



Sikh Faith Statement on the Environment

The Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib, declares that the purpose of human beings is to achieve a blissful state and to be in harmony with the earth and all creation. It seems, however, that humans have drifted away from that ideal. For the earth is today saturated with problems. It is agonizing over the fate of its inhabitants and their future! It is in peril as never before. Its lakes and rivers are being choked, killing its marine life. Its forests are being denuded. A smoky haze envelops the cities of the world. Human beings are exploiting human beings.

The Sense of Crisis

There is a sense of crisis in all parts of the world, in various countries and among various peoples. The demands of national economic growth and individual needs and desires are depleting the natural resources of the earth.

There is serious concern that the earth may no longer be a sustainable biosystem. The major crises facing the earth—the social justice crisis and the environmental crisis—together are heading the earth toward a disastrous situation. The social justice crisis is caused by humanity's confrontation with itself and the environmental crisis is caused by humanity's confrontation with nature. The social justice crisis is that poverty, hunger, disease, exploitation, and injustice are widespread. There are economic wars over resources and markets.

The rights of the poor and the marginal are violated. Women, constituting half the world's population,

The environmental crisis caused by humanity's exploitation of nature is leading to the depletion of forests, and overuse of land for agriculture and habitation. Today pollution is contaminating ponds and lakes. Smoke from industries, homes, and vehicles is in the air. Industrial waste and consumer trash is piling up. The consequences are unknown. The viability of many animal and plant species, and possibly that of humans, is at stake.

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A Sikh Solution

This crisis cries out for an immediate and urgent solution. The crisis requires going back to the basic question of the purpose of human beings in this universe and an understanding of ourselves and God's creation.

We are called to the vision of Guru Nanak which is a World Society comprising God-conscious human beings who have realized God. To these spiritual beings the earth and the universe are sacred; all life is unity, and their mission is the spiritualization of all.

Guru Nanak laid the foundation of Sikhism in the late fifteenth century. His writings, along with those of other human Gurus who succeeded him and of other spiritual leaders known as Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Granth has been the Guru and Divine Master of the Sikhs since 1708. Guru Singh declared that there would be no more human Gurus. Guru Nanak and his successors during the last 500 years have been creating an ideal society that has as its basis spiritual awareness and ethical integrity. The name "Sikh" means "one who seeks the Truth."

Guru Nanak in his philosophy states that the reality that humans create around themselves is a reflection of the current instability of the natural system of the earth—the external environment of human beings and the instability and pain within humans. The increasing barrenness of the earth's terrain is a reflection of the human impact on the environment.

The solution to problems manifest in our world lies in prayer and in accepting God's hukam. It is difficult to explain these concepts accurately. Hukam is one such concept—it may be best described as a combination of God's will and an attitude of humility, and surrender to the Divine Spirit, conscientious human beings can seek to realize a harmonious environment and of social justice. In the Sikh Way this is done through the guidance of the Guru, the messenger of God.

Quoted passages below are taken from the Guru Granth Sahib.

Unity of Spirit and Matter and the Interconnectedness of All Creation

The Sikh view is that spirit and matter are not antagonistic. Guru Nanak declared that the spirit is the essence of all matter, and matter is a form of spirit.

Spirit takes on many forms and names under various conditions:

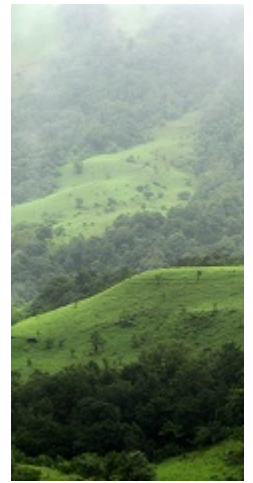
"When I saw truly, I knew that all was primeval.

Nanak, the subtle [spirit] and the gross [material] are, in fact, identical. (281)

That which is inside a person, the same is outside; nothing else exists.

By divine prompting look upon all existence as one and undifferentiated; the same light penetrates all

The chasm between the material and the spiritual is in the minds of humans only. It is a limitation of human perception that spirit and matter appear as duality, and their unity is not self-evident.



The material universe is God's creation. Its origin was in God and its end is in God, and it operates as God's will. Nanak declares that God alone knows the reasons for and the moment of earth's creation. The end is unknowable. The act of creation itself, the creation of the primeval atom, was instantaneous, caused by God's will.

Further descriptions of the universe and its creation in Sikh scripture are remarkably similar to those of the universe and its origin. One of the basic hymns in the Sikh scripture, which may be called the *Hymn of the Indeterminate Void*, describes the indeterminate void before the existence of this universe.

Limitless Galaxies



Guru Nanak speaks of innumerable galaxies, boundaries of which are beyond human ability to comprehend. The extent of creation is limitless.

God created the universe and the world, for reasons being the results of God's actions all parts of the universe are pervasive being manifest through various elements.

Having created this universe and the world, God places everything within God's hukam. God alone knows how to only direct this vast and massive theater, but also with kindness—the benign, supportive parent!

"Men, trees, pilgrimage places, banks of sacred streams, spheres, universes, continents, solar systems. The sources of creation, egg-born, womb-born, earth-born, mountains and sentient beings. He, the Lord, knows their condition, O Nanak. Nanak, having created them all. The Creator who created the world, He takes thought of it as well". (466)

The world, like all creation, is a manifestation of God. Every creature in this world, every plant, every animal, every Creator. Each is part of God and God is within each element of creation. God is the cause of all and sustains all between all existence.

"The Creator created himself ... And created all creation in which He is manifest. You Yourself the butterfly, the tree. You Yourself the water, desert, ocean and the pond. You Yourself are the big fish, tortoise and the form cannot be known." (1016)

In the world God has created he has also provided each species and humans with means of support and sustenance.

In Sikh beliefs, a concern for the environment is part of an integrated approach to life and nature. Understanding the origin and end, humans must have consciousness of their place in creation and their relationship with it. They should conduct themselves through life with love, compassion, and justice. Becoming one with God and being that humans endeavor to live in harmony with all of God's creation.

Spiritual Discipline

The second postulate is that humans, practicing a highly disciplined life, while remaining active in the spiritual progression. It is important that Sikhs retain the primacy of spirit over matter, while it is de matter or material existence. It is not required that humans renounce the world. They must maintain all responsibilities in the world. Humans should be renouncers of plenty and maintain a simple fundamentally starts with an individual conquering himself/herself with the guidance of the Guru.

The emphasis is on mastery over the self and the discovery of the self, not mastery over nature. Sikhism teaches against a life of conspicuous, wasteful consumption. The Guru recommends a judicious use of cultural resources available to humans.

“Then why get attached to what you will leave behind. Having wealth, you indulge in pleasures but they bail you out? All your houses, horses, elephants and luxurious cars, They are just pomp and show, all

The Gurus taught humans to be aware of and respect the dignity in all life, whether human or not. Spirituality should be fostered where one can first recognize the Divine spark within oneself, see it in others, cherish it, and

“This little shrine of the human body! This great opportunity of life! The object is to meet the Beloved,

Humans have the capability to further their spiritual progression through conscious choice and it is in this choice by which they might do so. The method suggested by Guru Nanak is one of spiritual discipline, meditation, and service. Sikhism emphasizes mastering five negative forces: Lust, Anger, Worldly or Materialistic Attachment, Greed, and Ego. Together they constitute what Sikhs term Haumai—“I am-ness.” Mastering Haumai is achieved by developing Compassion, Humility, Contemplation, Contentment, and Service (seva) without expecting any material

The guiding principles are Love and Forgiveness. Every decision in life has to be based on Ratio and ethics. Guru Nanak’s philosophy of values inspires the individual to transcend his/her existence through the Sikh religion preaches strong family involvement. A person pursuing this spiritual discipline creates a supportive atmosphere for other members of the family to progress spiritually.

The Ideal Sikh Has an Intense Desire to Do Good

The third postulate is that the true end of human beings is in their emergence as God-conscious beings, who remain aware of the earth and operate in the mundane material world, with the object of transforming and spiritualizing it into a higher plane of existence. In this spiritual state individuals are motivated by an intense desire to do good, transforming their surroundings.

Through a life based on the method prescribed by the Gurus humans may achieve a higher spiritual state. Such truly emancipated, valiant, and enlightened spirits (jivan-mukta, brahma-gyani) become the true benefactors of humanity and the world around them. Such an individual would not exploit another human or sentient being, as each is a manifestation of the eternal and the supreme. In this God-conscious state they see God in all and everything.

*“I perceive Thy form in all life and light;
I perceive Thy power in all spheres and sight.” (464)*



Spiritualization is a liberation from material compulsions and attractions. It means an awareness of 1 toward the execution of Divine Will. So, the spiritualized human is creative and constructive. The harmony with other individuals, with other beings, and with other forms. For an enlightened indiv purpose: to practice spirituality. That is the ultimate objective of all humans.

Such a person is involved in human problems and society and has to prove his or her effectiveness t a mission—and works for the emancipation of all. A true Sikh is for individual human rights, the envirc

“The God-conscious person is animated with an intense desire to do good in this world.” (273)

Practicing the Philosophy

Integrated approach: Care of the environment without social justice is not possible

Environmental concerns may be viewed as part of the broader issue of human developme environmental problems, particularly the exploitation of environmental resources in developing natic large parts of the population. Therefore an integrated approach is necessary.

Sikhism opposes the idea that the struggle of the human race is against nature and that human si “harnessing” nature. The objective is harmony with the eternal—God—which implies a life of harmc for a life of harmony, therefore, also implies a life of supporting individual rights and environmental injustice toward anybody and anything.

The tenth Guru in 1699 founded the Order of the Khalsa, whose members practice the spiritual committed to ensure the preservation and prevalence of a World Society. Over the last three centuri order have stood up for the rights of the oppressed and the disenfranchised even at the cost of their c 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 birthright

to seek and pursue happiness and self-fulfillment.

Love and persuasion is the only law of social coherence.” (74)

The Khalsa have opposed any force that has threatened the freedom and dignity of human beings. In the oppressive rulers of northern India, and invaders from Afghanistan; in the nineteenth and t struggled against oppression by European colonists and Indian governments. For the Khalsa, justice inclusion of all in obtaining and enjoying the fruits of God’s creation. Justice achieved through coop ideal for the Khalsa is to strive for justice for all, not merely for themselves.

The Institutions of Sangat, Pangat, and Langar

The Sikh Gurus, through their lives, provided role models for the Sikhs. They all actively worked to str and challenged the rigid social stratification of the caste system in India. The very existence of



challenging:

- * Inequality in society, and
- * The exploitation of the poor and the marginal establishment.

Sikh Gurus provided many examples of stand confronting exploitation and oppression. They stood for, as Guru Nanak said:

"There are the lowest men among the low castes. What have I got to do with the great? God's eye of

care of the lowly." (15)

Sikh Gurus challenged the status quo and came into conflict with the entrenched elite—political, social. The Gurus were most sympathetic to the downtrodden of society, the untouchables and those of low status. They opposed the division of society on the basis of caste, which had been and is still significantly present. They lived with the poor in full measure and were critical of those responsible for their misery. In the course of their lives, they lived in the homes of those who made an honest living rather than in 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. Guru Tegh Bahadur, was martyred when he stood up for the religious freedom of the Hindu inhabitants of Kashmir. Guru Arjan, was martyred for accepting Islam by the rulers.

Sikh Gurus also molded traditional lifestyles to exemplify a more equitable society. They created a new basis of Sikh society and are based on the equality of all. The Sikh Gurus invited people of all castes together. That would be called *sangat*. Either before or after the meditation, people were asked to sit together 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 house called *langar*. These three ideas were in contrast to the practices of Indian society, which had separate temples for different castes and outcasts. These changes by the Sikh Gurus created a lot of opposition from the religious establishment. Today, in Sikh practices, through the creation of the Khalsa, the Gurus established a system that would bring about peace and just order.

Equality of Women

Women and their rights have been ignored for too long. Any approach to solving problems of society must be sensitive to women's concerns, and must include women as equals.

Often piecemeal solutions to environmental problems focus on limiting population growth and on family planning measures end up abusing women's rights and should be rejected on those grounds. There is a deep mistrust of family planning among women.

Guru Nanak and other Sikh Gurus during their lives advocated equality and dignity of women and their principles. Guru Nanak denounced the idea that spirituality was only for men, and not for women. 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." (473)

Guru Amardas strongly opposed the custom of sati in the sixteenth century and also advocated the Indian practice whereby a widow burned herself with her husband's corpse at cremation. Guru Amardas had a large number of women preachers, and at least one female bishop, Mathura Devi, 400 years ago. His voice was against the purdah or veil. Guru Amardas did not even allow the Queen of Haripur to come wearing a veil.

The immediate effect of these reforms was that women gained an equal status with men. Those who were in society became fired with a new hope and courage to lift themselves to be equals of the best in the world. A woman was raised with the belief that she was not a helpless creature but a responsible being endowed with which she could do much to mold the destiny of society.

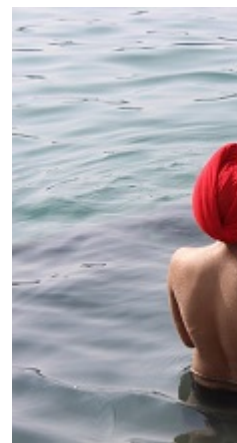
Women came forward as the defenders of their honor and dignity. They also became the rocks that bore the burden of unnecessary and unreasonable customs, Sikh women became the temporal and spiritual guides, acting as the "conscience of men." Sikh women proved themselves the equals of men in service, devotion, and sacrifice.

Since the late nineteenth century, Sikh community organizations have made efforts to expand education. Individual Sikhs, men and women, in various cities and towns took the initiative to start and operate schools. Women's education was part of the drive to improve education among the Sikhs, initiated by Sikh community organizations in towns and villages in the Punjab, and in cities with significant Sikh populations, there exist schools and community organizations.

Community-based Sharing of Resources

Traditional modes of farming and traditional modes of life in northern India have been dependent upon limited resources. As there exist circumstances where large numbers of people depend upon relatively scarce resources, the traditional lifestyle ensures use of the least resources, considerable reuse, and recycling. In a culture based on organic materials, recycling is an intrinsic and natural part of the resource cycle. There are strong traditions of sharing.

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 gurudwara and a source of water—pond, tank, pool,



or running water. Both of these sites were surrounded by community land, not owned by anyone and was where there were trees and plants, such as groves or small forests. They provided shade and firewood within easy reach of habitation.

The Gurus established towns and cities, each created around a religious center. The focus was on a lifestyle that promoted equity among people, and optimum utilization of resources. Even today, resources with their neighbors. This is particularly evident on large family occasions such as wedding play host to guests and share living space, beds, and so on.

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

Since the time of the Gurus, Sikh gurudwaras have included institutionalized practices that emphasize sharing. Gurudwaras, in addition to being places where people congregate for prayer and meditation, are also places for others; a community kitchen (Langar); a place for dispensing medication and medical care; and a place for the young. Gurudwaras have always been places of shelter for travelers and visitors, and most major gurus' visitors may stay. In addition Sikh gurudwaras stock extra beds, sheets, pots and pans, etc. At wedding the gurudwaras are a source for borrowing these items.

There has always been great emphasis on avoiding waste. Traditionally the community kitchen serves leaves and cups made from clay. Today they tend to use steel plates and utensils that are reused. They are stocked by ordinary people—farmers, traders, others in the community—on a voluntary basis.

Sikhism Against Smoking

It is now a known fact that smoking is both a primary and secondary health hazard. In addition to having seriously deleterious effects on the person who smokes, on the bystander who breathes the secondhand smoke, and on the unborn fetus of the female smoker. Though this has only been scientifically verified in the last half century, the last living Guru of the Sikhs, listed the use of tobacco as one of the four major acts forbidden to his religion. Though tobacco was introduced into India only in the mid-1600s, he had the wisdom to forbid its use. From its very beginning, Sikhism had forbidden the use of any intoxicants or mind-altering substances, except for medicinal purposes.

Conclusion

The ideal for Sikhism is a society based upon mutual respect and cooperation and providing an opportunity for everyone to grow spiritually. Sikhism regards a cooperative society as the only truly religious society, as the only one grounded in the worth of every individual as a microcosm of God. Therefore, an individual must never be manipulated, or engineered:

"If thou wouldst seek God, demolish and distort not the heart of any individual". (1384)



All life is interconnected. A human body consists of many parts, each with a distinct name, location, and function, all dependent upon each other. In the same way, all the constituents of the earth are dependent upon each other. Decisions cannot be ignored by others. Choices in one's life have consequences for the rest of the world. It is part of our very existence and nurturing, depends upon a balance of needs to derive sustenance from the earth and not to burn, or destroy it. Sikhs believe that an awareness of the interconnectedness between humans and the environment is necessary and for our survival. A new "environmental ethic" calls for the wise use of the resources provided by a bountiful earth through honest understanding and dedicated application of our heritage.

This statement was compiled under the guidance of the Jathedar of Anandapur, who is one of the five Gurus of Sikhism; and Sri Akhal Takhat Sahib, his deputy. It is one of the Statements from ten other faiths, in [Faith in Conservation](#), by Victoria Finlay, published by the World Bank in 2003.

The brief statement can be found [here](#)

For other faith's statements on the environment, please click [here](#)

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