



## Our environment and us: a Sikh perspective

**Gopinder Kaur**

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Gopinder Kaur** is a postgraduate researcher at the School of Education, University of Birmingham, focusing on intercultural approaches to the spiritual development of children. A graduate in Modern Languages from the University of Cambridge, she worked for the cross-cultural children's publisher, Barefoot Books, and completed a Masters at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Life in London and now Birmingham has provided a context for lifelong learning through the direct 'sangar' or company of Sikh faith practitioners, inspiring her contributions to BBC Radio 2's 'Pause for Thought' and Radio 4's 'Prayer for the Day', her work as an FE teacher of Sikh Studies, and other educational involvements, which includes volunteer work with the Sikh charitable organisation, Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha.

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Pavan Guru, pani pita, mata dharat mahat  
Divas ra-t dui da-i da-ya, khelai sagal jagat...

Air is our Guru, water our father, and great earth is our mother;  
Day and night are the male and female nurses, in whose lap the whole world plays...

Growing up as a Sikh child, these were some of the first lines from Gurbani, Sikh sacred verse, which became familiar to me, signalling the close of 'Jap Ji Sahib', our early morning prayer. As I absorbed their rhyme and rhythm, it was probably the simple imagery echoing a child's-eye view of the world which captivated me most. It expresses the state of being 'a child of the universe', by personifying nature and the elements into the figures of Guru, father ('pita') and mother ('mata'), and those who nurse us in our infancy – the central personalities who nurture and guide our growing bodies, minds and spirits. Such relationships are more than functional; they are held in balance by the twin qualities of love and respect and are marked by a capacity for self-sacrifice. Water and earth, father and mother, bring forth and sustain new life; the air too sustains us, and transmits to us the Guru's sacred words, which are capable of transforming us.

I begin with this personal recollection because, by illuminating our sense of relationship to the environment, it sets the tone for the reflections which are to follow, based on conversations I have had with Sikhs who can be described as environmental visionaries and activists. What I hope emerges is an understanding of how Sikh scripture and sayings help to give meaning, purpose, value and commitment to such endeavours, and of how this transformative dimension can be neglected when we attempt only to recognise the 'mechanics' of any faith tradition – be it viewed from the inside out or the outside in.

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Whatever our background or worldview, all of us are enmeshed in a web of systems and forces whose by-product is environmental harm on an unprecedented scale. From a purely secular perspective, it is nonsensical to continue in this way and such behaviour does not become us as humans. What does a faith-inspired perspective bring to this base-level understanding, and how does this filter down to those who inherit, associate with, or commit to the Sikh faith? What is it like to look at one's environment through Sikh eyes; more particularly through those eyes to which the 'eyeliner' of the Guru's wisdom has been applied? (1)

'A person of faith cannot help but feel a deep sense of connection, love, awe and respect for the environment,' remarks Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh, who serves as spiritual leader of Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha (GNNSJ), a Sikh registered charity active in building partnerships with both civic and faith organizations to work towards sustainable peace, locally and globally (2):

Our central belief is *Ik Oankar*: the One Creator pervades all creation. *Apin-ai ap sajio, apin-ai rachio naou; duyi kudrat saji-ai, kar asan dittho chaou...* Asa di Var, the early morning spiritual ballad, tells us that upon creating Himself (3), God created *nam*, the divine name – the first expression of His sacred presence. Secondly He created *kudrat* or nature, which is sustained and totally infused by *nam*. So, the Creator observes creation, and dwells within it. Both are interconnected. You will find this is something stressed especially by the eastern faiths. One cannot help but live in gratitude and respect for the gifts of nature which are marks of God's grace. *Balihari kudrat vasia, tera ant na jae lakhia...* I am totally indebted to you, Oh Infinite Lord, who dwells within nature and whose limits cannot be told...

Let us think about this word 'environment'. I understand it comes from the French *environs* – our surroundings. This includes not only the physical landscape, but the people and creatures around us. We must care for it, not simply in a mechanical way, but through an attitude of love based on *sarbat da bhalla* or seeking the 'well-being of all'. We must think about the 'ecology' of our relationships and attitudes towards each other. Industry creates toxins that pollute the earth, but we also create toxins which pollute the environment of our minds and bodies, through our selfish and ignorant tendencies. *Haumai dhirag rog hai, daru bhi is mahi...* Gurbani tells me the human ego, *haumai*, is an innate part of us, but it can afflict us like chronic disease. Faith is the antidote which uplifts us and unlocks our capacity for *deya* (compassion, human kindness). Then *deya* is not merely an 'obligation', but a 'quality' of our being. This is probably why you find that faith-based organisations are able to achieve tremendous things with few material resources.

My mind flits to a painting which in 2007 won the Westminster Faith Exchange Arts Competition for the 15-19 age group, under the theme 'What prayer means to me'. In it, young Sikh artist Jaskirat Singh Thethy depicted the Earth supported by the cupped hands of 'deya' and 'santokh', or compassion and contentment, inspired by the imagery of a verse in Jap Ji Sahib. These qualities sustain us spiritually as a human entity; they also hold in place our very existence as a planetary entity. I am reminded in turn of Oxfam's recent television campaign, calling on us to 'Be Humankind'. A little old lady going about her daily business starts to notice words representing global problems manifesting themselves as bugs around street corners, scurrying towards the giant monster of injustice. Compelled to act with her conscience awakened, she releases a lion-like roar, emitting rays of light, which are joined by those of others, bringing rainbows of hope to an otherwise gloomy planet.

'To be a person of faith is to be duty-bound to care for creation,' continues Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh:



You know, I rarely use this word "Sikhism". I prefer to talk of Sikh *dharam*. 'Faith' or 'religion', I find, are inadequate translations. *Dharam* for me is a self-acknowledged duty towards Creator and creation. You cannot love one without loving the other. And Jap Ji Sahib tells me to see this whole planet as a *dharamsal* – like a school to practice *dharam*, a giant place of worship, which we visit as spiritual travellers. Our goal is to generate spiritual wealth, in the form of divine attributes, with which to build wholesome lives and serve creation. These are the only 'souvenirs' we take with us on our return home. Instead, society glorifies the amassing of material wealth, thoughtlessly and wastefully, which causes destruction. We suffer from a lot of ignorance also, not only about our individual actions. Many times I wonder about the sheer scale of undisclosed ecological damage caused by modern warfare and nuclear testing. We have had Hiroshima and Nagasaki, plus numerous nuclear testing during the Cold War; we hear about the human death toll in Iraq, but know very little about the impact of war on its ecology.

In 2006 Bhai Sahib participated as an NGO and faith representative at a UN conference to discuss challenges to fulfilling the eight Millennium Development Goals, agreed by 189 countries to overcome key problems we face on a global scale. There he stressed there was a missing ninth Millennium Development Goal: the spiritual regeneration of the individual 'to ignite the nucleus of divine power latent within each of us' – a prerequisite for harnessing the degree of altruism and commitment needed to attain these goals and overcome the gridlock caused by apathy and selfishness. '*Dharam* means we have a duty of care,' Bhai Sahib continues. 'As rulers and caretakers of the planet, we must strive to be noble, responsible, humble and wise. My turban and kirpan are constant reminders of this,' he notes, pointing out the distinguishing marks of his identity as a Sikh.

I reflect on the character of the 'sant-sipahi', the saint-soldier of Sikh tradition – one who battles with inner demons to secure the victory of saintliness, which in turn motivates and guides thoughts and actions in the field of life. This is reflected again in the two outer 'kirpans' of the 'khanda' emblem, featured on the 'nishan sahib' flag which identifies a Sikh gurdwara. They proclaim the concept of 'miri-piri', that all secular power (miri) must be balanced and tempered by the strength of spiritual wisdom and values (piri). Freedom and sovereignty are made noble because of this; without this equilibrium, our personal liberty and socio-political systems fall prey to the workings of selfishness, greed, ignorance and an absence of ethics. Miri-piri puts a concern for ethical and spiritual standards at the heart of all human activity.

Today, however, we are easily deluded by that which on the surface seems benign: the slickness of marketing and our own comfort zones mask the economic, agricultural, industrial and other forms of exploitation taking place on a global scale. This, I sometimes think, is the sophisticated face of 'maya', worldly delusion which takes us away from the true nature of things. Most of us, Sikhs included, find ourselves enmeshed within such a delusion. Sikhs tend to inherit their faith through birth, since it is not a proselytising religion. Through our particular history, we have faced various challenges to 'learning about' and 'learning from' our Sikh spiritual heritage, learning which might allow us to harness this heritage to heighten awareness of what it means to be part of the environment and compel us to do more to respect and protect it. Still, the notion of environment runs strong within the Sikh psyche – the fact that faith is not only in one's 'head' or 'heart', but is expressed through one's lifestyle, what one consumes, one's gestures, speech and appearance: the wholeness of the 'environment' of the individual and community within which its spiritual character unfolds and grows.

Part of the Sikh lifestyle (especially of an initiated Khalsa practitioner) includes abstinence from nicotine, drugs, alcohol and, according to many committed practitioners of the faith, from food



derived from the slaughter of animals (4). The body is talked of as a home, temple, or even a universe unto itself, and regarded as a sacred space. The turban honours the seat of wisdom within the human frame; the wearing of the Five Ks inspires courage to uphold goodness, based on compassion and dignity ('kirpan'), commitment to the Creator and to ethical behaviour ('kara'), modesty and self-restraint ('kachhera'), saintliness and a spirit of harmony with the natural order ('kes') whilst maintaining tidiness, order and seeking purity ('kangha') (5). Our inherent dignity as humans and capacity for wise rule is reflected in the names Singh and Kaur, both associated with royalty. Such qualities and principles have resonance with an environmental consciousness and, who knows, if we were to try and visualise an 'eco-warrior', the image of the Khalsa might provide some interesting food for thought.

'To be "environmentally-friendly" is too lukewarm a concept now,' concludes Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh. 'Circumstances will demand us to become more active defenders of our environment. For this we need to transform our mindsets, our whole planetary consciousness, and education plays an important role. Let us try to teach ecology early and reduce the ignorance caused by excessive consumption and urbanisation, and also learn from our grandparents, who knew the art of being resourceful and recycling.'

Education lies at the heart of the ceaseless environmental work of Pardeep Singh Rai. Landscape gardener, educator and activist, he is a rare voice in the UK Sikh community devoted to raising environmental awareness and introducing practical change, which he does by drawing on his spiritual, cultural and, indeed, agricultural heritage as a Sikh and a Panjabi. He is also founder of DEEP, Defenders of the Ecology and Environment of the Panjab (6), and campaigns to bring attention to the ecocide of the 'land of five rivers' (from 'panj', five, and 'ab', water), the birthplace of Sikh tradition.

Reports on the environmental degradation faced by the region, detailing forces which are transforming this once fertile 'bread basket of India' into barren desert, can be found online in news from Birmingham Friends of the Earth and The Refugee Project (7). Pardeep Singh is also coordinator of the Environmental Group for the Panjabis in Britain All-Party Parliamentary Group which has met on issues such as the 'Pesticide Dilemma' (Nov 2005). 'There are a few Panjab-based Sikhs committed to environmental work in the region,' points out Pardeep, 'such as Ram Singh Dhesy of Savi Dharti and Gurminder Singh Thind who have planted hundreds of native species of trees.'

I am reminded of references by Eleanor Nesbitt (8) to Bhagat Puran Singh's attempts to alert people to environmental dangers and of Surjeet Kaur Chahal's work discussing ecology, particularly genetic engineering, from a Sikh perspective. Pardeep Singh also draws much inspiration from the Sikh Gurus themselves, who devised practical strategies to promote the welfare of the environment: 'The seventh Guru, Guru Har Rai, for example, ran a herbal treatment centre in Kiratpur, Panjab, which is now being revived with fresh plantation with the help of forest authorities. He also ran an animal clinic and used to arrange to collect sick animals for treatment to be re-released to the wild.' A painting also comes to my mind of the fifth Guru, depicting his work at a centre, not far from Amritsar, which he opened to treat and care for those suffering from leprosy.

Born in Malaysia, Pardeep Singh spent part of his childhood in the Panjab, which unleashed his fascination for the age-old relationship Panjabis have had with their natural surroundings. 'There is a well known Panjabi proverb which shows this love of nature,' remarks Pardeep, '"God sleeps in the tree, dreams in the animals & wakes in man"'. His stay also brought to life the imagery from nature which permeates the compositions of Gurbani. He gives the example of 'Barah Maah', the 'Twelve Months', which evoke the changing seasons to explore the evolving state of the human being seeking union with her Creator (9):



In this way, we come to see ourselves bound in both a physical and metaphysical relationship with the phenomena of nature. This has a far-reaching impact on how we understand the process of ethical-decision making. In our present-day secular society the individual person is viewed as having autonomy in such matters. Traditionally in Sikh culture, the person is viewed as a combination of mind, soul and body in the context of family, culture, environment and nature. Thus, he or she is seen not as autonomous but rather as intimately integrated with extended family, community and the natural world. This suggests we need a holistic approach to ethical and environmental matters. Sadly, many Sikhs today appear to be indifferent and unresponsive to the degradation of the environment in Panjab and our planet Earth. This is a disservice to Sikhism and human kind!

I picture some of the occasional sightings I've had of elderly, green-fingered Sikhs who visit their allotments on the edge of the Sandwell Valley, near where I live in Birmingham, and the touching scene of one such grandfather helping a young child to pat down some soil around a newly bedded plant. My husband and I both share memories of our grandmothers, whose love for the earth has passed into family folklore. One was famed for growing strawberries in winter, such was her tender loving care and gardener's intuition; another would be found drying melon seeds or tangerine skins in the sun, ready for some home remedy or beauty preparation. Like most grandparents of their generation, they were had the habit of being economical and efficient with resources, minimising waste, and recycling.

Today in an average Sikh family setting, as well as a linguistic gulf separating elders from youngsters, there is no doubt one of lifestyle and the attitudes which underpin our interaction with environment. Any initial shock elders may have felt at what goes into the garbage bin, the time that is spent in front of the TV, or the waste of food at large-scale family functions, has probably dulled over time to quiet tolerance. In some families, however, traditions which maintain a strong consciousness of gratitude and respect have filtered through, for example, in the tradition of covering one's head and meditatively chanting whilst preparing a meal, saying a short prayer before and after eating, and ensuring minimum wastage. An article from the SikhNet website (10) explores this concept of a 'conscious kitchen' with a host of practical ideas for Sikhs to 'green' their daily habits.

London-based Pardeep Singh dedicates himself to a range of ecological initiatives both locally and nationally in UK, with an intricate knowledge of the biodiversity to be found across a range of contexts. He also designs gardens, incorporating his concerns for sustainability, maintaining a holistic approach, and drawing out a sacred dimension. He continues to channel energy towards the Sikh community specifically, compiling reports such as 'The Green Action Guide for London's Gurdwaras', 'The Gurdwara as an Environmental Sanctuary' and 'Healthy Eating for the Sangat'. Changing community habits, he admits, is a slow and uphill struggle. To further this work, he helped to launch, in May 2008, the Sikh Environmental Network.

Other environmental work being done by Sikhs in the UK includes that of Parminder Garcha, who has helped to set up a community garden in Birmingham with the aid of a local Sikh women's group. Khalsa Wood, a project based within Bestwood Country Park on the northern urban fringe of Nottingham, engages local Sikhs in restoring the park. Non-Panjabi Sikhs, many of whom were inspired by Harbhajan Singh Yogi, are probably in the vanguard of Sikhs actively promoting healthy lifestyles with an environmental conscience. Some, such as the French-born Sikh couple who founded Aquarius Health in Cyprus, made a decision to move away from city life in West London and work towards establishing an eco-friendly health centre closer to nature. Another French-born Sikh, Darshan Singh Rudel, who embraced the faith through personal encounter with practitioners of the tradition, now runs Raza organic farms in the Panjab. Some of my Panjabi Sikh relatives are now establishing a life closer to nature in the British countryside and making plans for a well-being centre and a family-scale gurdwara.



None of those mentioned here are representative of Sikhs in Britain, any more than Monty Don, the BBC's organic gardener, is representative of the 'British' and their lifestyle. The do, however, provide examples of individuals whose enterprises draw very consciously upon Sikh spiritual and cultural heritage, whose character is linked to the land and traditions of rural Panjab. Sikh teachings are emphatic that religion is not to be a form of escapism from the world, but a way of reconnecting with it. Those who take the decision to move from city to country seem to be driven by a hope of creating new models for living and increasing self-sufficiency in order to survive some of the problems which may befall us with a possible scarcity of resources in the future. In the meantime, other Sikh organisations, like the Nishkam Civic Centre in Birmingham, are working to foster greater well-being, cohesion, educational nurture and social care within the environment of the city, with the idea that, once you help to generate understanding and peace within the human mind, greater and more sustainable peace is possible within society.

'Guru Nanak teaches me that the reality humans have created around themselves is a reflection of their inner state,' concludes Pardeep. 'The current instability of the natural system of the earth, the external environment of human beings, is only a reflection of the instability and pain within humans. The increasing barrenness of the earth's terrain is a reflection of the emptiness within the human soul.'

How might this barrenness be overcome? The closing message of the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred volume of scripture revered by Sikhs as a 'living Guru', offers an answer:

Nanak, nam milai ta(n) jiva(n), tan man theevai haria.

Says Nanak, by receiving the blessing of *nam*, the divine name of God-consciousness, I begin to truly live, and mind and body blossom forth in radiant greenery.

## Notes

(1) An analogy explored by Singh, N. K. (1993) in *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh vision of the Transcendent*, Cambridge Studies in Religious Traditions, Cambridge University Press.

(2) Details of the present institutional centre for such initiatives can be found at [www.ncauk.org](http://www.ncauk.org).

(3) Whilst God is considered beyond gender in Sikh teaching, the masculine third person singular, in Panjabi as in English, is often used to refer to the Creator, Transcendent etc. Translations by Nikki-Guninder Kaur Singh (see footnote 1) avoid this automatic gendering. Whilst God is often conceived in male terms in Gurbani, female imagery is also used, with an emphasis that the Creator is beyond human categorisation.

(4) This latter point regarding the need for vegetarianism is not explicitly stated in the official 'Rehat Maryada' or Sikh code of conduct, which, formalised in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, outlines the foundations of the Sikh way of life. Hence one comes across Sikhs who may eat meat, so long as it is not ritually slaughtered 'halal' meat, as is popularly understood from the Rehat Maryada. Those who commit to the faith, especially through the inspiration of saintly figures, may be strictly vegetarian, based on an understanding this practice is in line with the core principle of 'deya'.

(5) Approximate translations for each of the Five Ks are: 'kirpan', small sword associated with compassion, courage and dignity which is held in a 'gatra' or sash across the torso; 'kara', bracelet made of steel or iron; 'kachhehra', white cotton undershorts which close with a drawstring; 'kes', hair which for initiated Sikhs is uncut; 'kangha', small wooden comb to groom the hair twice daily.



(6) Note that in some circles the spelling 'Panjab' has superseded the traditional British spelling of 'Punjab', (which has tended to be mispronounced as 'Poonjab'). The former spelling is understood to encompass the region on both sides of the India-Pakistan border.

(7) See the following sites (both accessed June 2008): 'The environmental and water crisis in the Punjab' in 'The Refugee Project: How UK foreign investments creates refugees and asylum seekers': [www.therefugeeproject.org/environmentalrefugees.htm](http://www.therefugeeproject.org/environmentalrefugees.htm) and 'Ecocide in the Land of Five Rivers' in Birmingham Friends of the Earth Newsletter (Oct-Nov 2005), [www.birminghamfoe.org.uk/newslet/news1005/STORY\\_11.HTM](http://www.birminghamfoe.org.uk/newslet/news1005/STORY_11.HTM).

(8) See Nesbitt, E. (2007) 'Sikhism' in Morgan, P. and Lawton, C. (eds) *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2nd edition, 118-167, which makes reference to Singh, P. and Sekhon, H.K. (2001) *Garland Round my Neck: The Story of Puran Singh of Pingalwara*, New Delhi: UBS Publishers and Chahal, S. K. (2005) *Ecology, Redesigning Genes: Ethical and Sikh Perspective*, Amritsar: Singh Brothers.

(9) In *Barah Mah*, the Twelve Months, the human spirit is depicted in feminine terms, as a bride seeking union with her Beloved, also explored in Nikki-Guninder Kaur's work outlined in note 1.

(10) See 'Taking Care of Mother Earth – A Conscious Kitchen' (accessed June 2008) at <http://www.sikhnet.com/news/taking-care-mother-earth-a-conscious-kitchen>.