

# SYNERGY OF SIKH SCRIPTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS: RELIGIOUS INSIGHTS

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**Abstract:** This article explores the synergy of Sikh scripture and environmental concerns, and how religious insights can offer solutions to today's environmental problems. It argues that Sikhism has a rich history, philosophy and spiritual identity that reflects a harmony with nature and a respect for Mother Earth. The article examines the environmental concerns and ideology expressed in the Sikh scripture, and how they can inform ecological conservation and sustainable development. The article draws on evidence from textual analysis, historical sources, and contemporary examples of Sikh environmental activism. It concludes that Sikhism can contribute to a deeper understanding of the human-nature relationship and inspire ethical action towards environmental protection.

**Keywords:** Sikhism, scripture, environment, ecology, ethics, activism.

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**1.0 Introduction:** Indian culture has a very special harmony with nature. It is reflected in the variety of traditional practices, religious -cultural beliefs, folklore, arts, crafts, rituals and food habits followed by the Indians although from the ancient period to till today there are many changes noted in the same. As the Worship of Mother Earth is accepted by all the civilizations and cultures all over the world. In the Indian tradition we have numerous examples of worship of water bodies, sacred groves, forests, animals and natural energies. All religions have particular Cosmology, which defines the human relationship with the natural world. The connection between religion and environment is also depicted and define in the sacred texts.

Natural resources have a very significant role in the development of any nation. Men and civilizations developed day by day, the uses of resources and encroachment by the humans for the economic development are recorded by the different ages of history. The uses of land, clearances of forests and the agricultural, industrial developments are basically not area or a phase, it is the witness of the centuries. To write the Indian history accurately, we need to know the environment, geography, ecology and physical features that shaped it. The study of early Indian environmental history, in fact, is "highly rewarding to the present generations."<sup>i</sup>

It is matter of debate that how can religions create the environmental ideology; but if we see the philosophy of different religions we fine about the deep ecology and the solution of today's environmental hazard. Faith is the core of many people's lives in this world and we have to address this core to bring about the radical changes needed to preserve our earth. "Laws designed to prevent environmental degradation must be crafted and implemented with recognition that, in the face of scientific uncertainty, religious vales play an important role alongside the traditional cost-benefit analysis, typically claimed to constitute rational decision making."<sup>ii</sup>

About the religious entity of Indian milieu, several sects- religions carries the different theories related to environmental concerns, all the major religions in India, Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity define that man is creation of God. It means that humans are supposed to maintain the balance of nature and environment which is the great source of life. The present paper is an effort to find the solutions about the environmental problems as defined in the Sikh's scripture. As Sikhism has its very rich history, philosophy and spiritual identity in all over the world. The focus of the present study to find out the environmental concerns and the ideology about the nature and Mother Earth.

**2.0 Environmental Concerns in India:** The Environment is as much a natural phenomenon as a creation of perception. The environmental problems have received global attention during the last 40 years of the twentieth century. To examine the role of environmental history in ecological conservation, we need to know what the relevant terms mean; the word 'Environment' refers to all the living things (except humans) and the physical surroundings that we often call nature, while Ecology is a science that studies how animals and plants interact with each other and with the external world. "Ecology, is derived from two Greek words—*oikos*, that is, home or habitat, and *logos*, that is, study. The interaction is determined by these organisms view themselves vis-s vis the others around them."<sup>iii</sup> Environmentalism, the concept of preserving the natural world, is becoming more relevant and significant for the global population in the current situation.

India has developed a flourishing environmental history after 1980. Most of Indian writings especially that environmental history emphasis thoroughly that it is the history of social struggle. The colonial policies were termed as the major cause of environmental degradation, especially forest wealth. The modern environmental historians have tried to study environmental history through varied angles. The systematic beginning of environmental history writing in India is associated with Ramchandra Guha,<sup>iv</sup> who opened up new areas in historical interpretation. Guha showed colonial rule represented an ecological watershed and the forest policies of the British developed a new phase in the study of environment. We should save the living world and the organism, to review our past and to alert the consciousness to protect and preservation of our natural resources, which prosperity is now facing danger. The study of environment in recent times not only “confined to the scientists, engaged in various branches of biology and ecology rather calls for an active and independent role of historians to develop a new paradigm for the future.”<sup>v</sup> Due to climate change in recent decades has sparked interest in ecology and conservation across all academic fields.

**3.0 Religious Insights in Sikh Scripture:** The history of the religions and beliefs of the Indian subcontinent shows their strong connection with nature. All religions and cultures can contribute to conservation and environmental protection. From each religion “several injunctions and exhortations can be brought forth to form a code for environmentally sustainable developments.”<sup>vi</sup>

The Sikh holy scriptures, the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib (Adi Granth)* is the great source of inspiration for humanity. It is a sacred text for Sikhism, contains teachings of Sikh Gurus and saints. We shall reap the results, of the seeds which we sow, means if we unsustainably remove trees from the planet, then we are sowing the seeds of our own destruction and the result would be very dangerous for the coming generations of human. The Sikh literature also contains many references and information about the importance of preserving the ecology and environment. Even though the environmental problems were not as serious as they are today, the Sikh Gurus showed their awareness of the ecological balance and also assigned us the responsibility of keeping the environment in nature healthy and pure. The *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* is the Eternal Guru of the Sikhs which is living “embodiment of the light of ten Gurus. The *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* is venerated by the Sikhs as the final embodiment of the holy message for them.”<sup>vii</sup> It declares that human being’s purpose is to achieve “a blissful state and be in harmony with the Earth and all creation. Millions of Sikhs recite Gurbani daily wherein the divine is remembered using the symbolism from Nature, especially air, water, sun, moon, trees, animals and the Earth.”<sup>viii</sup> The Sikh Gurus exemplified many of these teachings, and their example continue to inspire contemporary social, religious, and environmental leaders in their effort to protect our planet. The *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* contains many references to the Supreme divinity ‘s omnipresent including its Presence throughout and within nature.

Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the first Sikh Guru, a philosopher, a reformer and spiritual leader for all the humankind, who served for humanity, in his composition ‘*aartee*’<sup>ix</sup> elucidates that the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars, the wind and the flowers sing the praises of the creator. Nature is His temple. By affirming God’s immanence and His presence in the creation, the Sikh religion imparts the spirit of self-righteousness to the entire subject of Nature. Sikhism is a remarkable religious and cultural phenomenon; the theology of Sikhism suggests that:

“*gagan mai thaal rav chand Deepak banay taarika mandal janak mote,  
Dhoop mal-aanlo pavan chavro karav sagalbanraa-ay foolant jotee.  
Kaisee aartee ho-ay. Bhav khandnaa tayree aartee.*”<sup>x</sup>

(“Upon the cosmic plate of the sky, the sun and the moon are the lamps, The stars and their orbs are the studded pearls. The fragrance of sandalwood in the air is the temple incense, and the wind is the fan. All the plants of the world are the alter flowers in offerings to You, O Luminous Lord. What a beautiful Aartee, lamp- lit worship service this is! O Destroyer of Fear, this is Your Ceremony of Light”).<sup>xi</sup>

Guru Nank Dev ji also explains that man creates himself is a reflection of his inner consciousness. He found a sacred vision for the healthy environment and ecological equilibrium while he composed the *shabad*:

“*Pavan guroo Paanee Pitaa, Maata Dharat mahat,  
Divas raat du-ay daa-ee dss-i- aa khayal sagal jagat.*”<sup>xii</sup>

(“Air is the Guru, Water is the father, and Earth is the Great Mother of all. Day and night are the two nurses, in whose lap all the world is at play.”)<sup>xiii</sup>

Thus, Guru Nanak explains that the ecosystem, the pure environment, the atmosphere, the air is crucial force as the Guru, Water is root base as the father, and the Earth is the great mother of us. The Shri Guru Granth Sahib ji

suggests and promotes to respect our natural resources like water, earth, and air, which provide the basic and necessary elements of life as well as they all are sacred also. All the Sikh Gurus considered our Earth to be used; respected, loved as it is a cultivator, a guide and a servant. The Gurus emphasised that “human being has congenital sensitivity and conscious about the nature and those five elements water, air, earth, forests and biodiversity make our society worth loving and sustainable.”<sup>xiv</sup>

The *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* advocates on the ideas that all God’s creations are equal and emphasises to respect them like our environment as:

“Asman jimi darkhat ab paida khudae”<sup>xv</sup>

(“The sky, the earth, the trees, the water- all the creation of the Lord”)<sup>xvi</sup>

The *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* stressed on the importance of healthy environment as :

“pa-un paanee Dhartee aakaas ghar mandar har bane.”<sup>xvii</sup>

The *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* states that ‘air, water, earth and sky are His abode and shrine, which must be protected, conserved, respected and kept eco-friendly. God created the Universe by infusing light into the dust and produce the sky, earth, trees and water and air which are necessary elements to sustain our living world and suggests that our mother Earth guides and motivates us to live with patience and love; sky guides to live with equality and broad - mindedness; air guides mobility; water guides to live with purity and fire warmth and courage.”<sup>xviii</sup>

There are ample examples in the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* about Nature and our Creator Almighty, as :

“Naanak sach daataar sinaakhat kudratee”<sup>xix</sup>

(“O, Nanak, the True one is the giver of all’ He is revealed through All-powerful creative Nature.”)<sup>xx</sup>

It is also the matter of amazement that Shri Guru Granth Sahib also gives about the geographical information as:

“khan pataal sapat nahee saagar nadee na neer vahaa-idaa.”<sup>xxi</sup>

(“There were no continents neither region, seven seas, river or flowing water.”)

May be the idea behind these lines about the Almighty presence but we can see the great and deep knowledge about the geography of the world of gurus in the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. The *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* states that God had created a superior creation as the man in the Universe who had responsibility to sustaining the mother Earth, care for animals and stresses on forestation as well strictly prohibited the killing of animals as:

“duneen-aa murdaar kjurdanee gaafal havaa-ay rahaao”<sup>xxii</sup>

(“The world eats dead carcasses, living by neglect and greed”)<sup>xxiii</sup>

As has been considered by Guru Arjan Dev, the most dignified way of uniting with the Supreme source is non-injury to any other species as:

“dukhu na dei kisai jia pati siu ghari javau”<sup>xxiv</sup>

(“do not put harm to any living being and go to your home of self-respect.”)<sup>xxv</sup>

The sacred verses of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* elaborate about the several species of trees which are beneficial to the mankind and environment universe. The followers of Sikh religion who are lovers of eco-friendly environment as they planted treed, especially besides *Gurdwaras*, tanks and pool etc. Guru Nanak was also impressed as much with water as with evergreen trees. The parts of trees have been revered as God in the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* and the plants which are grown beside near sacred place known as *Guru ke bagh or Garden of Guru*. Guru Har Rai, the seventh Guru, developed Kiratpur Sahib, also served health care to the masses and animals as well. He was also very well versed in traditional Indian medicines, he provided free medical treatment to the people. He also introduced the conservation zoo in Kiratpur Sahib which created a salubrious environment.

The Sikh Gurus emphasized that trees have importance for their usefulness not for their shape or size. Their philosophy provides conservation of biodiversity as well ecology. Trees and water as already noted are the base of life in the tropical environment. As we can find in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*:

“Jaa kay rukh birakh aaraa-o

Jayee Dhaat tayhaa tin naa-o

Ful bhaa-o fal likhi- aa paa-ay,

Aap bheej aapay hee khaa-ay”<sup>xxvi</sup>

(“The one who owns the trees of the forest and plants of the garden, according to their nature, He gives them all their names; the flower and the fruit of the Lord’s Love are obtained by pre-ordained destiny; as we plant so we harvest and eat.”)<sup>xxvii</sup>

The Gurus describes God as a tree like Kalpa tree, evergreen tree and many more names as:

“*Sahib safli-o rukh-rhaa amrit jaa naa-o*”<sup>xxviii</sup>

(“The Lord is a fruitful tree; His name is ambrosial nectar”)

Sikhism values environmental concern as a vital part of its view of life and nature. Humans should be aware of their position and connection with the Universe, as all creations share the same cycle of birth and death. Sikhism actively supports ecological preservation and balance with the moral duty of all living beings in the Universe. Sikh scripture encourages a life that avoids excessive consumption and believes that environmental awareness should be combined with social justice. Sikhs regard nature and eco-friendly environment as equivalent to the concept of mind and matter. Sikh Gurus taught that we should not harm any living being in the Universe, which is why Sikhs prefer a vegetarian diet, which is offered in Guru ka Langar in the Gurdwaras. The Sikh Gurus showed the world how to live in harmony with the environment, and all their teachings followed this principle.

However, “Sikhism has its own distinct theology, metaphysics, cosmogony, practical philosophy and ethics. Above all, it is unique in its perception of the environment in considering earth as the temple of God, a sphere of duty for the human.”<sup>xxix</sup> Sikhism advocated that the natural environment and the survival of all types of life are closely associated with the rhythm of nature. The environment concern of Sikhism underscores the value of non-human environment, too. It claims that since God is immanent to his creation human beings have to protect their environment.<sup>xxx</sup> Sikhism, through being basically a “spiritual experience, lays full of emphasis on the natural biological growth of the personality in which the communication with nature, its systems and the creation of congenial environment is taken as an important task before man.”<sup>xxxi</sup> According to Sikhism people should respect God’s all creations and know the eternal truth regarding their place in the universe. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* proclaims the glory of God in nature and the environment. Sikhs believe that the universe was created by the Almighty God. The history of the gurus contains many stories of their love and special relationship with the natural environment with animals, birds, vegetation, earth, rivers, mountains and the sky.

The environment is in a critical state due to various manmade causes. Many natural resources are being overused and depleted, leading to different forms of environmental crises. We need to respect the limits of nature and protect it from pollution. According to the, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, “humans create their surroundings as a reflection of their inner state. The current instability of the Earth’s natural system is only a reflection of the instability and pain within them. The increasing barrenness of the Earth also reflects a spiritual emptiness within humans. The Sikh scripture tells that an attitude of humility, surrender to the Divine Spirit, and maintaining a harmonious relationship with all existence is sine-qua-non for humanity to find a way out of this dilemma.”<sup>xxxii</sup>

The most pertinent need of the hour is its protection, conservation and proper use otherwise the living world will be endangered into inevitable dangers. Man has to adopt the nature, not vice versa. In the words of M.K. Gandhi, “the Earth provides enough to satisfy everyone’s need; but not for anyone’s greed.” The U.N Conference of Human Environment in Stockholm, was held in 1972, “in order to draw attention of the world to the imminent global catastrophe due to pollution of environment and depletion of natural resources.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> The Stockholm declaration was a significant initiative by the world powers to conserve and enhance the environment. The Indian Government also enacted various laws and constitutional provisions to safeguard the environment. We can conclude that “We have the awareness of a great danger and the responsibility and ability to act before it is too late.

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