

Environmental Concerns in Guru Granth Sahib

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ALL THE BIOTIC AND ABIOTIC FACTORS that act on an organism, population, or ecological community and influence its survival and development constitute its environment. Biotic factors include the organisms themselves, their food, and their interactions. Abiotic factors include such items as sunlight, soil, air, water, climate, and pollution. Organisms respond to changes in their environment by evolutionary adaptations in form and behaviour. At present humanity is facing great challenges for its survival as both these factors have come under great stress due to its unbridled demands of national economic growth and individual needs and desires.

Grave Crisis:

On the abiotic front, a grave ecological crisis is caused by man's exploitation of Nature, which is leading to a large scale depletion of natural resources, destruction of forests, and overuse of land for agriculture and habitation. Pollution is contaminating air, land, and water. Smoke from industries, homes and vehicles, is in the air. A smoky haze envelopes the major cities of the world. Industrial waste and consumer trash are choking streams and rivers, ponds and lakes, killing the marine life. Much of the waste is a product of modern technology. It is neither biodegradable nor reusable, and its long-term consequences are unknown. The viability of many animal and plant species, and possibly that of the humankind itself, is at stake.

At the biotic level, humanity is facing a social justice crisis, which is caused by humanity's confrontation with itself. The social justice crisis is that poverty, hunger, disease, exploitation and injustice are widespread. There are economic wars over resources and markets. The rights of the poor and the marginal are violated. Women, constituting half the world's population, have their rights abused.

Obviously, the contemporary human society is in the midst of a grave environmental crisis. There is a serious concern that the earth may no longer be a sustainable biosystem. Although human beings are seen as the most intelligent life form on earth, yet they are responsible for almost all the ecological **damage** done to the planet. The Sikh scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS), declares that the purpose of human beings is to achieve a blissful state and to be in harmony with the earth and all of God's creation. It seems, however, that humans have drifted away from that ideal. According to the Sikh scriptures, humans create their surroundings as a reflection of their inner state. Thus, the increasing barrenness of the earth reflects a spiritual emptiness within humans.

Interdependence:

Sikhism is very concerned with the relationship between humanity and the environment. Sikhs believe that an awareness of the sacred relationship between humans and the environment is necessary for the health of our planet, and for our survival. In SGGS, man and material world (biotic and abiotic components of the environment) are no more seen as external to each other, but being involved in inter-dependent relationship, reciprocally

conditioning the life of each other. Guru Nanak stresses this kind of inter-dependent relationship in his composition 'Japu Ji';

pvNu gurU paNI iptā mata Writ mhtu .
iwvsu rait wuie wael waieAa K[|{ sgl jgtu . [SGGS:8]

i.e. Air is vital force, Water the progenitor, the vast Earth is the mother of all, Days and Nights are nurses, fondling all creation in their lap.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib declares that the purpose of human beings is to be in harmony with all creation and that human domination is to be rejected. The Sikh Gurus recognized human responsibility towards the material world and its phenomena. So, the importance of Air, Water and Earth to life are emphasised over and over again in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The earth is referred to as the mother and as such requires our respect. Great care needs to be taken to ensure that no damage occurs to it while the Sikh is going about his or her daily life. The pollution of these three elements is against the principles laid down by the Gurus. The Sikh Scriptures emphasise the importance of the abiotic components of environment in the hymn:

pxuNu paNI WrtI Aakasu Gr m;wr hir bnl . [SGGS:723]

i.e. Air, water earth and sky are God's home and temple - sacred places which need to be protected and looked after.

The Sikh Gurus showed the world, the way to appreciate the interdependence of living beings and their environment and the way to nurture this inter-relationship. All their constructions adhered to this principle. They built many Gurudwaras surrounded by large pools, which supported marine life, especially fish. This was clearly a sign to live in harmony with environment rather than in conflict with it. Guru Har Rai, the seventh Sikh Guru developed Kiratpur Sahib as a town of parks and gardens. Located on the banks of tributary of the Sutlej, he planted flowers and fruit bearing trees all over the area. This created a salubrious environment, attracting beautiful birds to the town and turning it into an idyllic place to live in.

Nature - A Spiritual Guide:

Nature (the material world and its phenomena), a major component of our environment, is a great spiritual teacher because it enables the spiritual seeker to be in touch with Ultimate Reality. God is revealed through His All-powerful Creative nature. As pointed out in Gurbani, everything seen is God in action. The Sikh scriptures are replete with examples about the interrelationship of the Creator (God) and Nature.

nank sc wataru isnaKtu kuwrtI . [SGGS:141]

i.e. O Nanak, the True One is the Giver of all; He is revealed through His All-powerful Creative Nature.

xutBuju cltu kIAa isir krt{ ibsmawu sbiw w[Kaiewa . [SGGS: 1037]

i.e. The Supreme Creator created the play of Nature; through the Word of His Shabad, He stages His Wondrous Show.

SGGS places a great deal of spiritual significance on the lessons we can learn directly from the Nature. One can learn true selflessness; real renunciation and sacrifice from it.

According to SGGS; 'Earth teaches us patience and love. Air teaches us mobility, Fire teaches us warmth and courage; Sky teaches us equality and broadmindedness, Water teaches us purity and cleanliness'. (SGGS 1018).

Harmony with Nature:

Sikhs believe that the material world and its phenomena (Nature), like all creation, is a manifestation of God. Every creature in this world, every plant, every form is a manifestation of the Creator. Each is part of God and God is within each element of creation. God is the cause of all and He is the primary connection between all existence.

j] A;tir s] bahir w[Khu Avru n wUja k]el j]lxu .
gurmuiK e[k iwRsio kir w[Khu Gio Gio j]it sm]el j]lxu . [SGGS: 599]

i.e. He is within-see Him outside as well; there is no one, other than Him. By divine prompting look upon all existence as one and undifferentiated; the same light penetrates all existence.

"The Creator created himself ... And created all creation in which He is manifest. You Yourself the bumble-bee, 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 cannot be known." (SGGS 1016)

SGGS stresses the importance of living in harmony with Nature. It opposes the idea that the struggle of the human race is against Nature and that human supremacy lies in the notion of "harnessing" Nature. The objective is harmony with the eternal—God—which implies a life of harmony with all existence. 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 emphasises the significance of various aspects of Nature and declares the Earth as Dharamsaal (a place for righteous action).

ratl rutl iTtl var . pvN paNI Agnl patal . itsu ivic Wrtl Taip rKI
Wrm sal . [SGGS: 7]

i.e. He created Night and Day, seasons and occasion, So also Air, Water, Fire and the Nether Regions, Amidst these has He fixed the earth, the place for Righteous Action.

By this portrayal of the world (earth) as a place for righteousness and purity, SGGS insists that we relate with others with equality and justice. Sri Guru Granth Sahib reveals that real peace can only be found when desire and greed are subdued and diminished. This will only happen when the individual realises that God is found in all the elements including water, earth and the woods and he stops damaging these elements purely to satisfy his material greed.

sa:it pavih h]vih mn sltl Agin n A;tir WuKI . [SGGS: 617]

i.e. 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.

World Society:

On the Biotic front, according to Sikhism, environmental concerns must be viewed as part of the broader issue of human development and social justice. Many environmental problems, particularly the exploitation of environmental resources in developing nations, are due to the poverty of large parts of the population. Therefore an integrated approach is necessary.

Sikhism emphasizes the main objective for humanity as the harmony with all existence. Striving for a life of harmony, therefore, also implies a life of supporting individual rights and environmentalism—a life that works against injustice toward anybody and anything.

The tenth Guru in 1699 founded the Order of the Khalsa, whose members practice the spiritual discipline of Sikhism and are committed to ensure the preservation and prevalence of a World Society. Over the last three centuries the members of the Khalsa order have stood up for the rights of the oppressed and the disenfranchised even at the cost of their own lives. The Khalsa vision of the World Society is:

huiN hukmu h]Aa imhrvaN wa . p{ k]ie n iks{ rVaNwa . sB suKall
vuOIAa iehu h]Aa hl[ml raju j]xu . [SGGS: 74]

i.e. Henceforth such is the Will of God: No man shall coerce another; No person shall exploit another. Each individual has the inalienable birthright to seek and pursue happiness and self-fulfillment. Love and persuasion is the only law of social coherence.

The Khalsa have opposed any force that has threatened the freedom and dignity of human beings. In the eighteenth century it was the oppressive rulers of northern India, and invaders from Afghanistan; in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they have struggled against oppression by European colonists and Indian governments. 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, not merely for themselves.

Intoxicants Free Simple Life:

SGGS describes the norms for a Sikh to live a life which does not harm their mind, health, others around them, society, or the environment. Therefore, Sikhs are prohibited from consuming tobacco, alcohol or any other intoxicant, and keep a simple vegetarian diet. Gurmat is against causing cruelty and suffering to animals.

scu imilAa itn s]PIAa raKN kxu wrvaru . [SGGS: 15]

i.e. Those who do not use intoxicants are true; they dwell in the Court of the Lord.

kblr Ba:g maCull sura pain j] j] pRanl Ka:ih . tlrT brt n[m kle[t[
sB{ rsatil ja:ih . [SGGS: 1377]

i.e. Kabeer, those mortals who consume marijuana, fish and wine - no matter what pilgrimages, fasts and rituals they follow, they will all go to hell.

It is now a known fact that smoking is both a primary and secondary health hazard. In addition to harming the environment, it has seriously deleterious effects on the person who smokes, on the bystander who breathes the secondhand smoke, and on the unborn foetus of the female smoker. Though this has only been scientifically verified in the last half century, Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru of the Sikhs, listed the use of tobacco as one of the four major acts forbidden to initiated adherents of the Sikh religion. Though tobacco was introduced into India only in the mid-1600s, he had the wisdom to specifically interdict it in 1699. From its very beginning, Sikhism had forbidden the use of any intoxicants or mind-altering substances for any purpose except medicinal.

Integrated Approach to sustainability:

In Sikh beliefs, a concern for the environment is part of an integrated approach to life and nature. As all creation has the same origin and end, humans must have consciousness of their place in creation and their relationship with the rest of creation. Humans should conduct themselves through life with love, compassion, and justice. Becoming one and being in harmony with God implies that humans endeavour to live in harmony with all of God's creation. A true Sikh is for individual human rights, the environment and justice for all.

bRhm igAanl k{ grlbl smaha .

bRhm igAanl prxupkar xumaha . (SGGS: 273)

All life is interconnected. A human body consists of many parts; every part has a distinct name, location, and function, and all of these are dependent upon each other. In the same way, all the constituents of the universe and the earth 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. It is a part of the same system. SGGS assures that the entire creation is inter-related mutually supporting one another.

All creation on one thread has He strung. (SGGS: 1108)

Any solutions to the problem of the environment must be sensitive to women's concerns, and must include women as equals. Piecemeal solutions to environmental problems will merely focus, for example, on limiting population growth through family planning measures, which often end up abusing women's rights, and should be rejected on those grounds alone. SGGS contains important lessons on this. Guru Nanak and other 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 with special emphasis on recycling and avoidance of wastage.

Life, for its very existence and nurturing, depends upon a bounteous nature. A human being needs to derive sustenance from the earth and not deplete, exhaust, pollute, burn, or destroy it. Sikhs believe that an awareness of that sacred relationship between humans and the environment is necessary for the health of our planet, and for our survival. A new "environmental ethic" dedicated to conservation and wise use of the resources provided by a bountiful nature can only arise from an honest understanding and dedicated application of our old, tried and true spiritual heritage. Such an integrated approach to current environmental crisis can lead to permanent sustainability of life on mother earth.



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