

# Environmental activism, Islam style

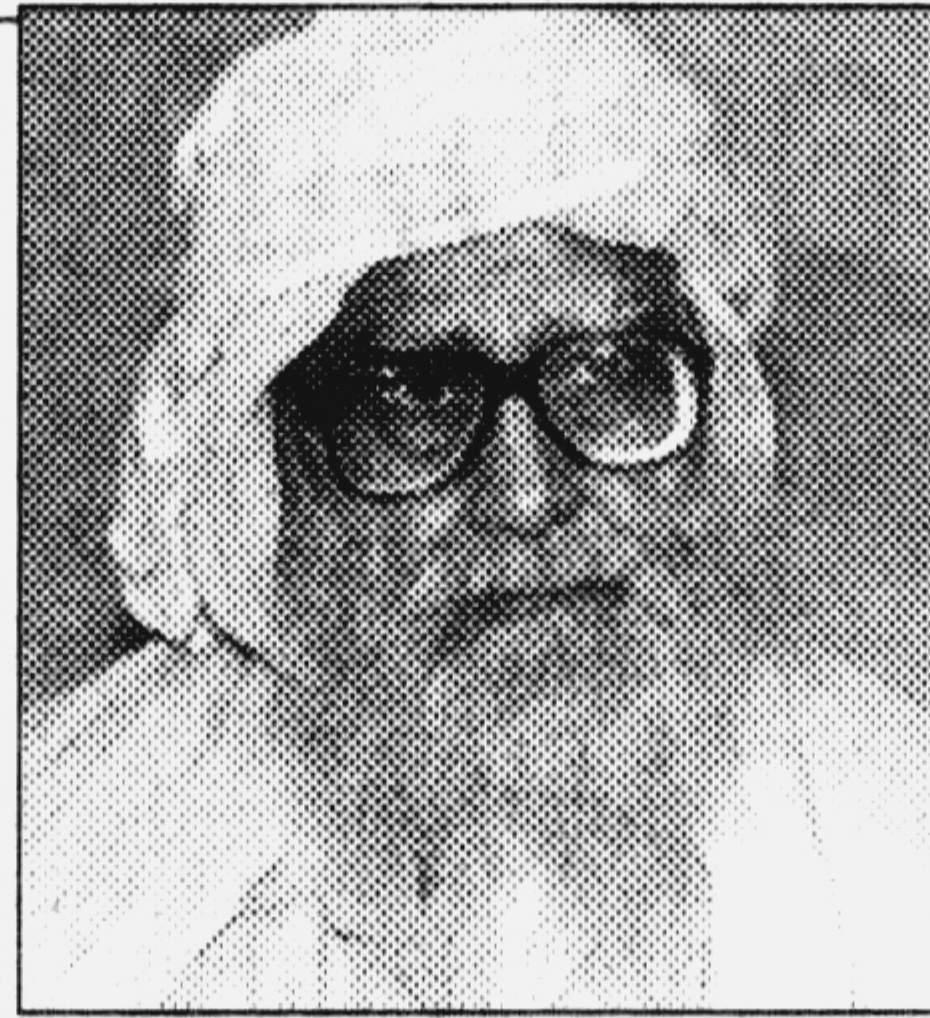
**A**ccording to Islam, the virtuous are to be rewarded by God in the after-life by being admitted "to gardens watered by running streams' and lodged in "pleasant mansions in the Gardens of Eternity." (*Quran*, 61:20) The very fact that Paradise is represented in the *Quran* as a beautiful garden shows the importance attached by Islam to vegetation: indeed, frequent mention is made in the Scriptures of green and growing things as being a blessing from God to mankind.

Referring to the initial stage of creation, the *Quran* states that "after creating the earth, God drew out therefrom its water and its pasture." (79:31). Nowhere in the vast expanses of the universe is there any similar vegetation, which explains why it is that living things, including man, exist only on this earth and on no other celestial body.

In another verse, which is more admonitory in tone, man is enjoined to "reflect on the food he eats: how We pour down the rain in torrents and cleave the earth asunder; how we bring forth the grain and the grapes and the fresh vegetation, the olives and the palm, the thickets, the fruit trees and the green pasture for you and your cattle to delight in." (80: 24-25).

This shows that God has made vegetation a special food for both men and animals, from which they receive all the nutrients essential to the sustenance of Life. The different fruits and vegetables have also been endowed with prophylactic and curative properties, and perhaps to show that life is more than mere biological existence, each food item has its own distinctive flavour to appeal to the human palate. Honey is specifically cited as a valued foodstuff produced from plants. Its therapeutic qualities are also emphasised in the verse which says, "therein lies healing for men." (16:69). Many effective medicines, from ancient times to the present day, have been produced from plants. The healing powers of plants are indeed so great that even that great

## Horizons



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carnivore, the tiger, will resort to eating grass when it falls ill.

People are urged in the Scriptures to engage in farming and gardening to provide both physical and spiritual sustenance for themselves, but, despite their Creator's largesse, are cautioned against waste. Verse 161 of the sixth *Surah*, after asserting that "it is He who brings forth all manner of plants and creepers and upright trees, the palm and the olive and the pomegranate" and exhorting mankind to "eat of their fruit in their season", goes on to admonish: "But waste not by excess. For God loves not the wasters."

Perhaps the most telling references to plant life made in the *Quran* and *Hadith* fall within the realm of the metaphor. The Prophet has been recorded as saying: "The believer is like a gentle plant. When the winds blow, it does

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not show haughtiness: instead, it sways to and fro with the wind, and when the winds are not blowing, it reverts to its position once again.' This simile is intended to show how the true believer, the worshipper of God, lives among others. He displays no arrogance, holding that adjustment is better than clashes and confrontation. He follows the principle of persuasion and avoids the path of violence.

In the *Quran*, the creature most favoured in God's eyes, the believer, has been likened to a tree. Just as the tree benefits mankind by its offerings of shade, fruit, flowers and a loveliness to gladden the eye, so should human beings live in society, giving comfort and bringing joy to their fellow men. Just as the tree affords the coolness of its shade to God's creatures, so should God's servants give respite and relief to all those around them.

Again, the tree is used in verse 14 of the 24<sup>th</sup> *Surah* to symbolise the expression of good intentions towards others. "Do you not see how God compares a good word to a good tree? Its root is firm and its branches are in the sky; it yields its fruit in every season by God's leave. God speaks in parables to men so that they may take heed." Conversely, the verse explains, "But an evil word is like an evil tree torn out of the earth and shorn of all its roots."

Such traditions show what great importance, both physical and metaphysical, is attached to vegetation in Islam. To emphasise this point, the Prophet once observed: "If you have a plant in your hand, and you can see Doomsday approach, even then, without any further delay, you should embed it in the soil." It was ever the desire of Islam that man should make his surroundings verdant, even if in the next instant his handiwork were to be destroyed by an earthquake. Perhaps the insight of the Prophet on this subject, which has as great a resonance in modern times as it had 14 centuries ago, is contained in his observation that he who plants a tree, whose fruits will eventually be eaten by birds and human beings, performs an act of charity.