



Teachings of Guru Granth Sahib Ji on environment and the contribution of Sikhism in environmental protection

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Abstract

This paper examines the environmental teachings found in the Guru Granth Sahib Ji (Guru Granth Sahib Ji), the central scripture of Sikhism, and explores how these teachings have been reflected in the environmental contributions of the Sikh community across history and in the present day. The study draws on key concepts from Sikh theology including Hukam, Seva, and Sarbat da Bhala and connects them to environmental ethics. It also looks at documented examples of Sikh-led environmental action, such as the Kali Bein River restoration and the EcoSikh movement. The paper finds that environmental awareness is not peripheral to Sikh belief but is embedded within its core scriptural teachings.

Keywords: Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Sikhism, environment, Hukam, Seva, Sarbat da Bhala, Eco-Sikh, nature

Introduction

Environmental issues like climate change, deforestation, and water contamination have pushed scholars, policymakers, and communities to look for solutions from multiple directions including religion. Religious traditions often shape how people understand their relationship with the natural world, and this can have real implications for how communities behave toward the environment.

Sikhism, a religion that originated in the Punjab region of South Asia in the 15th century, has a body of scriptural and institutional teaching that is directly relevant to environmental questions. The Guru Granth Sahib Ji was compiled between 1604 and 1708 and considered the living Guru of the Sikhs which contains numerous hymns (shabads) that address nature, the elements, and humanity's place within creation. These are not incidental references; they form part of a coherent theological position on the relationship between God, humans, and the natural world.

This paper is structured into three parts: first, a look at what the Guru Granth Sahib Ji actually says about the environment; second, the ethical principles in Sikhism that support environmental care; and third, examples of how Sikh communities have acted on these principles in practice. The goal is to give a clear and grounded picture of Sikhism's engagement with environmental issues, without overstating or understating its significance.

Environmental Teachings In The Guru Granth Sahib Ji

1. The Theological Starting Point: God Present in Creation

A foundational idea in the Guru Granth Sahib Ji is that the divine is not separate from the created world but is present within it. This concept is referred to as Sargun Brahm which holds that God can be seen in all of creation: in rivers, trees, animals, and the elements. This is distinct from a worldview that places God entirely outside of nature, and it has significant implications for how Sikhs are theologically expected to relate to the natural world.

The Guru Granth Sahib Ji opens with the Mool Mantar, beginning with "Ik Onkar" - One Creator, One Creation. The teaching that all existence flows from one source and

remains interconnected runs throughout the scripture. Within this framework, damaging the natural world is not simply an ecological problem but a spiritual one, since creation itself is understood as a divine expression.

2. Air, Water, and Earth in the Guru Granth Sahib Ji

One of the most directly environmental passages in the Guru Granth Sahib Ji comes from the Japji Sahib, the opening composition by Guru Nanak Dev Ji:

"Pavan Guru, Pani Pita, Mata Dharat Mahat"

("Air is the Guru, Water is the Father, and Earth is the Great Mother" — Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Ang 8)

This verse assigns specific, elevated roles to three of the most essential natural elements. Air is called the Guru - the guide and teacher. Water is the Father - the source of sustenance. The Earth is the Great Mother - the nurturer of all life. These designations place these elements in a position of reverence rather than utility, suggesting that they are to be protected and respected rather than simply consumed.

Water, in particular, receives significant attention throughout the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. Multiple shabads describe the divine light as being present within water:

"Jal te bhaio hari ka naama, jal meh jot samani"

("From water, the Name of the Lord emanates; in water, His light is contained" — Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Ang 1240)

This kind of verse situates water within a sacred frame of reference. The practical consequence is that polluting or wasting water becomes not just an environmental concern but a violation of something considered spiritually significant.

3. Hukam The Concept of Divine Order

Another concept central to understanding the Guru Granth Sahib Ji's environmental teaching is Hukam, which refers to the divine will or cosmic order that governs all of creation. According to the Guru Granth Sahib Ji, the natural world - seasons, growth, water cycles, ecosystems operates according to Hukam. Human beings are part of this order, not above it.

"Hukme andar sab ko, bahar Hukam na koe"

("Everyone is subject to the divine command; no one is beyond it" — Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Ang 1)

The concept of Hukam has clear implications for environmental ethics. Actions that disrupt the natural order deforestation, industrial pollution, unsustainable extraction of resources can be understood, within this framework, as acting against Hukam. The Guru Granth Sahib Ji teaches that Haumai (ego or self-centredness) is what causes humans to act in opposition to divine order, and much of Sikh spiritual practice is oriented toward overcoming it. Environmental destruction, in this reading, is partly a consequence of Haumai - the tendency to prioritise short-term human gain over the broader, divinely ordered balance of nature.

4. The Five Elements and Human Interconnection with Nature

The Guru Granth Sahib Ji also refers frequently to the Panj Tatva - the five classical elements of earth, water, fire, air, and ether as the building blocks of all creation, including the human body:

"Panj tat kar tumdha janiya"

("From the five elements your body was created" — Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Ang 1026)

The teaching that human beings are composed of the same elements as the rest of the natural world establishes a sense of interconnection rather than separation. This challenges the notion that nature exists purely as a resource for human use and instead positions humans as participants within a shared ecological and spiritual order.

5. All of Creation Shares the Divine Light

A recurring theme in the Guru Granth Sahib Ji is that the divine light (jot) is present not just in humans but in all living things - trees, animals, and plants included:

"Sab gobind hai, sab gobind hai; gobind bin nahin koi"

("God is in everything, God is in everything; without God there is nothing" — Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Ang 485)

This teaching has obvious relevance to biodiversity and the protection of ecosystems. If all living things are understood to share in the divine, then the destruction of species or habitats carries a moral and spiritual weight beyond just its ecological impact.

Sikh Ethical Principles and Environmental Responsibility

1. Seva Selfless Service

Seva, meaning selfless service, is one of the foundational practices in Sikhism. It has traditionally been understood as service to the community and to God. However, given the Guru Granth Sahib Ji's framing of the Earth as the Great Mother, a growing number of Sikh scholars and institutions have extended the concept of Seva to include care for the environment sometimes called Dharti Seva (service to the Earth). Within this interpretation, activities like planting trees, cleaning rivers, or conserving water are framed as acts of religious devotion rather than simply civic responsibility.

2. Sarbat da Bhala Well-being of All

The Ardas (the Sikh communal prayer) concludes with the petition for Sarbat da Bhala - the well-being of all. This principle extends moral concern beyond individuals or communities to all of creation. Environmental stewardship fits naturally within this framework, since ecological health

is a prerequisite for the well-being of all living beings. The principle also has an intergenerational dimension - well-being of all includes future generations, which connects to long-term sustainability.

3. Kirat Karni Ethical Livelihood

Sikhism's emphasis on Kirat Karni - earning one's livelihood through honest and ethical means has implications for how people interact with natural resources. Practices that exploit ecosystems for profit at the expense of communities or the environment would be difficult to reconcile with this principle. Sustainable agriculture, responsible resource use, and fair trade practices are broadly consistent with the spirit of Kirat Karni.

Historical Contributions of Sikhism To Environmental Practice

1. Environmental Practices of the Sikh Gurus

The Sikh Gurus actively built institutions that had environmental dimensions. Guru Amar Das Ji, the third Guru, constructed the Baoli Sahib at Goindwal in the 16th century, a large stepwell that provided clean water access to pilgrims and local communities. This was a significant act of public water infrastructure rooted in the view that water is a sacred and shared resource.

Trees were also integrated into Gurdwara design from early on. Many Gurdwaras included gardens (Phulwari) and orchards, with fruit trees planted so that travellers and community members could eat freely. This practice of planting and maintaining trees as part of religious duty reflects the scriptural reverence for nature in a practical, institutional form.

2. The Langar System

The Langar - the free community kitchen found in every Gurdwara - is one of Sikhism's most well-known institutions. Langar food is traditionally vegetarian, not because Sikhism requires vegetarianism, but because it ensures the meal can be shared across all castes, religions, and dietary backgrounds. As a side effect, this centuries-old practice has modelled a low-impact, plant-based communal diet on a massive scale. Millions of people are fed through Langar daily across the world, making it one of the largest vegetarian food operations in existence.

Contemporary sikh environmental contributions

1. The Eco-Sikh Movement

In 2008, the Eco-Sikh movement was formally launched in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC). The movement developed a Seven-Year Plan for environmental action, grounded explicitly in Sikh scriptural principles. Its flagship campaign of planting one million trees in honour of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's 550th birth anniversary was taken up by Gurdwaras, schools, and individuals across India, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, and several African countries. The target was met and surpassed through voluntary community participation.

2. Restoration of the Kali Bein River

One of the most documented examples of Sikh environmental action is the restoration of the Kali Bein River in Punjab. The river holds historical significance as the stream where Guru Nanak Dev Ji is said to have

received divine enlightenment. By the early 2000s, it had been reduced to a heavily polluted drain due to sewage discharge and industrial waste.

Sikh environmental activist Sant Balbir Singh organised a large-scale community effort to clean the river. Drawing entirely on voluntary Seva, hundreds of thousands of people participated in cleaning approximately 160 kilometres of the waterway over several years, without government funding. The river was restored to a flowing, functioning state and now supports aquatic life. The project has since been cited internationally as a model of community-led, faith-motivated environmental restoration.

3. Green Gurdwaras

A number of Gurdwaras worldwide have undertaken sustainability initiatives within their own operations. These include the installation of solar panels, rainwater harvesting systems, organic vegetable gardens, and composting programmes. The Golden Temple (Harmandir Sahib) in Amritsar has implemented water conservation measures. Several Gurdwaras in the UK and Canada have made public commitments to reduce their carbon footprint. Given that there are estimated to be over 200,000 Gurdwaras globally, the potential cumulative impact of such changes is considerable.

4. Sikh Participation in Climate Advocacy

Sikh organisations have also participated in international climate discussions, including the COP climate summits, framing their advocacy in terms of Sikh values. The argument made by these representatives is straightforward: addressing climate change is an expression of Sarbat da Bhala - caring for the well-being of all people and all species, including those most vulnerable to climate impacts. Various Sikh councils and coalitions have published resources connecting climate action to core scriptural teachings, with the aim of mobilising faith communities around environmental responsibility.

Challenges and gaps

It is worth acknowledging that there is not always a clear alignment between the environmental teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji and the situation on the ground. Punjab, the historical and cultural heartland of Sikhism, currently faces serious environmental degradation. Groundwater levels have dropped significantly due to water-intensive monoculture farming. Seasonal air pollution from crop residue burning is a recurring public health crisis. Several major rivers in the region are heavily contaminated from agricultural runoff and industrial discharge.

These realities point to a gap between scriptural values and everyday practice. Environmental teachings in the Guru Granth Sahib Ji are not always a prominent part of religious education in Gurdwaras or Sikh schools, and the connection between faith and environmental responsibility is not always drawn explicitly. Movements like Eco-Sikh are working to change this, but it remains a work in progress.

The Sikh diaspora, which is spread across North America, Europe, and elsewhere, also carries its own environmental footprint including consumption patterns and lifestyle choices that are not always consistent with the principles of Hukam and Sarbat da Bhala. This tension is something that Sikh institutions and communities are beginning to engage with more directly.

Conclusion

The Guru Granth Sahib Ji contains a clear and theologically grounded body of teaching on the natural world. Air, water, and earth are described as sacred; all living beings are understood to share in the divine light; and the concept of Hukam positions human beings as participants within a divinely ordered natural system rather than rulers over it. These are not isolated verses, they reflect a consistent perspective on humanity's relationship with nature that runs throughout the scripture.

In practice, Sikh communities have at various points translated these teachings into concrete environmental action through the design of Gurdwaras, the institution of the vegetarian Langar, the restoration of the Kali Bein River, large-scale tree planting campaigns, and participation in global climate advocacy. These contributions are real and documentable, even if they exist alongside significant environmental challenges in the regions most associated with Sikh history.

On the whole, the evidence suggests that Sikhism has a meaningful and internally consistent environmental ethic rooted in its central scripture. The extent to which these teachings are actively practiced continues to evolve, as Sikh communities across the world engage more directly with environmental issues.

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