

Dynamics of Martyrdom

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THIS PAPER EXAMINES THE concept of Martyrdom in the context of death and sacrifice of the young sons of Guru Gobind Singh. It is based on the experience of a Sikh trying to learn from childhood, not only the tenets of Sikhism but the very essence of the Sikh movement as a defiance of the prevailing system of inequality, injustice and tyranny. The victimized people of India facing oppression, prejudice and tyranny, not only from foreign rulers but also from priestly class, were taught - lovingly - to lift their spirits and come out of the self-imposed inertness. While the Ten Gurus righteously and spiritually took upon themselves to speak for the weak and the downtrodden, encouraging them to be fearless, Guru Arjun, Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh, as also the Sahibzadas, showed us the significance of Guru Nanak's words:

ਜਦੋਂ ਤਉ ਪ੍ਰੇਮ ਖੇਲਣ ਕਾ ਚਾਉ ॥ ਸਿਰੁ ਧਰਿ ਤਲੀ ਗਲੀ ਮੇਰੀ ਆਉ ॥

ਇਤੁ ਮਾਰਗਿ ਪੈਰੁ ਧਰੀਜੈ ॥ ਸਿਰੁ ਦੀਜੈ ਕਾਣਿ ਨ ਕੀਜੈ ॥

[SGGS : 1412]

If you wish to play the game of love,
Come in my parlour with your head on the palm;
On this path, with the first step,
You should be prepared to lay down your life, if necessary.

Guru Arjun became the first Sikh martyr for the cause of righteousness fulfilling his own words with his blood.

ਪਹਿਲਾ ਮਰਣੁ ਕਬੁਲਿ ਜੀਵਣ ਕੀ ਛਡਿ ਆਸ ॥

ਹੋਹੁ ਸਭਨਾ ਕੀ ਰੇਣੁਕਾ ਤਉ ਆਉ ਹਮਾਰੈ ਪਾਸਿ ॥

[SGGS : 1102]

First, accept the (certainty of) death, shed the lust for life;
Become the dust of the feet of all, then come to me.

The concept of martyrdom is an automatic offshoot of Sikh way of life. Since the Sikh has been taught never to compromise truth, always to shed selfishness, and engage himself in service and sacrifice, even at the cost of one's life, martyrdom – willingness to die – is included in the syllabus. But what our Gurus said and did, and what Guru Gobind Singh showed, at the age of 9, when Guru Tegh Bahadur offered to become a martyr for the cause of freedom of worship for Kashmiri Pandits, is a remarkable result of the teachings of righteousness of our Gurus. In fact, the courageous way in which the four *Sahibzadas* came out to face death and become martyrs is a glorious chapter in the annals of Sikh history of character-building and righteous-living, along with selfless, temptation-free existence. One does not become a martyr merely because one dies for a cause on the spur of a moment, or because he faces death as a result of common mutual opposition of ideas, or because of the personal rivalry and anger of the perpetrator of atrocity. Martyrdom is a seal on the life of righteousness, which aims at not only willingness to die, but

remaining always attached to love of mankind and a selfless life working for *sarbat da bhala* in the love and service of Guru and God.

Before I deal with innumerable cases of the righteous people willingly embrace martyrdom, it would be befitting to go into the question as to how martyrs come on the scene. This is not a sudden development. Our history is replete with individuals leading a righteous life, willingly offering to die for the love of the Lord. Here are the quotes from Guru Granth Sahib:

ਜੋਬਨ ਜਾਂਦੇ ਨਾ ਡਰਾਂ ਜੇ ਸਹ ਪ੍ਰੀਤਿ ਨ ਜਾਇ ॥

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਕਿਤੀ ਜੋਬਨ ਪ੍ਰੀਤਿ ਬਿਨੁ ਸੁਕਿ ਗਏ ਕੁਮਲਾਇ ॥

[SGGS : 1379]

I do not mind my youth being wasted
If my love of God persists because
I see many youths wasting away in death because
They could not fall in love with the Lord.

I cannot help referring to Guru Ram Das Ji's famous ਕੋਈ ਆਣਿ ਮਿਲਾਵੈ ਮੇਰਾ ਪ੍ਰੀਤਮੁ ਪਿਆਰਾ ਹਉ ਤਿਸੁ ਪਹਿ ਆਪੁ ਵੇਚਾਈ ॥ (SGGS: 757-58) in which, in an intimate inimitable style, Guruji says ਤਨੁ ਮਨੁ ਕਾਟਿ ਕਾਟਿ ਸਭੁ ਅਰਪੀ ਵਿਚਿ ਅਗਨੀ ਆਪੁ ਜਲਾਈ ॥ i.e. I am prepared to cut my mind and body into pieces, and I am prepared to burn myself in fire, for the sake of meeting my beloved Lord.

With these kinds of commitment to live in God, in righteousness, sacrifice and in the light of the commands of the Master, martyrdom was a natural corollary. Since the Gurus were steadfast in word and deed, in terms of their deeds, always matching with their words, the Sikhs learnt not only to obey, but to stake their lives. Guru Arjun led the way to martyrdom and we are naturally proud of him, but that he was the First Sikh Martyr is not the only high point in life, he had, apart from numerous other wonders, created the nucleus of our perpetual Guru by compiling the *Adi Granth* in which he showed unparalleled and unprecedented divine greatness by including hymns from the saints of other religions not excluding the so-called 'untouchable' saints. He had the foundation stone of Harmandir laid by a Muslim Divine, Mian Mir. And yet, he did not opt out for life, when faced with options of payment of fine at the hands of a bigot ruler Jehangir. The value of martyrdom is enhanced when the martyr finds peace on the iron stove and on burning stand. Not only does he not surrender to the will of the ruler, but he also has no grudge against him and accepts martyrdom as the will of God.

Even when Guru Hargobind introduced *miri piri*, the concept of *miri* was also subordinated to *piri*, i.e., spirituality would always dominate temporal life. To be ready to die for a righteous cause remained paramount even when it was considered inevitable to take up arms against the tyrannical rulers. Guru Tegh Bahadur set, for us, three golden rules for willingness to lay down one's life for righteousness; this was done not in so many words, but in his spectacular response to the call in distress made to him by the Kashmiri Pandits under siege to convert to Islam:

- When freedom of worship is threatened, a Man of God does not remain indifferent to the call of those whose form of worship is different from his own;

- A man of God does not merely promise to help ensuring safety for himself;
- A man of God is prepared to lay down his life, if necessary, for upholding the human right of freedom or worship.

The response was dramatic. "Tell Aurangzeb to convert your Guru first". The Guru knew that he would refuse the royal command and will have to face death, but he would have given the apparent impression to the ruler that it would be easier to prevail upon one man so that all others would automatically be converted. Let us not forget also the 9-year old Gobind's willingness – nay, exhortation – to let his Father being martyred to save the honour of Kashmiri Pandits. It is stated that when asked what he had thought to do in response to the appeal for help of Kashmiris, the Guru replied, "A great man is required to lay down his life to save them." "Who can be greater than you, Father?" had exclaimed the young Gobind.

Remember the story of Bhai Jetha and Bhai Lakhi Shah who did not waver to respectfully cremate the head and the body of the 9th Guru even at risk of their lives! Indeed, the examples of Bhai Mati Das, Bhai Sati Das and Bhai Dyala are an eye-opener not only for the Sikhs but for all mankind. I do not know why, but we have, in our own garbled version of paying respects to our Martyrs, treated martyrdom Days as celebration festivals by holding Kachi-Lassi distributions everywhere, and taking out processions, along with holding *Akhand Paths* and *Kirtan* sessions. YES, that may be important, but what is the core point has long been forgotten. In fact, near the Martyrdom Days of our Gurus, our forefathers and particularly, of Sahibzadas, every Sikh should dig into himself and find out whether he/she has imbibed the spirit of *Sikhi*; if the answer from within is yes, he/she should bow at Guru's feet and feel blessed; if the answer is no, the Sikh should feel ashamed and beg the Guru to bless him with the spirit to lay down his/her life for righteousness, walking in the footsteps of the Masters and our *Gurmukh* forefathers as indeed, of the young but devoted Sahibzadas. I cannot help recalling listening, with rapt attention, to a Gursikh's yearnings when he sang as follows near the Sahibzadas' Martyrdom days:

cmkor ky mYdwn sy sMdyS hY AwieAw, srhMd kl dlwroN ny muJ ko
bulwieAw [
mqldws ky Awry ny muJ ko llkwrw, Bwel dieAwly kl dyg ny hY muJ ko
pukwrw [
kb hogl pUrl AwrzU muJ ko bqlwE, kb aubwlw jwaUNgw muJ ko smJwE [
myry qn ko AwroN kw kb ipAwr imlygw ? crKVIE py cVH jwny kw kb Avsr
imlygw ?

The poetry was accompanied by tears streaming down his cheeks with devotion writ on the face. Surely, every Sikh should celebrate all martyrdom days in such fervour.

The innumerable sacrifices of our forefathers, including countless martyrdoms, the road for which was established by Sikh Guru themselves, created an insatiable urge among the Sikhs to live with dignity, self-respect and uncompromising death-defying righteousness. The strength came from the principles of *miri-piri* based on temporal life always being guided by strict divinity and spiritual awakening, the natural result of which is conflict with the tyrannical forces and vested interests.

When Guru Gobind Singh was convinced that we had learnt to live in truth, love and honesty, and the rulers had learnt nothing even after their ceaseless tyranny, he called upon his devotees to offer their heads on the Baisakhi Day on 1699, thereby bonding martyrdom with righteousness. And our sisters did not lag behind in following the dictates of our Guru. *Amrit* ceremony which we now regard as a valuable scorer of numbers of *Amritdhari Singhs*, was, to our Guru, a perpetual pledge to live the life of *jeevtian mar rahiye* – a life of humility and sacrifice with the remembrance of God's Name and willingness to die in the cause of righteousness. It would be useful to recall Guru Gobind Singh's two *Sahibzadas*, one as an *ardaas* for martyrdom, and the second, as willing acceptance of all adversities with cheer and *charhdi kala*:

dyh isvw br moih iehY, suB krmn qy kbhMU n tro]
 n fro Air so jb jwie Iro, inscY kr Awpnl jIq kro]
 Aru isK ho Awpny hl mn ko, ieh lwlc hau gun qau aucro]
 jb Awv kl AauD inDwn bnY, Aq hl rn mY qb jUJ mro]

(Lord, grant me a boon that I should never shirk from doing good deeds; never should I be afraid of the enemy in battle and I should have complete confidence that victory would be mine; I should go on teaching myself and should be greedy for singing your praises. And when my end is about to come I should fight courageously and lay down my life in a raging war for righteousness.)

- *Swayiya* in *Chandi Chritar*

The moving ode to God sums up the Guru's concept of martyrdom. On the one hand, there is absolute preparedness to lay down one's life, in line with Guru Nanak's concept, on the other, there is a perpetual pledge to live in righteousness with God in the heart, whatever the adversity. When Khalsa was created, these twin objectives overshadowed everything else and martyrdom became something like our moral heritage.

During the long unrest and struggle in recent times in the Punjab, hundreds of our youth were mercilessly killed and tortured, our sisters put to extreme hardships, including rape and torture. This was the tyranny of the worst order on the part of the establishment, but not all of our people could be considered as martyrs for the simple reason that many of them, while prepared to be killed, were not living the life of righteousness, and were indulging in nefarious activities even against one another. The unrest in Punjab, in gurdwaras and in terms of struggle in the form of *Morchas*, everything will be recorded in time to come, but the foolish, unnecessary, unprecedented step of the ultimate Operation Blue Star was tyranny. The unedifying spectacle of our Sants quarrelling among themselves, and making Harmandir Sahib as the shield somehow prevailed upon Centre's designs, aided by political chicanery, of the worst kind, by Sikh and non-Sikh political opportunists, to believe that the Sikhs would take the onslaught on Harmandir Sahib lying down. Otherwise, Mrs. Gandhi would never have dared to attack our most sacred shrine. The *shenanigans* of our so-called political leaders, jathedars and even intellectuals, have now proved to be our undoing. Not only have we become victims of material degeneration and personal pelf and illegal and immoral pursuits, but we have also

thrown up leaders who are willing to sell themselves, sell the *panth*, for the sake of ministership, and other temptations.

So, the concept of martyrdom, or even righteousness, has been forgotten. Ordinary Sikhs too have become paraders of ostentatious living, black money, Five-star culture, with total alienation from the Guru's word and Guru's way of life and our *Sikhi* is now only the external display of ill-gotten wealth, dubious grandeur and dishonest practices. The rot has been strengthened by Babas of *deras*, whom even our political leaders pay obeisance and who benefit from their nefarious activities. *Jathedars* have become political tools of their political masters in SGPC or DGPC, members of whom have come to occupy seats of power by dubious means of winning voters. Where is then the question of martyrdom and selfless sacrifice?

When Guru Gobind Singh created Khalsa, and himself became a member of the Khalsa Brotherhood, subjecting himself to the dictates of *Panj Piare*, it was given that all the members had willingly opted for martyrdom. That is why we have stories of our mothers and sisters who allowed their children to be killed and put in their laps, but did not budge from their stand of righteousness. Our forefathers were burnt alive, boiled alive and broken on the wheels, but did not shirk their commitment. That is why even till today they are remembered in *Ardas*.

But look at our degeneration. When Khalsa Tercentenary was celebrated, it became a great *tamasha* between Badal and Tohra, *Jathedars* being replaced like small time clerks, and the Sikhs witnessing only external showmanship and the ritual *amrit chhakna* ceremonies without any commitment to martyrdom. The Sikh president in Rashtrapati Bhavan not only stuck to his *kursi*, in the face of the horrendous Operation Bluestar, but also honoured those Army personnel who had desecrated our most sacred shrine. Neither *Jathedars*, nor the people in position showed willingness to become martyrs to resist tyranny (and we would have greater *ghallugaras*). The Army could have been defeated, not with our arms, but with our dead bodies. True, our material attachment and our addiction to a life of ease and pleasure, even if illegal and immoral, has made us a caricature of Khalsa.

Where is the spirit now of a woman stated to have protested to Guru Gobind Singh against his order of recruiting for his army one child from every family but not from the family, which had only one son? "My Lord, what fault have I committed? Why this injustice to me?" bewailed the lady who had only one son. When the Guru asked the reason of her discomfiture, she said: "Why should I not have the honour of my son fighting in your army?"

And where would you find now the young boy in a long queue of Sikh prisoners in Banda Singh Bahadur's army, to be killed, disowning his mother who had obtained mercy for him on the plea that he was wrongly detained, and he was not a Sikh? "She may be my mother but she tells lies. I am a Sikh and I want to be treated like my brothers; I want to be martyred."

We are all aware how we were subjected to various indignities after Indira Gandhi was killed. The wholesale massacre, provocative and uncalled for as a whole, although we were tortured, killed and raped in various places. What was the result? Large numbers of youth discarded long hair and beard, disowning Sikh principles and identity. The tragedy is that even till today we have not woken up. The youth in Punjab is getting alienated from religion and truth. And why not? Who is there to

show them righteousness? Who is there to stem this rot? We have now commercial houses in gurdwaras. We have now members running our Institutions like schools and hospitals, who have come to occupy posts by bribery, corruption and treachery, and, who in elections, do not hesitate to assault fellow Sikhs by pulling one another's hair, unmindful of being photographed thus in newspapers. Where would you find now the candidates for martyrdom?

Let me conclude this emotive piece with five observations:

Firstly, the concept of Martyrdom is to be analyzed with righteousness as the base for living. The strength must come from commitment to honesty, truth and faith in God.

Secondly, the selflessness has to be the hallmark, in all circumstances, when a Sikh lays down his life for a cause.

Thirdly, no circulation or a hankering for recognition is taken into consideration.

Fourthly, the credit for all kinds of sacrifice and the ultimate willingness to die, has to be part of a training to be uncompromising in defiance of tyranny, and

Fifthly, no temptation, no one upmanship, no chicanery and no hoodwinking should deflect a Sikh whose commitment to righteousness is total and irrevocable.

