

# **ECOLOGY REDESIGNING GENES - ETHICAL AND SIKH PERSPECTIVE**

**By Surjeet Kaur Chahal,  
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**A Review by Paramjeet Singh, IRS\***

\* C-26, Income-Tax Colony, Peddar Road, Mumbai - 700 026.

Reading this book, one might think that she is an ardent environmental activist gifted with outstanding communication skills or a prodigious professor of eco-philosophy, who like renowned British scientist Dr. James Lovelock, believes that our planet earth is in dire need to be saved because it, too, like human beings, is a living biological entity rather than an inanimate cosmic rock.

Actually Dr Surjeet Kaur Chahal is all this and then much more. A reader in the Department of Philosophy, University of Pune, she is also a devout Sikh who can with equal ease hold fort in conferences on Sikhism as she can do on such subjects like Philosophy, Ecology and Genetic Engineering.

This book is a continuation of her earlier book-*Environment and the Moral Life-Towards a New Paradigm*. In that book also, as in the present book, she has focused primarily on the value neutrality thesis of science and carried it further to include moral and ethical concerns that surround the contemporary scientific research in the area of Genetics. And what is more amazing and indeed bold is the attempt to present all this with a Sikh perspective. As the introductory remarks to the book say-"Dr Surjeet Kaur Chahal explores some of the issues associated with genetic technology to provide her interpretation of how genetic technology challenges the relationship between God, humans and the rest of nature. However the way a society decides its policy about use of biotechnology must include reflections of philosophy and religion, and it is important for scholars to take definite views upon the subject. The author has also drawn upon some of the literature from different religious perspective and this volume is important to provide a Sikh perspective on these issues."

The central theme that pervades the book is that the Earth is on the verge of ecological collapse. Today the issues related to this cannot be tackled with objectivity alone. We require an adequate ethics to deal with nature. Man has gained immense power to modify the ecosphere. This power cannot be exercised sans any restraints or without values. We cannot use this power with our finite and egoistic mind and destroy the biosphere and its biodiversity. As pointed by Holmes Rolston, III "Power without ethics is profane and destructive."

Such an ethics is there in the Eastern religions, especially in Sikhism. Sikhism places mankind along with other species. Man is a part of nature. Man's mind is finite, his creativity is finite, and his understanding of the ecosphere is limited. Under no circumstances can man ever completely comprehend the ways of the working of the universe, which is created by the infinite God. Many other religions especially Christianity, claim that humans are above all forms of life. Every creature of the earth has been created to serve a human. This attitude towards nature makes us exploit it to the fullest. Nature is looked down upon; it has no intrinsic worth, no value.

In comparison to this, the author points out that in Sikhism, the Guru's say that the world is a play created by God and he is sitting and enjoying it. Man is one actor amongst the other actors. He is superior to the other beings because he has the capacity for self-realization that is lacking in the other beings. However, this does not give him the license to spoil or

exploit nature. On the contrary Guru Nanak requires of him to become a humble soul to realize that he is lowliest of the low; just a speck of dust in this universe.

Once we realize this, our attitude towards nature will automatically change. We will no longer want to exploit it but will rather make friends with it. We'll see God immanent in it and therefore realize its intrinsic worth. In that sense Sikhism is an ecological religious tradition. The author puts it very succinctly—"It appears that we need a greening of religion and of ethics, if we want to save our planet." Once we realize that God resides in nature too, we will allow things to flourish in their own right and use them only when necessary i.e. we would curb wanton use of the non-human world.

Unfortunately the innocent greed of the affluent and the unheeding need of the improvised are ticking away the ecological time bomb. Today we dominate over others not by our personal qualities but by our material possessions. This leads to consumerism and which in turns leads to rampant exploitation of nature. The more we consume, the more we deplete the natural resources.

However even though we all are morally concerned and worried about this threat, yet the efforts on our part to control this crisis are very minimal. We feel it is for technology and science to handle this crisis. We have our hopes pinned on technology and science and we think science will find ways to control and regulate this crisis and restore the environment.

Thus what the author has attempted in this book is an amazing and refreshingly new viewpoint. It goes beyond the sustainable development model that the ecologists are advocating today. The sustainable development model exhorts us to exploit the nature in the fashion that the resources are not depleted. It calls for conservation and talks of harmony between the environment, society and economy. It emphasizes the use of efficient and eco-friendly technology to avoid wastage enabling people to enjoy a better quality of life now as well as in future.

This book goes much beyond it. Taking the Genetic modification issue, the author places the same in an ecosystem context and then she brings her considerable capabilities in philosophical analysis, giving out her knowledge of the literature in environmental ethics and joins these with her location in the Sikh tradition. As Prof. Holmes Rolston, III distinguished professor of philosophy, Colorado State University, USA and a Templeton Prize Laureate notes, "Neither ecology, nor environmental ethics nor Sikhism has so far been much present in the contemporary debates on genetic bioethics. Readers will find that this gives her unusual resources with which to address these concerns."

Thus this book is a must read for all those who are concerned about the ecological issues. It must also be read for the beautiful linkages that it provides with the values and teachings of Sikh Gurus vis-à-vis nature and our attitude towards it. And though complex issues like Genetic engineering, Cloning and Eugenics are dealt with in this book, yet the language of the book is very simple and refreshingly it avoids scientific jargons. The issues are dealt with a lay man's perspective and the book is overall a very interesting read. The author has done a commendable job and it is hoped that the moral, ethical and Sikh perspectives that she brings to Ecology will be appreciated the world over and taken up for further debate and discussion.

Her vision thus coincides with that of Dr. Lovelock, whose many celebrated books argue that, **"Our planet can be saved only if we see the world as a living super-organism, of which we are part-not the owner, nor the tenant, not even a passenger."**

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**By Rattan Singh Bhangoo**  
**Translation by Prof. Kulwant Singh**  
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**A Review by Dr. Gurcharan Singh Mehta**

\* 18 - Guru Arjun Nagar, Railway Colony, Saharanpur, UP.

*Sri Gur Panth Prakash* (Vol. I) by Rattan Singh Bhangoo has been rendered into English by Prof. Kulwant Singh and published by the institute of Sikh Studies, Chandigarh in 2006. It consists of the first eighty one episodes out of a total of 170 episodes of the original work. "SRI GUR PANTH PRAKASH" occupies a unique and significant position among the primary sources of Sikh history. This Granth is a great work of art as well as Sikh history especially of the blood-soaked history of Sikhs of over hundred years covering 18<sup>th</sup> Century (1675-1795). It comes to be written soon after the British capture of Delhi. In 1783 a massive Sikh force of 40000 troops occupied Delhi under the command of S. Baghel Singh, the head of Kroresinghia Misl, who vacated Delhi only after demarcating the major Sikh historical shrines in Delhi and after collecting huge ransom and a significant percentage of octroi on regular payment. The British authorities were unnerved by the sudden emergence of the Khalsa force and were keen to gather true history of the Sikhs and their evolution into a formidable military power in order to draw a suitable strategy to deal with the rising power of the Sikhs and ultimately to capture Punjab.

The East India Company Governor General's Agent at Delhi, General David Ochterlony had gathered some information about the Sikhs through the Mughal Emperor. Farukh Siyer and also got one version of Sikh history written by Khushwaqat Rai which was almost a Mughal version of distorted Sikh history. Not satisfied with these accounts, he entrusted the task of writing a history of the Sikh to Captain David Murray, the British representative at Ludhiana. Captain Murray commissioned the services of Maulvi Bootey Shah of Batala to dictate to him the history of the Sikhs. His version not only confirmed the earlier Mughal version, but was even more biased and prejudiced against the Sikh. It was by coincidence that Captain Murray came into contact with Rattan Singh Bhangoo and shared his mission of getting the Sikh history recorded. He showed him the version of Bootey Shah Batalvi which Bhangoo found not only inadequate, but extremely biased and bereft of truth and facts.

After knowing this, Captain Murray entreated Bhangoo to acquaint about the historical developments of the times, particularly the moral and spiritual ideals preached by Guru Nanak and his successors, the origin of the Khalsa Panth, its evolution nurturing, trials and tribulations and ultimate rise to power.

Bhangoo was the grandson of S. Mehtab Singh of Mirankot from paternal side and S. Sham Singh of Kroresinghia Misl from the maternal side. S Mehtab Singh along with S. Sukha Singh had beheaded the Mughal Chaudhary Massa Rangarh of patti in the open court for his act of desecrating the holy Harmandir Sahib at Amritsar. For this brave act, the Sikh Panth declared them martyrs when the Mughal court put them to death. Being direct descendent of the Sikh martyrs and having a through knowledge of the Sikh history and ideals acquired through Gurbani, Janamsakhis, Gurbilas, Bansawali-nama Dasan Patshahian ka and Persian records, he undertook the arduous task of presenting a true, unbiased and objective history of the Sikhs from its beginning upto his own times. The recording of the matter was done in 1808 and from 1808 onwards the author collected it in the form of a poetical epic called "SRI GUR PANTH PRAKASH" in 1841 at Amritsar.

The *Granth* was 'discovered' and first published by Bhai Vir Singh in 1914, and has since seen four editions. The S.G.P.C. published and edited version of this Granth prepared by

Dr. Jeet Singh Seetal in 1984, which has been adopted as basis for this translation. Access to this monumental work has been limited to Punjabi knowing readers only. The vast English knowing people, however remain unaware of this great work. **With the availability of this English translation along with the original Punjabi text and transliteration in Roman script, a long felt need of a vast section of readership of Sikh history has been met.**

The additional merit of the volume in hand has been enhanced by highly informative and scholarly additions made by Dr. Kharak Singh and dr. Kirpal Singh, the eminent Sikh historian in the preface and the subsequent write-up in which he has observed that the various accounts given in this work are authentic. The sacrifices of Sikh martyrs have been given in the same Sikh spirit in which they were actually made. It is most indispensable source of Sikh history and it also gives a clear pattern of Sikh ideology from its origin upto final culmination in the establishment of a sovereign Sikh state. **Prof. Kulwant Singh's comprehensive and critical Introduction provides intimations of rare sensitivity and in depth study of Sikh history and Sikh ethos. He has done a commendable task of translating it, keeping in view the subtle nuances of the medium of expression, tone and tenor of the idiom and the spirit of the text. As such, English translation is as readable as the original. The translator's skill of adaptation of the four-line stanza for translating the various poetic forms of 'Doha', 'Chaupai', 'Kabit', 'Sortha', 'Kundliya', 'Swaiya', etc. used in the original text is superb.**

This publication has been brought out by M/S Sidhart Media Printers, Chandigarh in a beautiful get-up. The title and back page displaying of imposing portraits of Sikh heroes together with concise information on the blurbs appeal both the eyes and perceptive mind. The book is priced at Rs. 400/- which seems to be a bit on the higher side. It should have been priced modestly so as to be with in the reach of the common reader.

On the whole, this volume is a laudable achievement of the Institute of Sikh Shudies, Chandigarh and the second volume covering the remaining episodes from 82 to 170 will be keenly awaited.

