

Ecosophical Concerns in the Sikh Tradition

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The contemporary transnational capitalist-technocratic society, with its profit interests which claims to have mastered the techniques of controlling and conquering Nature, is, unfortunately, faced with the problems of environmental degradation, a basic threat to global living.

The egoistic human potency to corrupt and pollute has eroded the phase of nature, while Nature has all along been nourishing, protecting, sheltering, life-giving, creative and maternal. Nature, earth, its biosphere and atmosphere have been mortally wounded, due to the immortality of man. The life giving mother earth (*terra mater*) is turned to be life-destroying, to the extent of self-annihilation. The scientific community, partially describe this crisis-situation as deforestation, depletion of ozone layer, global warming, impoverishment, etc.

However, this factual description is only one side of the coin, i.e. the technological. The reasons for this crisis are many. They include factors such as racial discrimination, economic exploitation, casteism, world-wars, socio-political colonization, cultural invasions, religious fundamentalism and so on. Hence, the reasons for the crisis, is not merely scientific and technological, but also non-scientific. In other words, ecological problem is multifaced.

Deep down, the radicality (root cause) of the crisis is, philosophical (ideological). It is philosophical in the sense that the worldviews (perspectives or the ways of looking at) of those who are responsible for destruction of Nature often tend to be partial (monolithic) dualistic, and non-earthly (other worldly); for instance, the idealism of Plato denying the reality of the World, affirms only the Archetype, and hence it is partial, not ecological.

Naive realism and materialism assert that Cosmos is what ranks first, and consciousness is only secondary (one sided); Existentialists, like Sartre, affirm the world and consciousness as primary, and confuse the real cosmos with the human-world alone. In

the Indian philosophical tradition, *Vedant*, for example, affirms the primacy of the ideal of the 'identity of atman or Brahman', to the extent of giving only a relative or no importance to the existence of the world (*maya* theory).

The frontier-mentality of human-centricism (humanism) of the 18th century, proved to be not sufficiently human, as it implied the development of the dominant class and the Western scientific man's interests. These are some of the instances to point out the fact, that, our worldviews that shape human attitude to life and Nature, were predominantly partial and other-worldly, implying an inbuilt-insensitivity to ecology.

Given this context of metaphysical exclusion of Nature, it is high time that we search for philosophical foundations that are eco-relational. It is the moral responsibility of man to establish a new humanism without 'human-centricism' of the West. In other words, the practical relationship of man with Nature must be redefined or deconstructed, outside the 'wrong kinds of philosophizing'.

Perhaps, one of the ways of responding to the situation, is to investigate the philosophical foundations of the South Asian ethos, and that too, of those, who are neither monolithic nor other-worldly. In contrast to the European individualism, the remarkable characteristic of West Asian Religious ethos, (that of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, etc.) is holistic - these religions are in general anti-individualistic, not consumeristic and indiscriminative. The spirit of peace, justice, global living, harmony with Nature, is foundational to these religions.

This paper is a tentative endeavour to reconstruct the ecological wisdom, embedded in the Sikh tradition as a viable response to global living, in the context of environmental crisis, for if ecological crisis is defined as the alienation/estrangement of human life from Mother Nature, it is the responsibility of humans, to establish again, filial relationship with Her, which, in turn, will develop into a certain subjective, emotional attitude towards Nature.

What is Ecosophia? How and in what sense Sikhism, as a religion, may be considered ecosophical? Whether the Sikh Scriptural tradition (Sri Guru Granth Sahib) has the potential to promote deep ecological consciousness? These are some of the inter-related queries that I have tried to expound in this paper.

The objective will then be to highlight the Sikh emotional-religious-spiritual and the philosophical attachment with Mother Nature. Such an attempt is in fact a prerequisite to breaking away the egoistic, antagonistic, consumeristic attitude, relationship of man with Nature. In other words, it is to interpretatively understand the Sikh tradition, in the context of promoting peace, justice, ecology: even though strictly speaking, attempts of this kind may not directly or factually offer a praxis or theory to the global crisis.

Human attitude to religion may be classified into three kinds: First, the fundamentalists. Second, those who deny everything of religion, with a view that religion is redundant and

hence it has no positive role to play in society. Third are those who develop empathy to religion in general, and continue to maintain a religious outlook, which goes beyond any sectarianism. They are those who strive for the formation of alternative frames that would actively respond to the emerging problems of the human society. They are of liberal nature, organically interested in the authenticity of their religion.

The third, namely, the attitude of liberal, is adapted to respond to ecological crisis, since it allows the advocacy for searching into newer and meaningful ways concerning one's religion that contributes to the problem situation. Such an approach, brings the religionists and the non-religionists together in harmony. And in fact, provides the common, universal theoretical foundation for inter- and extra-religious encounters. With this view, may I be allowed to stike a liberal attitude to Sikhism.

ECOSOPHIA IN SIKHISM

The term ecosophia, literally means the wisdom of the Universe that is required for the promotion of sustainable and peaceful ecology. The combination of the two Greek words, *Oikos* + *Sophos* gives rise to Ecosophia; (*Oikos* means the Cosmos, the household of being). Ecosophia is a philosophy of ecological harmony and equilibrium. It is the kind of wisdom (sophia) that is suggestive of norms, ways of perceiving Nature, as against dominant world-views. It is an attempt to go beyond anthropocentrism; towards holistic consciousness of the universe. It is a new mediation of humanity and society with Nature. It involves developing a certain religious attitude towards nature-eco-spirituality. It views that social and environmental problems are the consequence of specific social relations of dominations.

Within this frame, ecology (mere environmentalism) is elevated from a scientific description to philosophy, in this sense, it is called deep ecology. It is to view that the problems of human society are not to be treated in isolation with other social systems and norms, for "systems are integrated wholes, whose properties cannot be reduced to those of its parts."

Ecosophia is the articulation of religious and philosophical world-views that provide a "face to face relation with Nature."

The ecosophical paradigm, aims at the liberation of life - that necessarily includes the liberation of Nature, women and the underprivileged. It is an attempt to contact with intrinsic dignity/worth of Nature, women and the downtrodden. It aims to establish relation in justice. Cosmic unity and biocentric equality are the two ultimate norms of ecosophia. Ecosophism essentially recognises that both human and non-human life on earth has intrinsic values. It abnegates any form of domination and subjugation. People and Nature is the core of ecosophia(ism).

The issue now is to ascertain, whether, Sikhism is ecosophical. This question may be responded to by delving into the metaphysical foundations of Sikhism, and its Scripture - Sri Guru Granth Sahib, for that which is essential of a religion is its scripture, and that which is central to the scripture is its metaphysical foundations.

THE IDEA OF GOD: (ECO-SPIRITUALITY)

Apart from the transcendental idea of God, Sikhism lays emphasis on the immanent nature of God. God, for Sikhism, is a 'Living Truth', the Creator and the Sustainer of the Universe. He is *ik-oan-kar*, meaning that God manifests Himself as a determined Infinity in the dimension of Time and History. He is the manifesting material Reality. He is conceived to be the Creator-Person (*karta-purakhu*), He is immanent in the cosmic form (*moorati*). The act of creation of God, for Sikhism, is a never-ending process, that He is the continuous life-giving principle. He creates, animates, sustains Nature. Nature is the dwelling place of God, and hence reverence to Nature is a must. SGGS reads:

He, the Creator, Himself creates the world....and watches all....He alone imparts understanding (SGGS: p.767).

Where is this Creator-God?

The Lord, (it is said) is contained in spaces and inter-spaces. He cherishes all beings (SGGS: p.760). The Lord has made this world an arena of symphonic dance. Creating the entire creation He has placed in various forms and colours (SGGS: p.746). The Lord abides amongst all (SGGS: p.748). The devotee remains pleased with their Lord and see Him, in water, land, nether regions and firmament (SGGS: p.748). God who has created, sustains the creation; He gives sustenance to all....thine Benefactor (SGGS: p.751).

There are innumerable texts that reflect the mind of Sikhism, that God is the source of cosmic formation, and He manifests in it, and hence, Nature is not a mere object that could be utilised to human ends - but it has intrinsic dignity and value.

THE CAUSE FOR ECOLOGICAL IMBALANCE

Human mind, by being self-conceited, loses communion with Nature, and ultimately with God. This causes him misery and it is the repeated assertion of Sikhism: The thief of self conceit (domination) is robbing the house (*oikos*)[..] now he finds no place to rest (SGGS: p. 752). By affirming the immanence of God and His presence in the Creation, the Sikh religion imparts the spirit of self-righteousness to the entire subject of Nature.

THE IDEA OF WORLD

In contrast to philosophies that encourage world denial, Sikh tradition affirms the reality/authenticity of the world/body. Body, is the mediation to the attainment of the Lord. The earth and the "here and now" is the space for liberation of life: engrossing into duality leads to forgetfulness of the dwelling God (SGGS: p.757). In the body are the invaluable wealth and the brimful treasures of Lord's mediation[.] Within the body abide all, the continents, the worlds and the nether regions. In the body dwells the Beneficent Lord, the life of the world Who cherishes all. Ever illustrates is the body-bride....meditates on the Name (SGGS: p.754).

Thus, in Sikhism, body symbolically stands for earth, Nature, Cosmos, through her (bridegroom) attainment of the Lord (peace) is possible. In the ecosophical language, the Sikh religion with its affirmation of the earth as Divine, calls for continuous consciousness of its harmony and unity. That the earth cannot be consumed for selfish purposes, but conserved - on the basis of need and not greed.

THE EARTH AS DHARAMSAL

Amidst (creation) He fixed the earth, a place for righteous action" (Japuji: SGGS-7). According to the Sikh belief the world is Holy, and one's relation to it must also be holy. The whole world is Holy. Be you in its purity absorbed. By discarding of egoism does one find acceptance at God's portal (SGGS: p.142). By this portrayal of the world (earth) as a place for righteousness and purity, Guru Nanak insists that we relate with others with equality and justice. And that there is a possibility of a future for the history of Nature, for it has a spiritual meaning. The monistic denial of the "reality" of the world, for the Sikh religious mind, is inadequate and un-Godly.

THE SIKH-PROTEST AGAINST INJUSTICE

The history of Sikhism is a history of 'class struggle' that fought against all forms of political imperialism, economic exploitation and caste inequality, and religious hypocrisy: If the mighty molest the mighty no feeling of protest rises in my mind; But should a ferocious tiger (the greedy caste-men) attack the feeble herd (Nature, women and the downtrodden), I would question even my Lord (Guru Nanak). For *bhagat* Kabir, "I can't keep on meditating on a hungry stomach, here, have Thy rosary back, my Lord."

Protesting the theory and practice of pollution (untouchability) - (environmental pollution refers to water, air, etc. But ecological pollution refers to all forms of discrimination) Guru Nanak says: Caste is hollow, fame is hollow and the One Saviour protects all.

He advises the caste ridden Indian mind not to practice it, and for him the one who is proud of his caste and practices it, causes pollution of the other. 'Is the Brahmin really born of Brahma? is the question he raised. For the Sikh Guru, the source of pollution is primarily in the mind of man (haumai) which is self-centered. Removal of the self-

centredness of the technocratic humanity would contribute to peace and justice. It is but the liberation of life in its totality, from false consciousness and unequal social structures.

Sangat, the basic Sikh community, may be viewed as the basic ecosophical community that intensively reflect and live a life of harmony with nature. It is a community of equals. *Khalsa*, is the congregation, whose members when initiated into the Order, are baptised by water, symbolic to reveal that the mystery of parthenogenetic creation of the first human society in the world history, organised with the deliberate object of and pledged to - bring about anoecumenical (ecosophical) human society (Phenomenology of Sikhism, p.77).

The idea of Guru or *Gurmukh*, implies that the Guru (liberated one) is a realized person of the fundamental unity of God with the creation, man with other creations. He strives to foster ecological harmony, by being cosmic-God conscious. He is a true *yogin*, who treats all the creation equally, and hence asceticism is discouraged in Sikhism, because detachment from everyday life is a form of escapism, or denial of earth/world, that amounts to the denial of God, the Creator person, who abides in life. His dedication to God, is his devotion to the well being of all life.

As against the claims of *Manusmriti* which sanctions caste, and hence anti-ecological, Sikhism is opposed to every detail of the caste world-view. Manusmriti is not ecological in the sense that it is a theory of purity and pollution: it treats those who have affairs with the earth, i.e. those who deal with agriculture, who supply material needs of the higher caste, those who clear dead bodies, are treated by Manusmriti as impure, and capable of pollution. In other words, the working-class are deemed impure and the non-working class (religious class) are deemed pure (due to ritual purity).

According to Manu, the so-called pure class, "do not involve in harming a living being" (because they are freed from the affairs of the Body) and hence freed from the earthly/body. Such an inhumanitarian, anti-ecological claim is not in the culture of Sikhism. As against the logic of domination, the Sikh logic is ecological. If caste-minded people who do not involve in affairs of the earth (agri-production) they do not contribute to the act of creating (contributing to) life. And it is the mother's womb that is the temple of life. Treating the Dalits and women and Nature as inhuman, secondary and *maya*, the caste-interwoven Indian tradition continues to contribute to ecological degradation.

By negating caste, the Sikh affirms that Nature, earth, women, the Dalits are the real people who stand in need of liberation. By definitely parting ways with the spiritual monistic-caste-construed world-views, Sikhism, as a religion, responds actively to the promotion of ecological equilibrium and self-righteousness of all beings in the Cosmos. Thus given to the metaphysical foundation of Sikhism that affirms the reality of the Universe and the Divine abiding in it, and in the historical context of Sikhism, as a protest movement against injustice and exploitations, Sikhism is foundationally ecosophical.

It is up to the Sikh community to reflect and live its ecological truth claims, for they believe that: **Truth is high, but higher still is truthful living.**

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