

LIVING IN DANGEROUS TIMES

Thoughts on Tercentennial of Martyrdom

* Quoted by RC Majumdar in "The History & Culture of the Indian People, Vol. X: British Paramountcy & Indian Renaissance pp. 481-5.

THE STORY OF GURU GOBIND SINGH's sons embracing death cheerfully within the space of a month in 1704 is scarcely known outside of Sikh history books. Even the younger generation of Sikhs is sadly ignorant of the reasons - and the manner - of their death, two in the battlefield of Chamkaur and the younger two - aged nine and seven - bricked alive at Sirhind by order of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's subedar Wazir Khan, as the Mughal army fanned across Punjab to hunt the Tenth Guru after he had been solemnly promised a safe passage out of Anandpur fort.

Destiny reserved this extraordinary sacrifice for the Guru's four sons perhaps to establish Guru Nanak's test: ਜਉ ਤਉ ਪ੍ਰੇਮ ਖੇਲਣ ਕਾ ਚਾਉ ॥ ਸਿਰੁ ਧਰਿ ਤਲੀ ਗਲੀ ਮੇਰੀ ਆਉ ॥

[SGGS : 1412]

'If you truly desire God's love, come to me holding thy head on the palm of thy hand.' The young "warriors" have forever carved a place of honour in the hearts of all freedom-loving people. Their sacrifice constitutes the most profound proof of God's love for all human beings.

Among perceptive Indian historians the late Anil Chandra Banerjee, who made an in-depth study of the Sikh religious movement, characterized it as a liberating influence. He acknowledges Guru Nanak as the saviour of Indian masses, not only freeing them from the stranglehold of Brahminical hegemony, but also **empowering** them to confront the oppression of the Mughal satraps. Guru Arjun wrote: ਫੂਟੋ ਆਂਡਾ ਭਰਮ ਕਾ ਮਨਹਿ ਭਇਓ ਪਰਗਾਸੁ ॥ ਕਾਟੀ ਬੇਰੀ ਪਗਹ ਤੇ ਗੁਰਿ ਕੀਨੀ ਬੰਦਿ ਖਲਾਸੁ ॥

[SGGS : 1002]

'The egg of superstition hath burst, the mind illumined,
The Guru hath cut the fetters off the feet and freed the captive.'

Significantly, these lines appear on the title page of **each** volume of Macauliffe's book. Indeed, the forerunner of Indian national movement, Surendra Nath Banerjee, in a lecture delivered, in Calcutta in 1878, described Guru Nanak as "the spiritual founder of the Sikh commonwealth"* ***"Such liberation (from tyranny of ceremonialism and the inequitable caste system) was to be the prelude to political liberation without which the social aspirations and spiritual cravings of man cannot have free expression."***

It is a modern day paradox that, once freedom is achieved, the moral and social spirit which sparked the flame starts ebbing away. While the older generation becomes cynical and static, the younger people simply drift, and plunge into consumerism, unblushingly to enjoy its benefits, thereby triggering incipient decline and confusion.

In such social malaise, there is a fear that the saga of sacrifice and martyrdom, which claimed Guru Gobind Singh's Mother, the legendary Mata Gujari and the four Sahibzadas, may go unnoticed, or perhaps swept away in ritualist jamborees with

trappings of electoral politics as witnessed on Sept. 11, 2001 in the name of Sri Adi Granth Quatercentennial. As one looks around the present day world, man's cruelty to man becomes only too obvious. The fiendish Al Qaida conspiracy leading up to Sept. 11, 2001 tragedy, the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the plight of women and children in the man-made tragedy in Sudan, the violence long inflicted by terrorists in Kashmir, all mock at the moral and religious claims of our civilized society.

But the chaotic state of contemporary world hark back to the tyrannical regime in AD 1704 - to Guru Gobind Singh's tryst with destiny: A swollen Sirsa river, in darkening shadows of December, of the warrior Sikhs and Guru's family struggling to find a safe landing, only to be separated by encircling darkness. No one with any trace of compassion can fail to be overwhelmed by the conspiracy of circumstances and treachery of an unscrupulous foe. Yet the intrepid Guru stood like a rock, leading scores of his faithfuls to the shelter of a mud-fortress in Chamkaur. How heroically Ajit Singh - the first born "Sahibzada" fought the hordes on the following day, bringing glory to the illustrious Khalsa, is the stuff of which legends are made. Upon his death, Guru Gobind Singh brushed aside his aides' pleas and helped the second son Jujhar put on the armour and step out of the fortress to challenge the unrelenting Mughal troops. He too fell as hero on the battlefield. Then the Guru-Father knelt in prayer of thanksgiving to *Akal Purakh*, "*God, I am blessed in obeying Thy command.*"

While Chamkaur fortress witnessed the Great martyrdom, destiny was creating history of another kind at not-too-distant Sirhind, where ruled the Mughal viceroy Wazir Khan. Zorawar Singh and Fateh Singh had been captured, along with their grandmother Mata Gujari, betrayed by a disgruntled but greedy Ganguram who had once served the Guru's household. The Mughal satrap was mighty pleased at the prize catch, determined to offer his monarch a rare gift, for he used every trick to force them into conversion to Islam, because that would win him honour from emperor Aurangzeb.

The rest is history. The Sahibzadas (as Sikhs like to call Guru's sons) though barely nine and seven, were made of sterner stuff - firmly rooted in Guru Nanak's universal faith of One God, Benevolent Creator of a universe of multitudinous diversity. Their refusal to convert surprised and angered the Nawab, who turned to the Quazi to pronounce the sentence: to be instantly bricked alive into a wall - that should serve as a lesson to others.

The *Sahibzadas* are perhaps the youngest martyrs in the history of mankind. The spot is hallowed as Fatehgarh, named after the youngest of Guru's sons, signifying victory over evil.

Three centuries later, why do some people claim superiority of their religion over others? How could one Creator have preferences among His children? Guru Nanak declared all paths to God as valid; Guru Gobind Singh proclaimed all humanity as one family. Indeed the Indian subcontinent has always welcomed diverse faiths. Even Mughal kings were, by and large, tolerant. The present day fanaticism is contrary to God's Will. Neither Al Qaeda, nor the aggressive Hindutva, nor the absolutist evangelical Christianity is justified in enforcing their exclusivist *diktat*, much less defend the killing of innocent men, women and children in the name of religion. The 18th century martyrs remind one of Hasan and Hussain who died at

Karbala. The torture of Guru Arjun and execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur remind us of crucifixion of Christ in the times of King Herod.

Those who stand for freedom of faith must celebrate the spirit of Four Sahibzadas who embraced death cheerfully. In some ways Guru Gobind Singh's life was in itself a passion play. The lives and teachings of the Guru counsel a breadth of vision and a quality of character which are emancipatory because they are focussed on the universal spirit of love.

