

Spiritually transformative education: Charting a roadmap for global sustainability

Keynote Speech Abstract - Bhai Sahib (Prof) Mohinder Singh Ahluwalia OBE KSG

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In education and public discourse, we accept that our complex global challenges intersect social, economic, political and cultural domains, and require us to think holistically. However, the spiritual domain remains routinely overlooked, and unmentioned in the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Yet to activate the very values that global sustainability requires from us - intrinsically and at scale - there is a need to put spiritual growth at the heart of education. Drawing on insights from Sikh teaching, this keynote address presents a rationale for doing so, offering examples of publicly recognised initiatives to highlight pathways to broader cultural and systemic change.

How does a focus on the spiritual transform how we conceive, configure and deliver education, informally and formally? For this, we explore verses from *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sacred Scripture Sikhs honour as 'eternal Guru', an eminent enlightener. The opening, sacred logo, *Ik Oang-Kar*, evokes One Divine Consciousness, creating, sustaining and interconnecting creation through an all-pervading sacred resonance. This Oneness is the sublime intelligence and eternal wisdom that religions translate as 'God'. If we seek sustainability, we must open our minds to acknowledge the reality of a Universal Sustainer, and the awesome, self-sustaining capacity blessed to nature. To know that so little is in our real control inspires deep reverence and humility. By cultivating such sentiments, education can build a base of authentic values, inspired action and sustained commitment. By neglecting this sacred vision, education falls short.

Composed in vibrant, musical form, the teachings also call on our mind to grow in wisdom and not ego. For when learning inflates arrogance and greed, it leaves the mind spiritually ignorant. Hence wisdom is not dependent on being studious or learned. Rather it fosters spiritual literacy, to critically self-reflect, to morally discern, to become Creator-conscious and creation-conscious. The barrier to sustainability lies ultimately in the mind that becomes enslaved and destabilised by the ego. The awakened mind embodies compassion, integrity and contentment, relates to all without fear (*nirbhau*) and without enmity (*nirvair*) – all values to inform the principles and policies by which we shape our lives. As humans, we are uniquely able to reason and discern, to review and reshape our thoughts and actions, to repent, to seek forgiveness and learn from our errors. And so, we are taught to live with hope, faith and optimism, without succumbing to apathy and helplessness. To accept the mystery and paradox of God's existence helps us to recognise that 'believing is seeing', to look beyond appearances and see possibilities for change.

Acknowledging society's historic rift between spiritual and secular, the keynote will set out a vision for both domains to purposefully realign, supported by examples from the city of Birmingham, UK, where we have partnered to develop policy frameworks and innovate educational approaches through the Nishkam Group and its ethos of altruistic service. Closing insights will consider how faith itself awakens a self-governing and self-sustaining process of enlightened, accountable living that connects spiritual and global worldviews for '*sarbat da bhalla*', shared flourishing.