialist central planning.

...which are functions established during modern European colonialism.

This is also an issue I've noticed with those who seem to be so anti-colonialism (rightfully so) that they have blinded themselves to pre-colonial history. These functions were established long before European colonialism. We suffered under it from tyrannical rulers during the Guru's times also, and long before that too. Government centrally-planned systems have operated their protection rackets all the way back when the people of the British isles were painting

⁴ Section IV

themselves blue and living in mud huts. Merely changing the group of central planners is not a solution. As we have seen evidenced through multiple socialist “revolutions” throughout history such as those of Lenin, Mao and Guevera.

“The Mughals replaced the Lodis, Lenin was brought to power after deposing the Tzar and Hitler too inherited the status of Führer via democratic means. Simply replacing one centrally planned state with another, one authoritarian regime with the next, is not the solution. The problem is the state itself. Too much power concentrated in too few people.”

– Excerpt from “Azadist Manifesto”, Section V

This is also why Azadism prefers the term “liberation” over revolution since the latter has consistently materialised as literally that. The *revolving* of a wheel from one set of central planners to the other. Liberation on the other hand is diminishing the power of states entirely, and eventually breaking that wheel altogether⁵.

Our collective reflections

“During our discussions, we found that the majority of instances where we, as Sikhs, saw Langar being practised and performed fell into two camps. The first, were in community spaces, both within Gurdwaras (socio-spiritual Sikh space) and larger-scale Nagar Kirtans (devotional processions); the second, however, was through the lens of charity when Langar is practised in non-Sikh spaces, whereby Langar is expressed through responses to local and global humanitarian crises (such

as homeless ‘feeds’⁴ and international aid), “outreach events” on University campuses, and “in performing to whiteness” when putting on events for state agents and bodies.”

Again, in either case, I fail to see why calling langar a form of charity is a point of contention in the first place. It is a private effort where no one is forced to participate, and many people benefit from it regardless if they need it or not. This is exactly what charity is.

Perhaps this is why you are seeking to distance the Panth away from the charity categorisation. As socialists, you must be ideologically against the concept of private property and detest the private sector. Since charity is indeed firmly classed as a private enterprise by definition, this doesn’t fit well with your anti-capitalist worldview. It challenges your perception that you like to paint that capitalists are just greedy businessmen or obese factory owners. In fact, this is a common mistake committed by many socialists who use the term “capitalist” to refer to people who have capital. This is incorrect since a capitalist is just someone who believes in capitalism, which can be applied to anyone regardless of class, occupation or any other arbitrary characteristic. A poor man advocating for capitalism is capitalist the same way as a rich politician like Bernie Sanders is a socialist.

But back to the original point: within most interpretations and sub-traditions within capitalism, things like non-profit organisations, worker co-ops and even charities are perfectly compatible. What may have confused you is that within the definition of capitalism, it states “...for a profit”.

What it does not state is that profit maximisation is the only exclusive goal of the private enterprise. When we look at charities

⁵ For more on this, here is a post on this topic: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb7rUaJstC2/>

this is obviously not the case either, as their purpose extends to the cause they were set up for. But they still must generate a profit. Langar needs to make a profit too, or at the very least break even. All profit is indicating is how much the income outweighs the costs. If the Langar can not receive enough income from donations (either monetarily or directly through food or labour), then it will run into shortages and won't be able to feed everyone. Hence, profits are still being made, but since the focus isn't to increase any shareholder's wealth (as it is in a publicly-traded company) all surplus is aimed to be reused in the effort.

Profit is not evil, it is how it is made and how it is used that can be a question of moral judgement. If a profit is made through donations or people trading with each other in voluntary exchange, then there is no issue. However, if profit is made through slave labour or theft (i.e any non-consensual transaction) then there obviously is an issue. The profit itself isn't a problem if raised by private actors in a market-based system.

Despite your veiled attempt to distance Langar from capitalism (if my suspicions are correct that is), it is indeed something that is completely compatible within a capitalist framework. But it is also most definitely socialist too. Or more accurately – *private* socialist.

In a recent essay, I wrote I expanded upon the false dichotomy of capitalism vs socialism and revealed that they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, capitalism relies on a form of socialism. Socialism when applied on a voluntary basis is exactly what capitalism seeks to promote *more* of. More socialist units. However, by each unit being voluntary to participate in, participants can leave at any time and the policies of each unit can not (legally) affect a non-consenting third party. This is what classes it as a private unit.

Because each private unit may have a government of sorts that centrally plans its economic activity (within the jurisdiction of the organisation), then it is also then a private *socialist* unit. This is what businesses are, as well as charities and efforts like Langar.

The only thing that breaks this interplay between private socialism and capitalism is the government. Since everyone is forced to participate, there is no choice. The evidence of this is again *taxes*, which you must pay regardless of your choice to participate or not. E.g. If you do not want to support a war or particular government scheme, you can not withhold your taxes without the threat of being killed or captured. The imposition of a central state authority to diminish the ability of private individuals to choose which collectives they would like to join (or start their own) is what Azadsim calls “state socialism”, and it is this form of authoritarian *central* planning that Azadism is against.

Capitalism, therefore, is decentralised planning amongst many “private socialist units” that private individuals can participate in voluntarily (or start their own). If any one particular unit is not meeting the needs of the people adequately enough, it will fail and those that do provide value succeed. This means that risk is diversified so that the entire system does not fail if any one unit does. Whereas state socialism is centralising planning and all private individuals have no choice but to be affected by its policies. If the government of this system fails, the entire system collapses as there was no alternative. All the raam ladoos were in one basket.

Again, I explain and visualise the difference between private and state socialism in the write-up mentioned earlier: “Battle of the isms”.

“Within these conversations, we identified the several limitations in these forms of expression, whereby Langar is “losing its

power of solidarity, and being reduced to a transaction”.

Again, your adversity for capitalism affects your entire purpose here. So much so that you treat basic economic terminology like “transaction” as a reduction because it sounds capitalistic, even though transactions are what Langar is based upon. Some people give their time, or money to support it in return for a sense of spiritual satisfaction and, ideally, a reduction in one’s ego. The recipient of Langar also blesses the Sangat with their darshan in return for some food. You may think that is a joke (it only half is), but in all seriousness, one of the deepest goals of Langar is bringing people from all backgrounds together to share in a common humanity. Everyone needs to eat.

“That is, when Sikhs are displaced across the diaspora, they may feel pressured to orient the performance of Langar towards the hegemonic stage of colonial capitalist modernity.”

I am sure when the first Sikhs arrived on the shores of the UK and elsewhere they turned to each other and said, “we must hold langar to appease our modern colonial capitalist overlords”.

Honestly, how have you worked this one out? Is this what people were admitting to you in your focus group? Or where are you guys just coming up with this expert psychoanalysis to proscribe to others yourselves? I’m not surprised this got the pass though, it used the word capitalism so it must be true.

“One key example that was brought up during these conversations was the “selective” nature of the performance of Langar, where Sikh groups were lauded and praised for their humanitarian efforts in response to the Australian wildfires.

Despite this mainstream coverage, there was little to be seen regarding solidarity building with indigenous communities, who are often at the forefront of the climate crisis – from centuries-long practices of living in harmony with the earth, to having to face the harms resulting from others’ structures. A key limitation of this approach is that the radical potential of Langar instead becomes reduced to a PR (public relations) tactic.”

Were there any efforts to build solidarity with the indigenous communities? Or was it just not covered? If not, no one is stopping you from doing that work to build those connections.

Also a quick point: that PR element is actually really useful strategically for Sikhs if we know how to leverage it. But that goes outside of the scope of this article...

“Some of the more detrimental issues with perceiving Langar as charity would be the extreme oversimplification of its socio-spiritual demands. It has become almost ritualised whereby the spiritual and physical aspects of the practice become second – if even present – to simply serving free food.”

This may be a valid criticism, but I fail to see how hypothetically banning or otherwise diminishing the use of the word “charity” to describe it solves anything. I feel like you are merely projecting your own perception of the term onto others. Charity, for many, is deeply impactful even though you claim it oversimplifies it for some reason if they use the word “charity”. When we describe the acts of Bhai Khanaiya as charitable, that doesn’t diminish the value of the lesson from that Sakhi. Secondly, who are we to judge what others are feeling when doing Seva? It is an entirely personal matter relating to their own

spiritual journey. Only they and their Guru can know their own intent. Also, people doing Seva for ulterior motives have been going on throughout history. There is even a Shabad by Guru Nanak who calls out a public worker “Ganggu Bhagu” who was holding a Langar paid for using stolen funds. Bhagu wasn’t doing that because the word “charity” was oversimplifying the meaning of what he was doing. Obviously, they weren’t speaking English at the time.

If you feel that Langar should go further and cover more things, then do it! There is no need to establish a debate on nomenclature unnecessarily. Ravi Singh of Khalsa Aid is a great example of this. He didn’t try to find an issue with the labelling of “seva” in English terms, instead, he explored an avenue to expand it practically. Others seeing this new opportunity to conduct seva in a different way then also jumped on board.

“This reduces Langar to a secularised transaction, resonating more with liberal capitalist practices of being motivated for individual gain, or socialising through transactional atomised practices centring the disconnected individual, rather than embodying a radical socio-spiritual practice to abolish hierarchies and create communities”

Langar has always been a secular tradition though (notice I didn’t use the word transaction to respect your feelings). The whole point of it, as you detailed so excellently earlier, was to bring people together regardless of caste, creed, religion, class or any other arbitrary societal constraints. That is the whole point of secularism.

Secularism

“The principle of separation of the state from religious institutions.” (Oxford Dictionary)

This is exactly what the Guru did. Langar was and is a non-state, private “religious” effort, independent from government control. This is particularly apparent when the embodiment of the state at the time, Akbar, was also seated on the floor equally amongst private individuals.

Also, you falsely juxtapose capitalism again but this time with hierarchies and communities. I am really concerned about how little you understand capitalism yet so confidently shoehorn it in as a slur for anything you don’t like. Despite what you may have demonised it as, capitalism doesn’t necessarily care about how hierarchical or not structures are. Its primary concern is free-markets. For a market to be free, each private individual must have equal rights and freedoms. If a group of private individuals come together to set up a worker co-op that has no hierarchy, no managers and operates completely democratically, then this is perfectly fine within capitalism.

Secondly, communities are what capitalism relies on heavily. As discussed earlier, it seeks to promote many communities (those private socialist units) forming and competing with each other so that prices remain low and quality high. State socialists on the other hand are also community-focused, but seek to centralise into the state so that there is only one community that all must participate in. Therefore it is the collective will (or more accurately, whoever “represents” it) of that one community that reigns supreme. Regardless if it is represented by an autocratic dictatorship or a direct democracy, all must abide to the dictates of the state.

State

“A nation or territory considered as an organized political community under one government.” (Oxford Dictionary)

“In turn, this stifles any further developments that Langar could make – for instance, broader universal community-building practices centred around care could easily evolve from the provision of food alone to the creation of spaces for healthcare, education, and other basic needs that all deserve and need to flourish.”

This is a really good idea! None of what you have said before actually stifles that. Playing with semantics and crying about which words to describe langar does not prevent you from expanding langar into those areas. In fact, you probably are going to waste your time campaigning “langar \neq charity” which would be better used drafting up detailed plans of how you would like to do this.

I am going to give the benefit of the doubt here, as I am hoping you mean to provide healthcare, education etc as an extension of the already private effort of Langar. Hence, you are inadvertently supporting private healthcare and private education provided by the Sangat as private individuals independent of the government. In this, you have my full support, and I would class you as private socialists, as per Azadism’s framework.

“Rather than simply a form of charity to grease the gears of capitalism, Langar understood more deeply could allow us to envision a world otherwise; free from the disciplining structures of race, gender, caste, class, disability, and so on”

By doing the above you will indeed be greasing the gears of capitalism and putting a cog in the gears of statism and state socialism. However, it still does not invalidate any of that as a form of charity. Not unless I am mistaken and you are state socialists

seeking to co-opt the state and force taxpayers to fund you. If you are, I have written about both the economic and spiritual consequences of this in-depth in Section IV of the Azadist Manifesto.

“...(Shamsher Singh) Our role as Sikhs isn’t confined to fixing the broken people that capitalism churns out as a by-product of its economic model. We’re not neo-colonialism’s personal clean-up crew. It has to go beyond ‘langar is the free meal service found in every gurdwara’, ‘hello langar, goodbye world hunger’ – these aren’t Sikh ideas, they’re marketing slogans. ‘Langar Week’ is a capitalist response to a problem created by capitalism – it represents the death of an idea by commodification; tackling the root cause of these problems is apparently beyond the permissible scope of Sikh existence (Singh, 2021)”

Rhetorically, this quote from Shamsher Singh is very well written. It is just a shame it lacks correctness.

...Our role as Sikhs isn’t confined to fixing the broken people that capitalism churns out as a by-product of its economic model...

What capitalism? Where is capitalism being implemented today that churns out these people? If you are referring to the so-called “West”, these aren’t capitalist systems. They are mixed economies, meaning they have proportions of both central planning and markets at work. You need to show how exactly the capitalistic elements of these mixed economies create “broken people”. For example, in the Azadist Manifesto I detail exactly how the central planning proportion of mixed economies leads to poverty and oppression and give real-world examples of it too. I don’t just say it in passing and move on

relying on people's already preconceived notions about these terms.

As the rest of this article has done so far, capitalism has been repeatedly mentioned as the root of all evil yet not once has it been explained what it is or how you guys understand it. This isn't unique to this publication either. Shamsheer Singh with the Khalistan Centre also released a few articles committing the exact same fallacy, and when I reached out to them to clarify this, they chose not to respond:

Thoughts on "Who Speaks for **Khalistan**: Narrating Sikh Liberation"



Ranjit Singh <contact@azadism.co.uk>
to fateh@khalistan.org

Sun, May 8, 5:55 PM



Vahiguru Ji Ka Khalsa Vahiguru Ji Ki Fateh

Recently I have started a project to help increase economic education amongst the Guru Khalsa Panth. As part of this I wrote the 'Azadist Manifesto' which explores how a modern Sikh system of governance could look like combining principles from Gurbani, Itihaas and modern political-economic theory.

I came across your publication "Who Speaks for **Khalistan**: Narrating Sikh Liberation" and section 3 in particular caught my eye. You have taken a stance against capitalism and have lumped it together with racism and colonialism as if these were all almost interchangeable. However, I fail to see any critique of capitalism neither in that section or anywhere in your report. What is it in particular you disagree with about capitalism, do have a write up on this elsewhere?

I see this sort of thing a lot amongst those who don't understand economics and it mimics a lot of the more general left-wing narrative in the west. These sorts of stances are already prevalent in the youth in particular, who then begin to favour broken ideas like Socialism or Communism instead which have historically degraded human liberty and innovation. So it is a bit disappointing to see a similar approach being taken by Sikhs who are working towards promoting sovereignty.

Kind regards,

Ranjit Singh

Gurbar Akaaal

A while later after this, I was called by Shamsheer Singh to acknowledge the efforts of Azadism in general. In that call I asked Shamsheer to define capitalism to me right there and then and he proceeded to make

one up on the spot referencing buzzwords like "exploitation" and "colonialism". Much like the rhetoric I've been countering in this article. When I read out the actual definition to him and the way economists actually understand it, there was no response. Instead, he suggested to avoid getting bogged down in these terms as our overall nishaana is the same. I appreciate this deeply even still as I do believe that, and I similarly avoided using these terms in the Manifesto for that very reason. We probably agree on 90% of things anyway and should be working together to advance the discourse on Azaadi away from vague notions of intent to strategic, long-term planning.

However, you still refuse to engage meaningfully with Azadism (something that is entirely in your remit and should be a priority for you in particular) after a year of busying yourself elsewhere. Instead, I come across you still using terms like capitalism after first-hand witnessing your misunderstanding of it and apparently that hasn't changed. You also told me to my face that you were not a socialist, yet here you are heavily quoted in an article for Sikh Socialists mirroring their rhetoric. It really puts into question what you are trying to do? Do you want to take the time to have a dialogue about these positions to define problems accurately so that our solutions are similarly relevant and practical? Or should we continue with social media activism and simply raising awareness so that we continue to... *raise more awareness*.

That 10% we differ on really needs ironing out. However, refusing to address this renders all your efforts to demean capitalism in these articles both useless and shows bad faith. If you are not willing to defend your slurs against it, then simply don't mention it. Your work on 84 parchar, promoting the Shaheed Singhs, educating Sikh youth at universities and getting people passionate about Azaadi is incredible. Without efforts like yours in

raising awareness, Azadism wouldn't exist. However, I am troubled by the fact that we as Panth are constantly looking backwards and wondering why we are not moving forward. Azadism is an attempt to look forward, but to *move* forward we need to make the effort, together.

"It has to go beyond 'langar is the free meal service found in every gurdwara', 'hello langar, goodbye world hunger' – these aren't Sikh ideas, they're marketing slogans."

Again, no one is stopping you or Socialist Sikhs in general from "going beyond". At least those efforts you mention are doing something rather than nothing. Again, Khalsa Aid is a great example of actually doing something. Rather than complaining about how limited Langar is these days, he as a private, non-state actor went and organised other private individuals to expand langar abroad.

This is the same philosophy that our Guru employed too. They didn't go on a march to beg the Mughals to provide free food. Neither did they collect dasvandh so that they can pay more taxes to the state to solve problems. They themselves as private entities went out and organised the community through voluntary action and provided this charity. They were living in a far more oppressive situation than we are today, yet still were able to sustain this.

"'Langar Week' is a capitalist response to a problem created by capitalism – it represents the death of an idea by commodification; tackling the root cause of these problems is apparently beyond the permissible scope of Sikh existence (Singh, 2021)."

I completely agree "Langar Week" may indeed be a capitalist response as it is

organised by private individuals, voluntarily without the need for the state. However, I disagree heavily it is a capitalist problem that we need a Langar week in the first place. Again, you need to understand we are not living in a capitalist country, it is a mixed economy. When you actually look into the details of what causes poverty here it becomes quickly apparent that it isn't the market elements causing it. It is all the government restrictions on the market pushing people into impoverished conditions by reducing employment opportunities, devaluing purchasing power, erecting monopolies, manufacturing inflation and manipulating interest rates. Many of these stem from policies that socialists back the most. Karl Marx would likely be very proud of the central banking infrastructure of the UK, as it is something he himself advocated for in the Communist Manifesto.

I completely agree with you that we need to tackle the root causes, which is why I spent so much time in the Azadist Manifesto explaining what those causes are and how to end them. But if you refuse to recognise what the root causes are how are you going to tackle them? If you want to solve a problem, you must first accurately define the problem, which is what Sikh Socialists have been failing at throughout this article.

"I am on your side, but you're not!"
– Milton Friedman⁶

Lastly, state socialism, the ideology responsible for the most deaths by hunger in the last century, is most definitely not the correct solution. Instead, I believe the answer lies in leveraging the utility of market capitalism, limiting it to the confines of a NAP-based law layer and giving freedom for *private* socialism to arise in multitudes will

⁶ [Milton Friedman - Case Against Equal Pay for Equal Work - YouTube](#)

solve these problems. The solution is *Azadism*, and the Azadist Manifesto details how and why.

Given the complex nature and multiple layers of Langar, its practice is not easily assimilable into a single definition. There are many aspects that modern, English terms cannot adequately capture – particularly the spiritual aspects.

It really isn't that complex. The best way to explain it is to show it and to do it. It doesn't need to be defined so academically like this, and your concerns are largely baseless. Working out a definition so that you can *then* work towards offering free health or education is a bit lazy in my opinion. Again, no one is stopping you, and many would support you. Just do what it seems like you want Langar to be.

“The hyper individualism that is promoted within a ‘free market’ system has led to an increase in competition amongst the average person. Despite history showing us that survival is a team effort, the development of global capitalism has led to the perception that everyone outside a certain group is an enemy to be defeated.”

Again, more baseless assumptions that really highlight your lack of understanding of what economic competition is. Let's break this down:

The hyper individualism that is promoted within a ‘free market’ system has led to an increase in competition amongst the average person.

What is your source for this? As compared to what? How can you quantify such a claim? We don't even have a pure free market anywhere in the world today. You would need to prove that the market elements within the

mixed economies of today are responsible for this. But to do that, you would have had to recognise that we live in a mixed economy to begin with, which you failed to do repeatedly.

However, I am not saying your claim is right or wrong, I am simply saying you have not explained the causal link between a hypothetical free market and an increase in competition amongst the average person. You haven't justified this claim, and therefore it is baseless.

Regardless, however, I will entertain it though. Some nations are closer to the free-market ideal than others. If you assess these places, metrics such as standard of living, healthy lifespans, GDP per capita etc all are higher as a result of their departure from centrally planned systems of the past. They still are not perfect, but the data shows their populations have benefited greatly from this shift towards market economics. The reason why is because when you allow a population the freedom to start their own businesses and increase the level of economic competition, you give consumers more choices. There are now more alternatives to choose from that cater for the variety and diversity present in a heterogeneous population. Trending towards free markets also makes it far harder for monopolies to form as large market share organisations fail to conduct corporate political activity such as lobbying.

Free Market

“An economic system in which prices are determined by unrestricted competition between privately owned businesses.”
(Oxford Dictionary)

A free-market economy is defined by the inability of a government to restrict the market via a variety of means. This means that large corporations can not collude with politicians in order to enact policies in their favour. For example, some organisations enact heavy

regulations that they themselves can easily pass but new and upcoming entrepreneurs can not. State-backed monopolists can also push for licensing to make it more expensive to compete with them in an industry. There are many ways corporations and governments work together like this to grant special exemptions and advantages over their competitors. It is the exact opposite of what free market capitalism advocates.

Monopolies (including state monopolies aka nationalised industries) are the opposite of competition by their nature. Monopolies are what you get when you restrict competition so much that only a few providers of a good or service remain. This inevitably leads to the exploitation of the consumer as they have no other choice. Hence why free marketers promote more competition.

Competition is a great thing if conducted within the confines of the law. Azadism uses the libertarian principle of the Non-Aggression Principle (NAP) to base the legal system on, so to prevent and actively work to eliminate the formation of markets that destroy human rights, such as slavery. Again, I write about this more in-depth in the Azadist Manifesto.

Competition amongst average people is what propels innovation on this planet. It is through competition that you can read what I am writing about right now. What really cements my belief that you misunderstand competition is that you again create a false dichotomy between competition and team efforts. The most vigorous competition happens between teams of highly collaborative individuals working together to solve problems better than a competing team does. E.g. competition between Apple and Samsung. We call them “companies”, but we forget that a company is indeed just a big team (or a collective of many teams).

Which is another thing you are missing out in describing economic competition under capitalism. “Enemy” is too strong a word for this context. Under capitalism, the aim isn’t to physically kill your enemies (as is often the case with governments). Even in the mixed economies of today, an Asda employee can’t go shoot a Tesco employee. If Asda wants to outcompete, it must offer better deals to the customer. In fact, competitors often even trade with each other and leverage each other’s strengths too. Using the Apple/Samsung example, iPhones contain components that are produced by Samsung, despite the fact they are fierce competitors.

Additionally, there does not have to be one winner! Capitalism allows for a space for many winners to emerge:

“When choosing what phone to buy, you may have gone through many different options, comparing each with your budget, or the features you want. However, the one you finally decided on was your own personal winner. There does not need to be one universal winner for everyone since everyone has different preferences.”

– Excerpt from “Azadist Manifesto”, Section III

Individualism is covered more in depth in the “Battle of the isms” essay but it is worth mentioning the following here too:

Individualism about giving freedom to each person to join a team of their choosing, or even start your own. In order to attract individuals, teams offer to trade a salary for someones labour and expertise. In capitalism they must provide an offer on par or better than other teams, since it is ultimately down to the individual to choose which offer is best for them. This maintains an incentive to keep high standards and offer the best deal possible. This again, also ensures that there are many options and alternatives available.

It seems you have a very “cartoon” portrayal of competition and its real-world utility in uplifting so many and eradicating poverty through granting more opportunities for everyone, not just the rich.

“For the Sikh Panth, competition is nothing immoral nor even a foreign concept. As Sikhs we have been competing in every aspect since our inception. From Guru Nanak conversing in debate with the Yogis and Siddhas (which later on formed the basis of Jap Ji Sahib), Guru Angad Dev establishing the Mal Akhara at Khadur Sahib, encouraging the Sikhs to wrestle with each other and become familiar with combat⁶. Guru Hargobind Sahib “competed” with the Mughals in multiple battles, Guru Gobind Singh also followed this example, as well as promoted competition between his court poets through offering vast rewards of land and gold. Competition is nothing unethical in of itself, it is only the people competing who can engage in moral or immoral methods. Competition is merely the nature of things.”

– Excerpt from “Azadist Manifesto”, Section III

“Despite history showing us that survival is a team effort...”

Survival for who? I don’t remember ever reading about the whole planet holding hands and singing songs to survive. The reality is that there never has been one “team of humanity” recognised universally by everyone. What we have had is many, many teams of autocratic central planners and their ministers working to subjugate populations of private individuals and conquer other territories governed by different a team of the same fundamental qualities.

This is indeed an oversimplification, but perhaps not as vast an oversimplification as your comment.

Individualism isn’t isolationism. Its the freedom to join and leave a team of your choosing or even set up your own (or work by yourself). Individualism is about placing the rights of the individual as sacred so that no collective can come and degrade or take away that person’s ability to choose. Things like the NAP constrain it so that the individual can not be so free that they can live in a way that affects the freedom of others to live how they want. But even without the NAP, that behaviour would violate individualism regardless.

I urge you to differentiate individualism from concepts such as selfishness, ego-centrism and isolationism as I think you are incorrectly confusing them together.

Individualism

“A social theory favouring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control.” (Oxford Dictionary)

“It is important to note that these reflections are not claiming that the notion of ‘charity’ is inherently unhelpful, nor that those who engage in it in the name of Langar or Seva are innately malicious or reductionist in doing so.”

I am glad you admit this since the only ones who I have witnessed committing reductionism are you guys in this article.

“However, this article’s aim has been to instead problematise the hegemonic lens through which we view the expression of Langar on a day to day, and to critically understand the potential that comes from seeing beyond the boundaries of these definitions.”

From my perspective, this article is making a problem out of a non-issue. Playing around with the idea of whether langar should be classed as a charity or not doesn't do anything real in terms of preventing or empowering people to expand the effort. What I fear this article actually does is create an unnecessary distraction and encourage a small portion of people to actively check the semantics whenever someone calls Langar a charity.

There are indeed some terms that could be clarified like this, such as Sikhi vs Sikhism. However, seeing how Langar is by definition a form of charity, it makes no sense to be so pedantic.

"The idea of 'charity' is incomplete when considering Langar, and therefore operating with this language within a capitalist system limits the scope of the revolutionary historical precedent laid out by the Gurus"

Again, the real purpose of your article is made clear through this statement. You don't like the word "charity" because it is a private sector effort. As socialists, you are ideologically opposed to private enterprise in favour of the public (state) sector. The real revolutionary (or liberating) precedent that the Guru set was that we the people do not need the state for everything.

We can work together as private, independent individuals and form our own voluntary communities based on dasvandh rather than forced taxes. The Gurus were inadvertently promoting free-market capitalism by fighting against the state and giving their lives to maintain the separation of the public and private sectors, way before the west clocked on to these concepts. This is an inconvenient truth for many Sikh state socialists today who have made Marx their Baba.

I would expect the accusations of "modernity" applied to me by describing the Gurus in this way, but if you do describe them using modern-day economic terminology, that's exactly what they were. Private, non-state actors who transcended the authoritarianism of worldly governments. They held individualism in high regard by accepting the freedom for individuals to choose. However, they were also collectivists as they sacrificed themselves for the community. Individualism and collectivism are not mutually exclusive. If you are interested in more about this, again read "Battle of the isms".

Imagining otherwise

"Notwithstanding our hesitations about the limitations of English language concepts for understanding Langar, one radical notion that resonates the most with Langar is mutual aid."

You have just thrown your entire argument out the window. You complain about using the word "charity" because you think it is somehow limiting people from expanding langar, then you just categorise it as "mutual aid" instead which itself is a form of charity! The only reason I can think of as to why you are doing this is that this term is maybe more "palatable" for your socialist lexicon.

"Mutual aid is a term used to refer to collective action undertaken by groups driven to challenge the systems that cause oppression."

Despite the obvious Marxist rephrasing of the term, you missed out on a crucial factor in defining it. Mutual aid is *voluntary*. It is again, something that private individuals do freely, independent of the state, as there is no threat of violence forcing participation.

There isn't much else I want to say really about this point since I actually support mutual aid efforts and do not wish to discredit it. If Sikh Socialists want to redefine langar for themselves as such, that's fine if it makes them happy.

Lastly, I won't delve into the case studies as most of that I am in agreement with or is not the focus of this critique. Should have invited me!

“(Shamsher Singh) Protesting the imposition of neoliberal reforms opening up India's agricultural sector to further privatisation...”

I have written in detail about the factors that led up to the Kisaan Morcha in my article: “This Kisaan Morcha was NOT a victory”, so I really encourage you to read that. What was going on in India was not privatisation. It was opening up the agricultural sector to state-backed monopolies like Ambani and Adani to expand their market share. The factors that have been plaguing the region stem directly from British colonialism and then continued by the central-planning policies of Nehru, a committed socialist⁷.

Alongside this, there were mass misinformation efforts by communists who were attempting to leverage the situation for political gain through blaming capitalism. I highlight this in the article too and how ironic that the principles of communist ideology caused the whole situation in the first place!

Can, read the article here:

www.azadism.co.uk/kisanmorcha

It's unfortunate that Shamsher Singh seems to miss this aspect, but if he did point out the hypocrisy in this, I doubt he would have been featured so heavily in a Sikh Socialists article.

⁷ [9 Nehru and Socialism | Jawaharlal Nehru: Rebel and Statesman | Oxford Academic \(oup.com\)](#)

Conclusion

All in all, this is such an overcomplication of a really simple concept established by our Gurus. I fail to see why classing langar as a form of charity should be an issue in the first place. Further to this, I really do not buy the whole idea that this classification is preventing anyone from expanding charity efforts by Sikhs either.

I believe a lot of this is actually a fear response from the Sikh Socialists to quickly contextualise this all as part of their political-economic position. I don't mind the contextualisation per se, as I do feel like it is often necessary to do so when talking to a modern audience in a new language. I wouldn't criticise this on the basis of appealing to modernity as that is a bit of a cop-out in my opinion and limits Sikhi to a particular time period, geographic region and set of languages. I don't believe the Guru, who we consider as *Jagat* Guru, limited themselves in this way either, particularly as they also travelled extensively and spoke to many different groups

I reiterate my offer to discuss these topics further, and despite my harsh tone and heavy disagreement, I do genuinely respect these efforts. Just like I said to Shamsher Singh, we probably agree on 90% of things, this is just an expression of that 10%.

Additionally, I want to make clear that I do not class all socialism as the same. As explained in my essay, Azadism separates socialism into two camps: "State Socialism" and "Non-State / Private Socialism". This is in respect for the real anti-establishment attitudes of many leftist-inspired socialists who denounce the state even though their policy recommendations promote and consolidate state power.

Lastly, I encourage everyone reading this to delve further by reading some of the main write-ups mentioned throughout this article:

1. The "**Azadist Manifesto**: Economics of a Sikh State":

www.azadism.co.uk

2. "**Battle of the isms**: Azadism's navigation of the conflict between Capitalism and Socialism"

www.azadism.co.uk/isms

3. "**Azadist Vs Marxist**: A Debate (Argument) between an Azadist and a Marxist"

<https://medium.com/@Azadism/azadist-vs-marxist-2c5c0524678a>

4. "**The Kisaan Morcha was NOT a Victory**: A retrospective analysis from an Azadists perspective"

www.azadism.co.uk/kisanmorcha