

Martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur

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TOWARDS THE END OF FEBRUARY 1644 A.D. Guru Hargobind nominated Har Rai, the second son of his eldest son Baba Gurditta who had passed away in 1638, as his successor and asked his wife Nanaki to settle at Bakala with her son Tegh Bahadur. Within a few days the Guru passed away, and a few weeks later Tegh Bahadur, with his mother and wife, left Kiratpur for Bakala. There he lived, in isolation from the vicissitudes of the Mughal Empire and their repercussions on the Sikh community, till his assumption of Guruship in April 1664 according to Guru Har Krishan's direction to his disciples: "*Baba Bakale*". During these twenty years he, along with his wife, 'meditated on the Incomprehensible' and practiced the highest *yoga*'. In these simple words Guru Gobind Singh describes the formative period of his father's life.

Journey to East:

The next important phase was Guru Tegh Bahadur's tour in Eastern India where, according to Guru Gobind Singh, he 'visited various places of pilgrimage'². The term 'pilgrimage' was appropriately applied to the places which had been sanctified by the footprints of Guru Nanak, such as Decca and Dhubri; but the Ninth Guru's tour had two other important aspects: spread of Sikhism and consolidation of the *sangats* in the region. Far away from the selfish intrigues of disappointed relatives and unscrupulous *masands*, he was free to move about as a zealous missionary planting the faith of truth in virgin fields. This was really congenial work for one who had passed twenty years in meditation. He desired to share the spiritual joy which was his daily experience with thousands who were less gifted and less fortunate.

Reversal of Mughal Policy:

After several years of fruitful missionary work *circa* (1665-1670) Guru Tegh Bahadur returned to the Punjab at the beginning of 1671. Here he found a new situation developing as a result of the complete reversal of Akbar's religious policy by Aurangzeb. The principle of *sulha-i-kul* (universal harmony) was challenged by the doctrine of 'one State, one Religion' which was enforced by all the resources of a powerful Government. The persecution flowing from the bigoted policy of Aurangzeb affected all sections of Indian life - except the orthodox Sunnis. The orders relating to destruction of temples, which began to be issued from 1669, were faithfully implemented by loyal officers whose activities were supervised by a Director General.³ In every *Pargana* 'officers went from the *thanas*, with orders from the "Presence," for the destruction of the idols'⁴. Although there were no idols in the Sikh Gurdwaras no distinction was drawn between them and the Hindu temples; the imperial orders required the Gurdwaras to be destroyed and the *masands* collecting the Guru's *daswandh* to be expelled from the cities⁵.

Saint-Warrior?

It is possible that Guru Tegh Bahadur decided to wait and watch the situation before contemplating a confrontation with the Mughal Government. It is true that in his early years he had been a valiant warrior; his performance at the battle of

Kartarpur won his father's admiration. But he cut himself off completely from warlike activities during the long years of meditation at Bakala, and he did not permit his loyal followers to return blow for blow when Dhir Mal's mercenaries made an open attempt to kill him. Sir Jadu Nath Sarkar's view that he fought in the ranks of the Mughal army in Assam⁶ has been dismissed as 'pure fiction'⁷. The great historian did not indicate whether he derived this information from the Persian histories which according to him, are silent about Tegh Bahadur⁸. Macauliffe's account⁹ has some inconsistencies with the account of Ram Singh's expedition, as given in the Persian histories and the Ahom *Buranjis*, but its general import is that the Guru travelled as a missionary and accepted no military involvement. There is, indeed, no rational explanation of his alleged participation in the Mughal expedition; although Sawai Ram Singh had a close family connection with the Sikh Gurus, the task assigned to him by Aurangzeb did not in any way involve the interests of the Sikh community. It is incredible that the Guru, who had spent twenty years in meditation, would suddenly recover the military zeal of his boyhood and turn himself into a soldier although his own flock was in no way involved in the Mughal-Ahom conflict.

Renunciation:

In explaining the political or military activities of any historical personality it is necessary to take due note of the special features of his character and outlook on life. Even a hostile critic like Trumpp observed that Guru Tegh Bahadur's hymns 'bear the stamp of a rather melancholy and world-renouncing character'¹⁰. It is possible that even this 'melancholy, world-renouncing' Guru would have taken up arms against the Mughal Government if confrontation had taken the form which had driven his father into armed resistance. But Mughal troops were not yet sent against the Sikhs by Aurangzeb or his officers; and the measures taken against the *gurdwaras* and the *masands* apparently called for a milder form of resistance than armed hostilities for which the Sikh community was not prepared at that stage. The Guru had just returned from a long sojourn in the east; he had to take stock of the situation in the Punjab, to stimulate the zeal of his followers, to secure new converts, and to release a new feeling of confidence which might – if necessary – strengthen the community's will to resist. We need not assume that he had become temperamentally averse to adoption of military measures *under any circumstances*; the crucial point is whether, in his judgment, the circumstances called for resort to arms.

The Miri-Piri Precept:

Here the law had been laid down by Guru Hargobind. Guru Har Rai, who was 'touched' at the sight of flowers dashed to the ground by his cloak,¹¹ maintained an army of about 2,000, strong, as a precautionary measure, according to his grandfather's advice.¹² The underlying principle behind this advice was that the *Panth* should keep itself prepared for self-defence in military terms. This seems to be the proper background of certain features of Guru Tegh Bahadur's activities: his hunting excursions in the course of his travels in Malwa, his possession of a sword with his name engraved on it, and his gift of arrows to some of his favourite followers. There is, however, no evidence at all showing that he engaged soldiers or arranged systematic military measures against the Mughal Government.

Normally historians do not attach much importance to the 'argument of silence', but the present case is different. Sikh writers have left for us details about the battles fought against the Mughals by the Sixth and Tenth Gurus; they have made no secret of the Seventh Guru's maintenance of a military force. There was no reason, therefore, requiring them to observe complete silence on Guru Tegh Bahadur's military activities if he had actually organized an army or fought battles against the Mughal Government. Since the days of the Sixth Guru it had been the accepted principle that violence was not ruled out when it was inescapable for defence or righteous objectives. This is what Guru Gobind Singh declared in *Zafarnama*; "When all other means have failed, it is lawful to take to the sword". The qualifying clause is very important: violence was not lawful **until all other means had failed**. If Guru Tegh Bahadur felt that a proper occasion for adoption of military measures had arisen he would not have hesitated to respond, and the writers of Sikh chronicles would have mentioned his exploits with the same zeal as they displayed in the case of the battles fought by his father and son.

Erroneous Version:

The situation has been complicated by two Muslim versions of Guru Tegh Bahadur's career which were composed a little more than a century after his martyrdom. Timur Shah, son and successor of Ahmed Shah Abdali, who governed the Punjab as his father's representative in 1757-58 wrote in 1783 a Persian monograph entitled *Hakikat-I-Bina Wa Urûj-I-Firkah-I-Sikhan*³. There Guru Tegh Bahadur's relations with the Mughal Government are described in the following words:

"When the news of many people assembling (around Tegh Bahadur) reached the holy ears (of Aurangzeb), orders were issued to the effect: 'If as previously, like the poor *Nanakpanthi faqirs*, you live peacefully in a corner, no harm will befall you. On the contrary, alms, suitable for your maintenance in the style of *faqirs*, would be given to you from the state treasury, just as in the case of other prayer-offering groups.... But the horses and arms, and the equipment of your retinue that you have gathered in places of worship must be removed'. Accordingly, the Faujdar of Sarhind intimated this order (to Tegh Bahadur). Before the proud and virile disciples, who had assembled there, Tegh Bahadur said defiantly, 'We are *faqirs*, what God has given us, why should we return?' On this point there arose a great contention, which ended in war and Tegh Bahadur was driven out of that place by force. Tegh Bahadur took up his residence in the jungle country between Shahjahanabad and Lahore and passed his days in anxiety."

The most curious feature of Timur Shah's account is that he makes Guru Tegh Bahadur die peacefully, not at the hand of the executioner. Apparently he made a confusion between the Ninth and Tenth Gurus; what he said about military preparation and war could not be applicable to the former. Despite his close contact with the Sikhs, the Afghan ruler had curious ideas about them. The '*Nanakpanthi faqirs*' or the Sikh Gurus were neither 'poor', nor did they 'live peacefully in a corner', since the days of Guru Arjun. Never did they accept 'alms, suitable for... maintenance in the style of *faqirs*' from the Mughal Government. When Akbar requested Guru Amar Das to accept a few villages, apparently as a source of income for the maintenance of his *langar*, the reply was that he had 'obtained lands and rent-free tenures' from his Creator. The Emperor then issued a grant in favour of

the Guru's daughter Bibi Bhani.¹⁴ It was unthinkable that the orthodox Sunni regime of Aurangzeb should provide 'alms... from the State treasury' for non-Muslim 'prayer-offering groups' including the *Nanakpanthi faqirs*.

Distortion:

The other Muslim version of the Ninth Guru's career is found in Ghulam Hussain's *Siyar-ul-Mutakhirin* written in 1783. Although the author lived far away from the Punjab, he was an inhabitant of Patna where a very important *gurdwara* perpetuated Guru Tegh Bahadur's memory. He wrote:

"This man (Tegh Bahadur), finding himself at the head of so many thousands of people, became aspiring; and he united his concerns with one Hafyz-Adeem, a Mahomedan *faqir* These two men no longer saw themselves followed by multitudes, implicitly addicted to their chief's will; then forsaking every honest calling they fell to subsisting by plunder and rapine, laying waste the whole province of Punjab."¹⁵

This passage was the basis of the picture drawn later by Cunningham and Trumpp. The historian of the Sikhs 'found more of the kingly than the priestly spirit' in Guru Tegh Bahadur's 'repeated injunction that his disciples should obey the bearer of his arrows'. Apparently, he ignored the fact that the principle of 'two swords' adopted by Guru Hargobind¹⁶ *harmonised* the kingly with the saintly spirit. Moreover, the use of arrows as a symbol of confidence and trust in the bearer could not be interpreted as an indication of warlike or predatory zeal. However, Cunningham wrote: 'Tegh Bahadur followed the example of his father with unequal footsteps and, choosing for his haunts the wastes between Hansi and the Sutlej, he subsisted himself and his disciples by plunder, in a way, indeed, that rendered him not unpopular with the peasantry'.

Here we have a significant addition to Ghulam Hussain's narrative: the Guru "plundered in a way that rendered him not unpopular with the peasantry". Trumpp added that his 'predatory incursions' were directed on the Muhammadan population'. The Guru, we are told 'rode at the front of well-armed disciples, who, if not willingly provided, levied contribution on the Zamindars, and the inhabitants of the villages through which they passed'; it is not clear whether those who paid 'contributions' were – all of them - Muslims. Apart from 'a strong band of Sikhs' the Guru 'engaged also some rural clans to enter his service, promising them, that he would pay them handsomely and put them in the way of obtaining booty'.¹⁷

Trumpp's version is more elaborate than Cunningham's, and the two versions are qualitatively different. Cunningham made the Guru a friend of the 'peasantry'. In the Punjab a large section of the 'peasantry' belonged to the Muslim community. So the Guru's policy of 'plunder' could not have been directed solely, or even primarily, against the Muslims. Cunningham did not indicate the source of his remark on the attitude of the 'peasantry' to the Guru's activities. Trumpp spoke of 'the Muhammadan reports which ascribe his capture and execution to political reasons'. The only 'Muhammadan reports' known to us are those of Timur Shah and Ghulam Hussain. The former was, in all probability, unknown to him; in any case the Guru's execution is not mentioned there. To Ghulam Hussain's version Trumpp added new embellishments, the most important being the anti-Muslim character attributed to the Guru's activities. He argued that 'the Sikh tradition itself' as recorded in certain

sakhis, 'confirmed the charges' brought in 'the Muhammadan reports', against the Guru, although he himself was not at all certain whether this *sakhis* referred to the wanderings of Guru Tegh Bahadur or of Guru Gobind Singh.¹⁸

The only point on which Trumpp's narrative appears to have some support from an independent source is his reference to some rural clans entering the Guru's service. In Sohan Lal's narrative we have reference to the association with the Guru of some Zamindars whose relations with the Mughal Government were strained and who were not unprepared to enrich themselves by plunder¹⁹. These malcontents might have been the heads of rural clans which had been dragged into the unlawful activities. The statement of Sohan Lal should not, however, be given too much importance. What some Zamindars did was not necessarily what Guru Tegh Bahadur himself, did or approved, even though they might have found shelter in his camp. Guru Nanak by not breaking off his association with the burglar Bhumia, on the latter's declaring that he would not be able to give up burglary, but suggesting alternative restraints for him, cannot mean that the founder of Sikhism approved of burglary²⁰. In the absence of detailed information on the complaints of the refractory Zamindars against the Mughal Government, on the activities in which they were actually engaged, and on the exact nature of their relations with the Guru, it is not possible to interpret this side issue as an evidence of the Guru's 'predatory incursions'. They might have been victims of Mughal tyranny seeking shelter in the Guru's camp just as the captive rajas in the fort of Gwalior had sought refuge with Guru Hargobind.

Agrarian Discontent:

It is practically impossible to pick out of these confused traditions any element of truth in regard to the character and activities of Guru Tegh Bahadur. But even though we might reject the details recorded by Timur Shah, Ghulam Hussain, Cunningham, Trumpp and Sohan Lal, we are left with general impression that at a particular stage of his career in the Punjab the Guru was involved in activities which brought him into contact with different classes of people, particularly the peasantry, in the context of their grievances against the Mughal Government. This could have happened only after his return from the east in 1671 which has followed by an extensive tour in Malwa.

The selection of this region appears to have been due to several reasons. It was one of the backward regions of the Punjab where the peasantry suffered from economic distress. Their helplessness provided opportunities for forcible conversion which were utilized by local Muslim officials in the hope of attracting imperial notice. Sikh propaganda and organisation in this region began during the pontificate of Hargobind. Under his direction his eldest son, Baba Gurditta appointed, in 1636, four preachers named Almast, Gonda, Balu Hansa and Suthra Shah who founded *dhuans* and *bakshishes* to facilitate proselytizing activities. The work was continued by Guru Har Rai who personally visited Malwa and gave his blessings to Phul, the progenitor of the Phulkian chiefs of Patiala, Nabha and Jind. Thus some of the most powerful Sikh families 'were set on their way to greatness by the fostering care of Har Rai'²¹. The process interrupted by the premature death of Guru Har Krishan and the long tour of Guru Tegh Bahadur in the East. It was resumed in 1672 or 1673 when Guru Tegh Bahadur Found himself comparatively free from the burden of organisational work at Anandpur.

Saviour of People:

The Guru's tour covered nearly 90 places in the *tehsils* of Patiala, Rajpura, Sirhind, Sunam, Mansa, Dhuri, Bhatinda, Sangrur, and Barnala²². Very few details of the Guru's activities at these places were recorded by later chroniclers; but it is clear from what we know that, apart from preaching the faith, he took an active and helpful interest in the problems which the down-trodden people faced in their daily life, such as scarcity of water for drinking and irrigation, shortage of milk, fear of epidemic, etc. The religious teacher became a man of the people, identifying himself with the sorrows and sufferings of the masses, and teaching them to improve their lot by escape from demoralisation through moral and spiritual elevation. Fear, he taught, was to be conquered: 'He who fears no one, nor strikes fear in any one' was a 'sage'²³. Fearlessness in the peasantry was not a quality appreciated by greedy Zamindars and oppressive officials. In fostering a new spirit in the countryside, the Guru was probably aided by Hafiz Adam, a saint belonging to the order of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi²⁴. They 'saw themselves followed by multitudes, implicitly addicted to their chief's will', as the historian Ghulam Hussain says. Naturally the Guru became, from the Mughal point of view, 'a pretender to power and disturber of the peace' (Cunningham).

The Guru's offence was aggravated by another factor. Nawab Saifuddin of Saifabad was his devoted friend; according to *Suraj Parkash* he embraced Sikhism. There is reference in the same work to another Muslim convert²⁵. What Jahangir had written about Guru Arjun was applicable to Guru Tegh Bahadur: '..... he had captured many of the simple-hearted of the Hindu, and even of the ignorant and foolish followers of Islam, by his ways and manners, and they had loudly sounded the drum of his holiness'²⁶. Reports on the Guru's activities soon reached the 'holy ears', for the Emperor's news-collectors were active and Malwa was not at a great distance from Delhi.

Kashmiri Pandits:

Meanwhile, Aurangzeb had sent a new governor to Kashmir in 1671 to replace the governor who was liberal and conciliatory in his treatment of the Hindus. The new provincial ruler, Iftikhan Khan, better known as Sher Afghan, was committed to full implementation of imperial policy in respect of destruction of temples and forcible conversion of the Hindus. His activities took Kashmir back to the dark days of Sultan Sikandar (1393-1416) who was a cruel persecutor and iconoclast. The Kashmiri Brahmins were offered by Sher Afghan a choice between Islam and death. Under the leadership of a well-known scholar, Kirpa Ram, about 500 of them came to Anandpur where the Guru had arrived on completion of his tour of Malwa. At their request the Guru took up the cause of protecting *dharma* (righteousness) against bigotry and tyranny. Under his direction they sent a petition to the Emperor, intimating their willingness to embrace Islam if Guru Tegh Bahadur could be converted.

The Epic Deed of Martyrdom:

Instead of entering into the controversial details of the course of events which culminated in the execution of the Guru in Delhi on 11 November 1675, we would try to understand the basic reasons behind the Emperor's cruel policy. The most crucial evidence is contained in a few lines written by Guru Gobind Singh:

“He sacrificed his life for protecting the rights of the Hindus, to wear their sacred thread and frontal marks;
He gave up his head without uttering a word of sorrow,
For the sake of righteousness...”²⁷

No Sikh – far less a Guru – attached importance to ‘sacred thread’ (*janeu*) or ‘frontal marks’ (*tilak*); these were distinctive marks of caste categorically condemned by Guru Nanak. But Guru Tegh Bahadur approached the issue from an entirely different – and much wider – point of view: he chose to sacrifice his life ‘for the sake of **dharmā**’. Macauliffe narrowed, and practically misinterpreted, the Guru’s position when he used ‘religion’ as the synonym for *dharmā*.²⁸ He followed the common practice ignoring the context in which Guru Gobind Singh used the word **dharmā** in this passage. Guru Tegh Bahadur made himself a martyr in defence of the right of every man – Hindus, Sikh, Muslim – to live his life in the manner sanctioned by the religious faith which he professed. He appealed to Aurangzeb, in effect, to revive Akbar’s policy of *sulha-i-kul*, which Shivaji explained in the following words in his historic letter to the Sunni Emperor on the *jeziyah*: “That architect of the fabric of empire (Akbar) ... admitted the admirable policy of universal harmony (*sulha-i-kul*) in relation to all the various sects, such as Christians, Jews, Muslims, Dadu’s followers, sky-worshippers (*falakia*), *malakia*, heathens (*ansaria*), atheists (*daharia*), Brahmins and Jain priests”.²⁹ This was the *dharmā* for which the Guru faced death.

Guru Gobind Singh places his father’s martyrdom solely in the context of his championship of *dharmā*; he does not refer to any other cause of the Emperor’s wrath. As a corollary, refer to the Guru’s refusal to save his life by performing miracles:

“True prophets of God are ashamed
Of displaying their occult powers.”³⁰

It appears that Guru Gobind Singh concentrated his attention on the climax of the tragedy because he was personally connected with his father’s response to the Kashmiri Brahmin’s mission. When Guru Tegh Bahadur was troubled by the thought that, after he paid the penalty for resistance to the Emperor’s policy, none would remain to take care of his nine-year old son, the boy assured him that Almighty Himself would look after him.³¹ The boy’s simple but bold assurance convinced the Guru that the future of the Panth would be safe in his hands. Later, when the Guru was kept in the lock-up at the Chandni Chowk Kotwali in Delhi, he tests his son’s reaction to the crisis which had taken a concrete shape. He sent a *sloka* to the boy, saying that all human powers had failed and nothing but the Lord’s ‘merciful aid’ could save him. Gobind replied in the form of *dohra*: ‘Lord, everything is in Thy Hands’. The Guru, doubly assured of his mantle, sent to him the spiritual Regalia with his blessing:

The Word of God shall ever abide,
The saints shall ever survive;
Guru Gobind’s glory shall ever remain.³²

Supreme Saviour:

The absence of any reference to Guru Gobind Singh’s extremely brief statement to the Malwa phase of his father’s career should not be construed to mean that his activities in that region had no impact on the Emperor’s policy. It is quite possible

that the Kashmiri Brahmins approached Guru Tegh Bahadur because they were impressed by his services to the people of Malwa; the reputation he had acquired there as a champion of justice, of human rights – of ‘righteousness’ in the widest sense – encouraged them to hope that they would find a saviour in this man of truth. They did not approach any of the Hindu ruling princes who occupied high positions in the Mughal Darbar. As Guru Tegh Bahadur lived in seclusion from the 1644 to 1664 and traveled as a missionary in the East from 1665 to 1670, he could make an impression on the people of the north-west only by his work in the Panjab after his return in 1671. The best part of the work was done in the Malwa region at a time when Sher Afghan’s policy was creating consternation in the Hindu society of Kashmir. It would thus appear that the Malwa episode prepared the ground for the final strategy.

Is it possible that the Guru would have been left in peace if religious persecution had not acquired a fresh momentum in Kashmir, or if the Kashmiri Brahmin had not sought a Saviour at Anandpur? Although our information is incomplete, a negative answer to this question seems to be called for. The Guru’s activities in Malwa had attracted the Emperor’s notice even *before* the arrival of the Kashmiri Brahmins at Anandpur. The local officials probably regarded him as an undesirable intruder. There is a ‘stray record of ‘doubtful authenticity’ suggesting that the Faujdar of Sirhind arrested him, kept him in prison for two or three months, and sent him to Delhi after the Emperor’s return to the capital from Hasan Abdal.³³ It is not clear whether the arrest was made by the Faujdar on his own initiative, for the Guru’s activities within his own jurisdiction, or on an order from the Emperor. The usual story is that the Guru proceeded to Delhi in response to imperial summons in connection with the Kashmiri Brahmin’s petition; he was, however, arrested on the way, because the suspicious Emperor thought he might try to escape.

These points cannot be clarified till fresh evidence is available, But it is difficult to escape the impression that the Malwa phase cannot be ignored in any rational analysis of the confrontation which culminated in the Guru’s martyrdom. Aurangzeb’s purpose was to get rid of one who not only championed *tilak* and *janeu*, but also inspired the Malwa peasantry with the vision of a new freedom.

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Reference

- 1 & 2. Trilochan Singh, Guru Tegh Bahadur, p. 92 & 192 respectively.
3. to 6. J.N. Sarkar, History of Aurangzeb, Vol. III, p. 267., 283, 212 and 312 respectively.
7. Trilochan Singh, p. 255.
8. J.N. Sarkar, p. 354.
9. *The Sikh Religion*, Vol. IV, pp. 354-360.
10. Adi Granth, Introduction, p. 1 xxxviii.
11. Narang: *Transformation of Sikhism*, p. 144.
12. Macauliffe, Vol. IV, p. 277.
13. Tr. I. Banerjee (Indian Historical Quarterly, March 1942).
14. Macauliffe, Vol. II.
15. Macauliffe, Tr. Published by R. Cambray & Co., p. 85.
16. Macauliffe, Vol. IV, p. 4.
17. Adi Granth, Introduction, p. 1. xxxix.

- 18.I. Banerjee observes that 'practically all the 'Sakhis' on which Trumpp relied refer to Guru Gobind Singh. (Evolution of the Khalsa Vol. II. P. 62).
- 19.Umdat-u-Tawarikh, Daftar ii, p. 48.
20. *The Sikh Review*, January 1975, p. 51.
21. Macauliffe, Vol. IV, pp. 293-295.
- 22, 23 & 24. Trilochan Singh, pp. 277-278., 284 and 286 respectively.
25. *The Sikh Review*, January 1975, p. 45.
26. *Tuzuk-I-Jahangiri*, tr. Rogers and Beveridge, Vol. I, p. 72.
27. Trilochan Singh, p. 311.
28. Macauliffe, Vol. V, p. 295.
29. J.N. Sarkar, *Shivaji*, p. 306.
30. Trilochan Singh, p. 311.
31. P.N. Kaul Bamzai, History of Kashmir, p. 555.
32. Trilochan Singh, pp. 316-317, 325.
33. Trilochan Singh. p. 310.