

# Sikhism and Caring for the Environment in Practice

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BY DR. RAJWANT SINGH

**I**ntegrated Approach: Care of the Environment without Social Justice is not possible. Environmental concerns may be viewed as part of the broader issue of human development and social justice. Many environmental problems, in both developed and developing nations have the greatest impact on the poorest, most vulnerable, and marginalized populations. Therefore an integrated approach is necessary.

Sikhism opposes the idea that the human race's struggle is against nature and its supremacy lies in the notion of 'harnessing' nature. The objective is harmony with the eternal - God - which implies a life of harmony with all existence. Striving for a life of harmony, therefore, also implies a life of supporting human rights, social and cultural rights, and the environment – a life that works against injustice towards anybody and anything.

The tenth Guru founded the Order of the Khalsa in 1699, who practice the spiritual discipline of Sikhism, and are committed to ensure the preservation and prevalence of a world society. Over the last three centuries the members of Khalsa order have stood up for the rights of the oppressed and the disenfranchised even at the cost of their own lives. The Khalsa vision of the World Society is:

*"Henceforth such is the Will of God: No man shall coerce another; No person shall exploit another. Each individual, has the inalienable birth-right to seek and pursue happiness and self-fulfillment. Love and persuasion is the only law of social coherence."*  
(Guru Granth Sahib, page 74)

The Khalsa have opposed any force that has threatened the freedom and dignity of human beings. In the eighteenth century it was the oppressive rulers of northern India, and invaders from Afghanistan; in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they have struggled against the oppression of European colonists and national governments. For the Khalsa justice requires the participation and inclusion of all in obtaining and enjoying the fruits of God's creation. Justice achieved through co-operative effort is desirable. The ideal for the Khalsa is to strive for justice for all, not merely for themselves.

## **THE INSTITUTION OF SANGAT, PANGAT AND LANGAR**

**T**he Sikh Gurus, through their lives provided role models for the Sikhs. They all actively worked to stress the equality of all humans and challenged the rigid social stratification of the caste system. The very existence of the Sikh religion is based on challenging (1) inequality in society, and (2) the exploitation of the poor and the marginal by the religious and political establishment.

Sikh Gurus provided many examples of standing by their principles and confronting exploitation and oppression. They stood by the 'low' and the 'poor', for, as Guru Nanak said:

There are the lowest men among the low-castes. Nanak, I shall go with them. What have I got to do with the great? God's eye of mercy falls on those who take care of the lowly. (Guru Granth Sahib, page 15) Sikh Gurus challenged the status quo and came into conflict with the entrenched elite - political, social, religious and economic. The Gurus were most sympathetic to the downtrodden of society, the untouchables and those of lower caste. They vehemently opposed the division of society on the basis of caste, which had been and is still significantly present. They identified themselves with the poor in full measure and were critical of those responsible for their misery. In the course of their travels they preferred to live in the homes of those who made an honest living to the homes of the rich who thrived on exploitation.

Two Sikh Gurus were martyred by the regimes of their period for challenging the contemporary authorities. One, Guru Tegh Bahadur was martyred when he stood up for the religious freedom of the inhabitants of Kashmir who were being forced to accept the dominant religion of the time.

Sikh Gurus also molded traditional lifestyles to exemplify a more equitable society. They created many institutions that form the basis of Sikh society and are based on the equality of all. The Sikh Gurus invited people of all castes and creed to meditate together. That would be called Sangat. Either before or after the meditation, people were asked to sit and eat together irrespective of their social background to create a sense of equality. That process would be called Pangat. Sikh Gurus started a tradition of free distribution of food to the rich or poor through the Sikh meeting areas. That would be called Langar. These three ideas were in contrast to the Indian society which had separate temples or water wells for social outcasts. These changes by the Sikh Gurus created a lot of opposition from the religious establishment. These changes are still much alive in Sikh practices today. Through the creation of the Khalsa, the Gurus established a system which would protect and maintain a free and just order.

## **EQUALITY OF WOMEN**

**W**omen are the bedrock of our society. Any approach to solve problems of social justice and the environment must include women as a vital part of the solution. Often piece-meal solutions to environmental problems focus on environmental solutions without understanding the role of women in protecting and preserving our environment. In many countries throughout the world, women play a central role in protecting the environment by caring for livestock, collect water, provide nutritious food for families, and preserving the families health in the face of disease and illness.

Guru Nanak and other Sikh Gurus in their life advocated equality and dignity to women and took steps to implement these principles. Guru Nanak denounced the idea that spirituality was only for men, and not for women. The first Sikh Guru in his preaching and writings made direct statements emphasizing that women were no less than men: After the death of one's wife, one seeks another, and through her social bonds are cemented.

Why should we condemn women who give birth to leaders and rulers? Everyone is born of a woman and a woman alone. Nobody is born otherwise. God alone is an exception to this rule. (Guru Granth Sahib, page 473)

Guru Amardas strongly opposed the custom of Sati in the sixteenth century and also advocated widow marriages. Sati was the Indian practice whereby widows burned themselves with their husband's corpse at cremation. Guru Amar Das appointed and ordained a large number of women preachers, and at least one bishop - Mathura Devi, four hundred years ago. The Sikh Gurus also raised their voice against the Purdah or veil. Guru Amardas did not even allow the Queen of Haripur to come into the religious assembly in purdah.

The immediate effect of this vision was that women were revered as the defenders of honor and dignity. They also became the rocks that stood against tyrants. Without the burden of unnecessary and unreasonable customs, Sikh women became the temporal and spiritual supporters of society, often acting as the 'conscience of society.' Sikh women are marked by a history of service, devotion, sacrifice, and bravery.

Since the late nineteenth century Sikh community organizations have made efforts at expanding educational opportunities for all. Individual Sikhs, men and women, in various cities and towns, took the initiative to start and operate women's colleges and schools. Women's education was part of the drive to improve education among the Sikhs, initiated by Sikh organizations in the 1920s. In towns and villages in the Punjab and in cities with significant Sikh populations there exists schools and colleges operated by Sikh organizations.

## **COMMUNITY-BASED SHARING OF RESOURCES**

**T**raditional modes of farming, and traditional modes of life in Northern India have been dependent upon limited resources. As there exist circumstances where there are large number of people dependent upon relatively limited resources., the traditional lifestyle ensures use of the least resources, considerable re-use, and recycling of resources. In a culture based on organic resources and materials recycling is an intrinsic and natural part of the resource cycle. There are strong traditions of sharing resources.

There have been traditional practices that maintained lands and forests as community property within proximity of human habitation. For instance in traditional rural India and Punjab, two of the most important centers of human activity have been the Sikh gurdwara, and a source of water - pond, tank, pool or running water. Both of these sites were surrounded by community land, not owned by any one and not used for agriculture. This was where there were trees and plants - groves or small forests. They provided shade and shelter, and were a source of firewood within easy reach of habitation.

The Gurus established towns and cities, each created around a religious center. The focus was on a lifestyle based on sharing. A lifestyle that promoted equity among people, and optimum utilization of resources. Even today even rural Punjab, families share resources with their neighbors. This is particularly evident on large family occasions such as weddings, when the entire village may play host to guests and share living space, beds, etc.

Most gurdwaras in India were specifically designed to have a water tank, or were near running water- river, or pool - always a community resource. For instance, Amritsar grew up around the Harimandir (ordinarily referred to as the Golden Temple) and the Amrit Sarovar (The pool of nectar - the water.. The cities and towns that grew around gurudwaras ideally, were centered on a spiritual lifestyle based on sharing.

Since the time of the Gurus, Sikh gurudwaras, have included institutionalized practices that emphasize sharing of resources. Gurudwaras, in addition to being places for congregation for prayer and meditation, are (1) a place to stay for travelers and others; (2) a community kitchen - langar; (3) a place for dispensing medication and medical care; (4) a place to impart education to the young. Gurudwaras have always been places of shelter for travelers, and visitors. Most major gurudwaras have rooms where visitors may stay. In addition Sikh gurudwaras stock extra beds, pots and pans etc. At weddings and other family events, the gurudwaras are a source for borrowing sheets, beds, pots and pans.

There has always been great emphasis on avoiding waste. Traditionally the community kitchen served food on plates made from leaves and cups made from clay. Today they tend to use steel plates and utensils that are re-used. The kitchens have always been stocked by ordinary people - farmers, traders, others in the community - on a voluntary basis.

## **CONCLUSION**

**T**he ideal for Sikhism is a society based upon mutual respect and co-operation and providing an optimal atmosphere for individuals to grow spiritually. Sikhism regards a co-operative society as the only truly religious society. As the Sikh view of life and society is grounded in the worth of every individual as a microcosm of God. Therefore, an individual must never be imposed upon, coerced, manipulated or engineered.

*"If thou wouldst seek God, demolish and distort not the heart of any individual" (Guru Granth Sahib, page 1384)*

All life is interconnected. A human body consists of many parts, every one of them has a distinct name, location and function and all of them are dependent upon each other. In the same way, all the constituents of this universe and this earth are dependent upon each other. Decisions in one country or continent cannot be ignored by others. Choices in one place have measurable consequences for the rest of the world. It is part of the same system.

Life, for its very existence and nurturing, depends upon a bounteous nature. A human being needs to derive sustenance from the earth; not to deplete, exhaust, pollute, burn or destroy it. Sikhs believe that an awareness of that sacred relationship between humans and the environment is necessary for the health of our planet, and for our survival. A new 'environmental ethic' dedicated to conservation and wise use of the resources provided by a bountiful nature can only arise from an honest understanding and dedicated application of our old, tried and true spiritual heritage.