

# **Faith and Environment - A Sikh Perspective\***

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The problems relating to environmental degradation have been vastly documented and continue to be subject of hot debate and intense social activism. The debate, especially in the West, has become more and more widespread and the concern for local as well as (to some extent) global environmental issues is beginning to impact public policy. The society thus is becoming increasingly aware and involved at various planes in its attempt to understand the complexity of issues and how these may impact their lives going forward.

The basic postulate is that the environmental degradation is primarily a result of rapid increases in population coupled with galloping increases in consumption levels. The unfettered consumerism in the developed nations with one fifth of the world's population, has led to their consuming four fifths of the world's resources. Extrapolations of these rates paint a grim picture in which the very survival on this planet could be in danger in not too distant a future. The emerging realization is that a more secure and sustainable world will require a significant shift in values that seem to be driving our collective life styles and social habits.

In this scenario, a growing view is that incorporation of values into environmentalism will essentially entail greater involvement of religious traditions in bringing about change at personal and social levels to cherish and protect the creation. This is the way it rightly should be because, in the final analysis, the religious leadership must be concerned about the moral and ethical questions inherent in this debate.

The Judeo-Christian traditions have been sensitive to this emerging problem and there is a plethora of literature that has come out in the last decade or so. Practically all of institutions engaged in instruction in theology (2500 or more in the US), and a vast majority of congregations have been energized to become part of the discussion and action programs. Pope John Paul II reasoned in his World day of Peace Message in 1990: "the ecological crisis is a moral issue — respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of the creation." In his Apostolic Letter in 2000 he questioned "—and how can we remain indifferent to the prospect of an ecological crisis which is making vast areas of our planet uninhabitable and hostile to humanity?" Earlier this year he said " – if we scan the regions of our planet, we immediately see that humanity has disappointed God's expectations. Man, especially in our time, has without hesitation devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted waters,,"

## **Happenings on ground**

There is a vast multiplicity of organizations and groups engaged in advocacy and promoting awareness programs on environmental issues. The religious leaders in Christian and Jewish

traditions have avidly adopted the issues as morally, ethically and theologically relevant and their Churches/Synagogues are getting their congregations involved. A National Religious Partnership for the Environment was created in the US in 1991. In ten years since its formation, the Partnership has:

- "Commissioned eminent scholars to establish the intellectual roots of religious response— link(ing) environmentalism to teachings to which civilization has turned for centuries,
- Integrated initiatives into established religious agencies which are addressing other social issues,
- Helped clergy and lay people enact diverse programs in thousands of congregations,
- Convened briefings and training for thousands of clergy and lay people,
- Undertaken local and national public policy initiatives,
- Engaged wide interest in its programs beyond the faith community, e.g. to corporate and union leaderships,
- Encouraged coverage of its activities in secular and religious media."

The Christian and Jewish communities are involved in these initiatives, and the Partnership has been working very actively with their various denominations, leadership and congregations. However, the Sikhs and - possibly - even Moslems, Hindus and other faith groups are conspicuously absent.

A global initiative is the formulation of The Earth Charter in pursuance of the call in 1987 by the United Nations World Commission. A final version of the draft prepared by the Earth Charter Commission set up in 1997, was approved in March 2000. The Charter document identifies " the wisdom of the world's great religions and philosophical traditions" as a source of Earth Charter values. I am not aware of the involvement of the Sikh faith adherents, or their religious leadership, in the consultative processes. India was represented on the Commission by Kamla Chowdhry

### **A Sikh Perspective**

In the prevailing activist environment on social issues in the US and elsewhere, including in India, we like other faith groups, should progressively get more proactively involved in the process and as a community of believers should develop and strengthen our internal institutions. It is hoped that the following broad narration of some aspects of Sikh perspectives - that may tend to influence our collective responses to a host of variables linked to environmental issues - may catalyze some thought and possibly some activist initiatives by the faith leadership, amorphous as it is.

The Sikh faith is life affirming. Sikhs are enjoined to live a householder's life. They are persuaded to work hard, provide for themselves and their families, share with the needy, seek the company of virtuous and devote themselves to prayerful, ethical living. Guru Nanak (b 1469), the founder of the faith spent over twenty years traveling far and wide to Bengal, Sri Lanka, Arabia, Turkey, Russia, and Tibet and in between spreading his message of love and prayer. In his final years he founded a fraternity of faith, charity, equality, affirmation, trust, mutual help and service at a place he named Kartarpur. The succeeding Gurus developed several new communities of believers where the seekers from all segments of society, lived together in harmony in a shared quest for spiritual fulfillment.

### **Cosmology:**

In the Sikh cosmology we believe that for eons and eons of time there was just God. At some point, God willed and the creation came into being. In the midst of this creation God installed the earth – *hukme dharti sajian sachi dharamsal* – the abode of duty, action. On the earth abide beings of myriad hues and infinite forms. Of all living beings God gave humans extra merits – *manas ko prabh deiye vadiayi*. Even as the other beings have their own place and purpose in God's scheme, they also fulfill the purposes of humans – *awar joni teri panihari*. Yet humans are told that God loves His creation the way it is, and looks at it joyfully. God also is the one who bears the concern for all – *jin karte karna kiya, chinta bhi karni tahe* – and men are counseled not to unduly worry because God will protect and provide for them all – *tu kahe dolay parania tudh rakhega sirjanhar*. God creates, sustains destroys and recreates all that is seen or unseen in the universe. This process is continuous and the creation expands or regresses as God wills. The entire universe is subject to God's will. The creation is real, not illusory - but subject to decay, dissolution and death.

For Guru Nanak one single essence pervades the entire multiplicity of the cosmic existence. God is immanent in His creation and this world is his home – *eh jag sache ki hai kothri, sache ka vich vaas*. The world that we see is in the likeness of God [otherwise formless – *nirankar*] and is His visible manifestation. This world is intended by God to be a place of beauty, an arena for virtuous deeds and moral actions and not a place of suffering or sin. The material body provides the outer form and color to the spirit/soul that dwells within. The relationship between God and soul is likened to the sun and its rays. There is inter-connectedness between matter and spirit; the divine and the gross; God and nature.

The Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Saheb, is written in poetry and set to *Ragas*. The compositions, by the Gurus as well as several Hindu and Muslim saints, have a uniquely lyrical quality about them. The language, despite its wide variety, is the spoken tongue of people. The choice of words and imagery is from nature and life – the sun, the moon, the stars, day, night, changing hues of sky, rain, clouds, cool breeze, budding flowers, trees, woods, animals prancing in the wild, chirping birds, breaking dawn, the early morning feeling of expectancy – so much so, it reaches the inner depth of one's being transporting one to a state of ecstatic wonderment [*vismad*] and oneness with God's creation, closer to a deep, uplifting spiritual experience. Witness some examples:

- *bhini rainariye chamkan tare* – twinkling stars of a mellow night.

- \_\_\_\_\_ *mori run jhun laiya, bhenai sawan aaiya*- listen, my friend, pitter-patter of rain; for sawan [the rainy season so welcome in tropics] is here

- \_\_\_\_\_ *chiri chahki, poh phutti, wagan bohot tarang* – the birds are singing, the dawn is breaking and [my] heart is filled with joyous expectation

- \_\_\_\_\_ *sun samadh, anhat te naad* – in the silence of spheres, the floating sound of celestial music.

As a practical faith, denial and austerities are not commended. It is recognized that even for a prayerful life, certain necessities have to be met – *bhookhai bhagat na keejay, yeh maalaa apni lijay* – here, take Thy rosary, [I] cannot pray on a hungry stomach.

Gurbani exhorts the seekers to ask what they want of God for He has provided us for ages and keeps on providing, even if we may tire of receiving – *denda de lainde thak paye, juga jugantar khahi khahe*. Limitless are His reserves – *ankhut bhare tere bhandara*. At the same time the believers are persuaded that for virtuous living – *sat, santokh, vichar* – truthfulness, contentment and contemplation along with rising above life's bondages and moderation in consumption will bring one closer to God - *unni duniya torre bandhna anna paani thora khaiya*. Propensity for acquisition, ostentation and indulgence is to be curbed.

Notwithstanding his pivotal role, the man is reminded that – *naru marai nar kaam na aavey, pashoo marey das kaaj swarey* – if an animal dies, its remains serve so many purposes, what good is a human dead? Humility is highly commended virtue. Man must accept the governing principle in nature, the divine ordinance, *hukam*.

The story has it that one of Guru's devotees unflinchingly cooked for the Guru every evening and reverentially served him the food. One evening as he set to do so, a storm rose and he panicked that he would not be able to cook the food. He went into prayer and beseeched God to stop the storm. His prayer heard, the storm stopped, and soon he brought the freshly cooked meal and placed it before the Guru, but the Guru turned his face the other way. When the devotee again put the food in front of the Guru, he again turned away. Distraught, the devotee begged the Guru to tell him where had he erred. The Guru replied that God had intended the strong winds to blow and spread food grains to remote nests where many insects were starving and your prayer did not let it happen!

### **Abundant Harvest:**

Several of the Sikh festivals and fairs are linked to harvest times and change of seasons. The folk songs and dances are vigorous and earthy. The colorful dresses are homage to the indescribably beautiful hues of the tropical sunsets. Mostly families/individuals say a word of thanksgiving to God before eating. In Gurdwaras the *prasad* and *langar* is distributed after prayer has blessed it. Water tanks were traditionally made a part of Gurdwaras so that devotees could bathe before joining the worship service. Simple food freshly cooked and served in metal or leaf plates was the routine in community kitchens. To leave food in the plate was considered irreverential. The clergy would go round and collect cooked food donations every day from neighboring

parishioners to distribute in the Gurdwara. If land were available the Gurdwaras would grow some vegetables etc for their use too.

The Sikh concept of *Miri & Piri* put simply, is to stress the basic unity of the temporal and the spiritual in life. Guru Nanak advocated active involvement in social upliftment and promoting equality and justice as a moral imperative. This ideal has driven the socialization of man in Sikhism and the themes of social concern and social change have pervaded the Sikh thought from the early days of the faith. The truly religious Sikh views all humans as the children of the same Father and all creation as equable. To love God, he must treat respectfully and love God's creation.

Sikhs pray for the triumph of the human spirit and well-being of *sarbat*, one and all. Naturalness, balance, poise, self-discipline are among the attributes to develop for spiritual attainment. They are encouraged to take a holistic look at life and man's place in the scheme of things. They are told that as humans, they have the rare opportunity, blessed as they are with intellect and ability to discriminate, to use their free will to make such choices which may bring them closer to God. At the same time, they are reminded that even though each one comes into this world with some pre-destination and inherent instincts influenced by their previous *karma*, the burden of making choices is theirs, and they cannot blame destiny or anybody else for what they do in their life. The persuasion is for progressive, constructive, responsible living in harmony with and caring for God's creation.

### **Mother Earth:**

**The Gurus not only propagated these values, they lived them. Their teachings continue to have relevance, perhaps even more today than in their own times. We must pause and ponder as to how much of the problems mother earth is facing are part of its own pre-destination and how much the result of collective *karma* of man. Never before in the entire human history has the earth faced dangers it is facing today. We need to become more earth friendly.**

Apart from global environmental problems, we face ecological hazards even in the narrow confines of Punjab. The problems emanating from rising sub soil water levels, denudation of forest cover in neighborhood, the damming of rivers, lackadaisical waste management, air and noise pollution are well known. The changing consumption patterns will accentuate these problems and create new ones in the coming years.

In defense of Sikhs I might say that there is some empirical evidence that they culturally are empathetic to nature. Given the cross roads where we are, is it enough? Is our collective awareness and response adequate? Is our religious and community leadership sufficiently exercised over environmental issues? I must admit some skepticism, respectfully!

And, finally, let us all ask ourselves – mother earth is the resource for all our nurturing, our sacred trust, are we playing out our *dharma* in the time cycle of day and night?

