

# Martyrdom as the Ultimate Sacrifice in the Sikh Ethos

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Sikh history is a long saga of sacrifices made and persecutions and martyrdoms suffered by the Sikhs in pursuit of the lofty ideals of freedom, equality, justice and righteousness. The term martyr has become an integral part, of the Sikh religious tradition. The purpose of this paper is to study the unique phenomenon of martyrdom, in relation to its origin and growth, handed down to the Sikhs by the Gurus. Who is a martyr? What are the attributes of a martyr in Sikhism? What was the motivating force that impelled the Sikhs to pay such heavy price in terms of blood and suffering? How does the concept of martyrdom among the Sikhs differ from that of the others? This paper seeks to find answers to all these questions. The paper takes full cognizance of the role of Sikh ideology in shaping Sikh history and providing comprehensive understanding of the Sikh tradition of martyrdom.

The concept of martyrdom has its roots in the Sikh ideology. Prior to the advent of Guru Nanak on the scene, the dominant refrain of the Indian religions was that the phenomenal world was nothing but a mirage, an illusion that must be shunned as a first step on the spiritual path. Such a view sanctified asceticism, monasticism and celibacy. It did not look upon the phenomenal world as a place worthy of improvement. Being too much occupied with other- worldliness, it reflected little concern with social and human problems. The result was that men of religion, imbued with the ideal of personal salvation, bade farewell to the house holder's life, cut themselves away from the society and pursued the spiritual path in complete isolation in the safety of mountains and caves. This life-negating and apathetic outlook was bound to cast its shadow on the socio-political scene witnessed in the form of quietistic, fatalistic and negative trends in the society.

Contrary to all this, Guru Nanak descended on the scene with his life affirming faith and revolutionary ideals. He repudiated asceticism and renunciation and declared, in unambiguous terms, that the phenomenal world was real and meaningful. He laid down for his followers the path of the house holder, thereby establishing a clear link between the spiritual and empirical planes of human existence.

The Guru assigned an active and creative role to religion and made it a vehicle to promote the values of universal love, brotherhood of mankind, truth, righteousness and social responsibility. The Guru believed that a man of religion cannot be an indifferent spectator to the acts of tyranny and injustice around him. Guru Nanak's sensitive heart throbbed with anguish at the sight of social and political oppression of his times. It was left to the Guru to truly see the plight of the down trodden and to devise means for their amelioration. Guru's Sikh was not supposed to be a self-contained, self-centred man, given solely to spiritual pursuits. He was to be a man of action, taking a real and abiding interest in the world around him.

The Guru laid the foundation of an activist faith in which love was the foremost element. But he clarified, in explicit terms, that the path of love which he recommended for his followers was full of hardships and hazards. It entailed selfless service and sacrifice. His call was "If thou are zealous of playing the game of love, put your head on your palm. But once you set your foot on this path, don't seek a way out and be prepared to sacrifice your head." This revolutionary call set the direction in which the Sikh movement was to move.

The Guru rejected the traditional concept of *Mukti* (salvation) and gave it a new orientation. In his gospel, *Mukti* does not signify release from life and its commitments as in the

traditional sense. It signifies liberation from the self centredness (ego) and liberation from all fears like the fear of insecurity, fear of oppression and injustice and fear of want. For a Sikh, Mukti is to seek martyrdom in the battles fought for upholding a righteous and a noble cause. It signifies a state of illumination. A man realises his inner essence, the eternity of his spiritual self, which is free from the servitude of time and space. The Guru envisions *Mukti* in a new perspective of *Jeevan Mukti*.

A true seeker inculcates the attributes of universal love, righteousness and fearlessness which brings him close to Divinity. He becomes aware of the unity of mankind and rejects man-made barriers separating man from man. Attuned to Cosmic Order and enriched with the experience of spiritual harmony, he becomes the highest instrument of Divine purpose and strives for the furtherance of universal harmony. His inner dynamism leads him on the path of liberation with the ultimate aim to redress the wrongs prevailing around him, to restore love, harmony and justice in human affairs and to establish God's Kingdom on earth. Such a man refuses to compromise with evil, falsehood, selfishness and moral ugliness. He is ready to stake his life in pursuit of the divine attributes of love, truth and justice. For him death loses its horror, rather it becomes for him a supreme blessing, a sublime act for the common weal, which transcends his individual self.

The concept of martyrdom did not exist in the traditional Indian ethos. It was left to the Sikh Gurus to lift Indian history into new dimensions through the revolutionary concept of martyrdom. Both through precept and example, they inspired their followers with new adventures of thought and action and enabled them to change the course of history. Fight against oppression and injustice, which formed the bedrock of Guru's teachings became an integral part of the Sikh ethos and the motivating principle of Sikh martyrdom. The struggle of the Sikh Gurus against the Mughal empire was not a personal one. They fought against tyranny and oppression and sacrificed their lives for universal causes, for the freedom of conscience and freedom of worship for all.

The Fifth Guru Arjun Dev was the first to wear the crown of martyrdom in Sikh history. The Guru had to face inhuman torture and suffer martyrdom to uphold fundamental human rights like the freedom to profess religion of one's own choice. The Guru's martyrdom had far-reaching consequences as it prepared the Sikhs for an armed resistance to counter forces of tyranny and injustice. As per Guru Arjun's instructions, his son and successor donned two swords as embodiment of Miri and Piri.

The Ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur, a passionate apostle of human rights, also had to tread the path of martyrdom, while raising his voice against a powerful regime which nurtured the unholy ambition of converting the entire sub-continent into the fold of Islam. There have been instances where men had fanatically sought death while protecting their own creed. But Guru's unprecedented sacrifice for the defence of Kashmiri Brahmins, who belonged to a faith other than his own, demonstrated that the sphere of social altruism for the Sikhs knew no boundaries. Such a sacrifice inspired by the lofty ideals of universal weal (*Sarbat Da Bhala*) was unique in the history of mankind. Guru's martyrdom won universal applause from the non-Muslims as a sacrifice for their faith. They were awakened to a new consciousness of religious and political freedom after a slumber of centuries. Guru's injunctions, "fear not, frighten not," set hearts ablaze. The Sikh movement was put into a new gear into its history.

The concept of martyrdom was concretized by Guru Gobind Singh who created the Khalsa - a disciplined body of the Sikhs. Inspired by a divine mission to right the wrongs of the world, Khalsa was to be God's agent in the world to restore justice and righteousness. Guru exhorted his followers to come up to his ideal of a saint-soldier (*Sant-Sipahi*) who would

combine in him the virtues of a saint and the strength and courage of a soldier. This direction was a clear fulfilment of the spiritual thesis of Guru Nanak. Martyrdom of the Guru and his sons for the cause of righteousness was unique in the annals of mankind.

Subsequent history of the Sikhs provides a glorious example of spiritually elevated superhuman struggle against tremendous odds. It was certainly the ethos of Sikh faith with its emphasis on a fight for righteousness that was the core of heightened sense of truth in Banda Bahadur and his men that enabled them to shake the foundations of the Mughal empire and impelled them to suffer martyrdom without fear.

A long series of martyrdoms adorn the pages of Sikh history during the turbulent eighteenth century when the Sikhs were persecuted, exiled and tracked down like wild animals. It was the ideological motivation of the Gurus that sustained the Sikhs throughout this struggle. The heroic death of men like Bhai Taru Singh, Bhai Mani Singh, Bhai Bota Singh and Baba Deep Singh kept the torch of martyrdom alive among the Sikhs. It is well-known that the fight for country's freedom was fought and won with the Sikhs in the forefront. These freedom fighters were not mercenaries. They were truly inspired by the virtues of fearlessness, steadfastness, dedication and commitment to the cause - the virtues that go into the making of martyrs. True to their ideological mooring, many of them embraced the gallows with the name of God and the Guru on their lips. This tradition has remained vibrant and relevant till date.

**Conclusion:** The ethico-spiritual dynamic society bequeathed to the Sikhs by the Gurus has been mirrored by them in their history. Guru Nanak conceived the concept of martyrdom, Guru Arjun, Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh concretized it in history. The seeds of egalitarian social justice and freedom planted by Guru Nanak were nurtured by the successive Gurus and bore fruit with the creation of the Khalsa by the Tenth Guru. Khalsa released a dynamic force in the Indian history.

Some Western scholars maintain that the Sikh ideal of martyrdom developed 'in response to the complex social, religious and political pressures with which the Sikhs were confronted.' They tend to overlook the role of Sikh ideology in inculcating the ideals of heroism, sacrifice and bravery for the cause of truth and righteousness. Their accounts of Sikh history often devalue the heroic Sikh martyrdoms by describing them as mere exigencies of war or some other crisis. Lois E. Fenech, who wrote his doctoral thesis, 'Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition', under the supervision of W.H. McLeod, asserts that the Sikhs have tried to glorify and romanticize their tradition by using the 'rhetoric of martyrdom'. He takes no cognisance of the ideological motivation which has been the driving force in Sikh history. His judgment of Sikh tradition is downright biased. It gives a glimpse of the conditioned approach of the some Christian scholars towards the glorious Sikh tradition which has so admirably stood for the sublime goals of universal love and brotherhood of mankind. In some other traditions martyrdom is associated with even forcible conversions or with killing of infidels. In Guru Nanak's game of love martyrdom is elevated to lofty peaks where love for God and Guru is the sole motivating force for suffering martyrdom. Sikh history is replete with examples of inspired men who spurned all offers of wordly rewards and even promises of paradise (after death) for the sake of their love for God and Guru. This makes them stand out as heroes of a divinely ordained mission. That is why there is always an eloquent reference to the sacred memories of these martyrs in the daily Sikh prayer. Memory of these martyrs overwhelms the minds of the congregation with awe and reverence for their selfless and heroic deeds. □

