

CONTRIBUTION OF BHAGAT PURAN SINGH TOWARDS NATURE AND
ENVIRONMENT CONSERVATION

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Abstract: *This Research Paper is mainly intended to explore the contribution of Bhagat Puran Singh towards Environment. Bhagat Puran Singh is the legacy of Punjab, a one time phenomenon in any nation's life. He embodied a culture in himself. He gifted to Punjab a tiny self-sufficient niche in the form of the Pingalwara, where socially, emotionally and physically ostracised humans are taken care of, irrespective of their Religion, caste, class or gender. His prime motivator for ecological activism is the Sikh Tradition of Seva, Service to the community. He Talked About combating environment pollution and erosion of Natural Resources which have now become the biggest challenge for civilisation.*

Keywords:- *Environment, Sikh Tradition, Bhagat Puran Singh, Pingalwara, Ecology, Seva, Nature, Religion, Contribution.*

Bhagat Puran Singh is an Transcendent Spirit. The birth of Bhagat Puran Singh was like a miracle in the Indian society, which was to transform this society into paradise. Bhagat Puran Singh surmounted the upheavals of his life under directives of hymns of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. He had probably foresighted the brazen exploitation of natural resources and its consequences. The reason, he propagated a lifestyle in harmony with nature. He talked about such ideas when these were not even thought upon. His ideas like eating in utensils made of bronze, not destroying environment but learning to co-exist, decreasing individual waste count and using natural made things. A big believer of Sewa (service), Bhagat Puran Singh served the poor and down trodden. He cleaned streets, nurtured the sick and adopted an eco-friendly lifestyle.

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Early life of Bhagat Puran Singh :- Bhagat Puran Singh (Puran Singh's childhood name was Ramji Das) was born to Chibu Mal, a wealthy Hindu money-lender, and Mehtab Kaur, a young widow he was betrothed to in a "chadar"* ceremony.

When Mehtab Kaur was expecting, Chibu Mal wanted to abort the baby. Having already lost three children before, Mehtab Kaur pleaded with Chibu Mal to allow her to have the baby, on the express promise that this child would never claim any of Chibu Mal's property or come in his way of loving his other family. From an early age, his Sikh mother taught Puran Singh the Sikh ideals of humility, selflessness, and seva, as well as love for humanity, animals and the environment which influenced the rest of his life. Mehtab Kaur would teach the child by example. She told Puran Singh to always to pick up harmful objects off the road such as bricks and glass. She said that it takes less energy for them to remove the brick than it would for an ox that had to pull a cart with a broken wheel to go over it. She taught him to treat all people with respect and to serve others. On her death bed, she made him promise to dedicate his entire life to service of others.¹

Born into a Hindu family, he was given the name Ramji Das as a child, but later in his childhood converted to Sikhism taking the name Bhagat Puran Singh. A miracle happened in the life of Ramji Das when he was still a young man. Once he had to go to some place and walking was the only option available to him due to his financial position. Motorized transportation as one sees nowadays did not exist in the rural areas at that time. After walking the whole day Ramji Das stopped at a village before sunset. There was no place to stay for the night.

The village he stopped at had a Mandir (Temple) and he went there with the hope to find shelter for the night. It was time for the evening Arti prayers and the priest asked him to take a broom and clean the courtyard of the Mandir, which he did. After the Arti prayers, when it was time for dinner, the priest sat down in full view of Ramji Das and ate his meal. He had walked many miles and was very hungry but the priest had no considerations for a hungry man and threw the leftovers to a stray dog. Ramji Das had to spend the night on an empty stomach drinking water from a pot kept outside. A few months after this unfortunate

* It was rural practice of marrying when a women becomes a widow.

incident, Ramji Das was travelling in another direction when he stopped at a village with a Gurdwara . He went there because he had heard that one could always find shelter and food at a Gurdwara. He sat down in the langar hall while the sewadar served sweetened lassi to him. When it drew close to lunchtime, the sewadars again called out to the sangat assembled there, 'Langar is ready, Guru's cherished followers. Come and eat.' 'As those sweet words melted in Ramji das's ears, he receiving answers to the several questions that had been bothering him for last so many years. It was like a mother enveloping her son in her warmth.²

Bhagat Puran Singh's life-journey to create Pingalwara is probably one of the most inspiring things in the history of this country. The odds that were against him were enormous. He did his entire work, including cleaning the feces and wounds off the suffering, single-handedly for years before he received any help. Almost always, the financial resources ran tight, but he managed to pull through. Bhagat Puran Singh first came up with the idea of caring for the destitute and disabled when he was doing seva in a gurdwara. "An old man with a badly infected leg limped came into the gurdwara one day. Puran Singh, on seeing maggots oozing out of a very small hole in his calf, took him to Lahore's Mayo Hospital - the biggest in undivided (pre-Partition) Punjab. The ailing man was admitted and given a proper bed with clean sheets to sleep on. At this, he gratefully remarked, 'I know I am going to die soon. But at least here I will die with dignity.'" He learnt from the incident that every man and woman has the right to live and die in dignity.³

Four years after his mother's death came the turning point in his life. In 1934, he found Piara, a young boy about four years old. "A mute, mentally impaired and physically deformed, he was suffering from acute dysentery and was covered with flies and his own feces." Bhagat Puran Singh brought him to the gurdwara and cleaned him. "From that day on they were inseparable for the next 14 years (until 1948, when he had assembled a group of those, discarded like Piara, with whom he could leave him for a few hours at a time)." Puran Singh carried Piara on his back literally every day for those 14 years. Puran Singh's inspiration to keep going was Piara whom he considered the "garland around his neck".

The Cripple Piara has been the biggest source of his strength. In his own words "Had i not found him, i would not have achieved anything in life- nor established Pingalwara which has earned me recognition and respect. For eighty years i have led a disciplined life inspired by the innocence and trust of Piara."⁴

He always says that about piara “if anyone is sad, he should just look once at the Piara and his spiritual and naive actions. The viewer's mind will be blown away and he will have never felt such a peaceful experience before. When Piara rides on my shoulder, I feel God has placed a precious diamond and pearl necklace around my neck.”⁵

When the cataclysmic Partition of Punjab and India took place in 1947, Bhagat Puran Singh found himself on a caravan to Amritsar from Lahore. He decided to settle in Amritsar and start a home for destitutes and the disabled. Many know of Bhagat Puran Singh merely as the founder of Pingalwara. However, he found the time to do much more. He cared for animals and the environment, in addition to humans in need and always kept all the three in mind whenever he did anything. For example, he would not take a car or a bus, but instead he would push his patients in a handcart. "Since the only way he knew of persuading people was by personal example, he seldom travelled by car or bus, and one of the questions that he invariably asked people was - how many miles had they walked that day? He recommended eight to ten miles a day!" This was because Bhagat Puran Singh sensed an upcoming environmental crisis as early as 1928. He printed and distributed material for environmental preservation on recycled paper and created a movement against deforestation. Alongside environmentally-friendly Pingalwara, he also created an animal shelter for sick and stray animals.⁶

Bhagat Puran Singh wrote very few articles on his own, but there is an emphatic one which warns the Indians against impending natural calamities. In one of his visits to different colleges and universities, in 1989, he said, 'In India, every year the forests are being depleted by a figure of ten lakh and fifty thousand hectares. If this massive depletion is not stopped and the forest cover not increased once again, then by 2010, this country of ours will resemble a desert.'⁷ It must be recalled here that Bhagat Puran Singh was a voracious reader. According to him, 'In 1930, one-third of the land in India was covered with forests. In 1951, only 23% forest area was left, and today (in 1989) only 10% remains.' Explaining his passion for reading, he would say, 'It is necessary for me to go through all those newspapers and magazines which include the details about the degradation of land, air and water. It is the global destruction which worries me.'⁸ The analysis and forecast made by Bhagat Puran Singh regarding the ozone layer in the fifties was highlighted by scientists two decades later. In simple words, he explained, 'It is very important to grow trees on the hills. Their leaves form a

canopy that helps rainwater to seep in slowly in the ground and form waterfalls later. Imagine crores of such trees helping in water conservation. To visitors at the Pingalwara, he would describe thus, If there are no trees on the land to bind the soil, it gets eroded. This soil enters lakes and rivers and chokes the dams, resulting in huge losses. Also, the top eight inches of soil is most fertile, and if that is lost or swept away, what are we left with? Tell me.⁹ His energy for propounding this subject was limitless. The eighties saw environment-related issues become an obsession with Bhagatji. He would collect articles on this topic, get them printed and distribute them at random. At the same time, what is admirable is that all this printing was done on recycled paper. One could see a sort of mini recycling unit running in the front verandas of the Pingalwara office complex and the veranda on its first floor. According to him, the only solution to vehicular pollution was, 'Plant more trees, for trees breathe out oxygen which fights the toxins generated by vehicular traffic.' Before Babaji had gone into coma, Beant Singh, then Chief Minister of Punjab, went to visit him in the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh, and asked, 'Bhagatji, can I do anything for you?' 'Yes,' he said, 'do something about the air. Get more trees planted!'¹⁰

Contribution Towards Nature and Environment Conservation

Bhagat Puran Singh had started a campaign to protect nature. Man is the precious work of nature's creation. While Bhagat ji was striving for the integrity of human life throughout his life, the distortion caused by the sub-conscious relationship between man and nature has been the subject of Bhagat ji's concern. Bhagatji was aware of the cutting of forests and the importance of trees since 1925. But overall protection of the environment was greatly influenced by the works of Sarla Bain, Meera Bain during the 1940s to 1950s, Chandi Prasad Bhatt from the 1970s and from Sundar Lal Bahugana also. All of them were engaged in the campaign to save trees in Garhwal and Tehri areas in Himachal Hills. Influenced by Mr. Sundar Lal Bahugana's 'Chipko Campaign', he decided to study and write in the field of

* The Chipko movement is a forest conservation movement in India. Opposed to commercial logging and the government's policies on deforestation, protestors in the 1970s engaged in tree hugging, wrapping their arms around trees so that they could not be felled.

'Ecology'. Through the newspapers and magazines of the country and abroad, he gained knowledge about the environmental conditions of the whole world and made a great contribution to the distribution of his knowledge. Bhagat Puran Singh ji very sensitively exposed the looting of nature and the ignorance towards nature in human life. In order to make people aware of the exploitation of nature, while Bhagatji wrote on many topics that are directly related to the environment, he also warned about the dangers to the environment and human health caused by the unnecessary changes in human life. He writes ‘’ the people of the world are putting their future in terrible danger by being unconcerned about the protection of the earth. Where the earth is ravaged by floods of rivers, it is also ravaged by darkness. Every man should be educated through advertisements and various other means to plant maximum number of trees for his protection and to return the waste of his produce as fertilizer.¹¹

Bhagat ji was also concerned about other problems of the earth, including the warming of the earth, the turning of the earth into a sand desert, floods, acid rain, etc. Bhagatji had also researched about the causes and prevention of these arising problems. By publishing his research through many advertisements, where he alerted the general public, he also kept alerting the governments. For these problems of the earth, they used to say that the factories and vehicles have heated the entire earth by indiscriminate use of petrol and diesel and have increased the heating of the entire earth's environment. Even in rich countries, airplanes run like buses in our country. As the earth warms, the glaciers have started melting and if the temperature of the earth increases further, the melting of the glaciers will raise the surface of the lake and the cities that are on the banks of the lake will drown, people will become refugees to escape. He also considered the increasing number of scooters, motor cycles and motor cars as a solid reason for air pollution. He himself did not travel by car all his life. They preferred walking and cycling. Pingalwara used to use bicycles or handcarts to transport patients to distant hospitals so that our air would not be polluted. To stop the increasing air pollution, Bhagat ji advises to plant more trees. Both Gurbani and science give information about the importance of trees. In order to expand his thinking, Bhagat ji encouraged to learn from the life of Guru Teg Bahadur Sahib, who went to Assam to preach religion and planted trees there. He published the articles of great scholars and scientifically explained the importance of trees and Provides information for prevention of air pollution. He publishing the great ideas and articles of Sarla Ban, Meera Ban, Pratap Singh and many other environmentalists through a book called '*Peril of survival*'.¹²

The Analysis and forecast made by Bhagat Puran Singh regarding the ozone layer in the fifties was highlighted by scientists two decades later. After his death Pingalwara society is doing necessary work on the basis of new researches and the 10-point charter given by Bhagat Puran Singh which every human being needs to follow. This charter suggested by him expresses his great contribution towards nature and environment which is as follows :-

- i) Do take care of the natural sources.
- ii) Leads A simple life.
- iii) Help the mankind by planting maximum trees.
- iv) Help remove unemployment by wearing cotten clothes. Pleasure lies in simple eating, simple wearing and simple living.
- v) Use Diesel and Petrol to the minimum.
- vi) Control Your Living style to check increase of population.
- vii) Listen to the crying pleadings of Air, Water and the Earth. Don't forget to plant trees.
- viii) Trees are the bases of a country's prosperity.
- ix) During the rainy season, every individual must plant at least one tree to help humanity.
- x) Men must adopt more and more compassionate means to care for safety and security of the animals.

Works Doing by All India Pingalwara Charitable Society :-

The major effort being undertaken by Inderjit Kaur and the entire management committee of All India Pingalwara Charitable Society is the concerted effort to maintain the environment. While Bhagat ji was against cutting trees and always tried to plant and maintain trees, extending this thought, the following efforts are being made by Pingalwara to preserve the environment and protect the environment from pollution: (1) Establishing nurseries (2) Planting trees (3) Natural farming awareness campaign. Establishing nurseries Although the work of planting saplings had been going on since the time of Bhagat Puran Singh ji. But Pingalwara organization used to plant these saplings from other nurseries and forest department. A nursery was set up in the year 2001-02 with the inspiration of Mr. Sundar Lal Bahugana to prepare a greenhouse for the saplings. Since the year 2003, the saplings being prepared in this nursery are given to different schools, colleges and other institutions so that they can plant these saplings at these places. Pingalwara now sends the saplings produced in

the nursery to various organizations every year. In order to make natural farming a people's movement, where conferences, seminars and workshops are being organized by the Pingalwara organization for the promotion of natural farming, Pingalwara is doing '**Kudrati Kheti**' on Pingalwara's own land at Maana wala Complex (Amritsar) and village Dhirekot (Sangrur). The residents of Pingalwara are taking advantage of the crops grown here. The office bearers of the Agricultural Heritage Mission are continuously contributing to the promotion of natural farming with the support of Pingalwara.

Bhagat Puran Singhji's work is a unique story in Indian society. He did not limit the principle of 'Seva' to only physical service but also broke the monotony of all forms of vision. Thus the contribution made by Bhagat Puran Singh towards nature and environment is very great. The establishment of Pingalwade was a great contribution of his, he has served the entire humanity and the entire universe through many works. Today the whole world is surrounded by many kinds of problems. If Bhagat ji's contribution is looked at with a deep eye, the solutions to these problems of the entire world can be found.

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