

Abstract

Environmental Ethics in Sikhism- Gaps and Achievements in Connecting Theory and Practice

Harpreet Kaur, University of Maryland

Introduction (Theoretical Framework)

Ikeke (2020) notes that science and policy alone cannot tackle environmental challenges. One cannot act with responsibility without conviction, which is mainly rooted in philosophical ethics. So, he makes a case for mobilizing religious resources to solve the grand challenges of the environmental crisis. Arne Naess also advocates for wisdom focused on ‘deep experience, deep questioning, and deep commitment.’ He situates the philosophy of ecology (eco-philosophy) in being, thinking, and acting.¹ These are the hallmarks of religion, an essential component of human civilization.

Eco-philosophy is a body of knowledge deliberating upon the relationship of living beings with their environment on the principles of harmony and equilibrium. Though the term eco- philosophy (also used interchangeably with ecosophy) was first coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in the 1970s, this existential wisdom has long been enshrined in the

¹ Deep Ecology, 2023

metaphysics of all world religions. The indigenous religions also lend a transcendental dimension to ecology. The intersection of faith and eco-philosophy is known as religious environmentalism and is a relatively recent movement in world history.

The Backdrop (Methodology)

The Sikh faith is the fifth-largest (the youngest) religion. However, it is still under- or misrepresented in media and academics. The scholarly community has yet to include Sikhi in its discourses on various subjects. The literature on Sikh environmentalism is even more scant. Donaldson (2015) points out that Jainism and Sikhi have typically been relegated to the ‘footnote’ status as the scholars are yet unprepared to address their philosophical insights. Therefore, the proposed paper will delineate the theoretical framework of Sikh eco-philosophy from the scriptures and historical references. It will examine the thin volume of the published literature and critique how different scholars have propounded the ecosophy of the Sikh Gurus hermeneutically or through other modes of inquiry. It will further investigate the practice of environmentalism in and by the community, specifically focusing on the gaps and achievements.

The Sikhs seek direction from Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS), which is not a mere sacred text but a living presence (Guru) for them. Additionally, they refer to hymns by the tenth Guru and the historical texts documenting the lives of the ten gurus. Although there is no direct allusion to environmental ethics in SGGS, the scripture explicitly references natural phenomena, forces, species, and the interconnected web of life. Thus, the verses enshrined (Gurbani) are a rich source of ecological wisdom. Since Sikhi does not view ecology and ethics as disjunct, they must be understood in the broader dharma (righteousness) context. This

necessitates a comprehensive approach to discussing ecosophy through the central tenets of Sikh metaphysics.²

Focal Points (Discussion and Findings)

This study is structured into two sections—the first briefly explains the environmental philosophy of Sikhi, while the second dives into its embodied activism. The former comments on how Sikhi exhibits deep ecological characteristics through the principles of equality and justice, probes into the pantheism versus panentheism debate, its ecocentric orientation, and the sustainable development framework. The latter highlights the contributions of icons like Bhagat Puran Singh, the Mother Teresa of Punjab (India), Sant Balbir Singh Seechewal's monumental river cleaning project for which he earned the distinction of being the Time Magazine's Hero of the Environment in 2008, and Sant Sewa Singh from the historic town of Khadur Sahib in Punjab who has been appointed the Faith for Earth counselor by the United Nations Environment Programme.

Further, the paper examines the local initiatives in Punjab and the diaspora. For instance, the EcoSikh came into existence in 2009 in response to an initiative of the United Nations Development Program and the Alliance of Religions and Conservation. This organization works globally and has built an impressive network of environmental programs. The paper also details some unique environmental projects grounded in religion: Guru Granth Sahib Bagh- a unique garden with all the trees mentioned in the Sikh scripture and the Museum of Trees in the capital of Punjab, Chandigarh. Finally, the paper appraises incongruities of the ground-level practices of the populace.

² Singh, 2021

Conclusion (Significance of the Study)

The paper concludes with recommendations for bridging the gaps by reconceptualizing the alliance between religion and environmentalism. It also suggests exploring the potential of eco-aesthetics and eco-criticism to inspire ecological sensitivity. For instance, the works of Bhai Veer Singh (1872-1957), the giant of Punjabi poetry and a Sikh stalwart much revered in the Sikh community, are a lighthouse for all nature lovers and those who seek environmental consciousness in literature.³ This study will thus significantly contribute to the literature on religious environmentalism by including a comprehensive range of Sikh eco-theories and praxis and suggestions for amping up faith-based environmentalism.

³ Singh & Kaur, 2017