

Interdependence of Things: A Gurbani Perspective

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'Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together ... all things connect.'

— Chief Seattle (1780-1866)

Any two things, living or non-living, countries or nations that cooperate with each other are said to be interdependent or mutually dependent. Interdependence means interconnectedness and reliance on one another socially, economically, environmentally and politically. It is a dynamic of being mutually and physically responsible for and sharing a common set of principles.

Some people advocate independence as a sort of ultimate good; others do the same with devotion to their family, community, or society. Interdependence recognizes the truth in each position and weaves them together. Sri Guru Granth Sahib [1-2], the holy scripture of the Sikhs, emphasizes the importance of the interdependence of all things. It stresses that preserving the natural state of things is a sine-qua-none for the sustainability of life on Earth.

Interdependence in Nature

In our daily life, we are inclined to perceive things as real and independent of each other. Take, for example, a leaf, which we see on the branch in front of us. We may think that this leaf exists independently of all the other leaves, independently of the branch, the stem, the roots, the clouds, the Water, the Earth, and the sky. In truth, this leaf could not be here without the presence of all these things, which we see as different from it. The leaf is one with the other leaves, the branch, the stem, the tree's roots; with the clouds, the river, the Earth, the sky and the sunlight. If anyone of these things were not present, the leaf could not be.

If we look deeply into the leaf, we can see the presence of all these things. The leaf and these things are present together. It is the principle of interbeing and interpenetration, the code of one is all and all is one. The principle of interdependent origin tells us that things do not exist outside of each other. Things exist within each other and with each other. Guru Nanak proclaims the principle of interdependent origination in his composition 'Jap (u)' as

ਪਵਣੁ ਗੁਰੂ ਪਾਈ ਪਿਤਾ ਮਾਤਾ ਧਰਤਿ ਮਹਤੁ ॥ ਦਿਵਸੁ ਰਾਤਿ ਦੁਇ ਦਾਈ ਦਾਇਆ ਖੇਲੈ ਸਗਲ ਜਗਤੁ ॥ (ਮ. 1,
ਸਗਗਸ, ਪੰਨਾ 8)

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. (Mehl First, SGGS, p 8)

In Sri Guru Granth Sahib [1-2], all the material world elements are seen no more as external to each other, but being involved in an inter-dependent relationship, reciprocally conditioning each other's life. Guru Nanak emphasizes this kind of inter-dependent relationship in his hymn;

ਜੇ ਅੰਤਰਿ ਸੇ ਬਾਹਰਿ ਦੇਖਹੁ ਅਵਰੁ ਨ ਦੁਜਾ ਕੋਈ ਜੀਉ ॥ ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਏਕ ਦ੍ਰਿਸਟਿ ਕਰਿ ਦੇਖਹੁ ਘਟਿ
ਘਟਿ ਜੋਤਿ ਸਮੇਈ ਜੀਉ ॥ (ਸੋਰਠਿ ਮਹਲਾ 1, ਸਗਗਸ, ਪੰਨਾ 599)

Whatever is within, the same is outside. See that there is nothing else. By divine prompting, look upon all existence as one and undifferentiated; the same light penetrates all existence. (Sorat'h, Mehl First, SGGS, p 599)

The interdependence of Body and Universe

All phenomena in the Universe need to be observed in the light of interdependence. Let us take the case of a human body. There is an interrelationship between our body and all that is in the Universe [3]. We should be aware of Earth, Water, fire, air and space elements in our body. These are the Five Great Elements, also referred to as the realms. The Earth represents the hard, tangible nature of matter. The water element represents the liquid, permeating Nature. The fire element represents heat, and the air element represents movement. Space means the unlimited expanse, in which everything exists,

Our bodies are more than three-fourth of water. When we look deeply to see the Water in our body, we see the liquid, permeating nature of the blood, sweat, saliva, tears and urine, but we also see the water element in every cell of our body. We see Earth in us, Earth as the minerals in our body. We also see that Earth is alive in us because, thanks to Mother Earth, we have food to eat. Without air, we could not survive since we need air to live like every other Earth species. Fire in our body is the energy with which we do our daily chores. Our body exists in space and contains it as well. Within our body, there is space for inhaling air, space for the intake of food and drinks, space for the flow of blood and other liquids. Above all, all the cells of the body also contain a lot of space. Thus one can see the interrelated nature of oneself and the Universe. In Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Bhagat Peepa articulates about this interrelationship as;

ਜੇ ਬ੍ਰਹਮੰਡੇ ਸੋਈ ਪਿੰਡੇ ਜੇ ਖੋਜੈ ਸੇ ਪਾਵੈ ॥ (ਭਗਤ ਪੀਪਾ, ਸਗਗਸ, ਪੰਨਾ 695)

Whatever pervades the Universe also dwells in the body; whoever seeks it finds it there.
(Bhagat Pipa, SGGS, p 695)

Thus one sees that one's life is not just present in one's own body but is also interrelated to all that is in the Universe. Guru Teg Bahadur proclaims this in his hymn;

ਪਾਂਚ ਤਤ ਕੇ ਤਨੁ ਰਚਿਓ ਜਾਨਹੁ ਚਤੁਰ ਸੁਜਾਨ ॥ ਜਿਹ ਤੇ ਉਪਜਿਓ ਨਾਨਕਾ ਲੀਨ ਤਾਹਿ ਮੈ ਮਾਨੁ॥

(ਸਲੋਕ ਮਹਲਾ 9, ਸਗਗਸ, ਪੰਨਾ 1427)

Your body comprises the five elements; you are smart and wise - know this well. Believe it - you shall merge once again into the One, O Nanak, from whom you originated.
(Shalok, Mehl Ninth, SGGS, p 1427)

Such a view helps one to transcend the erroneous belief that one is just one's body. Some scholars refer to the Sun as our second heart, a heart that lies outside our body. But which is as essential for our body as the heart inside our body. When the heart inside the body ceases to function, we know very well that we will die, but we often forget that if the heart outside our body, the Sun, stops working, we will die immediately.

When we observe our body's interdependent nature mindfully, we see our life outside our body, and we transcend the boundary between self and non-self. This practice of mindfully observing helps us go beyond such limiting concepts as birth and death. It is one of the principal ways [3] to witness the non-self, unborn, and never-dying nature of all that is. Seeing things in this way can liberate and awaken us.

Global Interdependence

As all things are interdependent, so a human being's existence in any given moment is dependent on the condition of everything else in the world at that moment. However, it is equally significant that the state of everything in the world in that moment depends conversely on the character and condition of that human being. Everything in the Universe is interconnected through the web of cause and effect. Thereby the whole (Universe) and its parts are mutually interdependent. The character and condition of entities at any given time are intimately connected with the nature and condition of all other entities that superficially may appear to be unconnected or unrelated.

As is apparent, we are the Earth, through the plants and animals that nourish us. We are the rains and the oceans that flow through our veins. We are the breath of the plants of the land and the sea. We are human animals, related to all other life as descendants of the firstborn cell. We share with these kins a common history written in our genes. We share a common present, filled with uncertainty. And we share a common future, as yet untold. We humans are only one of thirty million species weaving the thin layer of life enveloping the world. The stability of communities of living things depends upon this diversity. Linked in that web, we are interconnected -- using, cleansing, sharing and replenishing the fundamental elements of life.

Interdependence Sustainability – Need of the Hour

Our home, planet Earth, is finite; all life shares its resources and the Sun's energy and therefore has limits to growth. For the first time, we have touched those limits. When we compromise the air, the Water, the soil and the variety of life, we steal from the endless future to serve the fleeting present.

Humans have become so numerous and our tools so powerful that we have driven fellow creatures to extinction, dammed the great rivers, torn down ancient forests, poisoned the Earth, rain and wind, and ripped holes in the sky. The suffering of millions pays for our comfort. In such an abnormal ecological situation, life on Earth is facing a severe challenge to its survival. Baba Farid makes us aware of the perils of such a problem in his hymn;

ਕੰਧੀ ਉਤੇ ਰੁਖੜਾ ਵਿਚਰਕੁ ਬੰਨੈ ਧੀਰੁ ॥ ਫਰੀਦਾ ਕਚੈ ਭਾਂਡੈ ਰਖੀਐ ਵਿਚਰੁ ਤਾਈ ਨੀਰੁ ॥ (ਸਲੋਕ ਸੇਖ ਫਰੀਦ,
ਸਗਗਮ, ਪੰਨਾ 1382)

How long can the tree remain implanted on the river-bank? Farid, how long can Water be kept in a soft clay pot? (Shalok, Shaikh Farid, SGGS, p 1382)

We have to learn from our mistakes, we must mourn our vanished kin, and we should now build a new realm of peaceful co-existence. We must respect and uphold the absolute need for clean air, water and soil. We have to understand that economic activities that benefit a few while shrinking other's inheritance are wrong.

Since environmental degradation erodes many natural resources forever, the full ecological and social cost must enter all development equations. We must be aware that we are one brief generation in the long march of time; the future is not ours to erase. So, where knowledge is

limited, we must remember all those who will walk after us and err on the side of caution. All this must now become the foundation of the way we live.

At this turning point in our relationship with Earth, we must work for an evolution: from dominance to a partnership, from fragmentation to connection, from insecurity to interdependence. Baba Farid points out that if we are aware of the causes and perils of the ecological crisis and are taking appropriate steps to contain it, we shall be able to tide over the situation brilliantly.

ਲੰਮੀ ਲੰਮੀ ਨਦੀ ਵਰੈ ਕੰਧੀ ਕੇਰੈ ਹੇਤਿ ॥ ਬੇੜੇ ਨੇ ਕਪਰੁ ਕਿਆ ਕਰੇ ਜੇ ਪਾਤਣ ਰਹੈ ਸੁਚੇਤਿ ॥
(ਸਲੋਕ ਸੇਖ ਫਰੀਦ, ਸਗਗਸ, ਪੰਨਾ 1382)

The river flows on and on; it loves to eat into its banks. What can the whirlpool do to the boat if the boatman remains alert? (Shalok, Shaikh Farid, SGGS, p 1382)

Thus, we must be aware of our precise role in Nature's plan of things and play it responsibly to sustain and nurture things' interdependence.

References

1. Sri Guru Granth Sahib, 1983, S.G.P.C., Amritsar, India, p. 1 -1430.
2. www.granthsahib.com
3. Thich Nhat Hanh, Transformation & Healing: Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, 1997, Nice Printing Press, Delhi, P 55.