**Environment Day – Celebrating Guru Har Rai Ji[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Guru Har Rai Ji (1630- 1661AD), the seventh Guru of the Sikhs, was the son of Baba Gurdita Ji and Mata Nihal Kaur Ji . He was very gentle by nature. Once, when still very young, record old texts, his robe was caught in a bush and few of the flowers were broken from their stems. This pained his heart and he wept bitterly. Guru Hargobind Ji, sixth Guru of the Sikhs, consoled him by saying that – “It behoves God’s servants to be tender to all things.” Guru Sahib established an Aurvedic herbal medicine hospital and a research centre at Kiratpur Sahib. There, he maintained a zoo also. It is well known that from his hospital, rare herbal medicines were provided to the royal family. Guru Har Rai Ji, was blessed with Guruship on March 3, 1644, at the tender age of 14 years and the Sikhs celebrate this day, globally, as the Environment Day.

*General Philosophy of Sikh Religion*

In Sikh religion, according to the *Sri Guru Granth Ji* (SGGJ), word-*Guru* (spiritual teacher) of the Sikhs, God resides in creation. The exact term used in the very first line of SGGJ is *Karta-Purukh* meaning that one God is the resident-creator of the universe. Therefore, Sikhs believe that visible form of God is nature or environment itself, similar to the concept of mind and matter.

Sustainable development of environment in Sikh religion is considered not only in terms of flora, fauna and basic elements of nature but also the general environment.

*Sarbat da Bhalla* meaning ‘prosperity and peace for everything in the world’ is a statement that a Sikh utters at least two times a day, on completing the morning and evening prayers. This “everything” includes all the living and non-living as well as visible and invisible things in the universe.

Sikh philosophy believes that everything operates under principles set by God and the most basic principle that has regularly been stressed in the SGGJ is - The soul knows that as one sows, so will one reap (SGGJ, p. 1243). Therefore, it is in the interest of everybody that no harm is done to anything in the universe and it is this context that many Sikhs prefer vegetarian diet, as prescribed in community Kitchen or *Guru ka Langar*, served in every *Gurudwara* or a Sikh Temple.

As Sikhs believe that all things are created and inhabited by God, there is no scope for exploiting the environment or other individuals. Illustratively, Sikh gurus were particular in raising the status of women in society and prohibited wearing of a veil, or practicing female infanticide and sati, and encouraged widow remarriage and a healthy family life; a male child was not considered a must. Therefore, an attempt was made to change social norms and raise self-esteem of female population that constitutes one-half of the human race. Guru Nanak asked around 1500 AD - So why call her bad from whom kings are born? (SGGJ, p. 473). The general advice for an individual is to plan on a long term basis. The Guru also guides that the intentions while pursing any activity should be pious otherwise the noose gets tightened around one’s own neck itself. The emphasis is on developing harmonious relationship with natural surroundings. This would imply that nature and environment which is important for the survival of human race has to be nurtured.

Compassion and contentment should be the guiding principle for any follower of *dharma* as mentioned in SGGJ. Sikhism believes that there is need to respect everything in the environment, as SGGJ observes that - Now, the Merciful Lord has issued a Command, Let no one chase after and attack anyone else. Let all abide in peace, under this Benevolent Rule (SGGJ, p.74)

*Sikh Religion and Environment*

Sikhism believes that God resides in the creation. To quote – God resides in nature or environment and it is not possible to fathom your end (SGGJ, p. 469). Again, Air, water, earth and sky - the Lord has made these home and temple. God is pervading everywhere, O Nanak. Tell me: what can be counted as false? (SGGJ, p. 723)

SGGJ also guides that first came air from God, and then from air comes water. Therefore, these elements directly represent God’s presence in the environment. Thus, SGGJ mentions that natural resources like water, earth, and air are sacred and therefore, should be respected. SGGJ speaks of water as the father, earth the mother and air the guru. And nature and environment are so intricately woven into *Gurbani* (compositions included in SGGJ) that for followers of *dharma*, *kudrat* is just an extension of God and we living beings are a component therein - This world is the residence of the True Lord; within it is the dwelling of the True Lord. Wonderful are the forms, wonderful are the colors. Wonderful are the beings who wander around naked. Wonderful is the wind, wonderful is the water. Wonderful is fire, which works wonders. Wonderful is the earth, wonderful the sources of creation. Wonderful are the tastes to which mortals are attached. (SGGJ, p.464). And then again - Upon that cosmic platter 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 altar flowers in offering 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 (SGGJ, p. 13). According to SGGJ, human beings have evolved from various stages and traversed the path of plant and animal life, and that human form, an ultimate gift, is a unique opportunity to self-realize. Therefore, the guidance is to identify with flora and fauna and take care of the environment.

The Sikh Gurus generally had a tradition of establishing new cities like Amritsar, Anandpur Sahib, Goindwal, Kartarpur, Kiratpur, Paonta Sahib, and Tarn Taran, and in planning of those cities, environmental concerns like adequate development of water sources and drainage of waste water, gardens and open spaces were accorded utmost importance.

A quote from SGGJ sums up the attitude of Sikhs towards nature and environment - *Sabhay Sajhevaal Sadain Toonh Kisai Na Diseh Bahra Jio* - All are known partners; you are not seen Outside of anyone, O! Lovable (SGGJ, p.97). The whole universe seems a part of one continuity with nothing alien in it. That is the main motivation in conserving and caring for environment.

1. Material sourced from sites of SGPC, Encyclopedia on Sikhism by Harbans Singh; and Sikh Foundation. http://www.sikhfoundation.org/people-events/sustainable-development-of-environment-evidence-from-sikh-religion/. Compiled by Harbinder Kaur – harbinder.kaur1968@gmail.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)