

## ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION IN SIKHISM

Dr. Rachna Sharma<sup>1</sup>, Jappan Kaur Cheema<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor of History, Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law, Patiala.

<sup>2</sup> First Year Student, Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law, Patiala.



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### ABSTRACT

*Environmental rights are crucial in the modern context as they emphasize the need to safeguard nature while recognizing humanity's responsibility towards future generations. In various religious traditions, environmental ethics have evolved, shaping attitudes toward ecological preservation. This paper focuses on Sikhism's approach to environmental rights, a topic that integrates spiritual values, respect for nature, and human responsibility. Sikhism was founded in the fifteenth century by Guru Nanak, the first Guru, who laid down the foundation of this religion. The Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy scripture, contains numerous references that highlight the importance of nature, portraying Earth as a sacred space created and sustained by the Divine. Sikh environmental philosophy promotes the concept of balance and harmony, viewing the Earth as a shared space where all living beings have intrinsic values. In Sikhism, the environment is not merely a resource for human use but a manifestation of divine creation. This understanding encourages stewardship, sustainable living, and the protection of natural resources. This paper also aims to provide a comprehensive overview of how the ethos in Sikhism contribute to the broader discourse on environmental rights, highlighting the relevance of spiritual teachings in addressing contemporary environmental challenges.*

**Key Words:** Environment, Environmental Rights, nature, humanity, responsibility.

### INTRODUCTION

Guru Grant Sahib, the holy scripture for Sikhs, demonstrates immense reverence for nature and portrays environment as a valuable teacher for humans to learn from. In Sikhism, Divine is symbolised through many aspects of nature like air, water, earth, trees, sun, moon and the like. In Guru Granth Sahib, air has been designated as Guru, water as the father, and Earth as the mother of all, Days and Nights are nurses, fondling all creation in their lap.

"pavanu guru pani pita mata dhar ati mahati,  
divasu rati dui dai daia khelai sagal jagatu."

(Second Mehl, SGGS, p 146)

The Guru Granth Sahib contains many references where the Divine is not only portrayed as omnipresent within the nature, but nature as a manifestation of the Divine.

"Nanak sach datar sinakhat kudarti"

(Shalok, First Mehl, SGGS, p141)

(O Nanak, the true founder of all; He is revealed through his all powerful creative Nature)

"Kudarat kar ke vaseya soy"

(First Mehl, SGGS, p 83)

(He created the creative power of Universe, within which he dwells)

The importance of environment is enunciated through:

"pon pani dharti akaash ghar mandar har bani"

(Fourth Mehl, SGGS, p 723)

(Air, water, earth and sky - the Lord has made these His home and temple.)

Through the examples of nature, Sikhism teaches multiple lessons and importance of qualities such as selflessness and sacrifice. Guru Nanak emphasised the relevance of living a life free from materialism by:

"jaise jal me kamal niralam murgai nai saine.

Surat sabad bhav sagar tariye nanak naam vikhane"

(Ramkali, First Mehl, Sidh Gosht, SGGS, p 938)

(As the lotus flower floats untouched upon the surface of the water, and the duck swims through the stream, so with one's consciousness focused on the Word (Shabad), one crosses over the terrifying world-ocean. O Nanak, chant the Naam, the Name of the Lord.)

On the ecological front, the teachings in Sikhism can be summarised as:<sup>1</sup>

- **Nature is sacred:** It is believed that God is within every aspect of its creation. The qualities of the Divine are reflected through nature, which teaches humans ways of life and qualities to be inculcated within oneself. Humans should achieve a state of harmony with nature and all of God's creation;
- **Panch Tattva or the Five elements (air, water, fire, earth and space):** The five elements are the foundation of the web of life. Sikhism believes that the Divine creates these five elements from primal void. Everything in this world, including human beings, has been created through these five elements itself. Therefore, nature is an inseparable part of our existence;
- **Earth – a great teacher:** Sikhism believes that all life emerges from Earth. One is deeply intertwined with mother earth. Life not only originates from Earth, but one also merges into Earth after they die. Several verses of *Gurbani* highlights teachings and lessons through nature and its aspects;
- **Recognizing interdependence:** Everything in this world is intertwined and interdependent. One is a product of their environment. According to *Gurbani*, we are interconnected with nature in this web of life. Humans collectively use, share and replenish elements of nature;
- **Earth as dharamsal:** Sikhism declares Earth as a place for righteous action and purity. It is believed that only when humans realise that the Divine exists within all elements of nature and stops exploiting nature for their material greed, can real peace be achieved;
- **Kirat karo, Naam japo, and Wand chhako:** The Sikh model for sustainable economy includes a simple lifestyle, devoid of any materialism and exploitation. The key teaching of Sikhism is *Kirat karo* (honest hardwork), *Naam japo* (contemplation of God), *Wand chhako* (sharing with others). Living simply and appreciating the natural cycle of life by renouncing worldly possessions is believed to lead to peace and fulfilment. *Seva*, or voluntary service encourages a spirit of cooperation and equal sharing of resources, leading to *Sarbat da Bhala*, or universal wellbeing.

The *Gurbani* states that everything is interconnected in nature. Human body is formed from the *panch tattva* of the universe. One's life is not just present within their body, but also relates to everything in the universe.

“jo brahmande soi pinde jo khojai to pavai”

(Bhagat Pipa, SGGs, p 695)

(Whatever pervades the Universe also dwells in the body; whoever seeks it finds it there.)

This not only highlights Sikhism's understanding of how nature works but also describe the duties and responsibilities of humans towards environment. Since everything in the environment is interrelated and interdependent, the ultimate effect of environment degradation falls upon human beings. Therefore, Sikhism lays strong emphasis on the role of human beings in nature and stresses upon their responsibility to nurture and sustain the environment.

## Historical Practices

Sikhism includes number of historical practices that reflect deep respect for the environment. The history of Sikh Gurus includes multiple instances where their respect and love for elements of nature like animals, trees, rivers, etc. has been observed. Many Gurudwaras have been built surrounding by *sarovars*, or pools which support marine life. Guru Har Rai, the seventh Sikh Guru, developed Kiratpur Sahib as a town of parks and gardens. It is believed that Guru Har Rai had a keen compassion and sensitivity towards environment and nature. He had a garden full of medicinal parks, known as *Naulakha Park*, which is believed to have cured a Mughal emperor's (Shah Jahan) son Dara Shikoh, after he sought the herb from the Guru.<sup>2</sup>

Trees have been given much importance in Sikhism. Trees like *borh*, *pipli*, *jand*, *ber*, *imli*, *amb*, are considered pious and sacred. Some of these trees are associated directly with Sikh shrines, like *beri* of Gurudwara Ber Sahib, *Dukh bhanjani ber* of Harmandir Sahib. Devinder Pal Singh in his paper on *Prime Environmental Teachings of Sikhism* mentions that there are at least 58 holy Sikh shrines named after 19 species of trees. Some of them are Gurudwara Nim Sahib, Gurudwara Ber Sahib, Gurudwara Ritha Sahib, and the like.

Historical practices in Sikhism have always advocated for a simple living and minimalist lifestyle. Sikhism teaches *santokh*, or contentment with what one has in life. Such practices result in reduced demand for material goods, subsequently reducing the exploitation of resources. The belief that the Divine is present in nature itself discourages practices that harm nature and environment.

In Sikhism, water is believed to symbolise life and purity. *Sarovars*, or sacred pools, were not only spiritual sanctuaries but served the purpose of collecting and conserving water. The deep reverence of rivers, such as Ravi, Beas and Sutlej, as shown in *Gurbani*, also highlights the importance of this element of nature.

In Sikhism, the land is considered a gift from God that should be treated with respect and care. Traditionally, most of the Sikhs have earned their livelihood through farming. Sikh gurus have promoted farming practices that are environment friendly. Guru Angad Dev, the second Guru of Sikhs, promoted organic and sustainable agriculture in the region of Khadur Sahib. He encouraged the use of natural fertilizers and crop rotation, which were eco-friendly methods to maintain soil fertility and crop yields without harming the environment.

## Modern Perspective

It is well known that most of the Sikhs trace their heritage from the Punjab region of India and Pakistan. So, the highest concentration of Sikhs is also present in the same area. Traditionally, many people of this religion are farmers, and therefore, most environmental issues are surrounded upon the area and occupational trends of the Punjab region.<sup>3</sup>

It has been observed that with the coming up of Green Revolution in Punjab, the heavy use of irrigation and artificial pesticides and fertilisers had led to severe degradation of soil and toxification of water in the area. Along with this, planting of seasonal crop of rice has also led to the depletion of water table. The burning of stubble, seen as a quick and efficient way to remove paddy straw, contributes significantly to air pollution. While Punjab contributes mostly to the agricultural production of grains like wheat and rice, unsustainable farming practices have led to significant environmental degradation in Punjab.

However, several initiatives have been undertaken by the Sikh community, both internationally and in India, to conserve the environment. Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and

environmentalists have made considerable contributions to the same. One of the most significant and initial contributors to the same is Bhagat Puran Singh, the founder of *Pingalwara*, a charitable society which works for the betterment of both the society and the environment. Founded in 1957<sup>4</sup>, this society has implemented various initiatives, like *Pingalwara Organic farm at Dhirakot*<sup>5</sup>, introducing the concept of natural farming in the region, 'zero' budget farms, sewage and biogas plants, contributions to the restoration of *Naulakha Bagh*, awareness campaigns, plantation drives and so forth.

Sant Balbir Singh Seechewal<sup>6</sup> is another eco-activist in Punjab, with a notable contribution in cleaning up the *Kali Bein*, a tributary of river *Satluj* and resurrecting the 110-mile-long rivulet. His efforts in manually cleaning the rivulet, sponsoring the construction of bathing ghats alongside the river, and spreading awareness about *Buddha Nallah*, a highly polluted stream passing through the city of Ludhiana, has set in motion multiple initiatives to conserve the environment.

Baba Sewa Singh<sup>7</sup>, based in *Khadur Sahib*, is another renowned environmentalist who started a plantation drive in 1999 and has planted over 6,50,000 trees over North India, covering various places such as Punjab, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and so forth. He is also known to start the practice of planting tree saplings and seeds as *prashad* in *Khadur Sahib*. His organisation of *Kar Sewa Khadur Sahib* has made a significant contribution in environmental conservation and promoting sustainable practices.

A Sikh Diasporic charity organisation named *Fateh*<sup>8</sup>, based in Chandigarh, is also working on issues related to the deteriorating environment and ecology of Punjab. Several American Sikhs come to Punjab for short term volunteering on awareness and publicization of renewable energy resources and harms of pollution.

One of the most prominent Sikh organisations dealing with environmental issues is *EcoSikh*<sup>9</sup>, founded in 2009, responding to the United Nations call to world religions to conserve environment. In partnership with SCORE (Sikh Council on Religion and Environment), *EcoSikh* has worked on projects globally to sustain the environment. It has launched the Sikh Environment Day on March 14, the anniversary of accession of Guruship to Guru Har Rai. Apart from that, the organisation is a part of the Global Pilgrim Cities initiative, and has worked globally to expand the idea of 'green' Gurudwaras.

## Values related to Environment in Sikhism

Environmental rights are the core aspects of multiple religions. Most of them emphasise the responsibility of human beings towards nature and environment. The means of achieving this may be different for different religions, however, the principle of reverence for environment stays the same for all.

**Environment Rights in Global Religions:** Different religions have varying interpretations of God, and address the idea of nature and environment differently. Following are the reflections of various global religions towards nature:

- **Hinduism:** Hinduism has various practices which are deeply rooted in nature. Many elements of nature like fire, earth, trees, animals, are accorded the status of God/Goddess and are worshipped by the followers of this religion. Through the concepts of Earth being "*Dharti Maa*", and the sanctity accorded to Peepal tree, Ganga River and the animal cow, Hindu rituals and values are aimed at respecting and preserving nature. Concepts like Dharma and Karma play an important role in guiding the actions of Hindus towards conserving environment and avoiding any harm to nature.
- **Islam:** There are multiple verses in Quran that emphasise the importance of nature. Islam discourages overconsumption and lays focus on moderation. Quran mentions wasteful

consumption (Isrāf) as the thirty-second greatest sin. The Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change was adopted by the Islamic Climate Change Symposium.<sup>10</sup> *“Do not strut arrogantly on the earth. You will never split the earth apart nor will you ever rival the mountains’ stature” (Qur’an 17: 37)*. Thus, according to Islam, Earth is Almighty’s creation and it is human’s duty to preserve the environment.

- **Buddhism:** Values such as Karma in Buddhism teach responsibility of their actions to its followers. Wrong actions for them would continue the cycle of births, therefore not achieving *Nirvana*.<sup>11</sup> Buddhism believes in *ahimsa* and abstaining from taking life of animals. It is believed that mindfulness and compassion can lead to peace and harmony in nature. Some Buddhists also eat a vegetarian diet to minimize harm to the environment.
- **Christianity:** Christianity believes that the world is not owned by humans, but is God’s Garden. God has tasked humans with the tending of His garden.<sup>12</sup> Humans owe Him a positive return on His investment. It is believed that all creation is a loving act of God, and therefore must be protected. There are multiple verses in the Bible on animals, trees and the like. The Christmas tree is also considered sacred in the religion.
- **Jainism:** *Ahimsa* is a fundamental ideology propagated by Jainism. The Jain Code of Conduct includes the five *vratas*, kindness to animals, vegetarianism, self-restraint, and charity. The Jain Declaration of Nature<sup>13</sup> in 1990, presented to WWF, marked the entry of Jainism into the WWF Network of Conservation and Religion.
- **Judaism:** The Jewish tradition emphasises on the need to preserve environment through its belief that Earth is a loan from God. Any act that damages Earth is offensive to God, therefore is the duty of humankind to care for it. The Torah, the religious scripture of Jews, highlights several ethics, including those related to environment. The Torah says: *“When God created Adam, he showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: ‘See my works, how lovely they are, how fine they are. All I have created; I created for you. Take care not to corrupt and destroy my universe, for if you destroy it, no one will come after you to put it right’” (Ecclesiastes, Rabbah 7)*.<sup>14</sup>

**Environment Rights in Sikhism:** In terms of environmental ethics, Sikhism, while sharing many values with other global religions, also stands apart in multiple ways. A significant similarity with other religions is the emphasis on moderate consumption and discouragement of overconsumption. This value of self-restraint and rejecting overindulgence is not only propagated by Sikhism, but also by Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. Apart from this, another shared value is non-materialism. The ideology of detachment from worldly wealth and external possessions and focus on spiritual fulfilment is shared amongst multiple religions like Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism and the like. Furthermore, the belief that man and nature are interdependent is also a common value amongst religions. Such collective values promote harmony with environment, discouraging exploitation of nature, and propagating sustainable living amongst religions.

However, there are significant and notable differences that separates Sikhism from other religions in terms of environmental ethics. Unlike religions like Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism, which consider certain elements of nature, such as cow or Peepal tree as sacred, or certain places like Mecca and Medina as holy, Sikhism considers the entire world as sacred, as Divine exists everywhere in nature. It does not elevate specific sites or natural objects as above others, and puts forward the notion that every aspect of

nature is sacred. While pilgrimages are common in Sikhism too, the notion of worshipping a particular place, for instance, a river, is disapproved in this religion.

Another significant distinction is that many religions like Christianity believe that the world is 'owned' by God, and humans have a more responsibility to take care of this Earth gifted to us by God. Sikhism, on the other hand, simply propagates that that humans should live in harmony with nature, treating the environment as an equal partner rather than something to be dominated or controlled.

Sikhism's emphasis on *Kirat Karo* (honest work) and *Vand Chhako* (sharing with others) presents a unique practice in terms of environment ethics. These principles not only promote just and honest work but also encourages responsible use of resources, underscoring a sustainable, community-oriented approach to both society and the environment.

Finally, Sikhism propagates the idea that the divine is part of nature itself. Many other religions, such as Christianity and Islam, often see the God as a detached entity, separated from the environment. They view nature as created by God, and lent or gifted to humans. However, Sikhism emphasizes that God is omnipresent, in every aspect of the natural world. This approach deepens the respect for nature in Sikhism, as nature is not just viewed as a creation of the divine, but as an expression of divinity itself.

### Evolution Of Human - Environment Interaction in Sikhism

Human beings interact with the environment in various ways. This interaction and inter-relationship between humans and the physical environment can be referred to as Human-Environment interaction<sup>15</sup> in geography. Explaining practices of Sikhism through concepts like Determinism, Possibilism and Neo-Determinism offers a structured understanding on how Sikhism interacts with environment. Practices of Sikhism, emerging from the fertile agrarian society of Punjab, provides a context to study and explore the human environment interactions

- **Environmental Determinism:** The type of interaction between human society and strong forces of nature, where nature is considered supreme and human beings adapt to nature. There is a direct dependence on nature for resources. Here, physical environment dictates all human activities in the society, and the nature, being considered a supreme force, is worshipped and revered by humans. This is primarily seen in primitive human societies. In the context of Sikhism, this type of interaction can be seen through the emergence of ideologies such as *kirat karo* (honest work) and *vand chakho* (sharing with others). Sikhism emerged in the agrarian landscape of Punjab, and agriculture was the primary occupation of most of its followers. This originated in accordance to the fertile land of Punjab, where farming was practiced according to the geographical realities of the region. Beliefs in Sikhism like nature being sacred, and all life emerging from the 5 elements of nature, fall under the theory of Environmental Determinism. For instance, the emphasis on living in harmony with nature and respecting its elements as part of the Divine reflects a deterministic approach to environmental interaction.
- **Possibilism:** Through the advent and progress of technology, humans have overcome natural barriers and have shaped the environment according to their desires. Thus, the type of interaction where it is believed that the physical environment provides infinite opportunities for humans to act upon is referred to as Environmental Possibilism<sup>16</sup>. Here, human action has more significance than the action of nature, suggesting that humans have the capability to overcome natural barriers and shape the environment according to their needs. This interaction could be understood through various instances in Sikhism. The original teachings of Sikhism exemplify Possibilism, like non-materialism, respect for nature as a part of the Divine, and living in harmony with nature.

However, human action in Sikhism has shifted from the original teachings. The modern agricultural practices like overirrigation, stubble burning and the like, have diverted from the traditional ideas under the religion. This signifies a dual aspect in Possibilism. On one hand, human action can shape and adjust the environment according their needs. On the other hand, this can lead to overexploitation of nature. Despite the Sikh ideology of living in harmony with nature, modern economic pressures have led to deviation from the original principles.

- **Neo-determinism:** This environmental interaction reflects a middle path between determinism and possibilism. Devised by Griffith Taylor, this theory states that while humans can change and shape the environment, there is a limit to this change after which the environment cannot be altered.<sup>17</sup> This means that humans can only pursue developments and modifications in nature until it permits them. Neo determinism can be understood Sikh teachings that guide humans to use resources moderately, without over-exploitation. The practice of *langar*, where food is shared equitably, consumed in moderation and wastage is discouraged, can serve as an example of Neo-determinism. The creation of *Sarovars* to conserve water and serve as a sustainable water resource; modern practice of constructing solar panels in Gurudwaras, *seva*, or selfless service, form a part of this human-environment interaction.

### Evolutionary trends in Sikhism

Over time, the engagement of Sikhism with the environment has changed notably, shaped by technological progress and economic challenges. This can be examined through the changes from early period, modern era, and possible directions for future.

- **Early Period:** During its early phase, Sikhism highlighted a balance with and respect for nature. The focus on agriculture and reverence for natural elements corresponded with Determinism, while the principles of non-materialism and existing in harmony with nature illustrated Possibilism. The traditional farming methods aligned with natural cycles, and organic farming was most prominent in the early era of Sikhism.
- **Modern Era:** In the contemporary period, Sikh practices have encountered difficulties due to economic challenges and technological progress. Even while current agricultural methods are more efficient than traditional practices, they often result in environmental harm, such as soil erosion and water pollution. The transition from traditional practices of early times, to modern practices due to evolving technology and industrialisation after the emergence of Green Revolution signifies the conflict between Possibilism and Neo-Determinism. Additionally, modern consumeristic tendencies has influenced Sikh communities, leading to an increase in materialism that contradicts traditional Sikh values of simplicity and self-restraint. This shift from agrarian-based living to urban lifestyles has distanced many people from the direct connection with nature that early Sikh communities once had. Although humans are capable of influencing their environment, they need to do so within sustainable boundaries. This stresses upon the need to acknowledge environment limits and adopt sustainable environment practices to ensure that there is no further degradation of environment.
- **Future Directions:** For Sikhism to preserve its environmental balance, it is essential to incorporate Neo-Deterministic concepts into modern practices. This requires embracing sustainable technologies like organic farming, renewable energy sources, to align agricultural and industrial practices with environmental sustainability; conservation of resources to promote minimalistic consumption aligning with non-materialistic approach in Sikhism, and encouraging

fair consumption. The focus on *Seva* (selfless service) and community services and involvement in tree planting initiatives and *langar* can be utilized to foster environmental responsibility and sustainable lifestyles. Reconnecting and sensitising people by highlighting the importance of environment in the Sikh scriptures can affirm a sense of ecological responsibility from the followers of Sikh religion.

## Conclusion

Thus, we see that with the evolution of the society, the environmental ethics amongst religions have also changed. Through the advent of technology and modernisation of society, the ethics related to environment have been considerably set aside and economic development and urbanisation have become a priority for humans. This has led to an environmental crisis, with negative consequences like global warming, ozone depletion, pollution, depletion of carbon sinks, and subsequent health hazards like cancer to human beings. The economic pressures of modern times may compel a person to put their religious and environmental ethics aside and disregard the environmental problems for their own economic priorities.

It has been observed that while there are subtle differences in how environment is perceived in different religions, each religion has the power to compel its followers to respect environment and adhere to the environmental ethics. A study (*Faith and the Environment: Religious Beliefs and Attitudes on Environmental Policy*) in 1995 reported that religious tradition and commitment, and conservative eschatology, or beliefs about the ultimate destiny of the soul, rebirth, resurrection and the role of divine in it has a significant influence on environmental perspectives and behaviour of people towards the environment.<sup>18</sup> Thus, religion can induce its followers to be sensitive towards environment, and a tool to prevent environment from further degradation.

There have been efforts made by the Sikh community to promote environmental rights amongst its followers. This has been done through inculcation of environmental ethics in the contemporary practices of Sikhism. Evolving the usage of the term *prashad*, which is traditionally understood as a blessing by the Divine, usually in the form of a food offering, to the distribution of tree saplings and seeds<sup>19</sup>, can promote eco-friendly practices by inculcating religion to strengthen the influence on the followers of the religion. The organisation of 'Green' *Nagar Kirtans* by EcoSikh and EcoAmritsar<sup>20</sup>, through the inclusion of recommendations such as using biodegradable plates made from dry leaves, cleaning up litter, spreading awareness regarding environmental responsibility, and serving organic food during *langar*, can also serve as an example for the same.

Thus, the need for inculcating a neo-deterministic approach towards environment by stressing the significance of environmental ethics in their respective religion can serve as a tool to influence the masses into following environment friendly practices. Looking at the escalating severity of environmental degradation, it becomes necessary that religions should actively promote environmentally sustainable practices amongst its followers.

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