



Sikh Environmental Ethics for Sustainable Civilization

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Abstract

The interconnectedness of all living things and the natural environment are both highly valued concepts in Sikhism. It is considered as a duty in Sikhism that being a human, it is everyone's duty to take care of the planet and safeguard its natural resources for upcoming generations. So, the concept of sustainable civilization is intimately related to Sikh environmental ethics. The idea of '*seva*' or selfless service, is one of the cornerstones of Sikh environmental ethics. With no expectations of personal benefit, Sikhs are encouraged by this principle to work for the advancement of their communities and the environment. Sikhs aid in the preservation of the environment and the development of a sustainable civilization by engaging in *seva*. Sikhism also stresses the value of leading a modest lifestyle and minimising one's impact on the environment. Reducing waste, protecting resources, and engaging in responsible consumption are all part of this. '*Hukam*', which literally means heavenly order or law, is the foundation of Sikh environmental ethics and it is our responsibility as humans to live in accordance with it. This includes leading a life that respects environment and causes as little harm as possible to it. It is considered as a duty of human to preserve nature for future generations as it is a gift from the divine.

This paper revolves around the environmental ethics with special reference to the role played by Sikhism in it. It also provides the historical glimpse of environment depicting its link with the early civilizations and examining how Sikhism's historical and cultural environment influenced its adherents' outlook on life and interaction with nature. Adding further, identifying, and delving into the main environmental tenets and values that Sikh scriptures and values contain, assessing how Sikh environmental ethics might be used in real world situations to address current environmental problems including pollution, climate change, deforestation, and water scarcity and evaluating the contribution of Sikh communities, institutions and organizations to environmental sustainability and conservation are also depicted in it. The overall goal of this

paper is to increase the knowledge of Sikh environmental ethics and their applicability to solving the environmental problems that our planet is currently facing.

Key words: Sikhism, Environmental Ethics and Sustainable Civilizations.

Introduction

Environmental ethics is a subfield of philosophy that examines the moral and ethical problems relating to how people interact with environment which aims to comprehend the ethical repercussions of human actions on the natural world. As well as the moral duties and responsibilities that people have towards the environment and a society that is structured and developed in such a way that it can endure over an extended period of time without endangering the natural systems that sustain life is referred to as a sustainable civilization. Such a society would be founded on sustainability principles, which include providing for the needs of the present generation without jeopardising the ability of future generations. The wellbeing of the world and its inhabitants, including both human beings and other species, would be given top priority by a sustainable society, which would also work to strike a balance between social advancement, economic growth, and environment preservation.

In the 15th century, Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak Dev, having its roots mainly in the pre-partition Punjab, placing a strong emphasis on serving others and maintaining a healthy relationship with the environment. It also emphasises the unity of all creation. Sikh environmental ethics are strongly based on the monotheistic idea of '*Ik Onkar*' in such a way that since the divine is present in all creation, people have an obligation to preserve and protect it. Numerous references to the environment and ecology are found in the Guru Granth Sahib, a sacred text mainly belonging to the Sikhism which highlights the value of coexisting with nature peacefully. All living beings are created by the same creator and are sustained by the same sustainer and people must treat all living things with respect and compassion.

I

Environmental Sustainability: Definition and Application

Environmental sustainability is the effective and responsible use of natural resources with a focus on minimising environmental damage. Adopting behaviours that advance the long-term health and wellbeing of Earth and its inhabitants is a part of it.

Solutions for sustainable civilization

It is true to mention that there is an extensive need to bring sustainability into being because ecosystem has always been the target of human beings in terms of exploitation apart from the fact that there are several teachings in different scriptures that emphasise the need to preserve the environment and promoting the sustainable use of it. But there are numerous solutions for the sustainable civilization which includes avoiding the ecosystem degradation and collapse, putting an end to pollution and combat the global warming, marking an end to hunger and poverty and trying to ensure prosperity. This would take people to

the path of sustainable civilization leading a healthy and comparatively better lifestyle which would benefit the planet in several ways and would bring some positive change un almost every aspect of a human's life. This somehow, makes people more aware about the need to bring sustainability in their surroundings and the pros of adopting this concept which would be proved beneficial for the present as well as the upcoming generations as they won't be facing resource crisis. It would be possible to bring change in the surroundings in terms of sustainability only if the solutions would be adopted and practiced by every human being in his day-to-day life.



Figure 1: Solving for the sustainability, Sustainability= Survive, Thrive, and Nurture, medium

Source: The Shadow, April 10, 2021

The environment's impact on Early agrarian civilizations

Early agrarian civilizations developed in large part as a result of geography. The emergence of agriculture and sophisticated communities was more likely to occur in regions with fertile soil, flat topography, and simple access to water and natural resources. On the other hand, dry or mountainous areas were generally less populous and less conducive to cultivation.

Climate was yet another important environmental component. Crop yields and food production might be significantly impacted by changes in temperature, rainfall patterns, and other climate factors. Long term droughts or flooding, for instance, could cause crop failures and starvation, but more hospitable conditions could result in abundant harvests and population expansion. Early agrarian civilizations, Sumerian, and Egyptian were significantly influenced by their environment. Noteworthy to mention that agriculture's evolution was mostly a reaction to the environment. With the availability of water farmers had to choose crops that were compatible with the soil and climate of their region, with the availability of water. In river basins of Nile, Tigris-Euphrates, Indus, and Yellow Rivers where water was plentiful and reliable, early agrarian civilizations frequently developed. These rivers supplied water for domestic consumption, transportation, and irrigation as well as silt for crop fertilisation. Settlement patterns were also influenced by the environment.

Some regions, like the Fertile Crescent, have environments that were conducive to sedentary cultivation and the growth of urban communities. The environment was less conducive to agriculture in other areas such as sections of Australia and Africa, and societies there adopted more nomadic lives. So, early agrarian civilizations were strongly influenced by their environment, with the availability of water, the climate, and topography of the areas in which they emerged having a significant impact on the sustainable growth of these early and later classic civilisations.

Indus valley civilization

Indus valley civilization, also known as Harappan civilization, thrived in the area surrounding the Indus River valley in modern day India and Pakistan, from about 2600 BCE-1900 BCE. Temperatures in the Indus valley civilization's environment ranged from 25 to 40 degrees Celsius, and it was dry and hot. There were also two distinct seasons in the area: a hot and dry summer and a warm and rainy winter. A vital source of water for the civilization's agriculture and other economic pursuits was the Indus River and its tributaries. The majority of the earliest complex societies emerged in areas where the climatic conditions experienced by early subsistence farmers were variable but not particularly diversified. In a particular ecological setting where the winter and summer rainfall systems overlapped, the Indus valley civilization emerged. There is a solid proof that the climate in this area changed from around 2500 to 1900 BC, when Indus valley civilization was at its height. Therefore, the Indus Civilization offers a rare chance to comprehend how an ancient community dealt with a variety of ecologies and changes in the fundamental environmental factors.

One way of environmental sustainability is through the concept of sustainable agriculture which entails the use of farming methods that are socially responsible, economically feasible, and environmentally sound. Sustainable agriculture aims to reduce the loss of natural resources like soil, water, and biodiversity.



Figure 2: Ancient civilizations impact global environments, CGTN, news.cgtn.com

Source:Environment,01-Sep-2019.

II Sikhism and Environmental Sustainability

Sikhism has played an integral role and has contributed a lot in the making of sustainable civilization to ensure the usage of resources effectively and judiciously so that the resources could be preserved for the upcoming generations as well. Moreover, it is not just about taking an initiative but following such norms since the emergence of Sikh religion and considering the protection of environment as a duty as well as regarding the Earth as a motherly figure as it has been mentioned clearly in the Sikh scripture that all the human beings have emerged from the Earth so it is the duty of human being to avoid any kind of exploitation to the mother Earth. Sikhism present relationship between humanity and the environment through interdependence between the two, which leads to interrelationship.

Respect for the Earth

Sikhism promotes reverence for and coexistence with all living things, including plants and animals. Air is the Guru, Water is the Father, and Earth is the great Mother, according to the Sikh holy scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Night and day are like two nurses that watch over us. Guru Nanak stated that the elements of air, earth and water are vital for existence and since we are descended from them, we should honour the Earth as our mother.

The holy scripture Sri Guru Granth Sahib says:

“Pavan Pani Dharti Akaas, Ghar Mandar Har Bani”

“Air, water, earth and sky – the Lord has made these his home and temple¹.”

“Pavan Guru Pani Pita, Mata Dharat Mahat”

“Air is the Guru, Water the Father, and the Earth is the Great Father”²

“Pavan Guru Pani Pita Jatta”

“Air is the Guru, and Water is known to be the Father”³

The natural wealth all around them is sacred, and Sikhs make an effort to live by this. Gurdwaras, or places of worship, are frequently surrounded by lovely pools of fish and other aquatic life to symbolise a balance between man and nature. Given the oneness of all things, Sikhs contend that humankind cannot attain serenity or the truth while mistreating the environment which is equivalent to mistreating themselves. Continued exploitation of the environment in the sake of accumulating wealth is a sign of greed and a separation from God’s peace and creation. Individual acts of decency, such as putting trash in trash cans, are the first step in demonstrating respect for Mother Earth. For a Sikh, leaving trash on the ground is unacceptable. Respect for

¹ SGGs, Tilang Mahalla 4 Ghar 2.

² SGGs, Mahalla 2

³ SGGs, Maroo, solahas, Mahalla 1

Earth entails both responsible use of human technologies like nuclear energy and weaponry as well as sustainable use of planet's resources on a national and worldwide scale.

Respect for all creatures

The Sikh Gurus were nature and animal lovers.



Fig:3.Beri Baba Budha Sahib,Harmandir Sahib,Amritsar
Source:www.researchgate.net.

.Baba Budha , contemporary and companion of early Sikh Gurus,supervised the digging of the scared pool(Sarovar) at Harmandir Sahib under the Beri tree in the late 16th century. The pool is surrounded by many Bery's trees with the medicinal values.



Figure 4: Guru Har Rai, the seventh Guru. Leaf from a series of portraits of the Gurus.

Source:www.researchgate.net

During the lifetime of Seventh Guru Har Rai, the population of Kiratpur increased so much that many settlements were formed, 52 orchards were planted at various places to beautify the city, which were managed by wise gardeners. Kiratpur is still called the city of garden⁴

In fact, the 10th Guru is occasionally referred to as “the one with falcon”. The entire creation is frequently described as sacred in the Guru Granth Sahib because God’s soul penetrates every aspect of it. According to the SGGSJ, “In all beings is the Lord pervasive, the Lord pervades all forms male and female”. Sikhs are required to respect all living things, including plants and animals.

Fossil fuels, Metals Minerals and Sikh environmental ethics.

Fossil fuels have completely altered human culture since they were discovered. The quality of life for people worldwide has been significantly improved by technologies like the automobile and the aeroplane. Unfortunately, fossil fuels might turn out to be biggest adversary. Acid rains, excessive levels of particulate matter in the air, the depletion of the ozone layer, and global warming are all effects of the toxic compounds released by fossil fuels. Regrettably, every country’s needs for fossil fuels grow yearly. Fearing a loss of economic or political influence, rich nations hesitate to cut back on their consumption. However, developing countries are unwilling to cut back on their usage of fossil fuels because they believe they have a right to catch up with developed countries.

As per Sikh environmental ethics, we should make an effort to live as harmoniously with nature as possible. Communities and nations should adopt the same mindset, which calls for a less self-centred and more considerable approach to the environment. Sikhism advises followers to approach everything in life with moderation. The utilisation of Earth’s resources for humanity’s benefit is included in this.

Preservation of Rainforests:Herbal Treatment

One of the main causes of the ongoing destruction and shrinkage of the world’s rainforests is improper agricultural practices and metal and mineral mining. These rainforests are home to the vast majority of the planet’s undiscovered animal and plant species. Not just for their own benefit, but also for ours, the human population must protect the diversity of biological forms. Variety of plants are necessary for both a balanced diet and for medical purposes. Guru Har Rai, the seventh guru, was well-known throughout India for using herbal treatments to treat patients. There will undoubtedly be herbal treatments for some of the severe ailments of the present. Humans could have a chance to find and apply these treatments for the benefit of humanity if the rainforests are protected. One should volunteer to support projects to the rainforests as a Sikh.

⁴ Kaur Daljit, ‘Guru Har Rai :“Sultan Hum Darwesh,Guru Karta Har Rai” (Seventh Sikh Guru,1630-1661), International Journal of All Research Education and Scientific Methods (IJARESM), ISSN: 2455-6211 Volume 10, Issue 2, February-2022

In addition, one should get involved in projects that restore forests and trees, which are crucial for oxygen-breathing life forms.

The concept of *Kar Seva*

The practises of meditation and selfless service are highly valued in Sikhism. Enlightenment can only come about through the integration of the two.

Sikhism's special concept of "*Kar Seva*" entails the community as a whole cooperating to attain a common objective. This is essentially very extensive volunteer effort. Examples of this include the construction of the Harmandir Sahib, the most revered Sikh shrine in the entire world. Volunteers from the local communities worked tirelessly to construct the entire structure. Being a volunteer in the community is not only a good thing to do but also a religious obligation for Sikhs. The Sikh community has used the similar idea of "*Kar Seva*", for instance, to effectively remove litter from some of the Delhi's city streets. This is only possible because each person understands that it is their own responsibility to advance a community endeavour. If everyone started to recognise the significance of their own duties in protecting the environment, the same approach might be used to the entire world for all types of activities.

Conclusion

As per Sikh environmental ethics, one should make an effort to live as harmoniously with nature as possible. In order to achieve environmental sustainability, people, companies, and governments must work all together and play role in encouraging sustainability by putting in place laws and rules that encourage sustainable practices such as carbon taxes, environmental restrictions, and incentives for renewable energy. Reducing waste, saving energy and water, encouraging biodiversity, lowering pollution, and implementing eco-friendly practices and technologies are a few crucial actions that can assist advance sustainability. It is possible for the people to sustain the environment by making deliberate decisions in their daily lives, such as consuming fewer single use plastics, conserving energy, and water, buying locally, supporting sustainable businesses and recycling. Business might support sustainability by creating green supply chains, adopting eco friendly practices and technology, cutting back on waste and pollution, and investing in renewable energy sources.

To support agricultural output, sustainable agriculture recognises the significance of preserving ecosystem services, such as pollination, pest management, and nutrient cycling. By protecting natural ecosystems and raising a variety of crops and livestock, sustainable agriculture attempts to enhance biodiversity. Another idea to promote environmental sustainability is that of sustainable forestry. To ensure that forests provide a wide range of advantages, including timber, non-timber forest products, biodiversity, carbon sequestration, recreation, and cultural values, sustainable forestry requires balancing the economic, social, and environmental components of forest management. Sustainable forestry recognizes the importance of biodiversity in maintaining healthy forest ecosystems, seeks to promote the conservation of species and

habitats., recognizes the importance of forests in providing social and economic benefits to local communities, including income generation.

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