

Ecological Teachings in Sikh Theology

Devinder Pal Singh, Center for Understanding for Sikhism, Mississauga, Ontario,
Canada

In the present time, the ecological crisis is one of the gravest challenges being faced by humanity. There is a serious concern that our planet may fail to remain a sustainable biosystem in the long run. Though human beings are seen as the most intelligent life form on Earth, yet they are responsible for almost all the environmental damage done to the planet. Sikh theology emphasizes that recognizing the sacred relation between human beings and the environment is crucial for preserving the health of our planet and our survival. Furthermore, Sikh doctrines emphasize that humility, surrender to the divine spirit, and maintaining a harmonious relationship with all are crucial for humanity to find a way out of its current predicament.

Grave Ecological Crisis

For the survival and perpetuation of an organism or ecological community, its environment depends on biotic and abiotic factors. The ecological crisis has been triggered as both these factors have come under great stress due to humans' unbridled desires and demands [1-2]. The large-scale depletion of natural resources, destruction of forests, and overuse of land for agriculture and habitation have contributed immensely to the peril of these factors. At the biotic level, humanity faces a social justice crisis, which has led to large-scale poverty, hunger, disease, exploitation and injustice. [3-4]. There are economic wars over resources and markets. Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) [5-6], the sacred Sikh scripture, articulates that humans create their surroundings as a reflection of their inner state. The current instability of the Earth's natural system is only a reflection of the instability, pain and spiritual emptiness within humans [7].

Interdependence

The principle of interdependent origination states that things do not exist outside of each other. So all phenomena in the universe need to be observed in the light of interdependence. Sikhs believe that an awareness of the sacred relationship between humans and the environment is necessary for our planet's health and survival [8-10]. In SGGS, humans and the material world are seen being involved in an inter-dependent relationship, reciprocally conditioning the life of each other [11-12]. It enunciates: "Air is the vital force, water the progenitor, the vast Earth is the mother of all, Days and Nights are nurses, fondling all creation in their lap. (SGGS, p 8)

The Sikh Gurus appreciated the interdependence of living beings and their environment. Furthermore, they displayed the way to nurture this interrelationship [9]. All their constructions adhered to this principle. They built many *gurudwaras* surrounded by large pools, which supported marine life, especially fish. Guru Har Rai, the seventh Sikh Guru, developed Kiratpur Sahib as a town of parks and gardens. He planted flowers and fruit-bearing trees all over the area. It created a pleasant environment, attracting beautiful birds to the town and turning it into an idyllic place to live in [10]. The importance of air, water and Earth to life is repeatedly emphasized in the SGGS. The Earth is referred to as the mother and, as such, requires our respect. The pollution of these essential elements of life is against the principles laid down by the Gurus [13-17].

Harmony with Nature

SGGS proclaims that Nature is a manifestation of the Creator. Every creature in this world, every plant, every form is a manifestation of the Creator. It states, "Fareed! the Creator is in the Creation, and the Creation abides in God." (SGGS, p 1381). SGGS emphasizes that Creator (God) is the Cause of all and is the primary connection in all existence. It elaborates: "You (The Creator) are the bumble bee, the flower, the fruit and the tree. You are the water, the desert, the ocean and the pool. You are the great fish, the tortoise, the Cause of causes; Your form cannot be known. (SGGS, p 1020);

SGGS opposes the idea that the human race's struggle is against nature and that human supremacy lies in the notion of "harnessing" nature. The history of the Gurus is full of stories of their love for animals, birds, trees, vegetation, rivers, mountains and sky. Many Sikhs, though not all, also have a strong tradition of being vegetarian. A simple life free from conspicuous waste is the Sikh ideal – a life that stresses mastery over the self rather than mastery over nature.

Earth – A Dharamsaal

SGGS emphasizes the significance of various aspects of nature and declares the Earth as *dharamsaal* (a place for righteous action). It enunciates: “Creating the earth, He established it as a place for righteous actions.” (SGGS, p 1033). By portraying the world (Earth) as a place for righteousness, SGGS insists that we relate with others with equality and justice. It reveals that real peace can only be found when desire and greed are subdued and diminished. It will only happen when we realize that God abides in all the elements (including water, Earth and the woods) and stop damaging these elements purely to satisfy our greed for worldly gains. SGGS asserts that by realizing the essence of God in all, eternal peace is obtained. SGGS states: “You shall find peace, and your mind shall be soothed and cooled; the fire of desire shall not burn within you. The Guru has revealed God to Nanak, in the three worlds, in the water, the Earth and the woods.” (SGGS, p 617)

World Society

Sikh theology enunciates that ecological concerns must be viewed as part of the broader issue of human development and social justice. Many ecological problems, particularly the exploitation of natural resources in developing nations, are due to the poverty of large parts of the population. So, an integrated approach is necessary. Sikh theology proclaims that the main objective for humanity is to be in harmony with all existence. It implies life-supporting individual rights and environmentalism; a life that works against injustice toward anybody and anything.

In 1699, the tenth Sikh Guru founded the Order of the Khalsa. Its members practise the spiritual discipline of Sikhism and are committed to ensuring the preservation and prevalence of world society. Over the last 322 years, the Khalsa fraternity stood up for the rights of the disenfranchised and the oppressed. The Khalsa worldview is outlined in SGGS: “Now, the Merciful Lord has issued His Command. Let no person exploit another. Let no man coerces another; Let all abide in peace, under this Benevolent Rule. (SGGS, p 74). For the Khalsa, justice requires the participation and inclusion of all in obtaining and enjoying the fruits of God’s creation. Justice achieved through cooperative effort is desirable. The ideal for the Khalsa is to strive for justice for all.

Prudent Life-Style

SGGS describes the norms for a Sikh to live a life that does not harm their mind, health, others around them, society, or the environment. So, Sikhs are prohibited from consuming tobacco, alcohol or any other intoxicant and keep a simple vegetarian diet. SGGS states: “Those who do not use intoxicants are true; they dwell in the Court of the Lord.” (SGGS, p 15); Sikh theology is against causing cruelty and suffering to animals. “Kabir states that those mortals who consume marijuana, fish and wine - no matter what pilgrimages, fasts and rituals they follow, they will all go to hell. (SGGS, p 1377)

Integrated Approach to Sustainability

In Sikh beliefs, a concern for ecology is part of an integrated approach to life and nature. As all creation has the same origin and end, humans must be conscious of their place and relationship with creation. Humans should conduct their lives with love, compassion, and justice. A true Sikh must stand for human rights, the environment and justice for all. SGGS delineates: “The God-conscious delighting in doing good to others.” (SGGS, p 273)

All life is interconnected. All the constituents of the creation are dependent upon each other. Decisions in one country or continent cannot be ignored by people in other countries or continents. Choices in one place have measurable consequences for the rest of the world. SGGS assures that the entire creation is inter-related, mutually supporting one another. It describes: “There is only one breath; all are made of the same clay; the light within all is the same.” (SGGS, p 96)

Any solutions to the ecology problem must also be sensitive to women’s concerns and include women as equals. Sikh gurus advocated equality for women and took steps to implement this. Community-based sharing of resources (e.g. langar) is another practice prevalent in Sikhism, which can be adopted worldwide to share scarce resources.

SGGS asserts that an awareness of the sacred relationship between humans and the environment is necessary for our planet’s health and survival. A new “ecological ethic” dedicated to conservation and wise use of natural resources can only arise from an honest understanding and dedicated application of our old, tried and true spiritual heritage. Such an integrated approach to the current ecological crisis can lead to the permanent sustainability of life on mother earth.

Conclusion

The Sikh doctrines emphasize that an attitude of humility, surrender to the divine spirit, and maintaining a harmonious relationship with all existence is crucial for humanity to find a way out of the current ecological crisis. Environmental well-being without Social Justice is not possible. Therefore, ecological concerns must be viewed as part of the broader issue of human development and social justice. A new 'environmental ethic' devoted to conservation and wise use of natural resources can only arise from an honest understanding and dedicated application of our old, tried and true spiritual heritage.

References

1. Singh, D. P. (2012). Ecological Concerns in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, in *Harmony in Science and Sikh Religion*, Edited by Hardev Singh Virk, pub. by HSV, Mohali, India, 103-113.
2. Singh, D. P. (2010). Environmental Concerns in Guru Granth Sahib, *The Sikh Review*, 58 (3) 16-22.
3. Smithson, P., Addison, K., & Atkinson, K. (2008). *Fundamentals of the Physical Environment*, 4th Ed. Routledge, London.
4. The Environmental Crisis in *Environmental Science and Management*. https://www.soas.ac.uk/cedep-demos/000_P500_ESM_K3736-Demo/unit1/page_11.htm
5. Sri Guru Granth Sahib (1983). S.G.P.C., Amritsar, India
6. Khalsa, S. S., English trans. of SGGS, <http://www.srigranth.org/servlet/gurbani.gurbani?S=y>
7. Singh, R., *Sikhism and Caring for the Environment in Practice*, <https://ecosikh.org/sikhism-and-caring-for-the-environment-in-practice/>
8. Lourdunathan, S. (1996). Ecosophical Concerns in the Sikh Tradition, Proc. *Sikhism & Global Living*, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, India. <https://ecosikh.org/ecosophical-concerns-in-the-sikh-tradition/>
9. Singh, D. P. (2009). Interdependence of Things: A Gurbani Perspective, *The Sikh Review*, 57 (11), 13-16.

10. Singh, D. P. (2021). Prime Environmental Teachings of Sikhism, *Sikh Philosophy Network*, 9th April, <https://www.sikhphilosophy.net/threads/prime-environmental-teachings-of-sikhism.51892/>
11. Singh, D. P. (2018). Ecological Concerns in Sri Guru Granth Sahib in *Science and Sikhism - Conflict or Coherence*, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, India, 256-268.
12. EcoSikh, Sikh statement on climate change, (2014). <http://www.arcworld.org/faiths.asp?pageID=199>
13. Singh, V. (2015), Vision of Environment in Sikhism, *International Research Journal of Commerce Arts and Science*, 6(5), 168-173.
14. Sodhi, M. K. (2012). Environmental Issues & Sikhism, *Abstracts of Sikh Studies*, XIV(3). http://sikhinstitute.org/july_2012/5-manmeet.html
15. Singh, D. P. (2009). Green Guru, *The Times of India*, Dec. 5. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/green-guru/articleshow/5304598.cms>
16. Singh, D. P. (2009). Our Green Guru, Faith, Dec 5. https://www.sikhchic.com/faith/our_green_guru
17. Singh, D. P. (2010). Ecological Concerns in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, *Abstracts of Sikh Studies*, XII(4), 10-19.