

AUGUST 2021 VOL.7

WORKING TOWARDS A PLURALISTIC FUTURE

NEWSLETTER BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE SIKH HUMAN RIGHTS GROUP
NGO WITH SPECIAL CONSULTATIVE STATUS AT THE UNITED NATIONS

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WELCOME TO OUR AUGUST 2021 NEWSLETTER

DIRECTORS NOTE

BY DR JASDEV SINGH RAI (SHRG DIRECTOR) (LONDON OFFICE)

The month of August has few international meetings but the Sikh Human Rights Group (SHRG) got busy with holding podcasts and developing policy as well as position papers. It is also the month that the SHRG prepares for the Human Rights Council 48th Session in September.

We have had a few new interns and some who have finished their internship. Interns are very important for the Sikh Human Rights Group. They help to do a lot of research, focus our minds on subjects and we also hope that they will learn a lot to add to their knowledge on human rights in various fields.

We have had podcasts on the climate and environment issues based on our theme of a pluralistic approach to tackling climate change. Pluralism is a theme that cuts across all our areas of work.

It is encouraging to know that there are many other organisations, movements and academics who share our views and approach. This became evident from the podcasts.

Professor Hassan Kaya of the KwaZulu Natal University in Durban (South Africa) is head of the Centre for Indigenous Knowledge. He explains eloquently the philosophy of his centre (please see page 3). The Centre has become influential in many countries in Africa as people begin to appreciate that indigenous understanding of our shared environment and climate needs to be strengthened in order to save the planet.

The SHRG has also held a very interesting podcast with Extinction Rebellion (please see page 4). Extinction Rebellion has really brought the climate issue to the forefront in world debates. The member group who engaged with us agreed that the climate issue needs to connect with different communities through their cultural perceptions.

It was wonderful to listen to the ongoing work of Professor Jay Mistry (Royal Holloway University) who has been promoting indigenous value systems in the environment field (please see page 5). We are also delighted to inform you that the SHRG will be taking up joint projects with her.

The work of the SHRG has expanded into several fields where we think our approach has value. These range from Private Armies, Artificial Intelligence and the World Trade Organisation.

This month's newsletter has some excellent articles on the range of work that we are currently undertaking. Please sign up for future newsletters. We will keep you updated of our work.

Dr Jasdev Singh Rai
SHRG Director

Dr Jasdev Singh Rai



WELCOME TO OUR AUGUST 2021 NEWSLETTER

EDITORS NOTE

BY MR CARLOS ARBUTHNOTT

(EDITOR AND HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICER & PROJECT COORDINATOR AT THE SHRG)

Welcome to the August 2021 edition of the Sikh Human Rights Groups newsletter informing you of our ongoing work. Unfortunately, we are not able to cover everything that we do in this brief newsletter. Nevertheless, as you can see we are engaged in a wide variety of international human rights issues to promote our founding doctrine of pluralism.

We have also recently taken on a number of interns who take up research, take notes during United Nations events and conferences and write reports. Consequently, we always try to encourage them to contribute to our newsletter.

If you would like to get involved in any of our ongoing projects or for anything else please contact us via email at info@shrg.ngo

I very much hope that you enjoy the contents of this months edition.

Mr Carlos Arbuthnott

Editor and Human Rights Officer & Project Coordinator

Mr Carlos Arbuthnott



INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS IN THE 21ST CENTURY



On the 11th of August 2021 the Sikh Human Rights Group and the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (CIKS), University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa held an online interactive discussion on:

Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Cultural and Biological Diversity Conservation for Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation

The DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (CIKS) is a partnership of five higher education institutions in South Africa, with its hub at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Durban, South Africa. The CIKS is a strategic instrument for implementing the South African National IKS Policy (2004) and facilitates the integration of IKS in higher education as a key component of human capital development, social transformation and sustainable development. It is through its mandated areas of research, postgraduate training, information brokerage, networking, and community engagement that CIKS stimulates a paradigm shift in the advancement of the democracy of knowledge systems in the global pool of knowledge.

Essentially, the CIKS promotes the recognition of the multiplicity of knowledge systems in the global knowledge economy, which are cultural, place-based, and complementary, in order to mitigate against the dominance of one knowledge system in the global knowledge economy. As a knowledge system on its own merit, Indigenous Knowledge has its own worldviews, epistemologies, research methodologies, and value systems that enrich understanding and management of the environment and climate issues. Therefore, its promotion enables South Africa and Africa as a whole, to enter the global knowledge economy on its own terms rather than those dictated by others.

The Sikh Human Rights Group has been active in the field of sustainable development and climate change through conferences, networking with like-minded organisations, institutions, and movements. We have also held several international conferences with our partners from India, South Africa, Thailand, and the UK amongst other countries. The organisation promoted the idea and wrote the booklet on Universalism and Ethics of Environment published by UNESCO. The essential argument is for a pluralistic approach to Environmental and Diversity issues.

The overarching objective of this online discussion was to promote **the importance of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in our global efforts to mitigate and adapt to the negative impacts of climate change.**

To watch the full video please click [here](#)

SHRGS ENVIRONMENTAL AND DIVERSITY SPEAKER SERIES

EXTINCTION REBELLION UK



Recorded live on the 4th of August 2021 this is the 6th podcast in Sikh Human Rights Groups 2021 Environment and Diversity Speaker Series.

Topic:

'Addressing Climate Change with a Diversity of Religious, Cultural and Indigenous Views'

Extinction Rebellion Panellists:

Mr Mothiur Rahman
Ms Aasiya Bora
Ms Fazeela Mubarak

Sikh Human Rights Group Panellist:

Dr Jasdev Rai (Director)

Questions include but are not limited to:

XR is best known for their eye-catching protests. However, in a lot of States, including the UK, protesting as a minority carries a lot more risk than protesting as a Caucasian person. Therefore, do you see yourself as an organisation changing tactics to allow those who may fear the police and/or those who may feel more targeted when protesting to become involved in climate activism?

Educating our general society and especially our youth about different religions and cultures is clearly essential when it comes to positive environmental change. So how, as an organisation, do you see yourself educating as many as you can about the different strands of XR from all cultures and religions whilst remaining true to a single objective? In other words, are there any lessons or tactics that you can share with those who are actively trying to engage diverse communities in our fight against climate change?

Do you agree or disagree that non-Governmental environmental protection movements such as yours have historically been ignored by large environmental organisations and agencies, western science and State Governments but this is now starting to change?

To watch the full video please click [here](#)

SHRGS ENVIRONMENTAL AND DIVERSITY SPEAKER SERIES

PROFESSOR JAY MISTRY (ROYAL HOLLOWAY UNIVERSITY)



Recorded live on the 11th of August 2021 this is the 7th podcast in Sikh Human Rights Groups 2021 Environment and Diversity Speaker Series.

Topic:

'Addressing Climate Change through the lens of Environmental Geography'

Panellist:

Mr Professor Jay Mistry (Royal Holloway University) (London)

Whose research interests include environmental management and governance, participatory visual methods and Indigenous geographies. Her work involves supporting local livelihoods and biodiversity conservation, action research using participatory video and capacity building for natural resource management.

She is also concerned with fire management in tropical savannas, particularly the social-ecological interactions and policy implications.

Finally but amongst various other matters she is also the coordinator of an ongoing [Darwin Initiative](#) entitled *'Integrating traditional knowledge into national policy and practice in Guyana'*.

Sikh Human Rights Group Panellist:

Dr Jasdev Rai (Director)

Questions include but are not limited to:

How does the education system in the UK need to be altered to ensure that it is actively engaging children and young adults in biodiversity matters? Particularly, when it comes to ensuring that there is a drastic change in the way that we treat our homes, our neighbours and each new generation to come?

Do you believe that there is scope to integrate indigenous and/or traditional knowledge systems from around the globe into our domestic legislation, policy and practice? Particularly, in regards to what must now become a national effort to mitigate and adapt to the negative implications of climate change.

To watch the full video please click [here](#)

WORLD WATER WEEK

BY MS JENNA LANOIL (HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICER AT THE SHRG) (NEW YORK OFFICE)



This past week marked World Water Week 2021, a conference on global water issues that spanned the globe. World Water Week as it has come to be known was supported in part by the Government of the Netherlands and the United Nations as a means of making States' individual water needs and solutions known as well as reminding us that this life-giving resource is what binds us together.

The virtual event covered topics from **'Food Security versus Water Resilience and the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)'** to **'How companies can regenerate the water cycle through agriculture'**.

Sikh Human Rights Groups attendance at this event was inspired by our connection to the SDGs and the work that we have done towards environmental justice and stewardship. World Water Week has inspired important conversations around what comes next, but one pivotal question remains: Is it enough?

This conference much like the other environmentally driven events that have taken place this year is missing a strong commitment to change. It is understood that an international body such as the United Nations can do quite a lot for bringing to light the biggest challenges we face as human beings. What is lacking is how we can now take these conversations and translate them into action. With climate change no longer in the horizon, but on our doorstep, the 'Decade of Action' needs to be just that.

Sikh Human Rights Group, within our own push towards environmental protection, seeks to share in these ideas and move forward in a direction that not only builds resilience but maintains it.

For more information please click [here](#)



Ms Jenna Lanoil

WORLD HUMANITARIAN DAY (19 AUGUST 2021)

BY MR ALBERT BARSEGHYAN (HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICER AT THE SHRG) (GENEVA OFFICE)



(Ms Tatiana Valovaya's)
(Director-General, UN Office at Geneva)



(Palais des Nations, Geneva)

On 19 August 2020, World Humanitarian Day, United Nations staff, Diplomats, and NGO representatives gathered at the Palais des Nations in Geneva to honour humanitarian workers who have been injured and/or killed in their mission to provide life-saving support and protection to people most in need.

In her speech on this occasion, Ms. Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, mentioned that **'it's a day of mourning, reflection and renewed commitment'** and that **'we come together to remember all those UN personnel who have been killed to make a world a better place'**.

The World Humanitarian Day was designated in memory of the 19th of August 2003 bomb attack on the Canal Hotel in Baghdad, Iraq, killing 22 people, including the chief humanitarian in Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello. In 2009, the United Nations General Assembly formalized the day as World Humanitarian Day.

The Sikh Human Right Group supports the dedicated efforts of humanitarian workers worldwide, pays tribute to their courage and commitment and stands in solidarity with families of those who have lost loved ones in the devastating bomb attack of the Canal Hotel in Baghdad.

For more information please click [here](#)



THE PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF THE RIGHTS OF OLDER PERSONS IN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CHANGE

BY MR CARLOS ARBUTHNOTT

(EDITOR AND HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICER & PROJECT COORDINATOR AT THE SHRG)



Earlier this year the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released a report entitled **A/HRC/47/46** that offers an enlightened analysis into the promotion and protection of the rights of older persons in the context of climate change, including their particular vulnerabilities, such as physical and mental health risks, and their contributions to efforts to address the adverse impacts of climate change.

However, and as highlighted at **paragraph 51**, meaningful and effective action to address climate change requires the participation of all affected communities and groups, as guaranteed by international human rights law. Therefore, it is essential to respect, protect and fulfil older persons' participation rights, and to create meaningful opportunities for their involvement in climate action, including taking the necessary steps to provide them with relevant climate information and/or to overcome the many barriers to their inclusion. For not only do older persons bring unique and important contributions to climate action but they often support their families and local communities financially and through informal care work and contribute to decision making and conflict resolution.

Consequently, I would like to highlight the OHCHR's findings at **paragraph 52**, that older persons possess important knowledge of science, history, tradition and culture that inspire and support actions by current and future generations. They also wield significant voting and economic power that can be mobilized for the implementation and enforcement of effective climate policy. However, I would like to respectfully remind our readers that modern environmental thinking is not the first time that human beings have thought about their relationship with the environment and other lifeforms. Therefore, we as a global community need to stop assuming that environmental threats have suddenly dawned upon us and/or that humanity has lived in a state of blissful ignorance until the sudden advancement of modern technology, lifestyles and environmental science. In other words, almost all cultures, civilizations and community belief systems have some concepts, rules and taboos that have been passed on through the generations and that can inform us about the human relationship with the environment. This deep understanding, reverence and experience, reflects the consciousness of our evolving place in the environment. For example, through our affiliates **Repository of World Views of Nature Project**, we can see how all communities and peoples around the world have sophisticated environmental protection concepts that date back to prehistory and that have been carried through time through the transfer of knowledge from generation to generation.

However, what has occurred through the dominance of colonial legacies is that many prominent environmental organisations and agencies marginalize the wisdoms that cultures and community belief systems carry about human relationships with nature and which are embedded and passed on through the...

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generations through traditions, customs, festivals and outlooks. Therefore, in pursuit of imposing a universal rule of law and colonial mentality as a philosophical basis to the political doctrine underpinning our global societies, the dominant culture has displaced and disenfranchised older persons value systems which has served the close coexistence between nature and human societies since the dawn of mankind.

For instance, and as stated at **paragraph 54**, traditional environmental knowledge has the potential to play a crucial role in mitigating and adapting to climate change. Traditional knowledge is useful in defining earlier environmental baselines, identifying impacts that need to be mitigated, providing observational evidence for modelling, providing technologies for adapting, and for identifying culturally appropriate values for protection from direct impacts or from impacts of adaption measures themselves. For instance, the aforementioned may include the historical understanding of weather patterns and of the signals that presage coming disasters, methods of reducing the risk of and surviving such disasters, and agriculture and herding methods that create less environmental harm while maintaining production levels. Traditional environmental knowledge can also include a holistic understanding of the natural ecosystems, giving greater visibility to environmental changes and to human responsibility for them. Traditional knowledge that incorporates a longer time scale can also help to generate adaptability to climate change, by recognising that people are accustomed to living in a shifting environment.

Consequently, older persons are clearly invaluable and underutilised human resources that have largely been ignored by international institutions, State Governments, prominent environmental organisations and agencies and to some extent by civil society. For instance, it is an indisputable fact that many of the most powerful and wealthy persons in the world, including Heads of State and business and community leaders, fall within the older age group. However, and as noted at **paragraph 55**, this cohort wields enormous resources that can be invaluable when seeking climate solutions and addressing the negative human rights impacts of climate change. Nevertheless, their foremost benefit can be found within their traditional knowledge and years of experience. For instance, retirement has allowed many older persons to become devoted to educating themselves on climate issues and/or to becoming involved in climate action. For not only do they possess the knowledge and skills necessary to purposefully engage and organise young activists, but they also possess the ability to utilise their powerful standing within society to amplify the voices of younger people and/or marginalised groups that have often been neglected or ignored.

In conclusion older persons clearly possess enormous amounts of knowledge, experience, skills and resilience that, as the OHCHR themselves conclude, gives them the capacity to be key contributors in global efforts to mitigate and adapt to the negative impacts of climate change. Therefore, cultivating and enabling older persons participation in climate action is not only a human rights imperative, but also a means of ensuring effective solutions for all people and for the planet. However, it is extremely important to note and as mentioned above, it is only when people rediscover the reverence for nature, biodiversity, and other life forms in their own way, through their own customs, beliefs and cultures that the human population as a whole will act with greater passion for the protection of our environment and move away from what is currently found under the prevailing utilitarian, legalistic and rationalistic approach. Nevertheless, older persons are clearly in the unique possession of being able to effect such a change by relying on and/or utilising their generational knowledge and skills. Therefore, State Governments, prominent environmental organisations and agencies and civil society organisations need to focus their attentions on ensuring older persons effective and meaningful participation at every stage of environmental protection policy development.

For the full report please click [here](#)

THE WOMEN OF AFGHANISTAN

BY MS BETHAN WALTERS (LONDON OFFICE)

(HUMAN RIGHTS, COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA OFFICER AT THE SHRG)



When the word was aware that the Taliban were on their way to Kabul women were seen running home in fear as men on the street laughed and mocked them yelling 'Go and put on your chadari [burqa]' one called out. 'It is your last days of being out on the streets' said another. 'I will marry four of you in one day' said a third.

Reports on the response to the Taliban taking over have spread across the globe as one eyewitness reports that women came running out from the women's dormitory on Sunday the 15th of August 2021. When they asked what had happened? One of the women fleeing told them that the police were evacuating them because the Taliban had arrived in Kabul, and they will beat women who do not have a burqa.

What was it like to be a woman in Afghanistan in 2014 when the Taliban were not in control?

The position of women in Afghanistan has begun to improve. Under the Taliban they were barred from attending school and going out to work. However, the latest figures from the World Bank say 36% of girls are now enrolled in school - although many do not complete their secondary education and figures from 2007 suggest 52% of women were married by the age of 20.

Literacy among female adults is still very low - although official statistics are hard to come by. A report by the Central Statistics Organisation/UNICEF reported a literacy rate of 22.2% among women aged 15 - 24 in 2010/2011.

Some women have begun to forge careers for themselves. More than a quarter of Parliament and Government employees are now women, according to charity Islamic Relief. A [survey](#) by the Central Statistics Organisation (CSO) in 2009 found women were being employed by the Government at a much faster rate than men. If the female growth rate continued, the share of female employees would be more than 40% by 2020.

Women are now also employed by the police and army. British officers have helped to establish a military training academy that aims to train 100 female army officers per year.

Despite the advances, violence against women is still a problem, with beatings, forced marriage and lack of economic support being listed as the top three offences reported by the CSO in 2010. Although the number of cases appears to be going down, the report also notes a new form of violence - prevention of women from taking part in social activities.

THE WOMEN OF AFGHANISTAN

BY MS BETHAN WALTERS (LONDON OFFICE)

(HUMAN RIGHTS, COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA OFFICER AT THE SHRG)

It is hard to predict what it will be like with the regime, but we can look back at stories when the Taliban was in control in the 1990s

The Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 – 2001. Under the Taliban, women and girls were:

- Banned from going to school or studying.
- Banned from working.
- Banned from leaving the house without a male chaperone.
- Banned from showing their skin in public.
- Banned from accessing healthcare delivered by men (as women weren't allowed to work this meant healthcare was not available to women).
- Banned from being involved in politics or speaking publicly.

If these laws were disobeyed, punishments were harsh. A woman could be flogged for showing an inch or two of skin under her full-body burqa, beaten for attempting to study, stoned to death if she was found guilty of adultery.

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001 women and girls in Afghanistan gradually began to claim their basic human rights: many schools opened their doors to girls, women went back to work and voted in local and national elections. Some entered politics even though it was still very risky.

All we know so far is that the Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, has told reporters that *'Working women in Afghanistan must stay at home until proper systems are in place to ensure their safety'*. The spokesman added *'Our security forces are not trained (in) how to deal with women - how to speak to women (for) some of them'*, Mr Mujahid said. *'Until we have full security in place... we ask women to stay home'*.



FROM THE IMPOSSIBLE TO THE IMPROBABLE (PLASTIC EATING ENZYMES)

BY MS SUKHMANI MANDAIR (INTERNS AT THE SHRG)



Approximately 8 million tons of plastic end up in our oceans every year and make up 80% of marine debris. Over a million marine animals are killed each year due to plastic debris in the oceans and it's estimated that there are 100 million tons of plastic in oceans around the world, and this number continues to grow exponentially. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch, also known as the Pacific trash vortex, is a collection of marine debris that spans just over 1.6 million square kilometres. There are 5 such Garbage Patches in the oceans. Plastic pollution of oceans is on course to double by 2030, and plastic has even been found in the deepest place on Earth—the Mariana Trench.

Waste plastic on land causes enough of a problem as its poorly regulated incineration in developing countries poses a threat to human health and the environment. In oceans, plastic kills marine ecosystems that are vital to the sustainability of Earth's atmosphere. The breakdown of plastic can take hundreds of years, and as it does, it leaves devastating effects on the environment.

In March 2016, Japanese scientists published their discovery of a bacteria that developed the ability to decompose plastic. The bacteria, *Ideonella sakaiensis*, has the ability to decompose a particular kind of plastic called PET - a clear, strong, lightweight plastic that's typically used in water bottles, food packaging. PET is the most widely produced plastic in the world and it's estimated that between 20 billion and 34 billion plastic PET bottles end up in the ocean each year. The naturally evolved enzyme enables the full recycling of PET plastic. Researchers revealed an engineered version of the first enzyme in 2018. The first enzyme found at a waste site in Japan was able to break down plastic within a few days. The super-engineered enzyme breaks down plastic six times faster.

Pros

The plastic-eating enzyme could be a vital asset to solving the global plastic pollution crisis. Plastic can take hundreds of years to fully degrade. As plastic in the ocean builds up, sunlight and heat cause the plastic to release greenhouse gases, causing a formidable feedback loop. As our climate changes and temperature increases, the plastic breaks down into methane and ethylene, further increasing climate change. The microplastics that disperse are also ingested by marine animals, including plankton and the fish we eat. Ingestion of microplastics by plankton is particularly important because plankton are the most important players in taking carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and disseminate it in deep ocean sinks. Therefore, plastic in oceans both directly and indirectly damages the health of marine ecosystems and life.

By eating away plastic, which is generally very resistant to degradation until now, the enzymes could be one of the most important factors in our journey to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, saving marine life, and improving the Earth's atmosphere.

FROM THE IMPOSSIBLE TO THE IMPROBABLE (PLASTIC EATING ENZYMES)

BY MS SUKHMANI MANDAIR (INTERN AT THE SHRG)

Cons

The super-engineered enzyme shows promising potential, but there are also potential side effects that are still undergoing research.

Spraying engineered enzymes widely in the sea can create serious unassessed hazards. Plastics could be even more deadly than we realize today, which should also give us pause. Many types of plastics actively absorb highly toxic persistent pollutants such as PCBs, for example, we know from our work on reefs that floating plastics deliver disease-causing microbes to corals. Ecosystem and human health risks related to both floating and sinking plastics should be considered before any large-scale plan is employed to deal with floating or sunken plastics problems (Environmental Defense Fund, 2018).

Regardless of how promising and interesting the concept of plastic-eating bacteria seems to be, the first order of business must be reducing our reliance on single-use plastics and improving solid waste management systems. Tackling the problem directly at the source is more important than finding remedies to a never-ending problem.

Costs

While there aren't any statistics on how much it would cost to use the enzymes on a wide scale, there has been research on using the enzymes to convert PET plastic into raw materials, ready to be reused. Through this process, the enzyme itself is expected to cost around 4% of what new plastic costs to make but acquiring, preparing, and processing used plastic materials isn't cheap, so the overall cost of this process is expected to be higher than producing virgin plastic for some time; especially if oil prices stay low. That said, this process is being celebrated by many interests in this industry, from those who are involved in making plastics currently, to those who are interested in keeping plastics out of natural environments (Wright, 2020).

