

Sustainable Development : The Sikh Perspective

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We see unlimited progress around us. The only limits to progress are human creativity and policy. The whole and sole aim of our actions today is development. By development and progress we merely mean material development. Traditionally human beings have taken the view that nature is created simply for man. The philosophy of Bacon was the Charter of the Industrial Revolution. Bacon said "Let the human race recover that right over nature, which belongs to it by Divine Bequest." It was such an attitude towards nature which has led to the present development. The west was always interested in external material progress.

In contrast with this the Sikh Gurus looked down upon mere material progress. They stressed upon both material as well as internal progress. Internal progress was considered as having more value. They stressed the need to search within rather than the material world. Nature was not regarded as having merely instrumental value. God dwells in nature, " Eh Jag Sache Ki Hai Kothri Sache Ka Vich Vaas."

Therefore nature is not created solely for mankind, but it has a right of its own.

Global ecological crisis has arisen because we think we have a right to use nature as we wish to. We are unconcerned about the effects of our actions on nature. We are using more than what the earth can replace. Till now we have been closing our eyes towards the ecological threat. We have been thinking like a rabbit. We think that if we close our eyes the danger will automatically go away. Today, we cannot do that any more.

The Ecological threat faces us at three levels:

- a) There is a serious danger to the environment by factories, industries, and automobiles. But in spite of the fact that there is unbreathable air, we consider every rise in consumption as a progress.
- b) Global environmental pollution caused by the emission of greenhouse gases specially Carbon di-Oxide. Also the global warming caused by cutting down forests. The ecological threat to nature by human culture is rising alarmingly.
- c) The third level at which the ecological threat is rising is at the personal level.

We always think that something has to be done at the governmental level or by science or by someone else. We do not realize each one of us has a major role to play. Each one of us needs to limit our consumption in every way, be it petrol, diesel, water, food. It is high time that we realise the need to tread lightly on the earth. We should realise that ecological ethics is the centre stage for this millennium. We need to examine our lifestyles. We need to examine the meaning of economic growth and development. Economic growth has lowered rather than raised our standard of living, which includes time spent with family and friends, enjoyment of a rich human and natural environment. Consumption provides an entry into a complex set of problems. Impositions of gadgets and malls add to the rat race. We are so optimistic about technology that we feel technology is the answer to all our problems. We require to change our consciousness and also we need to support this change with the creation of appropriate institutions and structures that hold a genuine promise of a better life. Further economic growth and consumption are not the solution. Greater depression occurs in "precisely those countries that have experienced or are currently experiencing rapid economic growth. Friendship and other social supports are antidotes to depression. Religiosity, a turning inwards, meditation, altruism that will lead to lesser jealousy, lesser feelings of dominating the other will reduce depression.

Today all of us are releasing toxic gases into the atmosphere through our automobiles, our gadgets. These gases are as deadly and toxic as the gases in the gas chambers of the Nazis. But do we ever stop and think? Do we ever consider ourselves immoral? Are we not responsible for the increasing ecological threat to the planet? Can we merely blame others? I think it is high time we change our concept of morality. Today we require not merely traditional ethics but an ecological ethic.

Earlier greed was regarded as undesirable. Sikhism specially believed in living with minimum requirements and hoarding was looked down upon. Contentment being a desirable value for the Sikhs, the ethics of consumption is not there in Sikhism. However, today we have also started aping the west. Under the impact of Western civilization, desire is no more considered to be a state of the sick soul. On the contrary a person's status is dependent upon his material possessions. The more he desires, the more he possesses. The insatiable desire is continuously being fuelled by science and technology. We no longer are searching ourselves from within, which was a value earlier. Our aim is not to conquer ourselves but rather to conquer others. We try to conquer others by dominating over them. Our desire to dominate and show our superiority is reaching ever-increasing levels. We dominate over the others by our material possessions. These possessions are possible only by exploiting nature. We are thereby continuously exploiting it without paying heed to its consequences.

Earlier too, there has been the affluent class, which has been exploiting. But this class could enjoy the fruits of human labour only. Therefore the pace of exploitation of nature was slow. Today, science and technology is feeding our desires at such a terrific pace that the exploitation of nature is taking place very, very fast. The demand being placed on Earth is more than what the earth can give. Even in the east, we have started believing that ever-rising levels of consumption will solve all our problems. We are feeding our egoistic tendencies,

our urge to dominate over the other. As pointed out by Erazim Kohak, limitless egoism elevated to a civilization strategy is not sustainable. We require to search within ourselves and see what are the desirable traits, which will help us to live in harmony with the planet earth.

Paul Santmire said, "The earth is in danger of destruction". A time has come today when we are all feeling the pinch of the environmental crisis towards which we are heading. This environmental crisis is engulfing us at such a rapid speed that we can no longer neglect it saying that it is an affair of the environmentalists. We all need to address ourselves to this and try to reduce if not reverse or stop the environmental deterioration.

In my paper. I shall try to argue out that Sikhism is not against development. It does not preach asceticism. It encourages progress and development. However, one point to be remembered is that if we look at the Sikh theology, it does not prescribe anthropocentric development or egocentric development. It preaches altruism.

The 'I' when it expands it not only includes the others who are belonging to my family but it includes the whole earth as my family. It prescribes co-operation in place of domination. Co-operation leads to humility. According to the Sikh metaphysics, I am related to the entire universe. It therefore prescribes development in which the environment is not exploited or subdued. How can I be justified in exploiting that to which I am closely related?

Thus Sikhism prescribes sustainable development. Sustainability is the capacity to keep going indefinitely. Development could be defined as bringing out what is latent, bringing out potentialities. But while doing so, the present and the future have all to be taken into account. World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in its 1987 report, Our Common Future defined Sustainable Development as:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present

without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs" while discussing sustainability the focus is on two issues, viz, meeting the needs of the present generation and not undermined the ability of future generations of people to achieve acceptable standards of living themselves. There are four factors that threaten the well being of the present and the future generations viz, population, pollution, resource use and consumption. An increase in any one or all these factors causes imbalance and furthers the ecological crisis causing devastation.

Sustainable development raises various ethical issues. These have two main thrusts, viz, social justice and the other concern for future generations. Sustainable development implies that we should not proceed with our development, researches and progressive plans without taking into account the needy around us and the well being of the future generations. We have a positive duty to help those in need. In this connection there are different views. Those who propound the Lifeboat ethics hold the view that if you help people who are starving there will be more people suffering half a century later. Garret Hardin holds the view that we should not attempt to equalize. If we feed people who cannot look after themselves they will produce more of their kind. Let them fend for themselves or else perish. On the contrary Peter Singer holds the view that those of us with surplus wealth should share it with the unfortunate and needy. Singer believes in helping starving babies rather than buying that new car or suit. Hardin's plan is to control human population by the policy of survival of the fittest.

Our Gurus have stressed on contentment, on inner progress and on consideration of the welfare of others. They emphasised "Pichhon bachia aap khaavanda". Thus if this is our attitude, we would automatically help the poor and the needy. They have emphasized on helping those in need. (Gau garib di Raksha) only that development/progress is acceptable which is sustainable. Not only the present needy have to be given justice but the future generations too have to be taken care of.

American population is very low as compared to the third world countries but its consumption is the biggest in the world and has increased tenfold since 1960 as pointed by Erazim Kohak in "The Green Halo" This clearly indicates that reducing population levels is not a magic solution to all our environmental problems. It requires a deeper thinking and a change of our attitude. Thus Hardin's way of thinking which is opposite to that of the Sikh Gurus, does not really help in sustainable development. Thus we need to work for a sustainable society. Population Control will definitely reduce pollution and the consumption but as seen above from the example of the Americans we require a change of our attitude.

Due to our lackadaisical attitude we use modern gadgets, technological innovations and spoil the environment. Also we deplete the resources of the environment. In this regard our Gurus have stressed Sanjam, control and moderation. Anyone who believes in moderation will not waste the resources of nature. In the name of development, we devastate nature. In this connection Guru Nanak Devji says that man is just a speck of dust in this universe. The universe is made by God and man is just a part of it like any other part. No doubt he is higher because he alone has the capacity for self-realisation, however, this does not give him a license to use/spoil nature as he desires. Nature is independent of man, exists in its own right. Man can use it wherever necessary but he must at the same time realise the intrinsic worth of nature. The universe is a complex web of relations. Each individual human being is interlinked with others, with animals as well as with the ecosphere. Whatever relation is there in the macrocosm it is there in the microcosm. Thus in order to understand the universe and its complex web of relations we have to look within our-self, realize our potential and realize our-self. The knowledge of the universe will automatically follow. Our development will be sustainable development and not selfish, egoistic, short lived development.

Once we have knowledge of the complex web of relations, our attitudes towards nature will automatically change. We will no longer want to exploit it but will rather make friends with it, will see God immanent in it and therefore realize its intrinsic worth. Once we see God immanent in his creation, we will identify ourselves with the creation and the result would be respect, concern for nature, we would realize that we are part of nature and if we try to bring any changes in it, any changes in its homeostatic balance, it would have repercussions on us.

We can see that through the Sikh religion, one can provide a justification for unity in diversity. A self-realized person sees this unity and once he sees this unity he no longer exploits nature, he rather respects it as a 'House of the Lord in which dwells the Lord. Such a person will always vouch for sustainable development, for he cannot but think of the well being of the present , future generations as well as the entire ecosystem.

Sustainable development understood in this way would entail a positive obligation to assist present generations and a negative obligation not to hinder future generations.

As regards the hindrance to future generations is concerned this could be done in a variety of ways by depleting resources, by storing radioactive waste unsafely, by diminishing biodiversity, by bringing about climate change and by causing other kinds of pollution. We all can play a role in providing a safe liveable environment to the future generation for e.g. if I use public transport, walk wherever I can instead of using my car, avoid usage of the air-conditioner or at least switch it off whenever not needed, I can reduce pollution. Every air conditioner releases CFC'S causing holes in the ozone layer which protects us from sun's ultraviolet radiation. By the holes in this layer we are exposing the people to ultra violet radiation which causes skin cancer. Similarly we can use scarce resources such as water, electricity food judiciously. We need not go back to the stone age and live in the dark but we can certainly go in for sustainable development.

Some would oppose sustainable development on the pretext that science & technology will find alternative ways, alternative resources. Yes this does seem a very attractive proposal but is it really so? The alternative to electricity may be nuclear energy but is it without its accompanying danger? The problem of nuclear waste disposal, the possibility of nuclear accidents, all these make us question such development. We cannot say it is sustainable, for it puts the future generation at a considerable risk.

Similarly the developments in genetic engineering are questionable. Gene therapy promises a very bright future to medicine. Many incurable diseases will be curable. However, is this development sustainable or does it raise ethical and religious issues? Similarly genetic engineering would make it possible for us to create clones, to engineer animals genetically so that we could use them for organ transplantation. However, it is really questionable as to would such a development be sustainable. For one thing, by genetically engineering animals for xenotransplantation, we are not treating them as ends in themselves but as a means to human ends. Secondly, by creating new species we are trying to become co-creators with God. Sikhism questions such development. However, Sikh Gurus state "Poorai ka kia sabh kichh poora, ghat wadh kichh nahi". The imperfections that are there in the world as we perceive them are all under the Will of God. He does not need man's help to perfect the world. As regards gene therapy, before this is really made possible, there is a need to examine how much genetic pollution it would cause. Genetic engineering treats the entire plant and animal as a means rather than as an end. These species are genetically engineered to serve human purposes.

As regards human genetic engineering for the purpose of cure, most scientists accept the fact that the process of human genetic engineering is risky and the process will itself generate new mutations which will be passed on to future generations. There is a need for looking back into the past and learning from the past experiences. However, we must remember that our human

creativity depends upon our human brain. Any alteration of man that would injure the brain and hence his very creativity would indeed be a disastrous mutilation, especially if this were to be transmitted genetically, thus further polluting the gene pool with defects which might be hidden and incalculable.

Thus scientific advances should not be made just for the sake of mere progress or research. Sikhism prevent us from trying to be co-creators with God. Development of this type can never be sustainable but would rather be disastrous. If we start playing with Genes, we are 'playing God.' We are very finite beings knowing only our present and past. Our future too is unpredictable. It is not possible for us to know the long term consequences of our actions. When we genetically engineer organism, we are trying to create new organisms, a new type of a world. We think we have the power to create. Do we really have this power? We must be humble. We are like a speck of dust. Guru Nanak says, that we finite beings cannot know the limit of God. If we cannot know God, how can we 'play God'? How can we bring about creation. If we do so, our action would lead to disastrous results and we would not know how to reverse our action. Especially in case of genetically engineered organisms it may not be possible for us to reverse the process. Ideally man should adjust himself to the environment. He should let nature take its course and not interfere with it either by miracles or by science. This is what is called as Hukam in Sikhism or accepting the Will of God or the Law of Nature. Heidegger states "in technology we make objects according to some blueprint that we determine. We design things to satisfy our purpose rather than allow our purposes to be affected by, and find creative expression through, the qualities of the objects themselves."

Today we are not satisfied with mere artefacts designed to serve our purposes. We are now aiming at nature, animals and humans deigned to serve our purpose. How arrogant and selfish we have become. Thus genetic engineering is questionable because it goes against the very basic principle of Sikhism viz. the world as it is created is best. God knows what is right and wrong. He has designed the laws of nature, creation and dissolution. Man has no right to interfere and bring about genetic changes.

The question which faces us today is, what is the root cause of our ecological crisis. Is it human greed or a flawed technology which is unsustainable?

There are two extremes, on the one hand we have the have nots who are dying of hunger and starvation. On the other hand in the western countries and even in our country we have the haves who are becoming goods rich and time poor, dying of stress and over consumption. These people are addicted to consume the Earth itself. They consume because others consume. There is a rat race of consumption. We think that we would be happier if we consume and as Paul Wachel claims - nothing is "as naively utopian as continuing on our present course and hoping for a deus ex machina by the name of "technology" to bail us out at the last minute." 1

Some environmentalists oppose the idea of sustainability for in this the environment does not have any intrinsic value of its own. It is only for humans, the present and the future humans. According to Sikhism, the environment exists for itself, it has its own intrinsic worth. Just as God created humans whenever He so desired under His Will, similarly, the entire universe is His Creation, created under His Will. He is immanent in it. I have a duty to look after another human being who is in need and also have a duty to take care not to harm the non-existent future generations, I also have a duty not to harm the environment. I have a positive duty to work for the sustainability of the environment. In fact to help others I need to realise that they are part of the complex web of relations found in the ecosystem. Thus I cannot help others in need without taking care of

the environment or by destroying it . In this context Sikhism would define sustainable development in such a way that it includes not only human society but biodiversity, ecological integrity and ecosystemic processes. Thus even though these processes may not appear to be directly useful, they have to be sustained. A point worth mentioning here is that with the growing human population, a time may come when human needs conflict with the needs of the environment per se. Thus sustainability of the society may conflict with the sustainability of the environment. What should take priority? If we say that humans, since they have more worth, they take priority, are we not merely paying lip the service while affirming the intrinsic value of ecosystems. Is it ethical to help the human needy by damaging the ecosystems? I feel that a deeper the ecosystems?

I feel that a deeper look and analysis of the problems would reveal to us that since we humans are merely parts of the complex whole, no good can really result by damaging the ecosystem. We have to strike a balance between good of humans and of the ecosystem although this is not an easy proposal.

To sum up, we can say that discussions on sustainable development centre around issues of social justice and the future generations. The main issues that are considered are population, consumption, resource use and pollution. In the context of all these Sikhism definitely prescribes moderation. Once moderation exercised in intimate interpersonal relations automatically the population would be controlled. As regards consumption, Sikhism prescribes an attitude of contentment, non-domination over the other humility van chhakna and sarabat da bhala. With such an attitude, the spirit of competition will be subdued, will be replaced by spirit of co-operation, helping the other whether presently existent or the non-existent future generations. As regards resource use, moderation and a spirit of non-domination brings about lesser wastage of the resources of nature. Also a concern for the others end and a recognition of the intrinsic value of the ecosystem makes us utilise the ecosystem with care so that the benefit that we and the future generations will draw from it will be sustainable.

1. Quoted in John Passmore, "Man's Responsibility for Nature .", Duckworth.
2. " Bande khoj dil har roj na fir paresani mahe,"
3. David A. Crocker and Toby Linden, from Ethics of Consumption, Lahham, Maryland; Roman and Littlefield publishers 1998, P-330
- 4.a) "Trsna virle hi ki bujhi he. Kot jorai leakh crore man na hore pare pare hi ko lujhi he."
b) "Jio pavak indhan nahin dhrape."
5. Adi Granth.
6. Adi Granth.
7. Adi Granth.

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Presented at the conference for
Religious Perspectives for Sustainable Development
Anadpur Sahib, July 22-23, 2002