

The Concept of Seva in Sikhism and its Practice for Holistic Well-being: An Analysis

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Abstract

The colonial era brought about significant changes in religious practices and understandings, leading to a need to re-examine the notion of 'Seva' in the context of Sikhism. This paper sheds light on the significance and impact of the Sikh concept of *Seva*, and its related activities, within the Sikh community and beyond. Today many NGOs are working for social welfare. Although there has been a discussion on the negatives and positives of NGOs, Sikh NGOs have never been the subject matter of these discussions. Khalsa Aid, which was started by Ravinder Singh in 1999 to help Albanian refugees, is today providing its services in a number of domains like disaster relief, education, health etc. EcoSikh, on the other hand, is working on environmental issues. Its creation was the result of a discussion on practical actions for the environment by a number of international agencies. The paper analyses key topics such as Sikhism, the philosophical underpinnings of 'Seva,' and the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in carrying out altruistic endeavours. It seeks to unravel the motivations and beliefs that drive individuals and organizations to engage in 'Seva'. In the ultimate analysis, this study endeavours to contribute to a deeper understanding of 'Seva' in Sikhism, and its relevance in the contemporary world, shedding light on the broader significance of such acts of selfless service in fostering communal harmony and social uplift.

Key words: Sikhism Seva, NGOs

Introduction

The word 'religion' has its origins in the Latin word '*religio*'. This term was explained by Cicero, a philosopher from the pre-Christian era, as being related to '*relegere*', signifying the act of revisiting or rereading. Thus, '*religio*' involves the act of returning to the traditions and rituals of one's ancestors. As there are numerous traditions, there cannot be a single religion but rather a multiplicity of '*religio*'(s). In the third century CE, the Christian writer Lactantius explicitly rejected Cicero's etymology and argued that '*religio*' derives from '*re-ligare*', which means to bind together or link. This suggests that the comparative study of religion is based on a theological and Christian framework. The modern study of religion is influenced by the Christian heritage of Western culture, and the development of theology as an academic discipline in the West. Thus, the seemingly secular nature of religious studies is not a "position from nowhere". When studying any 'religious' tradition, there are two fundamental issues. The first is that scholars of religion attempt to legitimize their work by establishing methodologies that claim to follow objective and natural science methods based on rational analysis and empirical investigation. This is an attempt to avoid subjective biases and the favoring of predictable phenomena

(such as rituals) that can be repeated, analyzed, and classified. The second issue is Eurocentrism and the propagation of Orientalist discourses (King, 2001).

The case of the Sikhs was not different either, “unable to place the Sikhs into a category of their own”, early Western scholars set an academic ‘culture’ of treating Sikhs as per their Eurocentric theoretical framework. First and foremost, Ernst Trump tried to impose a ‘semblance of systematic unity and principles of speculative philosophy, which the Adi Granth apparently lacked’. Such a conclusion led to producing statements on the Sikh religion routed via rational thinking grounds. It was caused by the ‘displacement of the discursive field of translation and interpretation of the Adi Granth into an order of things governed by oppositions such as theism/atheism and chaos/order.’ With all this, Trump brought Sikh scriptures and traditions to the purview of Western intellectual and religious tradition. For a long time, both Sikh and Western scholars were not able to recognize the separate existence of *Sikhi* from the Western sense and conceptualization of religion. They missed how it had a broader vision for organizing life. In the end, it was established that the idea of religion exists in all cultures, and it is generally translatable as a concept. During ‘India’s transition to modernity’, and with the secular humanist framework of the modern university, Indian forms of thinking were displaced into the domain of European conceptuality. A large part of it has been made possible with ‘the constitution of the Indian subject through the enunciation of ‘religion’”(Mandair, 2009). Because of the ‘generalized translation’ of *Sikhi* as a religion in the Western Christian theological sense, the scholar is compelled to ‘accept without resistance the translatability of the term ‘religion’, and at the same time, must resist what is encompassed by the term ‘religion’”.

Interestingly, societal structures emanating from *Sikhi* offer powerful motivation and systems to counter chaos. Emile Durkheim (1916), a prominent sociologist, viewed religion as a fundamental aspect of society and humanity. He believed that religion was the cornerstone of all social institutions and had the potential to elevate individuals to an ‘extraordinary’ state of energy, which they shared collectively through a common belief system. This collective energy found expression in rituals performed repeatedly by the community, creating a tangible, objectified force that bound them together. In this context, *Seva*, the selfless service performed by the Sikh community, can be seen as a ritual, solidifying their connection with their faith and conceptual belongingness. The story of Sikhism and its engagement with Western notions of religion, not just highlights the complexity and beauty of cultural exchange and the evolving understanding of spirituality in a changing world but also the continued struggle for recognition of identity. This paper seeks to delve deeper into the Sikh concept of *Seva*, and its multiple manifestations in Sikhism, through a review of secondary literature such as books, journal articles etc., along with organizational literature of two Sikh NGOs, Khalsa Aid and EcoSikh, apart from interviews with office bearers of these two organizations.

Seva and its Manifestations in Sikhism

Seva has been one of the principal pillars of the Sikh faith. The word Sikh is derived from the Sanskrit word *shish*, meaning disciple. In literal English translation, the word Sikh implies a seeker of new knowledge (a learner, a disciple of the Guru), who is on a journey to discover and realise the *Timeless* (Sahota et al., 2016). The Sikhs were a group of people adherent to the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev. To continue the work started by him, Guru Nanak gave the authority of Guruship to Bhai Lehna, Known

as Guru Angad Dev. There were eight more Gurus before Guru Gobind Singh bestowed the Guruship to the scripture, Guru Granth Sahib. The Guru Granth Sahib has a collection of ‘*shabads*’, composed by Gurus and *Bhagats* to guide Sikhs in their worldly and spiritual affairs (Sahota et al., 2016). The Sri Guru Granth Sahib presents a comprehensive worldview that provides a set of values and a code of conduct that can be applied in everyday life. Its primary message is aimed at promoting the welfare of all humans, regardless of their caste, color, creed, culture, or religion. The Sikh religion is the youngest of all major world religions (Singh, 2006).

Seva denotes selfless service and civic virtue in the organization and within society. Today, the term is used in the sense of ‘dedication to others’ and can be found in various contexts (Schlecker et al., 2013). In Hinduism, people are encouraged to engage in community service as a transformative practice without personal recognition or publicity (Pio and Syed, 2014). In fact, every religion has stressed welfare and charity for the needy through different acts within their defined frameworks, i.e. *zakat* in Islam, charity in Christianity, almsgiving practice in Buddhism, *Daan* in Hinduism. All these concepts are part of a broader worldview of their particular religious belief system, and hence carry their own meanings to the practising individuals.

However, in Sikhism, *Seva* is defined as voluntary service without any expectation of anything in return for the welfare of others. “..... the modes of *Seva* sanctioned in Sikh tradition include *Seva* rendered through one’s body (*tan*), *Seva* rendered through one’s mind (*man*), and *Seva* rendered through giving of one’s material wealth (*dhan*). While all the three forms of *Seva* are considered equally important, the Sikh Gurus stressed that all *Seva* should be a labour of love performed without desire (*nishkam*), without intention (*nishkapat*), and with humility (*nimarta*)” (Virdee, 2005). *Langar* served at Gurdwaras and outside of their premises is a powerful example of acts of *Seva*. The Fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Dev, began the requirement of giving a tith (*Dasvand*) of earnings by Sikhs, as a tax system, to support acts of *Seva* (Nesbitt, 2016). “It would not be an exaggeration to say, that today, a Sikh is identified with his acts of *Sewa* – service to the humanity – and *Langar*, which has been taken out of the four walls of a Gurudwara to the doorstep of those who are in need (Dhali et. al., 2021)”.

Guru Nanak Dev’s teachings on charity are reflected in numerous writings, and *Var Asa* stands out as a composition where he delves into topics directly relevant to daily human life. In *Var Asa*, Guru Nanak Dev greatly emphasizes serving God and fellow human beings, shedding light on the true nature of charity while exposing its false manifestations. Notably, he underscores the importance of sharing honest earnings with others. Guru Nanak Dev unequivocally rejects performing good works and deeds solely as ritualistic practices to attain salvation. He perceives such acts as superficial and insincere. Instead, he emphasizes the significance of genuine charity, rooted in selflessness and compassion. Sharing one’s hard-earned wealth with those in need is a fundamental principle he champions. Angad Dev, the second Guru, further elucidates the concept of selfless service, asserting that true honor and respect can only be earned through self-sacrifice and dedicated service. According to Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Guru, a devout follower of Guru Nanak Dev should embody the spirit of ‘servant of servants,’ emphasizing humility and selflessness in all endeavors. Bhai Gurdas highlights three golden principles that govern Sikh life: earning through honest labor, engaging in selfless service, and adhering to the teachings of the Guru. Service holds immense importance in the Sikh faith, and it transcends societal

divisions such as caste, religious affiliation, or any other discriminatory factor. Guru Nanak Dev's teachings emphasize the genuine practice of charity and selfless service. He encourages individuals to share their earnings with others, reject superficial rituals, and embrace a spirit of equality and compassion while serving humanity. These principles resonate throughout Sikh scripture and underline the essence of Guru Nanak Dev's teachings (Massey, 2010).

There are four fundamental social ethics in Sikhism, social equality, universal brotherhood, altruism (*Sarbat da Bhala*) and *Seva*. These are interlinked and define the relations of individual Sikhs with others. *Sarbat da Bhala* and *Seva* are practical measures to achieve social equality and universal brotherhood. The source of social equality in Sikhism comes from the spiritual understanding of oneness among all (*Ikokar*) (Singh, 1996). Some Sikhs even find "community involvement, helping others, equality and following the Sikh teachings such as *Sewa*" (Kaur, 2018) as constitutive of their Sikh identity. Free food or *Langar*, sometimes called community kitchen or free kitchen, is the most visible example of *Seva*, which is served at every Gurudwara. Sikhs also serve it during relief work in different crisis situations. Preparing and serving *Langar* is a communal act performed collectively. In the words of James Massey(2010),

"Sikh giving in the form of *daswand*, supports langar. It is also an open expression of *vand chhako*. Therefore *daswand*, *vand chhako* and langar are the practical expressions of the life of a *gurmukh* These depend on the charity practices of Sikh religion. Along with langar, the other two important concepts connected are *pangat* which means a group of people sitting in a row, and *deg* and *regh*, which mean a big cooking pot and a sword. To begin with, *langar* was started by the first Guru, Guru Nanak Dev, as a token of human brotherhood or sisterhood and to help those who are in need. Angad Dev, the second Guru continued to follow this practice, but the third Guru Amar Das institutionalized the same. The tenth Guru Gobind Singh even ordered his followers to start or practice langar at a personal level, so that nobody may go hungry. The sharing of food in a langar always is taken while sitting in a *pangat*. Guru Amar Das even ordered his followers that they first serve food to the congregation and then should assemble for prayers. He said: *Pahle pangat piche sangat*, i.e. 'first sitting and eating together and then take part in the fellowship'. *Pangat* today has become a synonym for langar. At present, this practice has been made a part of Sikh service in every Sikh temple or gurdwara. *Langar* is the direct corporate responsibility of the Sikh community as a whole. It does not depend on givings of outsiders or others. Langar, besides being the practical expression of social equality and integration, is a place of training voluntary service and the practice of philanthropy and equality. Service is involved in the collection of fuel and rations, cutting vegetables, cooking of food, distribution of meals, serving of drinking water, washing of utensils and dishes, and the cleaning of dining halls. It is a practical demonstration of hospitality and love of human beings."

The practice of *langar* also serves as a means of social integration between different social classes, including the monarch and commoners, within Sikhism. *Langar's* rules dictate that everyone, regardless of their social status, should sit together and share the same food without any distinctions. The principle of equality and social integration by aiding the needy is emphasized in various life rules and teachings of Sikhism. The idea is to promote an ideal integration based on equality through simple yet effective moral precepts, encouraging mutual assistance. The *langar* system also acts as a continuous reminder of social equality and serves to counteract the immoral practice of untouchability, which arises from the

caste system. Sikhism also advocates for assistance to the needy through Gurdwara collections. However, this assistance is not viewed as charity but as mutual help, considering the common spiritual origin of all beings and the belief in the unity of humanity. Sikhism emphasizes the realization of social equality and human dignity through voluntary and unrestricted aid to those in need, promoting a sense of unity and harmony among all individuals (Singh, 1996).

It has been argued that the socialist promise of equality and liberation has failed (Friedman, 2009), and so has the promise of freedom by capitalism. Climate change is real and knocking on our doors. In this context, the significance of Sikhism has been argued to lie in the fact that it does not teach a lesson of detachment and renunciation, but liberation in life through family life and participation in daily life, with the thought of serving everyone seeking help (Madan, 2012). *Seva* can provide a new way of looking at the world. Habermas (2008) argues that modernity no longer implies the march towards secularism. Hence it would be a cultural and intellectual error to reject dialogue with religion, and in a democracy, the secular mentality should be open to the religious influence of believing citizens.

Historically, Sikhs have performed *Seva* individually or as being part of a larger community. Today, apart from individual Sikhs and the collective Sikh communities, there are many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) claiming to be working under the notion of the Sikh concept of *Seva*. They quote different *Shabds* from Guru Granth Sahib and ask for donations under the concept of *Dasvand*. NGOs working in this area are under scepticism for their operational procedure, funding, motivations, and various other factors. So, there was a need to scrutinize how they actually performed *Seva*. NGOs have also been questioned on their own effectiveness, accountability, and legitimacy.

Review of Related Literature

While reviewing the literature on Sikhism, and the concept of *Seva* in Sikhism, it was observed that Sikhism recognizes the broader perspective of life where a universal understanding includes all human and non-human life alike. An understanding of oneness amongst every element of creation is generated, driven by an omnipresent one. It is from this principle that the Sikh concern for the environment and nature emerges and “in this way, Sikh teachings, combined with the current approaches to sustainability, can lead to more resilient pathways to sustainable development” (Sahota et al., 2016). “Sikhism is a revealed religion based on a definitive revelation like Semitic religions of the West and therefore, it can be clearly distinguished from the earlier Indian religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. which have an anonymous mysticism as their source of validity. It is not simply a set of views or doctrines, but a way of life according to a definite model, for which the Sikh Gurus have given lessons for over a period of two hundred years, and themselves, led all their life exemplifying that model. Those who perfected it came to be known as Sikhs (literally meaning, the learned)” (Singh, 2009). Sikhism is a Western word that suggests a religious system based on theological and ethical principles that portray an abstract defined entity rather than a fluid tradition, pulsing with life and difficult to pin down (Nesbitt, 2005). Guru Granth Sahib is the source of the Sikh doctrine, which is divine. The doctrine of Sikhism manifests itself through the hymns of Guru Granth Sahib. It is called *Gurmat*, which is to act in life as guided by the Guru (Singh, 2009). It stresses more on rightful actions rather than on ritualistic life, and hence a Sikh is directed to “shoulder family responsibilities, trade-in truth and help others through the acts of ‘*Seva*’.....Sikhs are exhorted to

provide Seva, for example, by serving the *langar*”. Although in institutional terms the tradition of *langar* was started by the third Guru, Guru Amar Das, but sharing food together was integral to Guru Nanak’s Kartarpur community. The primacy of Guru Nanak’s concern with individual salvation needs hardly be emphasised; what must not be overlooked, however, is the fact that he did not teach a selfish concern for one’s own salvation alone, but rather the moral responsibility of fellow human beings as well. Guru Nanak summed up his teachings very simply ‘*Kirt Karo, Nam Japo, Vand Chakko*’ (work for a living; abide in the meditative recitation of God’s name; share what you have with others). The self is thus seen in relation to the divine and the social, so that a withdrawal from either of these relationships must spell out one’s extinction. It is this combination of piety and practical activity (in the form of worldly labour) which is the essence of Guru Nanak’s this-worldliness. *Seva*, including other activities, makes the individual concerned for others (Madan, 2012).

The emergence of the industrial/capitalist/scientific machine in the West had a significant impact on other cultures, especially those that were colonized or subjected to imperialism. The West claimed to be ‘enlightening’ or ‘liberating’ these societies, but this often resulted in complex territorialization. While cybernetics and informatics allowed for labor-saving moments, they also created the potential for severe and hyper territorialization. However, there is an alternative horizon that offers a more positive view of the universe. This is the Sikh *Vismad*, which sees the universe as a joyous wonder and beauty, connected by love and heterological mediation. Sikh culture is relatively young, but it offers a unique perspective that challenges the dominant Western narrative. Its distinct view is elaborated by the ten Gurus and the *Bhagat* poets in their writings and life practices Singh(2013). According to Dhali and Kaur’s (2021) research, Sikh tradition places great emphasis on the value of *Sarbat da bhala*, that encourages self-awareness and selfless service to society. *Seva*, an integral part of the Sikh religion, involves serving the congregation in the Gurudwara, helping the needy, and contributing to the *Langar*. Over time, *Seva* has expanded beyond the Gurudwara to include monetary or material contributions or services to help people worldwide. This reflects Guru Nanak’s vision of eliminating traditional customs based on exploitation and inequality and promoting a society based on love and equality for all. Singh (2011) argues that serving others with a cheerful attitude is deeply cherished, and *Seva* has become an essential part of Sikh life. GS Grewal (2017) discovered that the institution of *Langar* plays a crucial role in promoting unity and a sense of belonging among Sikhs. This institution also effectively minimizes the impact of caste on the community, thereby contributing significantly to the development of a unique Sikh identity. The concept of equality before God is evident in the communal worship at Kartarpur and in the shared kitchen that is supported by voluntary contributions of cash, kind, or service. Anand and Kaur (1998) argue that doing *Seva* of society is ethical and for some higher cause. Societal *Seva* is revolutionary and is a road towards freedom. According to Singh (1998), *Seva* can help in doing away with the egoistic attitude. Sikhism, being universal in nature, does not identify itself with any shape or form.

In contrast to philosophies that encourage world denial, the Sikh tradition affirms the reality/authenticity of the world/body. Sikhism is fundamentally ecosophical. Ecosophia is the articulation of religious and philosophical world-views that provide a “face to face relation with Nature.” The ecosophical paradigm, aims at the liberation of life that necessarily includes the liberation of Nature, women, and the underprivileged. It is an attempt to establish a connection with the intrinsic

dignity/worth of Nature, women, and the downtrodden. It aims to establish relation in justice. Cosmic unity and biocentric equality are the two ultimate norms of ecosophia. Ecosophism essentially recognises that both human and non-human life on earth has intrinsic values. It abnegates any form of domination and subjugation. People and Nature are the core of Ecosophia (ism) (Lourdunathan, 2012). Its concerns towards social services, human rights, and religious freedom of the common masses have made Sikhism a unique universal world religion. Sikh *Rahitnamas* is the code of conduct for life in Sikhism. Grewal (2011) cites these 18th-century *Rahitnamas* to present a sense about different aspects of Sikh life. For a Sikh, communal brotherhood was more important than ties of kinship.

On the other hand, NGOs have been understood as instruments of mainstreaming and regulating the relations between the state and society (Chazan, 1992). There is no single accepted definition of Non-Government organizations worldwide. They have been defined and governed by the local legal framework in individual countries (Salomon, 1994). Nevertheless, literature asserts that we should be conscious of the claims of NGOs and be aware of granting them the status of holy cow merely based on their claims. They have been accused of marketing their ‘good’ side and at the same time working for different vested interests (Ruano, 2016). David Harvey (2005), a known critic of neo-liberal policies, confronts the assumption that “the opposition mobilized outside the state apparatus and within some separate entity called ‘civil society’ is the powerhouse of oppositional politics and transformation.” He asserts that the leadership of such organizations is unelected and the elite of the society or community, where there is little or no representation of the poor and minority sections of the society. An important point herein is that the accountability of these NGOs is not towards the common masses but to their funding agencies and individuals. Harvey (2005) sees it as a tactic of state withdrawal and privatization. According to him, NGOs are serving only the propaganda part instead of doing something concrete for the people. Similarly, Manheim (2004) sees NGOs working for the benefit of corporations by sometimes setting agendas in their favour. At other times, he sees these organizations to be the product of the political liberal left face. While NGOs value openness and transparency, they may be resistant to scrutiny from external sources, especially well-established organizations (Baviskar, 2001). Despite advocating democratic decentralisation, NGOs may have idiosyncratic internal organizational structures, with authority concentrated in the hands of a charismatic founder and lack of mechanisms for addressing employee grievances. NGOs may operate on the principles of voluntarism, which can obscure underlying issues of exploitation.

Religious Nongovernmental Organizations, on the other hand, base their motivational apparatus on the fundamental values of a particular religion. Having collected data from a sample of 263 United Nations-affiliated RNGOs, Berger (2003) argues that political, ideological, and economic factors influence the establishment of RNGOs. They are not value-based entities but rather built on the foundation of religious and spiritual institutions for driving the value and making use of cultural power in the shape of symbols, ideologies, and moral authority to effect socio-political outcomes. RNGOs take political identity by classifying themselves as NGOs.

Contemporary Sikh NGOs and their Practice of Seva

Many organizations are working in the field of *Seva*, that claim to be deriving their inspiration from Sikh principles; for instance, SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhadak Committee), DSGMC (Delhi Sikh

Gurdwara Management Committee), etc., are registered under different legislative acts (Sikh Gurdwara Act 1925 and Delhi Sikh Gurdwaras Act, 1971 respectively), and there are a few studies on these organizations. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are, on the other hand, a new phenomenon in the Sikh world, claiming to be performing the act of *Seva*. They use modern, efficient management techniques to deliver services to end target users. There are a number of Sikh non-governmental organizations working with different objectives in the field of social welfare. Khalsa Aid is one of the most famous Sikh non-governmental organizations, running internationally across different continents. Several Sikh organizations like Khalsa Aid, Langar Aid, Midland Langar Seva Society, and others are now branching out to other countries where *langar* is used to provide nutritious meals to the undernourished. One such initiative is ‘Zero Hunger With Langar’, which is working in two African countries — Malawi and Kenya — which are among the countries with the highest malnutrition rates among children and feature in the UN’s target list. The hype built on social media about the Khalsa Aid is so big that it attracts thousands of volunteers and funding for its activities.

Khalsa Aid was started by Ravi (Ravinder) Singh, a UK-based Sikh. Initially, he was inclined to help refugees stuck in Albania, affected by the Balkan war in the year 1999. It was also the year to mark 300 years of initiation of the *Khalsa Panth(1699-1999)*. Ravi Singh thought of Khalsa Aid as a non-profit Sikh organization helping those in need. The organization uses a community funding mechanism to fund its activities worldwide. The activities of Khalsa Aid can be categorised into two broader categories: firstly, providing help and support to the persons affected by natural and man-made calamities (refugee crisis, flood, hurricane and other victims), and secondly, long-term programs aimed at sustainable solutions to community problems. Khalsa Aid has its headquarters in London, England. India’s head office of Khalsa Aid is situated at Patiala, Punjab, which also acts as the headquarters for the whole of South and Southeast Asia. Khalsa Aid is running a long-term programme named *Focus Punjab*, where they are looking to provide long-term support in the region. The Langar aid programme of the organization is another dedicated initiative to provide food and water supplies in disaster and war zones. According to Khalsa Aid, they derive their inspiration from the Sikh principle of “recognize the whole human race as one.” The source of funding for Khalsa Aid is donations, the most part of which comes from the Sikh community. The physical presence of Khalsa Aid is supplemented by a major social media presence, i.e. Facebook, Twitter, etc. Their activities are thus very well highlighted on social media. With a targeted approach and millions of followers online, just seconds are enough to reach out to the desired audience.

Long-sustained programs include educational help, medical assistance, family pension, wedding aid, and housing aid. Families who are not able to pay for the education of their children, or are unable to pay for medical expenses, come to the organization for help. The organization enquires about their actual financial and family condition through different sources. After the verification process is completed, money is directly paid to the concerned institution, i.e. hospital, school, college or university, etc. The researchers saw houses built by the organization for poor families at Malerkotla, a small city in the Sangrur district of Punjab. These activities provide a firm grounding to the organization, which is necessary to gain local support and sustenance.

EcoSikh is different from Khalsa Aid in one aspect - they have a single arena of work, that is, the

environment. Their tagline is ‘Sikh response to climate change ’(EcoSikh, 2019). They describe themselves to be working solely for the cause of ecology and related challenges. EcoSikh is the most prominent Sikh organization working on environmental issues globally. Although much of its work is in Punjab, EcoSikh has an explicitly global emphasis and has done an impressive amount of work in building a network worldwide for environment-focused Sikh activities and fostering the promotion of *green gurdwaras*. Their projects include an attempt to create green gurdwaras, by reducing the usage of disposable plates during *langar* and working towards enhancing the greenery of the areas surrounding the *Darbar sahib* in Amritsar, as part of the global Pilgrim Cities initiative of the United Nations (Prill, 2015). EcoSikh mobilises green gurdwaras, recycling drives, and tree planting efforts, as well as environmental education, and has more recently articulated a move into organic agriculture. EcoSikh draws its directions and inspiration explicitly from the writings, principles, and lived examples of the Sikh Gurus and employs the same in its public statements and community engagement efforts. *Seva* is a foundational motivation for EcoSikh’s environmentalism, and the organization seeks to change the ways in which it is practiced in the gurdwara and beyond (Mooney, 2018).

The idea of EcoSikh was conceived by the Sikh Council on Religion and Education (SCORE) when a United Nations initiative brought together representatives from all nine major religions of the world at Windsor Castle, the United Kingdom, in the year 2009. Dr Rajwant Singh of SCORE attended this meeting as one of the representatives from the Sikh community. The meeting was to discuss practical actions for the environment, and, it was a month before the major Copenhagen climate change talks were held in December 2009. At this juncture EcoSikh was born, as the ‘Sikh answer to climate change’, according to the representatives of the organization. The global headquarters of EcoSikh is in Washington DC, USA. This researcher visited the India office (Ludhiana, Punjab) of this organization, where the representatives told the researcher that the organization uses advocacy and targeted initiatives to work at environment-related challenges. EcoSikh is part of the Alliance of Religion and Conservation, a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) initiative, combining the religious message of preserving nature with modern operating procedures.

The EcoSikh had launched a campaign to celebrate the Guruship Day of the 7th Sikh Guru, Guru Har Rai, as Sikh environment day, which is commemorated on the 14th of March. Guru Har Rai is known for his deep sensitivity towards nature. The researchers were able to see Guru Nanak Bagh (Garden) at the Moga district of Punjab, where the organization has planted more than 5000 trees and plants of 60 different species, mentioned in the Guru Granth Sahib. The most popular initiative by the organization has been the plantation drive, where each village has been given 550 saplings to commemorate the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev. The government of Punjab has also adopted this program. The organization also plants ‘sacred’ forests on lands donated by individuals and institutions. There are also similar projects, and projects of other nature too, running in Pakistan, Europe, and North America, according to the organization. Initially, EcoSikh was totally funded by the Norwegian government, after which the funding was partial in nature. However, now they are receiving all their funds from the Sikh community, according to the officials at EcoSikh.

Conclusion

Religion, as exemplified by the philosophy of Jordan Peterson, possesses the innate power to motivate and inspire the masses. This is especially evident when religion becomes intertwined with critical issues like the preservation of nature. When the intrinsic value of nature aligns with religious principles, it transforms into the ultimate value for humanity. However, it's crucial to recognize that an exclusive reliance on a rational perspective could reduce nature to a mere consumable resource, neglecting its deeper significance. In the realm of Sikhism, being a Sikh extends beyond outward religious symbols; it is a commitment to embodying religious values and teachings. This commitment is exemplified by the practice of *Seva*, which is rooted in the belief in the value of community and the equal treatment of all individuals as part of the same human family. This communal identity, bolstered by the emphasis on *Seva*, extends beyond the Sikh community, signifying the broader importance of helping others. In conclusion, the presence of Sikh NGOs like Khalsa Aid and EcoSikh exemplifies the influential role that civil society actors can play in addressing critical issues. Their embodiment of Sikh values and commitment to *Seva* not only establishes a connection to a broader purpose but also underscores the necessity of upholding selflessness, holistic well-being, and adherence to their guiding principles. Despite the challenges within the NGO landscape, such as centralization and accountability, their potential to bring about positive change and influence in societies, policies, and perceptions remains substantial. In the ultimate analysis, the narrative of Sikh NGOs applying religious ethics for social welfare illustrates the profound impact that faith-driven initiatives can have on complex societal challenges. As Sikh NGOs navigate challenges and harness the potential of their religious principles, they not only contribute to tangible improvements but also stand as a testament to the enduring potential of religion as a catalyst for positive change on a global scale.

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