

Understanding Sikh Environmentalism and its Relevance to Sustainable Environment

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Abstract: *In the academic study of religion, the intertwined relation between environment and religion cannot be overlooked. In the modern cognitive realm, the growing impetus of understanding religion and its role in shifting human behavior to the environment has become a prime study. In this context, this article explores the Sikh stance on environment. Firstly, this article explores that the basic ethos of environmentalism is rooted in Sikh theory and practices throughout the ages. Secondly, it has been outlined that the Sikh basic concepts like "Seva" and "Sarbat da Bhala" have practical application in Sikh lives, which promotes sustainable environment. Thirdly, the Sikh practical approaches towards the environment are relevant to minimize the extreme materialism and consumerism. Fourthly, it has been argued that Sikh teachings foster accountability towards the environment, abolishing unethical human dictatorship. Besides, this article has shed light on the contemporary Sikh environmental activism around the world, which can be a vibrant example of the practicability of religion in the global environmental crisis. Therefore, this article can be a significant resource for further study of the relation between religion and environment, which can contribute to national and global policy making.*

Keywords: *Sikhism, Sikhism and Environment, Religion and environment, Religion and Ecology, Sikh environmental teachings.*

Introduction

The growing concern for environment has given impetus to study environmental issues from diverse perspectives. In the academic arena environment and its correlation with diverse social, cultural and natural issues are significant to understand the different dynamics of environmental changes and their effects. In this process, the religion and environmentalism have become a central scope to study. From birth to death, religion affects every facet of an individual's life, both individually and collectively (Tanner & Mitchell, 2002). Apart from the metaphysical and ritualistic approaches of religions, religion has a practical implication which needs to be studied. In the academic study of religions, the understanding the role of religion on human psychology and behavior is crucial. Religion shapes its adherents' conduct, which in turn influences their actions (Tanner & Mitchell, 2002).

The relation between environment and religion is two faceted. Environment significantly influences the development of religious beliefs, rituals, observances,

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dress code, diet and festivals. On the other hand religions can influence and shape the environment. We can give the example of Hinduism. In Hinduism, environment occupies a significant place and many of the components of environment are considered as holy. Based on religious footings, to the Hindus, for example, the river Ganga is sacred. The concept of '*Vasudaiva Kutumbakam*' promotes the concept that the whole world including the various components of environment is one family.

On the other hand, misinterpretation of religion can cause environmental degradation. The most debated seminal article of Lynn White Jr. 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' published in *Science* in 1967 made countable Judeo-Christian theology for contemporary ecological crisis. According to Lynn White, the excessive importance of mankind in Judeo-Christian tradition established unethical dominance over environment and this theology influenced the Western scientific and technological approaches which facilitated environmental degradation (White, 1967).

Eighty five percent of the global population is adhered to any of the religions or belief system (World Population Review 2022). This makes it more foremost to do a systematic study of religion and environment. It is mandatory to determine the place of environment in the faith system. It would help to format the national and international policy to deal the contemporary environmental crisis. That is why to understand the environmental crisis, there should be a room to understand the position of religions towards environment. This understanding could leads to sustainable development goals (SDGs).

In the study of environment and religions, every religion of the world is relevant. In this context, Sikhism can be a significant case to study in terms of its environmental stances. Sikhism is one of the world religions, ranking fifth largest religion in the world with 25-30 million followers (World Population Review 2024). Sikhism is getting popular in different parts of the world through the diaspora, globalization, and education.

Sikhism is also gaining attention for its concern and initiatives for the preservation of environment. It is true that a minimal attention has been given to study Sikhism and environment. This article attempts to sketch the relevance of Sikh teachings on environmental protection with contemporary Sikh environmental activism and advocacy for sustainable development.

Basic Idea about Sikhism

Guru Nanak founded Sikhism in 1469–1539, and nine subsequent Gurus, or teachers, laid the foundation for it. This religion has been referred to as the Sikh Dharma or *Gurmat*. The term Sikh originates from the Sanskrit word *sishya*, which means 'disciple' or 'learner', and *sikhsha*, which means "teaching" (Singh, 2010). Guru Nanak and the other Sikh Gurus are significant personalities in the history of religion. Their sayings and philosophy shaped the formation of Sikhism and

for this reason; a thorough study on this issue has been done in this article. This article focuses on the teachings and practices of Guru Nanak along with the other Sikh Gurus. Through this the theological stance of Sikhism and their practical implications have been analyzed to understand the relevance of Sikhism to environment and sustainable development.

Sikh Attitude towards Environment

To understand Sikh attitude towards environment, it is imperative to understand the Sikh basic concepts. Sikhism promotes the concept of *Ahimsa* (non-violence). This concept evolved through the teachings and practice of Guru Nanak. Guru Nanak said:

“No one is my enemy, No one is a foreigner, with all I am at peace, and God within us renders us incapable of hate and prejudice” (cited in Balakrishnan, 2014, p. 45).

His concept of universal empathy and compassion can be taken into consideration. In the then 15th century India this kind of statement from a new ideology gained much attention. Since Guru Nanak was free from any kind of ego and pride, he raised his voice against all kinds of injustice and inequalities existed in the society (Alam & Mojumder, 2023).

Guru Nanak’s concept of non-violence and empathetic expression can be explained from diverse perspectives. He is called the ‘Ambassador of Harmony’ since he preached harmony not only among the people of different faiths and strata but with “Mother Nature” as well. Guru Nanak’s thought was far ahead of his time since it opposed societal hierarchies and superstitions that had existed for ages. He also advocated for environmental protection, perceiving the earth as our “mother.” Guru Nanak says “*pavan guru pāñi pitā mātā dharat mahat*” meaning: “Air is the Guru, Water is the father, and Earth is the Great Mother of all (Guru Granth Sahib, p.8).” The three most significant components of the environment: air, water, and earth—were the subject of Guru Nanak’s remark. These three components are essential to our survival, and that is why Guru Nanak equated them to the three most significant members of relationships in our lives: our mother, our father, and our gurus (teachers). In that regard, Guru Nanak was an environmentalist as well, and his lessons and guidance are highly applicable in the modern world.

To the Sikhs, the practices of the Gurus are also synonymous with religious knowledge. They are full of spiritual examples for leading an ideal Sikh life. The Sikhs consider Guru Har Rai (1630–1661), the seventh Guru of the Sikhs, a role model for the environmentalist. March 14 is celebrated as Sikh Environment Day, honoring the ascension date of the Guruship of Guru Har Rai. Guru Har Rai was a kind-hearted, well-mannered person. There are some popular life accounts of Guru Har Rai. One day he was walking in a garden. Accidentally, a plant snapped off its stem by his clothing. Guru Har Rai became extremely sad, and for the rest of his life, he wrapped his clothing around him while walking to avoid such an incident (Singh, 1994).

Guru Har Rai was the grandson of Guru Hargobind. Hargobind was famous for his martial and hunter pursuits, but his grandson Har Rai was different. Guru Har Rai showed compassion for animals. He liked hunting like his grandfather, but it is said that he has never killed an animal but instead kept them in a zoo in Kiratpur. Guru Har Rai also had a medicinal garden in Kiratpoor known as the Naulakha Bagh. According to legends, Dara Shikoh, son of Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, was cured of his illness by the medicinal plants sent by Guru Har Rai (Singh, 1963). In recent environmental activism and sustainable restoration work by Sikhs have turned their attention to this garden (Prill, 2015). The life instances of Guru Har Rai represent that he was empathetic and compassionate towards the environment. Besides, conserving exotic animals and medicinal plants proves that he understood the importance of protection and reservation of the environment for a sustainable environment. That is why Guru Har Rai is known as the “Green Guru” (Prill, 2015).

Concept of Interconnectedness of God, Human being and Sustainable Environment in Sikhism

Sikhism can be identified as a pragmatic religion. Basic Sikh teachings strongly denounce any kind of asceticism or *sannyasa* (Singh, 2010). According to Sikh doctrines, this world is a stage for practicing righteousness. This righteousness includes duty to the creations of God. Escaping from the worldly duty is similar to renouncing the duty assigned by God. God is real, He is the creator of this world thus His creation, according to Sikhism, is not *maya* or illusory. His creation is ‘real’ and ‘limitless’ like Him (Singh, 2010). That is why it is the core duty of human beings to serve the world including its environment.

Sikhism is practical in its teaching. It rejects the antagonistic approach towards material world and preserves a moderate outlook between spiritualism and materialism. Hence Sikhism promotes a balanced life. Material is one of the forms that spirit takes, according to Sikhism. As the material cosmos was also created by God, spirituality can also be experienced through matter. In Sikh theology, “*When I saw truly, I knew that all was primeval. the subtle (spirit) and the gross (material) are, in fact, identical.*” (Guru Granth Sahib, p. 281), “*That which is inside a person, the same is outside; nothing else exists; By divine prompting look upon all existence as one and undifferentiated; The same light penetrates all existence*” (Guru Granth Sahib, p. 599). In Sikhism, nature is considered the wonder and beauty that God has created. God compassionately nurtures His creation.

Sikh theology affirms that this entire universe is the result of the divine will (Hukum) of God. Everything in the universe is in accordance with His supreme plan and will (Singh, 2010). It is said that God has manifested Himself in His creation. We can compare this concept with both the theories of pantheism and panentheism. In Sikhism, God is present in all He made, and this cosmos is His

light. All is a part of God. “The Creator created himself. And created all creation in which He is manifest. *You yourself the bumblebee, flower, fruit and the tree. You yourself the water, desert, ocean and the pond. You yourself are the big fish, tortoise and the Cause of causes. Your form can not be known* (Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1016); therefore, there is no scope for denouncing the responsibility towards the world, “*Earth is the true abode of righteousness*” (Adi Granth, p. 294).

Sikhism teaches that God continuously provides for His creation in a compassionate manner; thus, giving up the world or becoming a monk is equivalent to fleeing from this world and amounts to disobeying God’s will and commandments. In reality, salvation and the purification of human souls depend on doing good deeds until death (Tiwari, 2012).

If we closely investigate the above-mentioned Sikh stances on creation and interconnection of God, universe, and nature, we can find out that there lies an impressive teaching about sustainable development. Sikhism has conjoined spirituality, humanity, environment and human being for a sustainable society. It is closely similar to the concept of Deep Ecology (Barnhill and Gottlieb, 2001). Avoiding any of these is a degradation of Sikh way of life. Since Sikh theology affirms the manifestation of God in His every creation, so there is no scope to undermine the importance of environment. Rather, it is the utmost duty of all to preserve and maintain a spiritual and disciplined relationship with environment and ecology.

Concept of *Sarbat Da Bhala* and *Seva*: Path to Sustainable Environment and Development

‘*Sarbat da bhala*’ is a famous term popular in Punjabi which can be understood as “welfare to all”, “may good come to all” etc. (Prill, 2015). Sikhism associates itself with this concept and often considers this as one of the core Sikh principles. Thus it is repeated in Sikh scriptures with absolute significance (“*Sarbat Da Bhala*”, n.d.). It is also the concluding term of Sikh prayer called “*Ardas*”. The full couplet reads: *Nanak nam chahrdi kala tere bhane sarbat da bhala* (May God’s Name, may the human spirit forever triumph, Nanak: And in Thy will may peace and prosperity come to one and all) (“*Sarbat Da Bhala*”, n.d. para. 3). If we take a deductive approach, it can be concluded that this term “*Sarbat*” has a deep meaning. It is not only confined to the welfare of humankind, but this also “all” can be all pervading which includes our surroundings, our environment.

Throughout history, Guru Nanak has been recognized as a figure who champions justice, equality, and moral behavior. In this regard, it appears contentious and counterintuitive to Guru Nanak’s teachings to leave the environment, a significant portion of our existence, out of his welfare concerns. However, even if we interpret this phrase to be solely for the benefit of humanity, we still cannot ignore the message of welfare and environmental concern found in *Sarbat Da Bhala*. Because

our unjust treatment of the environment and our damaging environmental policies pave the way for the eventual extinction of humanity. Therefore, treating the environment with respect and importance is essential for both human development and the improvement of a sustainable environment.

Sikhism is suited to the needs of modern life and its demand on the basis of logic and justice. Scholars have termed Sikhism a ‘this worldly,’ ‘modernistic,’ and ‘pragmatic’ tradition (Prill, 2015, p. 215, Singh, 2010, p. 28), because Sikhism places more emphasis on non-attachment to lust, greed, pride, anger, and other worldly sins than it does on encouraging reluctance to face the world and rejecting one’s obligations. Sikhism holds that everyone has responsibilities to the community (Sangat). This is known as “Seva,” or selfless service, and it is a fundamental aspect of Sikhism; *you shall find peace, doing seva* (SGGS, p. 25, line 19), *In the midst of this world, do seva* (SGGS, p. 26, line 1).

The Sikh ideas of morality, fairness, and universal love are reflected in the concept of Seva. It is altruistic, selfless work that benefits the community. From an ecological perspective, some of the most important forms of Seva are those that involve protecting the environment, such as planting trees, abstaining from polluting the air, water, or soil, and treating organisms with care to ensure their well-being. In this context, concept of *Sarbat da bhala* and *Seva* is closely intertwined to ensure sustainable environment. This is all inclusive and accommodates diverse perspectives. It can include pluralism, unity in diversity, equity, environmental justice and consequently sustainable development.

Sikh Attitude towards Consumerism and Contentment

Overconsumption and waste culture are the alarming causes of environmental degradation. Overconsumption causes imbalance in the distribution of wealth in the society and that also causes waste culture. It is the result of one’s believing in and practice of extreme materialism. Extreme materialism is devoid of ethical concerns and leads to nurturing selfish desires. A selfish person is devoid of any kind of sympathy and empathy. He is also reluctant to follow the order of nature. In Sikhism, overconsumption and importance of self-contentment have been discussed with practical examples. The 15th century Indian society was suffering from moral degradation. To reverse the situation, self-judgment and self-control were taught by Sikhism. Sikhism focuses on three main teachings: *Nam Japna*-meditation on the sacred name, ‘God’), *Kirat Karna*- honest earning and living, and *Vandh Chakna*- sharing one’s earnings with others. These three teachings make it easy to understand the Sikh perspective of dealing with an inclusive ideal life. It also upholds the ideas of inclusive pluralism and sustainable coexistence with nature and human beings.

There is an anecdote in which Guru Nanak enlightened us on the needlessness and futility of excessive consumption throughout our lives. When Guru Nanak and his

traveling companion Mardana stopped at a village one day, Mardana received a lot of gifts and food. Mardana was having trouble carrying them because the food and gifts were very heavy. He was asked by Guru Nanak if he would require any or all of this for his journey. Mardana answered, “No,” to which Guru Nanak questioned, “Then why are you taking the burden?” Guru Nanak then counseled him to carry and eat only what was absolutely necessary and to stay away from extraneous items. Guru Nanak says: *“possessions do not always bring you happiness. Don’t hanker after them.”* Furthermore, he counsels us to resist temptation, not to be avaricious, and to only take what we truly need. His remarks: *“No black magic and witchcraft can affect you if you believe in the power of God. Also do not succumb to unnecessary temptations”* (Menon, 2011, p. 50-52).

To be content does not mean to live in extreme hardship and deprivation. Contentment is satisfaction. It does not impede one’s progress or represent a life of pessimism and fatalism. The lessons of contentment imparted by Guru Nanak emphasize self-control for a balanced lifestyle. Sikhism inspires people to be dynamic and to work towards improvement. A state of mind known as contentment views success and failure equally. A happy and fulfilled man makes an effort to move forward; if he is unable to do so, he does not resort to violence (Singh, 2010, p.134). As one becomes aware of one’s wants, means, and ends—realizing that worldly items are merely means, not ends—one enters into a state of contentment. A happy individual is mindful of her/his obligations to the environment and society at the same time.

Detachment from worldly superfluous possessions does not mean renunciation or asceticism, says Guru Nanak. To make the point clear, he provided a beautiful example of a lotus in a pond that is untouched by dirt, water flow, or pollution. In a same vein, one should maintain their distance from the material world and avoid it. This suggests that, like lotuses, we can live in the world yet remain apart from its lust and greed by holding our heads high and seeking out spiritual objectives and leading more moral lives (Singh, 2010, p. 135).

Sikhism does not promote Anthropocentrism and Egocentrism

Sikhism denounces all kinds of egoism and anthropocentrism. Human beings although occupy significant part of God’s creation; Sikhism does not promote unruly supremacy of human beings. Human beings are a minute part of God’s creation, yet has been given or blessed with reflection, morality and sense of responsibility (SGGS, p. 913). This sense of morality and responsibility makes human beings accountable for their deeds to God. Philosopher and scholar S. Lourdunathan (2012) remarks that Sikhism is an ‘ecosophical’ tradition which means a tradition or attitude that intends and attempts that is against anthropocentrism and supports holistic approach and consciousness towards the universe (Lourdunathan 2012, p. 167). This approach is more practical than the radical philosophy of non-dualism, considering this world is illusory as we mentioned before.

Sikh Guru Arjan says, “Of all the eight million and four hundred thousand species, God conferred superiority on man... you have formed government over this earth” (SGGS, p. 1075). Considering the divine responsibility and stewardship that God has put upon humans, this government is synonymous with accountability and caring for God’s creations. Since Sikhism forbids man’s egoism or self-centeredness, there is no possibility that this stewardship might be interpreted as a means of manipulation. In Sikhism, egoism or egocentrism is known as Haumai. The human being is a magnificent creature endowed with a divine aspect known as the atman, or soul; but this divinity is tainted when an individual harbors egoism or self-centeredness (Tiwari, 2012, p. 218).

In Sikhism, this earth is seen as *Dharamsala*, a place of practicing *dharma* (Lourdunathan 2012, 169), meaning a place of practicing religion of humanity where people are inclined to God and spirituality. They are disciplined bear and responsibility to the creation of God. Once Guru Nanak was asked “which the greater religion is – the Hindu or the Muslim?” Guru Nanak answered: “Without good deeds both leads only to suffering, neither Hindu nor Muslim finds refuge in (God’s court)” (cited in McLeod, 2000, p. 43). This means only good deeds are countable to God and this will ensure the reunion with God and that should be the Summum-bonum of life.

Extremism in ideas and deeds of any kind was condemned by Guru Nanak. With his teachings, he condemned blind religions, false strict ritualism, and many forms of self-abasement. He advised his followers to have a balanced existence by earning an honest living and leading a regular life, advocating for taking the “middle path” in life. Guru Nanak said that this might join a man with God and that being united with the ultimate truth, “God”, “...listen, listen to my advice, O my mind, Only Good deed shall endure, and there may not be some other chance” (Singh, 2010, p. 11, 46). Guru Nanak also reminds that,

“Good and bad deeds are all disclosed
In the presence of righteousness.
Our actions take us near or far.
Those who remember the Name earn true success.
Nanak says their faces shine,
and they take many with them to liberation”
(Guru Granth Sahib, p. 8, Singh, 1995, p. 67).

“Says Nanak, the (maya) illusion of after death may or may not be true,
but the fact is evident that our deeds are the tree which we sow;
bear the fruits of poison or *Amrit* (nectar).
Our doing is better known to the God Himself,
who is the reason and doer of all deeds,
why He makes us to do so?” (SSGE, p. 1290).

Sikhism has established the concept of accountability and responsibility in its theology. It has rejected the supremacy of human beings over nature and also emphasizes the fact that only one's actions will be judged. This teaching of Sikhism is consistent with the concept of sustainable development. Sustainable development requires an equal participation from all the parts of any society. Development sustains if the citizens and governments are committed to preserve it. It requires accountability to prevent corruption and injustice. This refers the practicality of the Sikh teachings of sustainable environment and development.

A Brief Overview of Some Sikh Environmental Activism Today

Various religious communities are now engaged in significant environmental activism throughout the world. Sikhism is increasing advocating various ways of responding environmental degradation. The history of organizational activism can be traced back to mid twentieth century Bhagat Puran Singh's Pingalwara. Bhagat Puran Singh, founder of Pingalwara emphasized the intertwined connection between human beings, social and environmental health (Mooney, 2018). Through the distribution and planting of trees, as well as the publication of pamphlets with titles like "Plant or Perish" and "Environment Concerns Trees," the *All India Pingalwara Charitable Society* has for decades promoted ecological responsibility and improvement (among other social causes). On its Zero Budget Natural Farm and Research Center in Deerekot, Sangrur, Pingalwara has focused in recent years on recovering the environment and public health in Punjab through natural and organic farming (Mooney, 2018).

In the recent time the activism has been noticeably accelerated by the formation of EcoSikh organization in 2009 (Prill, 2015). The fledgling organization EcoSikh organized the first World Sikh Environment Day in early 2011(www.ecosikh.org). Notably, EcoSikh released a collection of the gurbani on environment and ecology named *Ek Bageecha* (One Garden) in 2013 (Prill 2015). This is an important collection of studying Sikh approach to environment. Sikhism is actively participating in global faith based environmental projects. One such is the Green Pilgrimage Network (GPN), started in 2011. This project intends to incorporate major religious pilgrimage sites and Sikhism with its pilgrimage sites of Amritsar and Nanded. The underlying factors of this project are to make the religious places more sustainable. GPN promotes and participates in activities like tree plantation, use of solar power and promotion of celebrations and processions more ecofriendly (Prill, 2015). There are now two *Takhts* (Sikh authority seats) that are part of the GPN. Particular statements advocating environmental sensitivity have been made by the Jathedar of Hazur Sahib in Nanded (Singh, J. K. 2013).

As it is mentioned before, a significant part of diaspora Sikh is engaged in philanthropic activism, among them KarmaGrow is notable. In the spring of 2014, Jaskaran Singh Sandhu and Gagandeep Singh Bath, two young Jat Sikhs, founded KarmaGrow: Community Farms and Gardens, a relatively new Canadian social

venture (Mooney, 2018). *Karma* is a significant term in Indian philosophy and religions. It has both literal and spiritual sense (Keung 2014). “Karma” represents the ideology of good deeds, and it comes back to the doer. It is also like as you sow, so you reap. KarmaGrow adopts a more comprehensive approach to social justice, highlighting issues such as food security, sustainable development, and the restructuring of urban relationships with land and farming (Mooney, 2018). The goal of KarmaGrow is to build community gardens that will supply food banks with a sustainable supply of fresh vegetables [emphasis in original] and to strengthen the Sikh ideals of *Seva* (selfless service) and *Sarbat da Bhala* (the collective welfare). It seeks to bring about change in environmental protection, sustainable development, and community revitalization (<http://KarmaGrow.org/about/>).

Conclusion

The study of environment and religion has pragmatic implications, which makes it more relevant to contemporary environmental concern. Sikhism, being one of the influential world religions, has noteworthy connection and contribution to sustainable environment policy. The Sikh doctrinal teachings and practices of the Sikh authorities pave the way for theological and psychological footings to understand the human position and relation with the environment. Sikhism promotes peaceful coexistence of human beings and environment since it sustains the divine order. At the same time, mankind, according to Sikhism, has been given the special power to differentiate between right and wrong. This power made mankind a steward of God who has been bestowed upon a responsibility to serve the creations of God, and everyone is accountable for his or her deeds to God.

In Sikhism, this world is the *Dharamshala* to practice righteousness. There is no scope for escaping from the duty towards this earth and environment. The concepts of *Seva* and *Sarbat Da Bhala* have practical value in Sikh life, which has resulted in contemporary Sikh environmental activism largely. Environment is one of the core concerns in global affairs. Connecting religion and environment is a paradigm in correlating multiple stakeholders to contribute to a sustainable environment. In this context, Sikh environmentalism can surely contribute to both academia and global policymaking. Therefore, this article is substantial in mapping the role of religion, human beings, and environmental concern. Hence, it opens more scopes to study this topic from more interdisciplinary perspectives.

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