

The Supreme Sacrifice of Guru Tegh Bahadur

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IN THE EARLY YEARS OF Aurangzeb's reign, the Shia Muslims and Sufi saints and scholars were looked upon with disfavour and, at times, humiliated and even put to death for their so-called heresies.

Aurangzeb banned all religious assemblies involving music. No mahfils could be held, not even at the tombs and mausoleums of eminent darveshes and peers. When Sufi Saint Yahya Chisti held such a religious assembly, he was tortured. The celebration of Muharam, a Shiite commemoration was banned in 1699. The religious head of the Bohra Community was put to death along with seven hundred of his followers. The religious head of Khojas, Sayyid Shah Ji in spite of his claim of sacred lineage from the holy prophet Mohammed, was poisoned to death. The Halla-ji Sufis were brutally murdered for their Vedantic tendencies. Qumir was beheaded for his liberal and rational thinking: he was charged with leanings towards Christianity. Mulla Shah Lahori was the illustrious disciple of Miyan Mir. He was earlier addressed by Emperor Shahjahan as his padshah for his saintliness. Even he was subjected to Aurangzeb's wrath.

Previously, Emperor Aurangzeb had imprisoned - and starved to death - his own father Shahjahan, killed his own brothers - Dara Shikoh and Murad - and disgraced his eldest son, Muazim, who afterwards succeeded as Bahadur Shah I.

On account of all his cruelty and zealotry Aurangzeb was heartily hated by his own co-religionists. He, then, sent for his priests and asked them what he was to do to regain the sympathy of the Muhammedans. His counsellors said he could only do so by converting the Hindus to Islam. The Emperor took the advice of his priests, and on April 8, 1669, issued firman, orders, to all the governors of the provinces to destroy, with a willing hand, the schools and temples of the infidel; and they strictly enjoined to put an entire stop to the teaching and practising of idolatrous forms of worship. The firman specifically pointed to the Brahmin 'misbelievers' and their 'false books', the Vedas. The schools of Hindu learning and most sacred temples in North India especially at Multan, Kashmir, Kurukshetra, Mathura and Banaras were demolished.

As a matter of fact, up to this point, the Sikhs did not come into the picture and if some Sikh shrines in Multan and Kashmir were destroyed, because they were conducted by Udasi monks who looked like Hindus in their formal robes, nothing happened in Kiratpur, Anandpur, Amritsar and Lahore. Had there been any danger to Sikh shrines, Guru Tegh Bahadur would not have left Anandpur for Malwa tour during these very years. **Sikhism's concepts of Unity of God and the Brotherhood of Man were still very much revered by some of the Emperor's cortege. Moreover, Ram Rai (maybe disowned by Gurughar) was still in Delhi, respected and honoured by Aurangzeb as a Nanak-panthi with miraculous power. During these years of persecution of Brahmins, Ram Rai was given a handsome jagir of the whole region of Dehradun.**

It is stated that the reason for the hasty return of the Guru from Patna (in 1667) was the religious policy of Aurangzeb. At that time the victims of Aurangzeb's wrath were mainly

Shia Muslims and Sufis; the exploitation of Hindus only commenced after the firman in 1669. It was probably the news of the extermination of Muslim clergy that prompted the Guru to return to Punjab immediately. During his travels and holy sojourns in Punjab, Guru Tegh Bahadur did have some important discussions on the prevailing socio-religious problems with a number of Muslim divines, who did not advocate strict adherence to the Shariat. A consensus had ensured among the saints that a 'supreme sacrifice' was required to restrain the Emperor's tyranny.

At that time when Kashmir was torn with repeated Shia-Sunni riots, Hindu Brahmins of Kashmir were enjoying enviable positions. In 1671, Aurangzeb appointed Nawab Iftikhar Khan as the governor of Kashmir to quell Shia insurgency and create Sunni dominance. He was an enthusiastic exponent and executor of the Emperor's policy. His over-zealous ambition led him to divert his attention towards the Hindu population of Kashmir.

The Kashmiri Pundits were supposed to be highly educated, and it was thought that, if they were converted, the inhabitants of Hindustan would readily follow their example. Consequently the Pundits of Kashmir were the first one to bear the brunt of Aurangzeb's policy of conversion.

Iftikhar Khan's proselytizing activities terrified the Pundits. They were in search of a guide to help them. In the Deccan Shivaji was resisting the Mughal government. In Northern India the revolt of Jats of Mathura... had been crushed in 1669. In 1672 Satnamis had been completely wiped out.

In the Punjab Guru Hargobind alone... had provided military leadership to Hindus and Sikhs for the first time. The Pundits thought of waiting upon his son Guru Tegh Bahadur. A 15-man deputation of Kashmiri Pundits, under Kirpa Ram Dat of Matan, arrived at Anandpur on 25 May, 1675.

The necessity of a 'supreme sacrifice' to arrest Aurangzeb's oppression had already been the crux of deliberations. When Guru Tegh Bahadur told the Kashmiri Pundits, 'he is willing to sacrifice his life to free the earth from the burden of tyranny,' his son, Gobind Rai, who was barely nine at the time, intervened and said: **"for that purpose who is more worthy than thou who art at once generous and brave."**

On hearing this the Guru divined everything that was to follow. He told Kashmiris to go and make the Emperor known: **"Guru Tegh Bahadur is now seated on the throne of the great Guru Nanak. He is protector of faith and religion.** First make him a Musalman and then all the people, including ourselves, will of our own accord adopt the faith."

The Emperor was happy to receive this message. He was full of zeal, which he expressed to his Qazis, that, once the Guru was converted, there would be a large accession of Hindu and Sikh converts.

But the Emperor's hopes were all dashed.. Guru Tegh Bahadur laid down his life after making the following proclamation: **"...But I will offer my life and in doing so prove the Turks to be false and deprive them of sovereignty... since its monarchs have committed great enormities. I will now extirpate them and their line... I will not abandon my faith. The glory of the Turkish power is now at an end since thou art forcibly depriving men of their religion. I will dig up the roots of the Turks... and they shall never again have sway in Hindustan."**

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