

## MYTH, METAPHOR, AND RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDINGS: PUNJABI BELIEFS OF THE ENVIRONMENT

### ABSTRACT

In this article, I focus on the many folkloric beliefs and religious understandings and definitions of what constitutes the natural environment among middle-age Punjabi immigrants and how they may relate to the natural world in a collective and individualistic manner. This article uses research from a larger project that I conducted in my final undergraduate year as part of my Honours degree requirements. In my original thesis, I explore how transnational migration and Western understandings of the environment affect middle-aged Punjabi immigrants' relationship with and perception of the natural earth and, by extension, how these new or evolved understandings of the environment are disseminated throughout diasporic communities. My research examines ontological systems relating to the land and how these can shift in nature, how physical geography plays a part in shaping one's relationship to the natural earth, and the level of engagement between diasporic and homeland communities regarding environmental degradation and climate change.

### INTRODUCTION

*Religious worldviews are all-encompassing because they fully absorb the natural world within them. They provide human beings both a view of the whole and at the same time a penetrating image of their own ironic position as the beings in the cosmos who possess the capacity for symbolic thought: the part that contains the whole—or at least a picture of the whole—within itself. As all-encompassing, therefore, religious ideas do not just contend with other ideas as equals; they frame the mind-set within which all sorts of ideas co-mingle in a cosmology. For this reason, their role in ecology must be better understood. (Sullivan, 2001, p. xi)*

This article explores folkloric belief and religious understandings of the natural environment through a study of the metaphysical systems of middle-age Punjabi immigrants in British Columbia's Lower Mainland. This article is part of my overall undergraduate Honours thesis, which focuses on how perceptions and approaches to the natural world shift via the process of immigration. For this reason, it was necessary for me to examine the ontological realities of my informants as expressed through myth and religion. In this article, I share the folkloric and religious stories of my informants and how they relate to the natural world around them using myth, metaphor, and religious understandings. My interest in this subject was born of my unwavering curiosity regarding how the environment factored into the lives of Punjabi immigrants

who were born and raised in rural areas of Punjab, India. I wanted to know if it played a significant spiritual role in the everyday life of a Punjabi immigrant—whether the influences of the natural surroundings of Punjab and the physical structures of villages, including the homes, streets, farms, and other infrastructures, as well as the kinds of lives that were lived there, left an impressionable mark on the minds of my informants.

The questions I wanted answers to revolved around how the environment was perceived internally by this specific cohort within the Punjabi diaspora and community. Was nature considered a significant entity in the lives of Punjabi immigrants? Did living in rural areas in Punjab—enveloped by thick trees, dusty air, wild animals, and a sense of shared struggle to survive—create a particular mindset toward the environment? Was there respect toward flora and fauna to begin with, and if so, where did this respect originate? Was it a cultural phenomenon or a religious one, or a mix of both? Did respect for the environment diminish or expand over time?

To answer these questions, I contextualized my research and the information that my participants had shared with me through a variety of theoretical frameworks. For example, the theories of ecosociology (Kovel, 2008), deep ecology (Keller, 2008), ontology, and Wirzba's (2013) notion of ecotheology greatly influenced my research and helped contextualize my data. These theories helped expand and allow me to fully appreciate the information my participants shared and assisted in furthering these discussions on what defines the natural world and how people identify themselves vis-à-vis the environment.

My data shows that there appears to be a weaker relationship between environmental stewardship in the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora in the Lower Mainland than initially thought, at least according to my participants. However, my research also shows that there is a wealth of religious and folkloric beliefs within Punjabi culture that play a large role in how the environment is defined and understood. In fact, these stories encourage environmental stewardship, and there is a history of the environment playing a very important social role within the Punjabi community. This weak relationship is reflective of the changing social dynamics in which many older Punjabi immigrants find themselves situated, especially when they move from a rural area to an urban one and when they move from their homeland to a Western country, where understandings regarding the environment differ (for example, having an animistic understanding of non-human beings versus regarding non-human beings as commodities).

## METHODOLOGY

Most of my participants are known personally to me through family connections, as I am of Punjabi-Sikh background and my project was concentrated within my ethnic group. To participate in this project, participants had to have been living in Punjab prior to the 1980s and/or 1990s, had to be approximately 45 years of age or older at the time of the interview, and must have immigrated to Canada within the last 30 years. I chose this time frame so I could examine whether their perceptions and beliefs of the environment had changed over a prolonged period of time. Almost all my participants were in their early forties and fifties. They also had to have maintained some prolonged or continued connection to Punjab since they immigrated and had to possess basic knowledge of

Sikhi. This did not mean that they had to be active participants in the religious community, such as being baptized Sikhs, but merely that they were familiar with the Sikh texts and lived their lives influenced by Sikhi in some manner. Given that all my participants were of middle age and still had deep connections to Punjab and the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora in Canada, they all considered themselves religious to some degree. They prayed most days, went to the Sikh temple (*gurdwara*), or at the very least, respected the religious teachings and identified themselves as Sikh.

I chose to interview older immigrants rather than younger, newer immigrants to Canada for various reasons. Older immigrants had had enough time to settle in Canada and understand how the Canadian social and political systems worked. In addition, with their continual contact with Punjab and their own memories of what rural Punjab used to look like, their recollections and stories could provide valuable knowledge for diasporic communities as well as folklorists, historians, archivists, anthropologists, and others interested in these recollections. Additionally, these stories provided a wealth of information on cultural practices and beliefs that are no longer being practiced in diasporic communities. Furthermore, environmental organizations or those working on behalf of restoring Punjab's environment can use these histories to reconstruct the environment in areas that have been degraded or destroyed.

My participants consisted of four middle-aged Punjabi-Sikh women and one middle-aged Punjabi-Sikh man. They had all immigrated to Canada in the 1980s or 1990s, had been living in British Columbia since that time, and occasionally went back to Punjab, India over the past 30 years to visit family, with the average trip being once every 3-4 years. The oldest participant was 52 years of age while the youngest was 40, and the average age of the participants was 45 years. All belonged to the *Jat* caste. Two of the five participants were housewives (Sonia Kaur and Sukhneet Kaur), one worked in credit counselling (Nishi Kaur), another worked in the healthcare industry (Harleen Kaur), and another worked in the construction industry (Amardev Singh). Harleen was the sole baptized Sikh (*amritdhari*) from this group of participants, but all the participants had extensive knowledge of Sikhi. All my participants came from villages in Punjab, specifically in the Doaba region, and spoke a Doabi dialect of Punjabi (with some minor differences in dialect between some of the participants). None of my participants were Pakistani-Punjabi.

## ONTOLOGY

I asked my participants if they would share any beliefs or stories that had to do with the environment to understand how they internally perceived and positioned the natural world. I separate these ontologies from religious beliefs, in that they do not necessarily have a religious origin (although there is a fluid basis for this). Instead, they are akin to "folk beliefs." This does not mean that religion plays no role; rather, these ontologies could be influenced and shaped by religion (whether that is Sikhism, Hinduism, or whatever other religion is dominant in Punjab at any given time). Most importantly, they contextualize understandings of nature within a collective group. They also explain certain actions and behaviours toward the earth that may be performed by people, such

as planting trees to honour children as a means of expressing and processing individual and collective emotion.

In this section, I examine some of the ontological understandings that my participants shared with me that further influenced how they related to and connected with nature when they lived in Punjab. I wanted to know how elements from the natural environment were used in the daily rituals and activities carried out by my informants. How was the natural environment used as an object of expression? How was the environment used as a subject? How did it wield its own agency? What were some affective responses my participants had in carrying out these activities?

According to Lee and Nadeau (2011), Punjabi folk beliefs tend to include natural elements as part of their ethos; this includes things such as “leaves of trees, flower buds, bushes, flowers, animals, birds and landscapes” (p. 1006). Growing up in a Punjabi household, there were a few things that I was taught by my mother with regards to taking care of the plants and animals around me. The first was that all plants and animals had a soul (*atma*) and they could feel the same pains and joys that humans do. For this reason, my siblings and I were encouraged to relate to the natural world around us as though everything was a living entity imbued with the essence of God. My mother would tell me not to disturb plants at night by watering or touching them as they were asleep in the same way that humans fall asleep at night. This was echoed by Amardev Singh and Nishi Kaur, who told me that this belief still exists within the Punjabi community. This understanding of the world around me was incorporated into my own ontological realities and belief system.

Amardev Singh, Sonia Kaur, and Sukhneet Kaur shared beliefs that they had heard from others in their villages as well as the practices and activities carried out by their own families and neighbours. Some of these stories were locally based, meaning that only specific families and villages participated in certain activities, while the wider Punjabi community may have enacted rituals in a different way or may not have shared the same practices and beliefs at all. Some of the stories and beliefs shared were practical in nature, while some activities were carried out in the belief that they would bring about some aspect of relief, happiness, or good fortune to those engaging in them. For example, Sukhneet Kaur told me about the practice among school-aged children of using the leaves of the rare *vidya parahi* (literally translated as “study of wisdom”; *Oriental thuja*) tree as bookmarks. The belief was that this tree contained knowledge and that using its leaves as bookmarks facilitated the absorption of knowledge. Sukhneet Kaur suggested that even if the belief was not true, people engaged in the practice of creating bookmarks from the leaves of this plant because it brought some sense of relief or joy to them. Amardev Singh shared how people used the branches of the *sukhchain* (*Millettia pinnata*) tree as toothbrushes before modern toothbrushes were introduced into rural areas.

Nishi Kaur shared how her family would begin to make spinach curry (*saag*) right before, during, or right after *lohri*, an event that marks the winter solstice. She shared that spinach curry would not be made during other times in the year and that people waited until *lohri* to harvest the greens:

*Lohri* was always, like, you go to the farm to pick fresh spinach and get sugar canes and you make rice with sugarcane juice. [There was a saying], “Make rice on the sugarcane road.”<sup>15</sup> And that was something—that’s how the spinach was picked. Some families would only make spinach curry on *Lohri* because they’d be like, “this year, we’ll start spinach curry with the *Lohri* day.” So, the *Lohri* day, every single household had spinach curry. And every single household had sugarcane.

When I asked Harleen Kaur about this practice, she said that the harvesting of spinach around the time of *lohri* was not a custom in her village, meaning that this was a local custom in the villages of my other participants. Amardev Singh added that *lohri* was a time when people harvested sugar canes as well as jaggery. Sonia Kaur added that in the past, *lohri* was a time when children would go from door to door and ask for treats, which often included nuts, jiggery, and money. However, she noted that children no longer “ask for *lohri*” anymore; in other words, they no longer go from door to door and engage in this activity.

Although Sukhneet Kaur was a self-identified Sikh, she still knew many folk stories that featured Hindu deities. She spoke about a belief some people in her village held concerning the coming of insects and mosquitoes during the summer months and their disappearance at the onset of winter. According to this myth, mosquitoes, ants, insects, and other bugs appear during *shivratni*, a festival celebrated annually in honour of Lord Shiva. The myth goes that when Lord Shiva opens his knot of hair around the time when summer is to start, he unleashes mosquitoes and insects—this marks the start of summer and is also an explanation as to where these insects originate from during the hot summer months. When summer begins to wind down and winter arrives, the belief is that Shiva gathers up his hair again to put into a knot, taking along with it the mosquitoes and bugs that appeared in the summer (and will be unleashed again the next year). Although I find these beliefs to be fascinating, Amardev Singh felt as though they were simply that—imaginative stories that people told each other without any basis in truth. He echoed this sentiment again after Sukhneet Kaur finished sharing information on *shivratni*, saying, “Whatever happens there [in India], it’s all religious-based.” It seemed like this comment was aimed at dispelling the beliefs that others had, and it appears Amardev Singh himself did not particularly believe in these stories, but I felt as though this could have been because Amardev Singh self-identified as a Sikh and this comment was made in the context of a Hindu belief.

There were also practical beliefs, such as not cutting down fig trees or other large trees, as these provided shade for everyone, including animals. Amardev Singh said that the cutting down of these trees is often looked down upon by others, as it takes away necessary shade in villages. Nishi Kaur shared an anecdote from her childhood in which a famed lemon tree planted on one of her family’s farms had begun to dry up. She and her mother acted upon associated folkloric beliefs to understand what was happening to it and save it:

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<sup>15</sup> *ganea de rast’ vich chawl banao*

Nobody knows who planted it, where it came from, but that tree had so many lemons, that you could...literally make, like, two hundred kilos worth of pickled lemons (*achhar*), from that one tree. So, I remember that tree started to—like, one year, it started to—I don't know what happened, it dried up...Then my mom said, "Someone must have said something bad to it, now it has been given the evil eye," right? So then she went and then she, I don't know, she tied a black string onto the tree and gave it water.<sup>16</sup> I don't know, she was doing some things to, you know, take away the evil eye from the tree so I could get my fruits and you know—[laughs]. It survived, I think. I don't know if it's still there. But at that time, it survived.

Folk beliefs also revolved around the conservation of animals and taking care of them in the same manner that one would take care of a family member. Harneet Kaur acknowledged that there was respect for animals within the culture and also shared a belief that had been passed down to her by her mother and grandmother, according to which it was frowned upon to sew or embroider anything after sunset. She explained it thusly: "My mom and grandma, they always say that don't sew anything after sunset or doing any embroidery on the clothes. When you're poking the needle in there, it goes into bird's eyes because they are sleeping."

Additionally, peacock feathers are often used as items of décor for homes and businesses, and the accumulation of these feathers was traditionally<sup>17</sup> carried out in a sustainable and safe manner; those interested in selling peacock feathers would pick them up from the ground after they had been discarded by the birds. They were not pulled from birds in an aggressive manner. Harneet Kaur explained the motive behind this:

We don't take them from the birds, we just pick them up when they throw them. Otherwise, it will hurt them. Same thing as our hair, if we pull our hair, it will hurt. Same thing with them, if we pull out their hair, it will hurt.

Even though Harneet Kaur was a baptized Sikh initiated into the *khalsa panth*,<sup>18</sup> she still subscribed to some degree to these folk beliefs. Neufeldt stated that baptized Sikhs "required renunciation of all former preoccupations with caste, status, birth, country, religion, gods, goddesses, incarnations and prophets" (as cited in Mooney, 2011, p. 241), and yet there was a blending of folk beliefs with religious beliefs and practices among Punjabis, "with Hindu and Sikh practices demonstrating a particular overlap" (p. 137). According to Shackle (as cited in Mooney, 2011), "There exists...a whole spectrum of actual religious practice and belief between the fully orthodox positions of Sikhism at one end and Hinduism at the other" (p. 137). These insights help

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<sup>16</sup> Tying a string, usually a black string, to a person, animal, or plant is believed to ward off the evil eye.

<sup>17</sup> I have been told that this is the traditional way peacock feathers are acquired for sale in the bazaars and markets by several family members. However, if the method has changed in contemporary times, I have not read or heard about any such thing. Therefore, I have chosen to label this as the traditional method of gathering peacock feathers for sale.

<sup>18</sup> The Khalsa Panth refers to the collective and orthodox group of initiated Sikhs.

explain Sukhneet Kaur's knowledge of and participation in the folk belief of Shiva opening his hair and letting mosquitoes and insects out.

There were Punjabi folk beliefs that also mixed in Islamic figures and influences, such as the figure of Khawaja Khidr. Sonia Kaur shared with me a practice she and her mother used to partake in when she was a child, in which they would place a bowl of oatmeal on the edge of a well; this oatmeal was given as an offer to a water spirit known as *Khawaja*. Although Sonia Kaur was unsure about the name "Khidr," she did identify the water spirit as "Khajawa." According to Longworth Dames (2006), Khawaja (also known as "Khizr" in some parts) is "identified [in India] with a river-god or spirit of wells and streams...and Hindus as well as Muslims reverence him." However, according to Wheeler (2002), Khidr (or al-Khidr) is a messenger or angel who guards the sea.

These folk beliefs which dictate how the environment is approached explain how Punjabis relate to and with the environment. There is a relationship toward the land that reflects how people approach their own kin, and this understanding of kin extends outward to non-human beings. There is a sense of awareness regarding sustainability and consuming and growing food in the right season. Additionally, notions regarding "the evil eye" ensured that other beings (plants, for example) were also taken care of. On the other hand, some participants, such as Amardev Singh, doubted the reality of some of these beliefs. Because of this doubt, it is impossible to define Punjabi folk traditions as belonging to the same, singular ontology. Regardless, a faith-based syncretism exists in the shared beliefs of Punjabis, no doubt influenced by the merging of spiritual traditions in the region.

## SIKHI

Since all my participants identified themselves as Sikhs, I wanted to know how their faith, beyond folk religion, influenced their perception of the land. My participants prayed often and visited the Sikh temple (*gurdwara*) on a regular basis. Their faith was an integral aspect of their identity. Because of this, I felt that it was necessary to understand the significance of the land in their lives and how they continued to imagine the land collectively as a people through the Sikh texts. I also examined their spiritual beliefs regarding the environment, which led to a discussion of their interpretations of what *Sikhi* (Sikh philosophy) outlines regarding protection of the environment and whether it is a significant aspect of a Sikh's life. By examining how Punjabi-Sikhs frame their relationship to their natural surroundings as contextualized in the Sikh texts, one might better understand how this faith has shaped their understanding of the world around them.

"Punjabi" and "Sikh" are often synonymous with one another, since "Sikhism is an ethnic religion still closely associated with Punjab, culturally, linguistically and ethnically" (Cole, 2004, p. 2). Islam, on the other hand, is more closely associated with Punjab, Pakistan due to the events surrounding Partition in 1947 as well as the area's geographical position relative to Middle Eastern countries. Punjabi is both an ethnicity and a language, while Sikhism is a religion. However, because Sikhs originated from Punjab, the beliefs of the religion, folk beliefs, and beliefs stemming from Hinduism and Islam all exist in a syncretic fusion of sorts within Punjabi culture. This cultural and

religious fusion is not new in Punjab, even though 57.69% of the total population practices Sikhi, with 38.49% of people practicing Hinduism. India's overall population (79.8%) practices Hinduism, while 2% practice Sikhism (according to a 2011 census). In other words, although most Punjabi-Sikhs practice *Sikhi*, a certain level of familiarity with Hindu stories, texts, and beliefs is not uncommon. Aside from Harneet Kaur, who was a baptized Sikh, my other participants seemed more open to explaining environmental phenomena through some Hindu myths and beliefs, although they still held strong Sikh views on what constituted respect for the environment and how it should be maintained. Harneet Kaur perceived and understood the environment mostly through Sikh teachings (*gurbani*), although she accepted that others in India have a different way of understanding and explaining environmental phenomena.

Harneet Kaur told me she believed that environmental stewardship was an important part of being a Sikh; however, she was very clear that not all Sikhs made the environment a priority. She differentiated these people from what she called "true Sikhs" (i.e., those who did prioritize the environment). "True Sikhs," according to her, were also more pious and devoted than most other Sikhs. She stated her belief that Sikhs were more likely to care for the environment than people from other faiths, and she elaborated on this by examining how some Hindus eat beef and Muslims eat pork, but many Sikhs adopt a vegetarian lifestyle and were therefore more environmentally conscious and sensitive. She further explained what she meant by this:

Most of the Sikh people, they don't hurt the nature. They don't kill anything for to eat. In *Hajur Sahib*,<sup>19</sup> [I heard that] they kill goats to make meat. But I don't think it's true... Guru Sahib couldn't hurt anyone. They can't hurt anyone. I think Sikh people—true Sikhs—they don't hurt other things to make themselves happy. They just eat whatever they can find that's vegetarian. They don't kill chickens, they can eat vegetarian food. Some Hindus eat pig, not all, there are some vegetarians. But some eat pig, and I don't know if there are any Muslims who are vegetarian, but they can eat the cow. [Because of this] I can say that Sikh religion is better for protect environment and nature.

She also provided me with a very interesting story about how stewardship of nature and all beings was enacted by important Sikh figures or saints (*sant*). According to Harneet Kaur, Bhagat Namdev Ji, a Maharashtrian saint (Novetzke, 2008), saw God multiple times. She stated:

He see God about 72 times. He was seeing God in everything, right? One time, [a] dog came to his house and he was making flatbread (*roti*) and dog took the bread from his basket and then he was taking the butter (*ghee*) after him too, and the saint said, "Lord, you don't want to eat dry bread, do you? Here, take some butter as well!"<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> A Sikh temple located in Maharashtra, India.

<sup>20</sup> "...kenda 'raab ji, tusi roti sukhi tha nahin khani? nale ghae bhi lalo.'" *Ohne dog de viche god de darshan hoe sigi.*



Amardev Singh stated in his interview that “Singhs<sup>21</sup> don’t believe in anything”<sup>22</sup> when Sukhneet Kaur mentioned that some people in India believe in saints (*pire*). This was an interesting contrast to Harneet Kaur, who was a baptized Sikh and used these stories to support her personal beliefs; she did believe that saints had power that was God-given. Nishi Kaur’s views on religion vis-à-vis the environment were much more pronounced than Harneet Kaur’s and Amardev Singh’s. Nishi Kaur felt as though the lack of environmental stewardship on the part of the baptized Sikh community, who represented the faith, was due to their disinterest in helping the environment. She said:

Sikh philosophy talks about taking care of your surroundings, and your surroundings is the environment. Sikhs should be environmental stewards but they’re not. Not enough dialogue, not enough talk. When we get together, we start off discussing other people. It’s the same thing with baptized people [*amritdharis*].

She strongly felt that “the environment is not a priority for baptized Sikhs.” Cole’s (2008) book on the Sikh religion recounts many historical instances wherein the Sikh gurus themselves or followers of theirs used nature to honour and respect others. Cole (2008) mentions how a jujube tree (*Ziziphus jujuba*) had been planted at a spot inside the complex of the Golden Temple by Guru Arjan Dev Ji<sup>23</sup> “where a crippled man was [once] cured” (p. 6). Another story that Cole (2008) recounted was one in which the fifth *guru* was in the middle of building the Golden Temple during the late 1580s, and “[sat] under another jujube tree, Lachi Ber, to meditate and plan the next stage” (p. 7). Another tree had been planted and named in honour of one of the guru’s followers, Baba Buddha, and helpers in the construction of the temple; the tree planted in his honour was named Ber Baba Buddha. *Sikhi* is filled with stories in which saints and gurus use natural features to honour others, a practice which in turn places special importance on those natural features.

Additionally, there are numerous passages in the *Guru Granth Sahib Ji* in which stewardship of the environment is emphasized. One line that is commonly known and often recited is “*pawan guru, paani pita, mahaat dharat mahat.*” This translates to “the wind is the teacher, the water is the father, and the earth is the great mother.” This line is often evoked in environmental activist circles as evidence that Sikhs need to take care of the environment and help stop climate change.

When I asked Nishi Kaur further about her thoughts on the relationship between baptized Sikhs and the earth, or the general relationship between Sikhs and nature, she was very passionate in her answer, replying thusly:

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<sup>21</sup> *Singh* in this sense refers to baptized Sikhs, specifically males, but could also include the baptized community as a whole.

<sup>22</sup> Meaning they don’t believe in spirits, gods, goddesses, etc. Sikhism is a monotheistic religion; however, popular religion or other dominant religions can factor into people’s belief systems.

<sup>23</sup> The fifth *guru*, or teacher, of the Sikh faith. There are 10 human *gurus* in total; the Sikh holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib Ji*, is considered the 11th and last *guru*.

If you're a Sikh and the *Guru Granth Sahib Ji* says "*pawan guru, paani pita, maata dharat mahat*," get it? *Pawan guru, paani pita*: the wind is the teacher, the water is the father. We can't survive without it, we can't live without it. This is all we have. It is your shadow, it's who you are. It's what connects you with everything. *Maata dharat mahat*: the earth is the mother, can't live without her, it will give you everything including its soul for you to survive. So, if the water is the father and the earth is the mother, why are we not respecting any of it? Some people are like, "the water has become dirty"; so are you telling me, especially baptized people, so are you telling me that you don't respect your father? Don't you care for your dad? Your mother? You're putting all these pesticides into it, you're poisoning it—would you do that to your mother? Literally, to your mother? Would you give her a teaspoon of Round-up every day? Sikh philosophy doesn't talk about destroying anything.

Nishi Kaur especially felt that baptized Sikhs had more of an incentive to help the environment because of the initiation rites they took and their commitment and devotion to scripture; however, she felt as though this particular cohort of the Sikh community did not care much for the environment. Harneet Kaur, a baptized Sikh, said that the environment and taking care of it was important, and that "true Sikhs" would do so. On the other hand, she did admit that environmental stewardship was lacking in the community. Amardev Singh, Sonia Kaur, and Sukhneet Kaur all admitted that the environment *was* important as it provides food and other health benefits for people, however in reality, the environment was not important for many Punjabi-Sikhs, baptized and non-baptized. It was not seen as something to be concerned about, either in contemporary Punjab with all its present-day environmental issues or in British Columbia, where it was understood to be much healthier and cleaner than Punjab because of government prioritization and cultural attitudes in Canada toward the environment, which differ from those in India. Although there are social justice movements against climate change now, this issue of the environment becoming polluted did not seem to warrant as significant an outcry in the Punjabi-Sikh community as other causes, according to my participants.

Cole (2008) also mentions that while "social justice has always been important [to Sikhs]" (p. 98), there is a double standard within the Punjabi-Sikh community whereby "Punjabi farmers, in their successful efforts to produce high yields have used methods that have polluted river systems and had other harmful effects upon the population" (p. 101). While Nishi Kaur and Amardev Singh were far more critical about what they felt was a lack of care stemming from the baptized community, who often took it upon themselves to represent *Sikhi* as a whole, there do exist organizations and prominent Punjabi-Sikh figures that rely on scripture as justification for helping the environment. My participants were vaguely aware of these organizations and figures, but did not engage in them (e.g., volunteering, giving donations, etc.).

One of the most prominent environmental organizations, located in India and the United Kingdom, is EcoSikh. According to EcoSikh's website, the organization was formed as "a response from the Sikh community to the threats of climate change and the deterioration of the natural environment" (EcoSikh, 2014, n.p.). Using scripture as

the foundational basis of their work, EcoSikh has managed to establish numerous “sacred forests” named after the 10 Sikh gurus in various areas in both Punjab, India and Punjab, Pakistan. They have also started a campaign to plant one million trees, and they have helped to establish a Sikh Environment Day in Punjab, India. They have also compiled a list of Sikh hymns (*shabads*) extracted from the holy book which focus on the environment and how it must be maintained. This compilation is called *Eek Bageecha* or “One Garden.” They have also released statements on climate change and environmental theology that explicitly talk about how Sikhism is an environmental religion that has the resources and tools to combat climate change.

As for other prominent environmentally concerned Sikh entities, Cole (2008) also mentions Bhagat Puran Singh, an activist and humanitarian who “wrote tracts against government policies of deforestation and refused to accept state aid for his institution while such practices continued” (p. 132). Within the holy book of the Sikhs (the *Guru Granth Sahib Ji*) are many passages that contain keywords pertaining to the environment, such as “nature,” “earth,” “wind,” “water,” etc. There are some prominent passages that stand out which speak directly to the positionality of nature within *Sikhi*. A few examples of these passages include the following:

1. The air is the guru, the water is the father, and the earth is the great mother.
2. The Supreme Lord God has unleashed the rain clouds. Over the sea and over the land—over all the earth’s surface, in all directions, He has brought the rain. Peace has come, and the thirst of all has been quenched; there is joy and ecstasy everywhere.
3. The *Gurmukh* sees the Lord on the earth, and the *Gurmukh* sees Him in the water. The *Gurmukh* sees Him in wind and fire; such is the wonder of His Play.
4. Within the home of the self is the earth, its support and the nether regions of the underworld.

Additionally, the hymn below is used by EcoSikh on their website as supporting evidence that Sikh philosophy encourages environmental stewardship:

*There is a garden.  
It has so many plants created within it.  
And each bears the sweet-nectared  
Naam<sup>24</sup> as its fruit. ||1||  
Consider this, O wise one,  
In this garden you may seek the means by which to attain eternal bliss.  
O brothers and sisters of Destiny,  
This garden has dark pools of poison here and there,  
But it also contains the ambrosial nectar within it. ||1||Pause||  
There is only one gardener who tends it.  
He takes care of every leaf and branch. ||2||  
He brought all these plants and planted them there.  
They all bear fruit – none is without fruit. ||3||*

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<sup>24</sup> “Name”; refers to God.

*The one who receives the ambrosial fruit of the Naam  
From the Guru – O Nanak,  
Such a servant has a way to pass over the ocean of illusion. ||4||5||56||  
(EcoSikh, 2014)*

Therefore, the environment does prominently play a major role within the Sikh faith. Even if it may not be a priority within the community, the importance of it is still maintained in scripture, as shown by the examples above from the *Guru Granth Sahib Ji*.

#### ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Environmental stewardship is enshrined within Punjabi folkloric belief and religious stories. Since Punjabi people are one of the largest minorities within Canada, I firmly believe that knowing about these beliefs and stories can help to galvanize support within the Punjabi-Sikh community of Canada for taking better care of the earth and being eco-conscious, especially within the context of a climate crisis. Within these stories of what the environment is and how it should be taken care of is a wealth of knowledge that illustrates the relationship humans have with the earth. These stories reflect the interconnectedness of all beings, and the teachings within these stories can be brought back into social discourse and acted upon. Western discourse tends to depict the environment as a place to escape to or conquer; however, with these stories, we can deconstruct this human/nature divide and approach the environment more respectfully and holistically, integrating it with our everyday lives in much the same manner as my participants did when they were young.

*Deep ecology* posits that all of humanity is interrelated with every other living being and natural phenomenon on this earth, and that we are inseparable from the natural environment surrounding us (Keller, 2008, p. 206). This concept gives agency and rights to non-human beings, something that is not given by default to animals and plants in Western societies. These two theories combined show the tensions between Western approaches to the environment and Eastern ones (although it should be noted that Kovel was critical of some aspects of *deep ecology*). For example, folk belief in Punjab presents a very animistic understanding of natural phenomena—all living beings, whether human or not, have souls—and the fact that the actions humans take have a lasting effect on the environment around them. *Deep ecology* is also theoretically similar to Atleo's (2004) theory of *heshook-ish tsawalk* and the Sikh concept of *ek onkar*.

Wirzba (2013) examines agrarian *ecotheology* and the importance of analyzing scripture from systems of faith to understand how people think about the nature of reality and how dependent they are on their own conceptions of God, community, and earth. Agrarian *ecotheology* can provide clues as to how we identify ourselves in different places. Wirzba (2013) argues that the Jewish and Christian God is often referred to as the "Gardener/Vinedresser" or the "Good Shepherd" (p. 6), motifs that recall interrelations between humans and nature. He argues that the concept of *ecotheology*, which has focused mostly on Abrahamic religions, should be examined by theologians and scholars from other religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Indigenous religions, etc.

Ecotheology can be applied to environmental organizations as well. For example, EcoSikh incorporates environmental teachings from *Sikhi* into the environmental restorative work they do in communities. By using scripture as a tool to combat climate change and educate people on environmental issues, it is possible to physically apply scripture that speaks of environmental stewardship. This is especially important as people are more willing to engage in these activities if they are exposed to passages from scripture that encourage environmental stewardship. By examining scripture for what it says about the environment, we can examine how followers construct their relationships and understandings of the environment. This is because scripture is often seen as a kind of directive or guide on how to live a moral and ethical life. On the other hand, if adherents are not doing what scripture says, not only does it lose its power as a guiding tool that is usually seen as imbued with the power of the Creator, but a dissonance is also created between the people and their system of faith. They may be regarded as not “true” to their religion, as Harneet Kaur pointed out. There was an issue that baptized Sikhs—representatives of the religion as orthodox members—were not engaging in environmental stewardship. They are regarded as leaders of the faith, and without their engagement with the land, it seems as though even fewer people are willing to reengage with the land. This also shows that religion plays a far bigger role in influencing one’s relationship with the earth.

When the land is worked on through agriculture or ritual, there is an agentic power that arises that is affectively felt by those interacting with the land. In this way, relationships are built between two subjects—the land and the person working the land. This is the kind of relationship that was understood when my participants lived in Punjab. They were surrounded by the natural world and it was an intrinsic aspect of their identity; physically engaging with it created a relationship of reciprocal agentic power. The earth was nourished by people and people were nourished by the earth. Their identity was based partly on their relationship to the land; this manifested and was expressed through cultural activities, such as praying to the local river spirits or celebrating the harvest.

My research has shown that stories from participants’ past demonstrate a strong attachment to the earth. One of the most important findings I came across in my research was the cognitive dissonance between what is written in the Sikh scriptures and the attitudes of my participants regarding how they feel Sikhs take care of the environment. Their attitudes were overwhelmingly negative, as they believed that many people do not adhere to and follow the “true” path of the *guru*, which asks that the land be protected and taken care of. They felt as though it was not a priority in their lives.

I believe that discussion and dialogue surrounding environmental stewardship is important, and that these stories can be preserved if people continue to engage with them and discuss them in their everyday lives. How we understand and approach the earth is imperative if we wish to work together on solving the climate crisis. It also helps us identify ourselves and how we relate to those around us, including non-human living beings.

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