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SIKH ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS:

THEORY AND PRAXIS

Eco-philosophy, or ecosophy, offers insight into the relationship of living beings with their environment. The intersection of faith and eco-philosophy is known as religious environmentalism. This alliance of religion and ecology has been gathering momentum lately. Ikeke¹ notes that science and policy alone cannot tackle environmental challenges. One must act responsibly with conviction, primarily rooted in philosophical ethics. So, he makes a case for mobilizing religious resources to solve the grand challenges of the environmental crisis. Tucker and Grim² also support incorporating cultural and religious values as critical aspects of environmental discussions.

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess introduced Deep Ecology, an eco-philosophy, in the 1970s. It is a holistic view of ecology based on harmony and equilibrium. This ecosophy challenges the mechanist and reductionist worldview and lends a transcendent dimension to the understanding of ecology. Naess advocates for wisdom focused on 'deep experience, deep questioning, and deep commitment' and situates the philosophy of ecology in 'being, thinking, and acting.' (*What is Deep Ecology*, n.d.). These are all hallmarks of religion, which has always acted like a lighthouse for human civilization. The existential wisdom about the connection among different entities of the cosmos has long been enshrined in world religions and other ancient spiritual traditions.

Although much has been written about the eco-philosophy of different religions, it is a pity that some philosophies have either been omitted or inadequately and inaccurately represented in scholarly literature. It is a severe loss and epistemic injustice when people are deprived of particular ideological wisdom. For instance, despite being the fifth-largest religion in the world, Sikhi³ is still not very well represented in academic discourses.

¹ Ikeke, Mark Omorovie. 2020. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 19, no. 57 (Winter 2020): 81-95.

² Tucker, Mary Evelyn, and John Grim. 2017. "The Movement of Religion and Ecology." Essay. In *Routledge Handbook of Ecology and Religion*, edited by Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and Joh Grim. 3-12. New York: Routledge.

³ I refer to the Sikh faith and wisdom as Sikhi, unlike the usual practice of calling it Sikhism, for two reasons. One, it retains the original flavor of the tradition by using a

According to Prill, Sikh environmentalism has received scant scholarly attention despite its potential to contribute significantly to ecological rhetoric.⁴ Donaldson points out that Jainism and Sikhi are conspicuously absent from the *Norton Anthology of World Religions*.⁵ She remarks that these traditions have typically been relegated to the “footnote” status. Likewise, Sikhi is inadequately represented in Houston Smith’s *The World Religions* as a three-page appendix to the 75-page chapter on Hinduism. Jainism is missing altogether in this volume. The scholars are yet unprepared to address their philosophical insights.

Therefore, this paper explores Sikh environmental ethics as deduced from its eco-philosophy. It follows a thematic organization to discuss various aspects of its ecological theology. It attempts to retrieve wisdom enshrined in Sikh theological sources to examine and reevaluate their environmental significance and implications. It further critiques the reconstruction of this wisdom in practice to meet the current environmental challenges. Finally, reviewing all the gaps and misinterpretations, it offers suggestions for examining the intersection of Sikh ecosophy with other disciplines, such as education, science, politics, and literature.

Historical Context of the Sikh Faith and Scriptures

The Sikh religion, with an estimated 26 million followers, originated in Punjab in the 15th century. Following the division of Punjab between India and Pakistan in 1947, it is now the world's fifth-largest religion. Its origin dates back to Guru Nanak's *avatar*[2] in 1469, and it flourished under nine successors (Gurus). In 1708, the tenth spiritual master, Guru Gobind Singh, installed *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (SGGS), the compilation of revealed teachings, as the eternal living guru. The verses of this holy text, a collection of the compositions of six gurus and other saintly figures alluding to Hindu and Muslim traditions, are called *Gurbani*. It is a multilingual text in *Gurmukhi*, the literary script of the Punjabi language in India. As a living embodiment of the founder masters, it is ceremoniously enthroned on a high seat under a canopy.

Punjabi equivalent. Two, it renders the discipline free from the usual connotations of *isms*.

⁴ Prill, Susan E. 2015. “Sikhi and Sustainability: Sikh Approaches to Environmental Advocacy.” *Sikh Formations* 11, no. 1-2: 223–42.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2015.1023112>.

⁵ Donaldson, Brianne. 2015. “Jainism and Sikhism: The Value of Being ‘Footnote’ Traditions.” *Patheos*, March 9, 2015.

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/religionnow/2015/03/jainism-and-sikhism-the-value-of-being-footnote-traditions/>.

Singh defines Sikhi as an independent and autonomous prophetic religion, not a blend or mix of other creeds or religions.⁶ He establishes its validity as a complete and whole faith using scientific inquiry, thereby rejecting the arguments that it is a derivative of Hinduism or Islam. According to Singh, Sikhi is the only prophetic religion of the East. In his scholarly essay about the basics of the Sikh faith, he explains the three principles that define Sikhi's essence. He argues that the absence of a separation between matter and spirit, the ability of humans to participate in evolution consciously, and the ultimate goal of aligning God-consciousness with earth consciousness make Sikhi unique.⁷ These principles ensure that Sikh ontology and theology are relevant to worldly matters.

Many theological sources, including SGGS, *Dasam Granth* authored by Guru Gobind Singh, *Janam Saakhis* (historical accounts and anecdotes from the lives of the Gurus), compositions of Bhai Gurdas ji, and others, are in the Gurmukhi script. These texts cover Punjabi, Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, and other vernacular languages. English translations may not capture the original texts' true spirit and subtleties. However, efforts have been made to convey the general meaning faithfully. The translations have been sourced from reliable sources and occasionally modified to retain the original connotation.

Methodological Approach and Conceptual Framework

Tucker and Grim observe that the scale and complexity of the environmental crisis require a fresh approach to understanding religious traditions, teachings, and ethics and applying them to contemporary situations.⁸ They suggest a threefold methodological approach to resolve this matter – retrieval, reevaluation, and reconstruction. Retrieval is a scholarly investigation of scriptures or historical sources to discover religious perspectives on the environment. It clarifies how ethics have been translated into practice through rituals, customs, and traditions. Reevaluation evaluates the relevance of traditional teachings to contemporary circumstances: What is the significance of nature? What is the worldly versus transcendent orientation of the faith? What ideas promote ecologically sensitive attitudes and behaviors? Reconstruction is the creative adaptation of traditional ideas to the current circumstances, using modern modes of expression without challenging the essence.

⁶ Singh, Devinder Pal. 2021a. "Air- A Classical Element of Life in Sikh Theology." *Asia Samachar*. September 19, 2021. <https://asiasamachar.com/2021/09/19/40575/>.

⁷ Ibid, 56

⁸ Tucker and Grimm 2017, 8.

It must be noted, however, that reconstruction is the most sensitive part of religious environmentalism since *who* interprets *what* and *how* is the most critical part of the creative dialogue between the practitioners and scholars of religion.⁹ Singh suggests that auto-interpretation is a valid way to comprehend and value religious wisdom.¹⁰ This approach involves analyzing the religion's central precepts, practices, and history without relying on external theories. Sikhi does not endorse any hetero-interpretation based on ideas not aligned with its core teachings. Therefore, the author, a practicing Sikh, has leveraged her study of the scriptures, oral discourses by Sikh scholars, and academic papers in deference to the essence of Sikh doctrines to research the topic hermeneutically.

Ecological Inspiration in Sikh

Although there is no direct allusion to environmental ethics or ecology in SGGs, the scripture is prolific in nature symbolism and explicit references to natural phenomena, forces, and various species. Therefore, the verses enshrined are a rich source of ecological wisdom. Prill affirms that Sikhs find their ecological inspiration from SGGs by recovering wisdom from the verses and life stories of the Gurus, which serve as a parallel body of religious knowledge.¹¹ She adds that the hagiographical accounts are conveyed orally, though multiple textual sources are available. Pointing to the observation of Roger Gottlieb that the resource of eco-theology is “neglected parts of the tradition, reinterpretation of the familiar, the adaptation of the old to the unprecedented demands of the present, or radical innovation,”¹² she emphasizes how certain verses and historical events in Sikhi are highlighted for environmental advocacy.¹³

Singh presents the environmental orientation of the Sikh faith compendiously.¹⁴ He remarks that Sikhi does not view ecology and ethics as disjunct. They must be understood in the broader *dharma* (righteousness) context that enjoins humans to treat all creation respectfully. The premise of retrieval [source] is best understood through a quote from the first Sikh morning prayer composed by the first master, Guru Nanak: “Dharma is the progeny of compassion that holds the earth patiently in place”

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰ Singh, Kapur. *Sikhism and The Sikhs*. Kapurthala, Punjab (India): Baldev Singh: 2011, 34-35.

¹¹ Prill, Susan E. 2015. “Sikhi and Sustainability: Sikh Approaches to Environmental Advocacy.” *Sikh Formations* 11, no. 1-2: 223-42.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2015.1023112>.

¹² Ibid, 240.

¹³ Ibid, 224.

¹⁴ Singh 2021a., 3.

ਯੋਲੁ ਧਰਮੁ ਦਇਆ ਕਾ ਪੁਤੁ ॥ ਸੰਤੋਖੁ ਥਾਪਿ ਰਖਿਆ ਜਿਨਿ ਸੁਤਿ ॥ (SGGS, Jap, M.1, 3)¹⁵. Sikhi's explanation of the interconnected web of life can be interpreted in this context.

Deep Ecology Characteristics

The theory of deep ecology proposed by Arne Naess in 1973 rejects the notion of nature as inanimate and subordinate. It sees intrinsic value in all things of nature and places humans in the organic scheme of a participatory universe. It calls for reevaluating our understanding of nature and the conception of the human self so that humankind can address environmental degradation at the grassroots level. Naess urges us to identify our ego self with the larger ecological self. Drengson¹⁶ clarifies that this is achievable by identifying with other living beings. In other words, we must recognize the cosmic unity that binds all life and matter. Sikhi calls this cosmic principle or Divine Will/Command/Order as *Hukam*. It is *Hukam* that maintains harmony and equilibrium in the universe. When an individual functions in the ego mode, assuming a separation from other independent ego selves, it lays the ground for anthropocentrism. This intersects with the idea of *haumai* (egocentrism) in Sikh theology. Sikh ecology can, therefore, be studied through the [antagonistic] concepts of *haumai* and *Hukam*.

Since *Hukam* is the cornerstone of Sikh belief, Lourdunathan¹⁷ describes Sikhi as an ecosophical tradition. He points to the repeated assertion of the self-conceited nature of the human mind in SGGS. He elaborates that as the mind sees itself as separate from the rest of the creation, it loses the sense of integrity, which is at the root of ecological imbalance. Furthermore, he writes that SGGS obligates humans to live the ideals of justice and equality by declaring the earth a place for practicing dharma. Declaring the earth thereby a sanctuary echoes the tenets of eco-philosophy.¹⁸ This world is a sacred place

¹⁵ The notation in this paper (SGGS, M.1, 3) should be read as the verse composed by the first guru and enshrined on page 3. If the verse is from another saint, their name replaces M.1. In other verses, *raga* is also mentioned. The *raga* is the specific melodic composition in which the verse can be sung. Except for a few verses at the beginning and end of the scripture, all verses have been arranged under 31 ragas. Therefore, the *raga's* name and page number can be used to look up verses. The printed scripture does not mention the publication year.

¹⁶ Drengson, Alan. 1999. "Ecophilosophy, Ecosophy and the Deep Ecology Movement: An Overview." Ecocentrism Homepage. <http://www.ecospherics.net/pages/DrengEcophil.html?i=1>.

¹⁷ Lourdarnathan, S. 2012. "Sikhism and Global Living." In *Many Heavens, One Earth: Reading on Religion and Environment*, edited by Clifford Chalmers Cain. 165–70. Lanham: Lexington Books.

¹⁸ Skolimowski, Henry. 1997. "The World Is a Sanctuary." *The UNESCO Courier*, March 1997, 48.

to be treated with reverence and care. The Sikh morning prayer Jap expresses it thus: “Nights, days, weeks, and seasons; Wind, water, fire, and nether regions; In the midst of these, He installed the earth as an abode for *dharmā*. Upon these are placed the various species of beings; Countless are their names; their deeds and actions shall be judged” ਰਾਤੀ ਰੁਤੀ ਥਿਤੀ ਵਾਰ ॥ ਪਵਣ ਪਾਣੀ ਅਗਨੀ ਪਾਤਾਲ ॥ ਤਿਸੁ ਵਿਚਿ ਧਰਤੀ ਥਾਪਿ ਰਖੀ ਧਰਮ ਸਾਲ ॥ ਤਿਸੁ ਵਿਚਿ ਜੀਅ ਜੁਗਤਿ ਕੇ ਰੰਗ ॥ ਤਿਨ ਕੇ ਨਾਮ ਅਨੇਕ ਅਨੰਤ ॥ ਕਰਮੀ ਕਰਮੀ ਹੋਇ ਵੀਚਾਰੁ ॥ (SGGS, Jap, M.1,7).

Nature as a sacred and living entity is another deep ecology principle that resonates with Sikh cosmology. Prill¹⁹ and Singh²⁰ write that God is the Creator of the universe, who is immanent and transcendent simultaneously, according to SGGS. Therefore, nature is sacred and real, not illusory, as believed by some schools of thought on the Indian subcontinent. While Prill²¹ seems unable to resolve the apparent ambiguity of ‘the world as a palace of smoke’ referenced in SGGS and the reality of the creation, Singh clarifies that the Creation (nature) is real by the immanence of her Creator. Still, it is subject to decay and death.²²

The intrinsic value of nature, human and nonhuman life included, and the biocentric equality is a direct corollary of the holistic view of the living environment. Singh asserts that the expansion and regression of the Creation are governed by Hukam (the divine law), which ensures equilibrium in the cosmos.²³ He narrates an anecdote to illustrate this: A devotee, Bhai Jiva, cooked and served food daily to Guru Angad Dev, the second guru. One evening, when a storm rose, he became anxious because he could not light a fire to cook. He beseeched Guru to halt the storm, and the prayer was answered. However, the Guru turned His face away when the devotee brought Him a

¹⁹ Prill, Susan E. 2015. “Sikhi and Sustainability: Sikh Approaches to Environmental Advocacy.” *Sikh Formations* 11, no. 1-2: 223-42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2015.1023112>.

²⁰ Singh, Nirmal. 2013. “Environmental Stewardship: Sharing Sikh Thought and Some Sikh Perspectives.” In *Exploring Sikh Spirituality and the Paradox of Their Stereotyping in Contemporary American Setting*, 71-80. Hartford: Sanbun, 2003. <https://www.sikhnet.com/news/environmental-stewardship-steps-and-mis-steps>.

²¹ Prill, Susan E. 2015. “Sikhi and Sustainability: Sikh Approaches to Environmental Advocacy.” *Sikh Formations* 11, no. 1-2: 223-42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2015.1023112>.

²² Singh, Nirmal. 2013. “Environmental Stewardship: Sharing Sikh Thought and Some Sikh Perspectives.” In *Exploring Sikh Spirituality and the Paradox of Their Stereotyping in Contemporary American Setting*, 71-80. Hartford: Sanbun, 2003. <https://www.sikhnet.com/news/environmental-stewardship-steps-and-mis-steps>.

²³ Singh, Nirmal. 2001. “A Forum on Religion and Environment.” *Proceedings of A forum on Religion and Environment, October 4, 2001*. Hartford, CT: Hartford Seminary.

fresh meal the following day. The Sikh begged to know where he had erred. Upon this, Guru revealed that storms and rain bring sustenance to many living beings. God had intended to spread food grains through the wind to a remote place where many insects were starving. The devotee understood that he dared to violate the Hukam, *preventing* those beings from receiving nourishment.

SGGS illustrates the integrated web of life by describing the food webs and ecosystems: “Some eat meat, while others eat grass. While some relish delicacies, others live in soil and eat particles in it; Some live on air, and their food is in the air” ਇਕਿ ਮਾਸਹਾਰੀ ਇਕਿ ਤ੍ਰਿਣੁ ਖਾਹਿ ॥ ਇਕਨਾ ਛਤੀਹ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤੁ ਪਾਹਿ ॥ ਇਕਿ ਮਿਟੀਆ ਮਹਿ ਮਿਟੀਆ ਖਾਹਿ ॥ ਇਕਿ ਪਉਣੁ ਸੁਮਾਰੀ ਪਉਣੁ ਸੁਮਾਰਿ ॥ (SGGS, M.1, *Maajh*, 144). This is a

magnificent example of the scientific vision of religion since it classifies species as herbivores, carnivores, omnivores, autotrophs, and chemotrophs.²⁴ One can also discover the food chain concept in another composition: “Nanak, do not be anxious; you are in the care of the Lord. He created organisms in the water and nourished them; There are no stores nor anyone farms there, no business is ever transacted there; no one buys or sells; One animal eats another; this is His provision of food. He provides for the creatures of the ocean” ਨਾਨਕ ਚਿੰਤਾ ਮਤਿ ਕਰਹੁ ਚਿੰਤਾ ਤਿਸ ਹੀ ਹੋਇ ॥ ਜਲ ਮਹਿ ਜੰਤ ਉਪਾਇਅਨੁ ਤਿਨਾ ਭਿ ਰੋਜੀ ਦੇਇ ॥ ਓਥੈ ਹਟੁ ਨ ਚਲਈ ਨਾ ਕੇ

ਕਿਰਸ ਕਰੇਇ ॥ ਸਉਦਾ ਮੁਲਿ ਨ ਹੋਵਈ ਨਾ ਕੇ ਲਏ ਨ ਦੇਇ ॥

ਜੀਆ ਕਾ ਆਹਾਰੁ ਜੀਅ ਖਾਣਾ ਏਹੁ ਕਰੇਇ ॥ ਵਿਚਿ ਉਪਾਏ ਸਾਇਰਾ ਤਿਨਾ ਭਿ ਸਾਰ

ਕਰੇਇ ॥ (SGGS, M.2, *Raamkali*, 955).

Incredible natural shifts occur when human activity tampers with cosmic order and balance. For instance, a YouTube video shows a goat-eating fish.²⁵ We also know that the Sahara Desert was once an ocean. An explicit description of these phenomenal changes is recorded in SGGS: “Tigers, hawks, eagles, and falcons- the Lord could make them eat grass. Those who eat grass- He can make them eat meat; He thus makes them follow the way of life. He could raise dry lands from rivers, and turn the deserts into

²⁴ Chahal, Devinder Singh. “Environmental Ethics Perspective from Nanakian Philosophy.” 2015. *Understanding Sikhism-The Research Journal* 17, no. 1 (December): 3-15.

²⁵ “Goat eating fish - only in India, *WildFilmsIndia*, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzFQkSEgGck>. Accessed June 3, 2024.

bottomless oceans” ਸੀਹਾ ਬਾਜਾ ਚਰਗਾ ਕੁਹੀਆ ਏਨਾ ਖਵਾਲੇ ਘਾਹ ॥ ਘਾਹੁ ਖਾਨਿ ਤਿਨਾ ਮਾਸੁ ਖਵਾਲੇ ਏਹਿ ਚਲਾਏ ਰਾਹ ॥ ਨਦੀਆ ਵਿਚਿ ਟਿਬੇ ਦੇਖਾਲੇ ਥਲੀ ਕਰੇ ਅਸਗਾਹ ॥ (SGGS, M.1, *Maajh*, 144). These colossal changes in geological time can be construed as consequences of ecological imbalance and the breaking of the food chain. Therefore, Guru Nanak ordains living in harmony with the Hukam, and interference in natural affairs is considered folly. This is an illustration of the reevaluation of Hukam applied to ecological conservation.

Panentheism

Sikhi is a panentheistic faith that does not worship natural elements. The Sikhs are ordained to worship only one Timeless Creator, although they consider everything a manifestation of the Creator. SGGS has numerous verses that speak of the Lord’s presence in one and all. One, for instance, says, “Out of the same clay, the elephant, the ant, and many sorts of species are formed. In stationary life forms, moving beings, worms, moths, and within every heart Lord is contained” ਏਕਲ ਮਾਟੀ ਕੁੰਜਰ ਚੀਟੀ ਭਾਜਨ ਹੈ ਬਹੁ ਨਾਨਾ ਰੇ ॥ ਅਸਥਾਵਰ ਜੰਗਮ ਕੀਟ ਪਤੰਗਮ ਘਟਿ ਘਟਿ ਰਾਮੁ ਸਮਾਨਾ ਰੇ ॥ (SGGS, Naamdev, *Maali Gauda*, 988). Prill²⁶ (2015) cites a passage from the daily Sikh prayer recited at sunset, wherein Guru Nanak praises the Lord Almighty: “Your Light is in Your creatures and Your creatures in Your Light; Your almighty power is pervading everywhere” ਜਾਤਿ ਮਹਿ ਜੋਤਿ ਜੋਤਿ ਮਹਿ ਜਾਤਾ ਅਕਲ ਕਲਾ ਭਰਪੂਰਿ ਰਹਿਆ ॥ (SGGS, M.1. *Aasaa*, 469).

Singh extends a few more insightful examples for our consideration: “You (The Creator) are the bumble bee, the flower, the fruit, and the tree. You are the water, the desert, the ocean, and the pool.²⁷ You are the great fish, the tortoise, the Cause of causes; Your form cannot be known” ਆਪੇ ਭਵਰੁ ਫੁਲੁ ਫਲੁ ਤਰਵਰੁ ॥ ਆਪੇ ਜਲੁ ਥਲੁ ਸਾਗਰੁ ਸਰਵਰੁ ॥ ਆਪੇ ਮਛੁ ਕਛੁ ਕਰਣੀਕਰੁ ਤੇਰਾ ਰੂਪੁ ਨ ਲਖਣਾ ਜਾਈ ਹੁੰ ॥ (SGGS, M.1. *Maaru*, 1020). The next verse expresses the same theme: “You are the River of Life; all are within You. There is no one except You” ਤੂੰ ਦਰੀਆਉ ਸਭ ਤੁਝ ਹੀ ਮਾਹਿ ॥ ਤੁਝ ਬਿਨੁ ਦੂਜਾ ਕੋਈ ਨਾਹਿ ॥ (SGGS, M.4, 11). Even the natural forces are not considered

²⁶ Prill, Susan E. 2015. “Sikhi and Sustainability: Sikh Approaches to Environmental Advocacy.” *Sikh Formations* 11, no. 1-2: 223–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2015.1023112>.

²⁷ Singh, Devinder Pal. 2021b. “Prime Environmental Teachings of Sikhism,” *Sikh Philosophy Network*. April 9, 2021, 13.

outside of that Presence. The Lord abides in all elements: “Air, water, earth, and sky are the Lord’s home and temple” ਪਉਣ ਪਾਣੀ ਧਰਤੀ ਆਕਾਸ਼ ਘਰ ਮੰਦਰ ਹਰਿ ਬਨੀ (SGGS, M.4, *Tilang*, 723).

Alternatively, consider this one: “The Lord infused His Light into the dust and created the world, the Universe. The Sky, the Earth, the trees, and the water - all are the Creation of the Lord” ਖਾਕ ਨੂਰ ਕਰਦੰ ਆਲਮ ਦੁਨੀਆਇ ॥ ਅਸਮਾਨ ਜਿਮੀ ਦਰਖਤ ਆਬ ਪੈਦਾਇਸਿ ਖੁਦਾਇ ॥ (SGGS, M.5, *Tilang*, 723).

Chahal proffers another example to expand on the concept of Sikh panentheism: “From His state of absolute existence, He assumed the immaculate form; from formless, He appeared in the form” ਅਵਿਗਤੇ.²⁸ However, the ability to recognize the One creative force in all requires the dissolution of ego: “Knowing the True Lord as the One and only, egoism and duality are done away” ਏਕੇ ਕਉ ਸਚੁ ਏਕਾ ਜਾਣੈ ਹਉਮੈ ਦੁਜਾ ਦੁਰਿ ਕੀਆ (SGGS, M.1, *Raamkali*, 940).

The most recited quote from Guru Nanak’s composition Jap with an explicit environmental lesson is: “Air is Guru, Water is father, and the great Earth our mother” ਪਵਣੁ ਗੁਰੁ ਪਾਣੀ ਪਿਤਾ ਮਾਤਾ ਧਰਤਿ ਮਹਤੁ (SGGS, Jap, M.1, 8). Such spiritual affiliation with nature has implications for the ecological footprint of the Sikhs. It is meant to inspire Sikhs to act in an environmentally sensitive manner to avoid violating their sacred and tender relationship with nature.²⁹ Virk has elaborated on the concept of nature in his treatise *Man-Nature Relationship: The Sikh Perspective*.³⁰ He gives a historical background for Guru Nanak’s selection of the Arabic term *qudrat* over the Sanskrit one *prakriti* to speak of nature. He asserts this is a clear rejection of the Samkhya school of Indian philosophy, comparable to the Cartesian dualism of object and subject. He avers that Guru Nanak rejected the Vedantic philosophy that only God is real and His creation is only *Maya* or an illusion. Sikhi esteems nature as real and an abode of God. He notes that all species originating from the same source is a constant reminder of equality in SGGS, and this theological data is a pathway to intimacy with the Infinite and a springboard to ethical behavior.

²⁸ Chahal 2015, 7.

²⁹ Prill 2015, 228

³⁰ Virk, Hardev Singh. 2014. *Man-Nature Relationship: The Sikh Perspective*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260790809_Man_Nature_Relationship_The_Sikh_Perspective

Anthropocentrism or Ecocentrism?

As an ideology, anthropocentrism believes in the centrality of human beings in the scheme of existence.³¹ Conversely, ecocentrism values all nonhuman forms for their worth. Thus, ecocentrism assigns a meaningful identity to humans who are “in awe of life and part of the greater planetary existence.” Therefore, an ecocentric approach respects the web of life and attributes values to animals, trees, rivers, and landscapes. Anthropocentrism, by contrast, is an egotistical stance.³²

As discussed before, the verses in SGGS explain the intricate web of life delicately balanced by Hukam. How can humans be supreme in this philosophy when God permeates all forms in the Universe, and the same Hukam governs everything in the cosmos? However, mentioning Sikhi's comparative emphasis on the human body is crucial. This body is considered sacred and a privileged means to ascend consciousness and merge with the Supreme. So much so that, according to SGGS, even angels long for this body (ਇਸ ਦੇਹੀ ਕਉ ਸਿਮਰਹਿ ਦੇਵ) (SGGS, Kabeer, *Bhairo*, 1159). At the same time, there is a constant reminder from the Guru that this lofty aim is unattainable without acknowledging the presence of the Divine Light through all forms, without any distinction whatsoever.

Though the human is painted as a summum bonum of creation in Sikhi, it comes with a caveat. The Sikh scripture frequently reminds the mind of the inherent flaws that constantly threaten the vast potential of this gifted body. One example would suffice to drive home this message: “The deer, the fish, the bumble bee, the moth, and the elephant--each is destroyed by one flaw; what can be hoped for one [human] who houses five incurable (lust, rage, greed, attachment, and ego) vices within oneself?” ਮ੍ਰਿਗ ਮੀਨ ਭਿੰਗ ਪਤੰਗ ਕੁੰਚਰ ਏਕ ਦੇਖ ਬਿਨਾਸ ॥ ਪੰਚ ਦੇਖ ਅਸਾਧ ਜਾ ਮਹਿ ਤਾ ਕੀ ਕੇਤਕ ਆਸ ॥ (SGGS, Sri Ravidas, *Aasaa*, 486). It is the *agency* that places human beings in an advantageous position and necessitates ethical behavior on their part. Hence the warning: “As you sow, so shall you reap. Such is the field of *karma*.” ਜੇਹਾ ਬੀਜੈ ਸੇ ਲੁਣੈ ਕਰਮਾ ਸੰਦੜਾ ਖੇਤੁ ॥ (SGGS, M.5, *Majh*, 134).

³¹ Kopnina, Helen, Haydn Washington, Bron Taylor, and John J Piccolo. “Anthropocentrism- More than Just a Misunderstood Problem.” 2018. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 31 (January 18, 2018): 109-27.

³² *Ibid*, 123.

The only exception among Sikh scholars, Chahal, offers a statement of qualified anthropocentrism in Guru Nanak's philosophy that warrants censure.³³ He reasons that Guru Arjan declares man to be the ruler of the earth in one of His verses: "Other species may be at your service; you may be a ruler on this earth and possess all the wealth...but your carnal instinct causes your downfall" ਅਵਰ ਜੋਨਿ ਤੇਰੀ ਪਨਿਹਾਰੀ ॥ ਇਸੁ ਧਰਤੀ ਮਹਿ ਤੇਰੀ ਸਿਕਦਾਰੀ ॥ (SGGS, M.5, *Aaasa*, 374). Unlike other scholars, Chahal has not inserted the modal [*may*] in his interpretation. He probably wanted to highlight man's anthropogenic behavior when he remarked, "Although anthropocentrism is respected...it is discussed in a different sense"³⁴ because he does take note of human failure in the face of irresponsible behavior. Kopnina³⁵ comment that since humans are the only species with an evolved consciousness to recognize morality, the focus on values is anthropogenic. Still, it does not inevitably imply anthropocentric overtones.

Even if the quote used by Chahal is inferred to imply that a human being *is* a king of the earth, the hermeneutical approach requires a scholar to extend their investigation to the concept of a king in Sikhi.³⁶ The Sikh scripture is replete with examples of worldly kings acting corruptly. Ideally, a king is responsible for providing for his subjects, like a guardian or steward. In this regard, Guru Nanak declares: "There is no other king, except Him" ਤਿਸੁ ਬਿਨੁ ਰਾਜਾ ਅਵਰੁ ਨ ਕੋਈ ॥ (SGGS, M.1, *Raamkali Oankar*, 936). In his composition, *Akaal Ustat*, under the title *Savvaiye* (34), Guru Gobind Singh writes: "At all times, He (God) sustains all – animals, birds, mountains, trees, serpents, and men; In an instant, He nourishes all living beings in water and doth not judge their actions. The Merciful Lord sees the blemishes but doth not fail in His bounty." ਪਛ ਪਸੁ ਨਗ ਨਾਗ ਨਰਾਧਿਪ; ਸਰਬ ਸਮੈ, ਸਭ ਕੇ ਪ੍ਰਤਿਪਾਰੈ ॥
ਪੇਖਤ ਹੈ ਜਲ ਮੈ ਥਲ ਮੈ; ਪਲ ਮੈ, ਕਲਿ ਕੇ ਨਹੀ ਕਰਮ ਬਿਚਾਰੈ ॥ ਦੀਨ ਦਇਆਲ
ਦਇਆਨਿਧਿ; ਦੇਖਨ ਦੇਖਤ ਹੈ, ਪਰੁ ਦੇਤ ਨ ਹਾਰੈ ॥ Let us consider another example. As part of their daily morning prayer, Sikhs recite this line too: "Even kings and emperors, with heaps of wealth as tall as mountains and empires vast as oceans, cannot equal an ant that does not forget the Lord" ਸਮੁੰਦ ਸਾਚ ਸੁਲਤਾਨ ਗਿਰਹਾ ਸੇਤੀ ਮਾਲੁ ਧਨੁ
॥ ਕੀੜੀ ਤੁ ਲਿ ਨ ਹੋਵਨੀ ਜੇ ਤਿਸੁ ਮਨਹੁ ਨ ਵੀਸਰਹਿ ॥ (SGGS, Jap, M.1, 5).

³³ Chahal 2015, 9.

³⁴ Ibid, 9.

³⁵ Kopning 2018, 122.

³⁶ Chahal 2015, 9.

This implies that a life's value lies in its complete identification with the Hukam.

Singh³⁷ refutes all arguments of anthropocentrism by clarifying that notwithstanding a man's privileged position in the universe, he can still not claim to be better than an animal. He cites Bhagat Kabear: "When a man dies, he is useless, but an animal serves in many ways even after death." ਨਰੁ ਮਰੈ ਨਰੁ ਕਾਮਿ ਨ ਆਵੈ ॥ ਪਸੁ ਮਰੈ ਦਸ ਕਾਜ ਸਵਾਰੈ ॥ (SGGS, Kabear, *Gond*, 870). A religion that fairly weighs an animal's merits against a man's vices can, by no means, be labeled as anthropocentric.

Kinship with and Gratitude for Nature

Many verses can be retrieved to prompt human beings to be thankful for the bounties of nature. For instance: "The One [who] gave you the invaluable air; The One [who] gave you the priceless water; The One [who] gave you fuel of fire" ਜਿਨਿ ਦੀਆ ਤੁਧੁ ਪਵਨੁ ਅਮੇਲਾ ॥ ਜਿਨਿ ਦੀਆ ਤੁਧੁ ਨੀਰੁ ਨਿਰਮੇਲਾ ॥ ਜਿਨਿ ਦੀਆ ਤੁਧੁ ਪਾਵਕੁ ਬਲਨਾ ॥ (SGGS, M.5, 913). Such examples inspire a soul to be grateful and care for conserving this precious nature in all forms. It instills a feeling of solicitude for the planet. Capitalizing on spiritual guidance can thus protect nature's bounty, benefiting all living beings who share this earth with humans.

The universe comprises five primary elements- air, water, fire, earth, and sky. Sikh cosmogony proclaims that air and water were created out of the primal void³⁸ ਪਉਣੁ ਪਾਣੀ ਸੁੰਨੈ ਤੇ ਸਾਜੇ ॥ (SGGS, M.1, *Maaru*, 1037). Guru Nanak thus proclaims: "From the True Lord came the air, and from the air came water, and from the water came three regions into existence..." (2) ਸਾਚੇ ਤੇ ਪਵਨਾ ਭਇਆ ਪਵਨੈ ਤੇ ਜਲੁ ਹੋਇ ॥ ਜਲੁ ਤੇ ਤ੍ਰਿਭਵਣੁ ਸਾਜਿਆ ਘਟਿ ਘਟਿ ਜੇਤਿ ਸਮੇਇ ॥ (SGGS, M.1, *Sri*, 19). He further speaks of the creation of the world: "He created water, fire, and air, and then combined them to form the world" (3) ਜਲੁ ਤਰੰਗ ਅਗਨੀ ਪਵਨੈ ਫੁਨਿ ਤੈ ਮਿਲਿ ਜਗਤੁ ਉਪਾਇਆ ॥ (SGGS, M.1, *Prabhati*, 1345).

The final passage of the morning Sikh prayer *Japji Sahib*, which regards air as a guru, water as the father, and the earth as the mother, relays the message that nature sustains life on this planet

³⁷ Singh 2001.

³⁸ Singh 2021a, 1-2

and that we must treat *her* with the utmost respect³⁹. However, the passage merits a thorough interpretation to gauge its significance. Air is the medium through which sound flows and makes the chanting of the *mantra* accessible to the mind. The consciousness immersed in the Guru's mantra leads to gnosis (ਸਬਦ ਗੁਰੂ ਸੁਰਤਿ ਧੁਨਿ ਚੇਲਾ ॥) (SGGS, M.1, *Raamkali Goshti*, 943).

Breath, the vehicle for the mantra, has no existence without air. Therefore, air must be treated as sacred. Such reevaluation can motivate followers to consider reducing their carbon footprint.

The appellation Mother Earth is universal. It has been frequently used in SGGS. For example, "The womb of Mother Earth births everything"⁴⁰ ਉਦਰ ਸੰਜੇਗੀ ਧਰਤੀ ਮਾਤਾ ॥ (SGGS, M.1, *Maaru*, 1021).

Chahal has also explored ecofeminist strands in the scripture along these lines.⁴¹ ⁴² Similarly, water deserves the status of a father as it is another vital life force on the earth. The Japji passage continues: "The entire world plays in the lap of the nurses called day and night" ਦਿਵਸੁ ਰਾਤਿ ਦੁਇ ਦਾਈ ਦਾਇਆ ਖੇਲੈ ਸਗਲ ਜਗਤੁ ॥ (SGGS, Jap, M.1, 8). Here, day and night bear the connotation of solar energy (There can be no life without sunlight). They represent *yang* and *yin*, respectively.

Singh highlights the kinship among all beings through the following verse of Guru Ram Das:⁴³ "There is only one breath (air), all are made of the same clay, and the light within is the same" ਏਕੇ ਪਵਣੁ ਮਾਟੀ ਸਭ ਏਕਾ ਸਭ ਏਕਾ ਜੋਤਿ ਸਬਾਈਆ ॥ (SGGS, M.4, *Maajh*, 96). An essay's alternative expression of this interconnectedness reads, "We are the rock and the stars, the leaves, and the trees...we are the eyes through which the universe looks at itself. We are the minds through which the universe contemplates itself."⁴⁴ Hence, we must heal the planet by healing ourselves. This discussion of cosmic unity entails the reciprocal relationship between different entities of existence, and many other verses in SGGS articulate this interrelationship. SGGS declares, "What pervades the cosmos dwells in the body; whoever seeks finds it." ਜੇ ਬ੍ਰਹਮੰਡੇ ਸੋਈ ਪਿੰਡੇ ਜੇ ਖੋਜੈ ਸੋ ਪਾਵੈ ॥ (SGGS, Peepaa, *Dhanaasari*, 695). Such verses unite panentheism, ecocentrism, and deep ecology themes. Virk remarks that the

³⁹ Singh 2021a, 10; Prill 2015, 227; Singh 2010, 2.

⁴⁰ Chahal 2015, 4.

⁴¹ Chahal 2015.

⁴² Ibid, 11.

⁴³ Singh 2021a, 8.

⁴⁴ Skolimowski, Henry. 1997. "The World Is a Sanctuary." *The UNESCO Courier*, March 1997, 48.

revelation that we all are born of the same matrix breaks the sense of hierarchical order of existence. It instills feelings of justice and compassion.⁴⁵ The crux of the argument is that tampering with these elements will bring harm to us eventually because we live in an interconnected web of life.

Sustainable Living

Capitalism and neoliberalism are held responsible for the current environmental crisis. This is why activists believe that eco-justice should be viewed within the broader context of social justice and human development. The present situation has presented the challenge of ensuring continuing development at this rate without compromising the needs of future generations. Sahota⁴⁶ et al. reckon that sustainability requires a shift from anthropocentrism, which implies acknowledging the reciprocity of human beings' relationship with nature. Drawing a parallel between Sikh gurus' teachings and Saint Francis' philosophy, the authors offer a unity-in-diversity approach to developing a sustainable management model. This model assumes embracing diversity in all its complexity and developing a practical kinship through shared interests. Such a model accounts for equality and justice and leads to the value of selfless service in Sikhi.⁴⁷

Sikhi believes in balancing *Seva* (service) and *Simran* (contemplating the name of God). The phrase *Sarbat da Bhalaa* (welfare of all) from *ardaas* (the Sikh petitionary prayer) is unequivocally invoked in the context of socioeconomic justice. However, this ideal must be viewed as intertwined with environmental concerns to extend the act of service to planetary well-being.⁴⁸ The guidance for this reevaluation should be sought in the historical examples where Gurus and their Sikhs protected adversaries, and their altruism included nonhumans. A story has already been discussed in this review before. This is directly related to *Hukam*, which is not seen separately from *Naam* (the name of God, also the energy of creation). In this regard, the Sikh ideal of communal wellbeing –*Sarbat da Bhalaa*– is comparable to the African *ubuntu* philosophy or the Latin American *buen vivir*.

The three pillars of Sikhi are *Naam Japnaa* (Contemplating the name of God), *Kirt Karnaa* (living by the sweat of brow), and

⁴⁵ Virk 2014.

⁴⁶ Sahota, Parminder Singh, Maurizio Sajevo, Mark Lemon, and Mehar Brar. 2016. *Philosophy of Management* 15: 21-34.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 31-32.

⁴⁸ Prill 2015, 234-235

Vand Chhaknaa (sharing resources). Sikhi does not approve of asceticism or renunciation.⁴⁹ This one verse by Guru Nanak says it all: “One who eats by earning one’s livelihood by the sweat of their brow and shares one’s fortune with others, finds the path [of righteousness], says Nanak” ਘਾਲਿ ਖਾਇ ਕਿਛੁ ਹਥਹੁ ਦੇਇ ॥ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਰਾਹੁ ਪਛਾਣਹਿ ਸੇਇ ॥ (SGGS, M.1, 1245). Therefore, some have also stressed the belief in earning an honest living by hard work. Singh draws attention to the fact that a Sikh must actively engage with the world’s affairs by highlighting the blend of *Miri* (the temporal) and *Piri* (the spiritual) advocated and practiced by the Sikh gurus.⁵⁰ This is the driving force for all activism, which can be harnessed to adopt a holistic approach to solving environmental issues.

However, the interconnectedness of the three ideals needs to be appreciated more. For instance, those willing to ascend the levels of Naam must do seva. Furthermore, if haumai (ego) persists, seva cannot be called selfless. This implies that one’s spiritual journey is incomplete without actively involving worldly concerns and extending unqualified compassion to all creation. The faith leaders and activists can draw on this understanding to encourage environmental sensitivity and action among the devotees.

Many activists emphasize the role of frugality in saving the environment. It is also a pre-condition for inner happiness and one of the founding principles of eco-philosophy.⁵¹ This is because choices made in one place have an impact and repercussions for the rest of the world when all are interdependent and interconnected.⁵² A frugal lifestyle and sharing of resources promise sustainable living. Saryal and Saryal⁵³ note that water was meant to be a shared resource in the gurdwaras, with large pools built by Sikh gurus. The Gurus also built towns and cities around gurdwaras, serving as models of social justice and communal living. The fifth Sikh master, Guru Arjan Dev, initiated the practice of dasvandh (the one-tenth share of one’s earnings/resources), which many devout Sikhs follow. The Sikhs do not confine it to the financial resources only. Each Sikh decides, without the mediation of the priests, what and

⁴⁹ Prill 2015, 235

⁵⁰ Singh 2001.

⁵¹ Skolimowski 1997, 48

⁵² Singh 2010, 7

⁵³ Saryal, Sutapa, and Rajnish Saryal. “Environmental Crisis and Religion: An Analysis of Textual Source and Practices of Sikhism.” 2023. *Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary* 8, no. 12 (December): 50–59.

where they want to contribute. Imagine a world where everyone contributed their *dasvandh* to help the underprivileged!

Moreover, the value of contentment is also critical to realizing these ideals. A lot has been said about this value in SGGS, which can be used as an impetus for sustainability discourses. Suffice it is to quote one line here: “A content mind with compassion for all beings” ਮਨਿ ਸੰਤੋਖੁ ਸਰਬ ਜੀਅ ਦਇਆ ॥ (SGGS, M.5, *Gaudi*, 299).

Compassion is the reason devout Sikhs adhere to a vegetarian diet. Cruelty to animals is strictly condemned in Sikhi. A categorical directive in this can be read in this quote: “Kabeer states that those mortals who consume marijuana, fish, and wine - no matter what pilgrimages, fasts, and rituals they follow, will all go to hell” ਕਬੀਰ ਭਾਂਗ ਮਾਛਲੀ ਸੁਰਾ ਪਾਨਿ ਜੇ ਜੇ ਪ੍ਰਾਨੀ ਖਾਂਹਿ ॥ ਤੀਰਥ ਬਰਤ ਨੇਮ ਕੀਏ ਤੇ ਸਭੈ ਰਸਾਤਲਿ ਜਾਂਹਿ ॥ (SGGS, Bhagat Kabeer, 1377).

Recognizing the inalienable rights of all living beings is crucial to achieving sustainability targets and building a harmonious world society. The foundation of the sovereign commonwealth of *Khalsa* by the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, in 1699 was a momentous step in this direction. Guru Gobind Singh included people from different castes, regions, and occupations in this new socio-political fold. The *Khalsa* was ordained to follow Sikh spiritual discipline and stand up for the rights of the oppressed and disenfranchised. It was thus a radical model of political autonomy and solidarity, wherein all members lived as saint soldiers. Singh⁵⁴ writes that the *Khalsa* army fought the tyrant Mughal rulers in the 17th and 18th centuries and against the atrocities of the British colonists and Indian government subsequently. The ideal was to strive for justice for all.

The Sikh gurus condemned casteism and class distinctions and upheld the intrinsic worth of all beings. The tenth master, Guru Gobind Singh, asked his Sikhs to recognize all human races as the same. The Sikh scripture contains verses from saints affiliated with different spiritual traditions (with a unified philosophy) who were treated as outcasts, like Naamdev, Kabeer, and Ravidas. Guru Nanak started the tradition of *langar*, serving food to the needy and the visitors, where all classes and castes sat together. It was a revolutionary step toward creating an egalitarian society in those times as caste divisions were rigidly followed. Saryal and Saryal⁵⁵ describe this as a spiritual and political practice because it historically allowed the Sikhs to

⁵⁴ Singh 2010, 15.

⁵⁵ Saryal and Saryal 2020, 55.

practice food sovereignty. Gurdwaras thus supported local farmers.

Sikh Gurus also accorded high respect to women. Celebrating femininity, all Sikh Gurus depicted human souls, regardless of gender, as brides/females longing for the Beloved Lord in their verses. Guru Nanak reminded us that all great men were born of women. The Sikh historical narratives honor the contribution of women as saints and warriors. The Sikh history offers many examples of what Arturo Escobar calls “politics in the feminine.”⁵⁶ The Khalsa honors Sahib Kaur, the wife of Guru Gobind Singh, as their mother. She played a crucial role in inspiring the Khalsa to blend valor with compassion. She embodied this ideal by adding sugar to the holy water churned by a sword during the first initiation ceremony of the Khalsa. The tradition continues to this day. Therefore, the principles of bio-civilization – diversity, autonomy, solidarity, collective action, simplicity, justice, equity, etc. – as outlined by Kothari are enshrined in Sikh history and scripture.⁵⁷

Historical and Modern Praxis

This section examines how Sikh Gurus embodied the themes of kinship, community, biocentric equality, or reverence for nature and how these memories were historically constructed. It gives examples of reconstructing those memories and traditions in alignment with the ecological themes. These examples include initiatives by the spiritual leaders and organizations in the community. Further, it critiques why and where there are disjuncts when living the ideals laid down by the Gurus and endorsed by the spiritual leaders.

Sikh spiritual leaders have judiciously reconstructed the story of trees in various environmental campaigns. Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Master, describes the Creator as a grand tree and the creation as its branches (SGGS, M.5, *Maajh*, 102; M.5, *Aasaa*, 387). Guru Har Rai, the seventh Master, planted many trees and plants. There are 58 historic Sikh shrines named after 19 species of trees. Each has a *saakhi* (historical account or anecdote from the life of Gurus) centering on the tree it is named after.⁵⁸ One quote from SGGS sums up the status of trees in Sikhi: “ [If] aspiring to

⁵⁶ Escobar, Arturo. 2020. “Thinking about the Pot/Pandemia- Notes from Latin America.” *Global Tapestry of Alternatives*, October 2, 2020.

<https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/newsletters:02:arturo>.

⁵⁷ Kothari, Ashish, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Frederico Demaria, and Alberto Ecosta. Introduction. 2019. In *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*, xxi–xl. New Delhi, India: Tulika Books and Authorsupfront Publishing Services Pvt. Ltd.

⁵⁸ Singh 2021b, 23.

be a dervish, bear the patient endurance like a tree” ਦਰਵੇਸਾਂ ਨੇ ਲੋੜੀਐ ਰੁਖਾਂ ਦੀ ਜੀਰਾਂਦਿ ॥ (SGGS, Fareed, 1381).

Guru Har Rai is often cited for his eco-sensitivity. One of the stories recounts his remorse at breaking a flower from brushing his cloak against it. The young Har Rai expressed remorse for the inadvertent harm to the plant and carefully gathered his clothing around him for the rest of his life. His native place, Keeratpur Sahib, was a town of parks and gardens and was an idyllic place in his lifetime, which attracted many birds and animals to it. Here, he also built a large garden with medicinal plants. It was called *Naulakhaa Baagh*, meaning a garden with 900,000 trees. Many agencies have collaborated to research those ancient plants and revive the garden and the indigenous medicine.⁵⁹ The Sikh Environment Day, March 14, is dedicated to Guru Har Rai, who ascended to the position of Guru on this day.⁶⁰ Similarly, the Tri-cultural Sikh Society, a gurdwara near Pittsburgh, named their arboretum after Guru Har Rai in 2013. The arboretum features plant species native to Pennsylvania.⁶¹

Sant Seva Singh from *Khadoor Sahib*, a historic town in Punjab graced by the visit of eight Sikh Gurus, is a much-respected religious figure in the region. Known as The Tree Man, he was appointed the Faith for Earth counselor by the United Nations Environment Programme in 2021. He presented the Sikh Plan on Environment to Ban-ki-Moon at Windsor Castle in 2009. On the 550th anniversary of Guru Nanak’s avatar in 2019, he set up a goal of planting 550 small dense forests, called Guru Nanak Memorial Forests, with 50 different varieties of trees. He has planted 272 so far. He has planted 6.5 million trees all over India.⁶² Comparing his environmental venture to *langar* (the Sikh tradition of serving food to the needy), he believes these initiatives serve the environmentally sick generation.⁶³ He distributes saplings among devotees as a *Prashad* (a gift of grace usually offered as food). He has worked tirelessly to reclaim the green zone in Punjab. He has revived many native species of plants and persuaded farmers to prefer orchard farming to less sustainable crops.⁶⁴ He runs a charitable organization, Nishan-e-

⁵⁹ Prill 2015, 231.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 238.

⁶¹ Ibid, 234.

⁶² “Environment Conservation Project.” Nishan-e-Sikhi, 2023.

<http://environment.nishan-e-sikhi.org/archives/1919>.

⁶³ “Baba Sewa Singh-- The Tree Turbanator.” *Punjabis4BetterWorld* (blog), March 15, 2017. <https://punjabis4betterworld.wordpress.com/2017/03/15/baba-sewa-singh-the-tree-turbanator/>.

⁶⁴ Prill 2015, 237.

Sikhi, which works for education and social welfare besides environmental causes.

Another excellent example of reconstruction is the Museum of Trees in the capital of Punjab, Chandigarh, which was established in 2020. It was conceived and curated by DS Jaspal on his personal property and promoted by the Chandigarh Nature and Health Society. Inspired by his book 'Tryst with Trees- Punjab's Sacred Heritage,' this storytelling museum recounts customs, traditions, and historical events associated with every tree planted here. As a former high-ranking civil servant with a background in forestry, Jaspal employs both scientific and marketing techniques to conserve genetic clones of 12 sacred trees associated with historical Sikh shrines. Besides, it has a section devoted to medicinal plants. Environmental education for school children and the community is part of this conservation project, particularly on endangered species.⁶⁵

A similar eco-aesthetic endeavor can be found at a place sanctified by the visit of four Sikh Gurus – historical *gurdwara* (Sikh place of worship), Guru-Sar Sahib, in Patta Hira Singh village in the Moga district of Punjab. It is a botanical garden (*baagh*) featuring more than 58 species of trees mentioned in SGGs. EcoSikh, a US-based Sikh environmental organization in collaboration with a local non-profit, PETALS, inaugurated it in 2021. Named Guru Granth Sahib Baagh, it has about 6,000 trees and shrubs spread over 5 acres of land. Each tree carries relative references from the scripture calligraphically inscribed on big round stones. This environmental initiative aims to highlight the message of the Sikh Gurus to connect with nature. Dedicated to the 550th anniversary of Guru Nanak's avatar, it aims to offer a platform for environmental education.⁶⁶

Sant Balbir Singh Seechewal is another saintly figure in the Sikh community who has lived the ideals of Sikh ecosophy. He was named one of Time magazine's 'Heroes of the Environment' 2008 for his monumental river-cleaning project in 2000. He spearheaded the community enterprise of cleaning the 170-kilometer-long river *Kali Bein*, a tributary of the longer river *Beas* in Punjab. He took the initiative by entering the river and manually removing the water hyacinth. This river holds a deep significance in Sikh history because Guru Nanak took a dip here, disappeared for three days, and reappeared after being

⁶⁵ Singh 2021b, 23; Prill 2015, 232-233.

⁶⁶ "Guru Granth Sahib Bagh." EcoSikh, 2021. <https://ecosikh.org/guru-granth-sahib-bagh/>.

enlightened. The river, however, had become polluted over time with an overgrowth of water hyacinth, industrial effluents, and agricultural run-off. Its successful cleaning by the local community, without any help from the government, is an excellent example of ecosystem conservation. The project has now been extended to other rivers in Punjab.⁶⁷ So, Sant Seechewal, known as the Eco-baba, exemplified Gurbani's ideals to restore rivers. He addressed the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009 and spoke of how Sikhi is an ecological religion that teaches holding natural elements in deep reverence.

No Sikh environmentalism discourse is complete without reckoning the far-sighted activism of Bhagat Puran Singh ji, the bearded Mother Teresa of Punjab. Bhagat ji, who practiced the discipline of Naam, believed in transforming the face of the earth through work on both mind and matter. The prefix Bhagat (an imbued devotee) was assigned to him because of his exalted spiritual state. He was the epitome of the Sikh ideals who carried the legacy of eco-philosophy forward. He spoke about the denudation of the Himalayas as early as 1928. Making people aware of the impending ecological hazards was his spiritual mission. He published extensively and raised red flags about the environmental crisis.⁶⁸ Bhagat ji published his pamphlets on recycled paper and distributed them free of cost. He also organized many tree plantations and environmental awareness campaigns.⁶⁹

Bahgat Ji founded a charity home called Pingalwara, which means home for the destitute. He died in 1995, but the Pingalwara Society carries his legacy forward. Pingalwara is running a zero-budget farm and collaborating with farmers on organic farming. It has planted 90,000 trees in India.⁷⁰ The *Kheti Virasat Mission* (meaning Agricultural Heritage Mission), a civil society group dedicated to organic farming and founded in 2005, is another organization that has invoked the Sarbat da Bhalaa ideal and established a holistic model of advocacy working with various stakeholders to promote agroecology in Punjab. Their work extends beyond farming to women empowerment, forests, ecology, and resource management. Their focus is sustainability within the socio-cultural framework of Punjab. EcoSikh, which came into existence in 2009 in response to an initiative of the United Nations Development Program and the Alliance of

⁶⁷ Prill 2015, 236-237.

⁶⁸ Pirta 2013, 149.

⁶⁹ Singh 2021b, 22; Prill 2015, 236.

⁷⁰ Prill 2015, 236.

Religions and Conservation, works globally and has built an impressive network of environmental programs. It provides guidelines for environment-friendly religious processions and biodegradable plates for customary food distribution. Besides working with the Green Pilgrimage Network (GPN), a global collaboration of 28 pilgrimage sites worldwide to promote environmental care by reclaiming the sense of place, it is also active in interfaith environmental initiatives.

Disjuncts and Gaps

Punjab is primarily an agrarian economy. According to the official statistics of the Punjab Government's Department of Forests and Wildlife Preservation, the state's forest coverage is 6%. Expansion of agricultural land and developmental projects are responsible for this dismal proportion. Environmental organizations are, therefore, working earnestly to restore the green zone. However, many other severe environmental challenges need urgent attention. One of the most pressing issues facing Punjab, the breadbasket of India, is the depletion of groundwater and unsustainable farming practices resulting from the Green Revolution of the 1970s. According to Saryal and Saryal, state farmers were misled by subsidies and federal food procurement policies to rely heavily on water-intensive wheat and paddy farming.⁷¹ This overuse of groundwater, fertilizers, and pesticides has resulted in soil and water contamination, as well as a water crisis, high cancer rates, and an alarming number of farmers' suicides. Prill also points out the incongruity of social practices like lavish weddings, materialistic lifestyles, and the growth of motor vehicle usage among Sikhs.⁷² She adds that expensive tractors and combine harvesters contribute to high fossil fuel combustion.

The rise of plastic pollution results from a mindless consumption culture, which is opposed to the ideas of restraint and contentment. While the tradition of washing dishes manually is intact in Punjab's gurdwaras, plastic plates, cups, cutlery, and mineral water bottles are comparatively more prevalent in events outside gurdwara and among diaspora Sikhs. The devotees quote numerous verses extolling nature but inadvertently overlook the impact of their plastic use on land, air, water, and other earth species. Prill observes that Sarbat da Bhalaa has often been quoted in socio-economic justice but not explicitly in the ecological context.⁷³ This vast gap needs to be filled with the help

⁷¹ Saryal and Saryal 2023, 53.

⁷² Prill 2015, 225.

⁷³ Ibid, 235.

of religious leaders by emphasizing the direct relation between our consumption habits and the environmental state. An environmental activist from Punjab confided in the author how challenging it was to fight the plastic demon compared to organizing tree plantation campaigns. Her NGO, Action Group Against Plastic Pollution (AGAPP), submitted a letter of appeal to the Akal Takht Jathedar – the supreme Sikh authority, like the archbishop – and Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee – the organization managing gurdwaras in Punjab – in this regard in November 2023. The AGAPP, invoking the Sikh ideal of Sarbat da Bhalaa, has requested these authorities to lead the Sikh community in refraining from using single-use plastic.

Sri Harmandir Sahib (known as the Golden Temple) is the pre-eminent Sikh spiritual site in Amritsar – one of the prominent sites in the GPN. It holds the same place in the Sikh community as the Vatican does for the Catholics or Mecca for the Muslims. The fireworks display in its arena conflicts with the interests of the GPN since it causes air and noise pollution, besides eroding its gold plate and marble. Although the number of occasions and fireworks has downscaled over the last decade, the idea of fireworks is still questionable and has implications for the community. The supreme religious authority figure in Sikhi is *Jathedar of Akaal Takht*, the Sikh spiritual and temporal center located in the precincts of Sri Harmandir Sahib. If he issues a proclamation to abandon the fireworks display in Sri Harmandir Sahib and urges the Sikh community to refrain from crackers, it will serve as a great example of upholding Sikh environmental ethos. Both Sikh and Hindu communities cause obnoxious air pollution in Punjab on the night of *Divali/ Bandi Chhod Divas* by exploding firecrackers, which can be curbed by sending a practical, positive message of cracker-free holiday from the holy shrine.

Future Directions

The sense of mystique and beauty associated with the creation has been superseded by the modern, reductionist view of the capitalist culture today.⁷⁴ Many spiritual traditions, however, use wonder and enchantment as ways of knowing. Therefore, they can play a significant role in reviving the full appreciation of nature. This appreciation, or eco-aesthetics, must extend beyond the sensual experience. The sense of wonder and awe (*Vismaad*) in Sikh scripture holds epistemological value. Nature symbolism has been profusely employed to induce *Vismaad* in Sikh

⁷⁴ Tucker and Grim 2017, 4.

scriptures. It is important to emphasize this interconnection between all manifestations of nature and *Vismaad*. A rift implies serious environmental repercussions. For example, Prill describes Guru Nanak's composition *Barah Maha* (poetry on the theme of months) as an impressive portrait of the pre-modern Punjab ecosystem.⁷⁵ Each passage, corresponding to a month, vividly paints the ambiance, flora, and fauna: "We hear of the blossoms and the bumblebees of springtime and the greenery, snakes, and mosquitoes of the monsoon season; in the summer, the blazing sun scorches the ground."⁷⁶ However, the difference between this imagery and the current Punjab climate is noticeable. This distorted state of nature reflects the erosion of the human mind.

The law of reciprocity and symbiosis sustaining the complex web of life has not yet been deconstructed fully and explicitly by Sikh religious leaders. As pointed out in an earlier section, Sikh theology can be understood around *Hukam* and *haumai*. Prill⁷⁷ observes that *haumai*, or egocentrism, is the root cause of environmental destruction, but this aspect has not been fully integrated into the Sikh environmental rhetoric. Shiva remarks that separation is the key feature of capitalist values.⁷⁸ It not only alienates humans from nature but also humans from each other on the lines of race, gender, ethnicity, etc. This alienation causes all violence in mind and actions. The leaders and educators engaging with Sikh environmentalism must place *haumai*, or the idea of separation, in the center stage of capitalism and consumerism.

Ecological catastrophes are born of short-sightedness. McMichael contrasts the short-term 'economic time' with 'geochemical-biological time controlled by the rhythms of nature' by showing how shrimp aquaculture destroys coastal mangroves.⁷⁹ He concludes that the seed of the past is always buried in the present. Gurbani echoes this insight: "Do not indulge in the wrongdoing at all; use thy foresight to see [the consequences]." ਮੰਦਾ ਮੂਲਿ ਨ ਕੀਚਈ ਦੇ ਲੰਮੀ ਨਦਰਿ ਨਿਹਾਲੀਐ || (SGGS, M.1, *Aaasaa*, 474).

It will, therefore, be a great initiative to have emerging Sikh

⁷⁵ Prill 2015, 230.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Shiva, Vandana. 2019. "Development-- for the 1 per cent." Essay. In *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*, edited by Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Frederico Demaria, and Alberto Ecosta. 6-8. New Delhi, India: Tulika Books and Authorsupfront Publishing Services Pvt. Ltd.

⁷⁹ McMichael, Philip. 2019. "The Development Project." Essay. In *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*, edited by Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Frederico Demaria, and Alberto Ecosta. 12-14. New Delhi, India: Tulika Books and Authorsupfront Publishing Services Pvt. Ltd.

scholars and leaders in seminaries study basic environmental science, political discourses on the environment, policies, and different eco-philosophical traditions. They can then explicitly address the environmental crisis by presenting Sikh environmental ethics more eloquently and persuasively. Their social and political clout in the community will make a huge difference in saving the planet.

Educators in Sikh schools in Punjab and beyond and those engaged in non-formal sectors can also use faith-based approaches in their critical pedagogies. They can use ecocriticism from the lens of Sikh philosophy. Singh and Kaur define ecocriticism as a theory that makes people aware of their contribution to environmental devastation.⁸⁰ It examines literature from an ecological perspective. The authors clarify that ecocriticism is not confined to how a lion, a tree, or a flower is depicted in literature. Instead, it focuses on the overall representation of nature in cultures and communities. They conducted an ecocritical study on William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Bhai Veer Singh (1872-1957) - The giants of English and Punjabi poetry, respectively. Though they lived apart in time and space, their poetry is a lighthouse for all nature lovers and those who seek ecological awareness in literature. William Wordsworth profusely registered his protest against distance from nature in the wake of industrialization in 'The Excursion':

When on the darker side
Of this great change, I look, and there
Behold such outrage done to nature as compels
The indignant power to justify herself;
Yea, to avenge her violated rights,
For England bane (412).

In Bhai Veer Singh's poetry, one cannot help but notice his deep fascination with nature.

In the vein of Saint Francis of Assisi, he addresses Mashobra – a hilly paradise in the Himalayas – as a brother. In another poem, *Brichh* (the tree), he gives voice to a tree to criticize deforestation:

O selfish owners of the land,
Why do you fight us?
We don't grow out
We grow tall and straight.
Our rings and breadth

⁸⁰ Singh and Kaur 2017, 411.

Extend only in space;
We take but a palm of land,
Even then, you grudge us?" (415)

Bhai Veer Singh is deeply revered in Sikh circles. He was a soul imbued in divine love. His poetry can inspire the masses to protect nature. More scholars need to look in this direction, as the interdisciplinary nature of ecocriticism can be a creative mode of environmental education.

Conclusion

Although a gap between theory and practice has existed in all ages and civilizations, it cannot be a ground for rejecting ideals and values advocated by different faith systems worldwide. The fact that people have not always lived up to these ideals cannot and should not negate the significance and implications of these lofty ideas.⁸¹ The fact that a large section of society still draws their inspiration from religion has significant implications for solving the challenges of the 21st century. Therefore, Sikh religious leaders, scholars, and teachers must respond proactively and creatively in working with activists, scientists, lawyers, politicians, and educationists to mobilize resources and motivate people for environmental action. This requires a systematic collaboration among all stakeholders to rewrite and propagate Sikh environmental ethics in the new age language for the action to gain momentum.

Sikhi encompasses more than individual liberation and does not promote denial of the world around us. Its rich traditions and history reflect the belief that true transcendence can only be achieved by embracing the realities of our world and actively participating in its evolution. This is why religious fervor has often been present in social and political movements from Punjab, such as the massive 2020 farmers' protest. There is a tremendous opportunity for Sikh leaders and scholars to tap into this faith-based approach and leverage spiritual resources to benefit our environment. They can make a meaningful and lasting impact by inspiring new ways of thinking, being, and acting rooted in the care of our shared planet.

Guru Nanak called the earth a place to practice righteousness (dharma). In many Indic languages, the word 'dharma' is used to denote both religion and righteousness. It serves as a reminder that many Eastern spiritual traditions, including Sikhi, believe

⁸¹ Ikeke 2020, 88.

that the essence of a religion lies in the practice of its vision of cosmic unity. Guru Nanak emphasized the importance of dharma in human life and did not simply refer to the Earth as a metaphor. It is his reminder to all of us to recognize the presence of the spirit in every life form, from the smallest unit (cell) to the most complex ecosystem, and to re-establish our connection with the Earth.