

The Sikh Tradition of Martyrdom : A Continuum of Four Centuries¹

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PART III[®]

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IN 1621 GURU HARGOBIND HAD to fight against Chandu's Shah's relative Bhagwan Das Gherar who had taken away Sri Govindpur which had been founded by Guru Arjun Dev. Bhagwan Das died along with his son Futtan Chand and Chandu Shah's son Karam Chand in the ensuing skirmishes. The Sikhs also suffered heavy casualties and Guru Hargobind's bodyguards Bhai Nanu, Mathura Bhat and Bhai Praga were killed. Govindpur was then rebuilt and named Sri Hargovindpur. The Guru built a mosque for the Muslims in this town, with his characteristic liberalism.

The repeated attacks of his enemies led Guru Hargobind to strengthen his militia and train his followers for armed encounters. He went on a tour of Kashmir, Rawalpindi, Jhelum, Gujrat, Sheikhpura and Lahore in search of more converts. He met with great success in Malwa and succeeded in endearing himself with lower and downtrodden classes.

However, the Guru's opponents became jealous of his successes and the orthodox Hindus combined with Prithvi Chand and his sons Kaulian and Meherban who were called '*minas*' (lowly) by the followers of the Guru, to oppose the Guru.¹ Jehangir's death in 1627 had also changed the Guru's relations with the Mughal state and Shah Jehan's lieutenants took up an anti-Sikh stand. The Guru's *baoli* in Dabbi Bazar in Lahore was filled up and a mosque was raised in the place of the *Guru ka langar*. Mughal troops attacked Lohgarh and massacred the small Sikh contingent that was defending it when some Sikh hunters captured a royal hawk and refused to surrender it. Later the Guru killed the Mughal generals Mukhlis Khan and Murtaza Khan in a subsequent encounter.

Subsequently the Guru was attacked in Malwa where the Guru became victorious although 1200 of his fellow Sikhs died. The Guru was besieged in Kartarpur in the Jalandhar Dab and Painde Khan and Kalu Khan were slain. He had to fight quite a few battles before he moved to Phagwara and then to Kiratpur in the territory of the refractory hill chief Tara Chand. He was heard to have maintained 700 horses, 300 horsemen and 60 musketeers.²

But by now the Guru had been driven out of the borders of Mughal Punjab. In his absence the '*minas*' took possession of the Harmandir Sahib. They changed Nanak's ideology, stuffed the *Janamsakhi* with Hindu Puranic mythology and introduced their own *Granth* from which the passages of the *Bhagats* were expunged in view of their low caste origins.

Even in exile the Guru could not stop fighting. The king of Handur sought his help in warding off the aggression of the Nanak of Ropar and the Guru readily obliged.

In the meanwhile relations with the Mughal government began to improve with the rise of Dara Shukoh, the eldest son of Emperor Shah Jehan in imperial politics.

Dara was a devout follower of the Sufi saint Hazrat Mian Mir and he followed a policy of co-existence with all non-Islamic faiths.

Peace on the imperial front once again left Guru Hargobind free to propagate his faith and he sent his emissaries in different directions to make new converts. Bidhi Chand was sent to Bengal, Almast to the north-east in Pilbhit, and Baba Hasan to Pothohar (Rawalpindi Division) Chhach and Hazara. This period was thus marked by a great prosperity of Sikhism and it spread over a wide area from Kabul in the west to Dacca in the east.

Guru Hargobind had nominated his grandson Har Rai as the one to succeed him to avoid the outbreak of hostility among his four sons for succession to Guruship. Guru Har Rai's period (1638-1660) was marked by comparative peace with the Mughal Empire. Dara Shukoh was favourably inclined towards him as his life had once been saved by a medicine from the Guru.³ Guru Har Rai continued Guru Hargobind's tradition of inducting his followers in the art of warfare side by side with spiritual enlightenment. The Guru's court closely resembled "the pomp and circumstances of a semi-independent military chieftain" Cunningham observed.

Trouble began as the struggle for succession broke out during the last years of the rule of Emperor Shah Jehan between his sons. Aurangzeb moved from the Deccan with a large army and defeated Dara Shukoh at the battle of Samugarh (May 1658). Dara fled to the Punjab and was planning to collect a large army to retrieve his fortune. Guru Har Rai had resisted him at his camp at Govindwal and advised him to go further west and collect a large army.⁴ There is some controversy regarding the actual role played by the Guru at this juncture. Sujjan Rai writes in his *Khulasat-i-Tawarikh* that the Guru had left Dara's camp promising to bring more forces. Gokul Chand Narang says that Aurangzeb's forces pursuing Dara were checked by the Guru's forces for some time near the Beas till Dara reached a safe place.⁵

When Aurangzeb became Emperor he called the Guru to Delhi to explain his conduct during the struggle for succession. The Guru sent his elder son Ram Rai to the Mughal court. According to Cunningham, Ram Rai was confined to Delhi by Aurangzeb as a hostage to ensure the good conduct of the Sikhs. Some say that Ram Rai had misinterpreted some of Guru Nanak's hymns at the Delhi court in such a manner which hurt Sikh feelings and this disqualified him for succession to the Guruship. Guru Har Rai therefore nominated his younger son Har Krishan as the Guru. But Har Krishan died of small pox soon after in 1664 and Teg Bahadur, the youngest son of Guru Hargobind was brought from his seat of worship at Bakala and invested with the responsibility of providing leadership to the militarist-spiritual cult of Sikhism at one of the most tumultuous periods of its history.⁶

Guru Teg Bahadur nurtured in deep meditation was not of a worldly temperament at all. Indeed he had spent twenty years (from 1644 to 1664) in meditation and contemplation in an unassuming hut in Bakala when he was called upon to offer leadership to the Sikh community. His formal induction to guruship was delayed for four and a half months as the child Guru Har Krishan had not mentioned him by name. He had only mentioned the 'Baba at Bakala.' This was properly a play to keep the nomination a secret and free from Mughal interference since the Mughal Emperor now insisted on confirming all appointments of Sikh Gurus.

Guru Teg Bahadur came to Makhawal, later named Anandpur, near Kiratpur. He was hunting in the forest near Agra when the Kotwal caught him and took him to Aurangzeb. The Emperor asked him to embrace Islam, and failing to tempt him through many inducements tried to torture him to submission. However, he was released on the intervention of Raja Ram Singh, the son of Mirza Raja Jai Singh and was allowed to return to Makhawal.

From 1667 to 1671 Guru Teg Bahadur went on a tour of Bihar, Bengal and Assam and carried the message of Sikhism to those places. Some say that he accompanied the Mughal expedition to Assam led by Mirza Raja Jai Singh. But evidence points out that Jai Singh never went to the east and his son Ram Singh went to Assam in 1667 long before the Guru made his visit.

After his return from the east, Guru Teg Bahadur went on a tour of Malwa (Zira, Moga and Daroli) and Morjha (Verka, Chukewali, Nijharia, Tarn Taran and Khandur) and made many converts. He started collecting offerings of followers through *masands* (agents for collecting contributions) and his place of worship was equipped with horses, arms and militia. It was said that his forces numbered thirty thousand. His assumption of the title 'Bahadur' roused alarm in Mughal ruling circles. However, Aurangzeb did not strike till the Guru challenged his policy of forcible conversion.⁷

The Guru was approached by a delegation of Kashmiri Brahmins led by Pandit Kirpa Ram of Mattan to save them from forcible conversion launched by Aurangzeb. Aurangzeb had decided that if he could convert the Kashmiri Pandits who were the leading section of the Hindu population then gradually other sections of the people would follow their example. As Kashmir was close to Peshawar and Kabul, the emperor probably expected to put down all probable Hindu reaction with the help of the Muslim inhabitants of those places. It had been rumoured that Kashmiri Pandits were very poor and needy and it would be easy to tempt them with money and appointments. In 1669 Aurangzeb had ordered the demolition of all the schools and temples of the *Kafirs* (non-believers) and put down their religious teaching and practices. In 1671 he ordered that all revenue collectors, *diwans* and *peshkars* should be replaced with Muslims. In 1674 Aurangzeb himself went to Hasan Abdal (between Rawalpindi and Peshawar) to put down the Afridi and Khattack tribal uprisings (1672). It was rumoured that the Sikh Guru's links with *fakir* Adam Hafiz of the order of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi had much to do with these tribal uprising. When Aurangzeb came to learn that the Guru had been approached by the Kashmiri Pandits to defend their *tilak* and *janau* (sacred thread) he ordered the governor of Sirhind to arrest the Guru and bring him to Delhi.⁸

The Guru was arrested when he was on his way to Delhi to plead the cause of the Kashmiri brahmins with the Emperor Aurangzeb. He was brought in an iron cage to Delhi and offered death if he would not embrace Islam. He was beheaded on November 11, 1675 at the Kotwali where the Sisganj Gurdwara now stands. The guru's martyrdom in defence of the *tilak* and *janau* of Hindu Brahmins earned him the epithet *Hind di Chadar* (Honour of Hindustan). He had truly appreciated that what had started as an attack against the freedom of conscience of the Brahmins of Kashmir was soon to envelop other sections of the population and all non Muslims were to come under its spell. He therefore decided to protest against such invasions of the freedom of conscience at the very outset. Guru Teg Bahadur had thus,

through his martyrdom, raised the Sikh community as the defender of the freedom of the entire country against its tyrannical oppressor from the position of peaceful devotees in the monotheist mould of Guru Nanak spreading the message of an egalitarian self-respecting society.

The Tenth Master Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) succeeded to the leadership of the Sikh community at a moment of deep crisis. Guru Teg Bahadur's severed head [The body was cremated in village Rai Sina - now Rakabganj, New Delhi adjoining Parliament House,] had to be smuggled out of Delhi in the basket of a plucky ranghretta (grass cutters). It signified the utter ruthlessness of the Mughal Satrap and insecurity of the nascent Sikh movement and imprinted the necessity of training up the Sikhs in the art of war and the science of using arms. The youthful Guru Gobind Singh spent several years and long hours in silent contemplation at Paonta on banks of Jamuna, a place much farther from his usual habitat in Kiratpur and at last came out with a classic: the Dasam Granth of the Tenth Guru which can be called a treatise on the art of governance and the use of weapons.

Long years of penance and deliberations led him on the Vaisakhi of 1699 to organise the entire Sikh community into a *Khalsa Panth*. He asked the *Khalsa* to come out with an offering of head to the Guru and when five bold and committed Sikhs approached the Guru, he called them his *panj piare* or five beloved ones. He then offered them pure water mixed with sweets and stirred with a two edged sword (*khand*) used in the head dress of the Akalis and initiated them to the *Khalsa*. These men were to spread the message of the *Khalsa* to as many as possible and make new converts. He prescribed the five symbols (not dissimilar to the practice among the Jats) *Kesh* (uncut hair), *Kangha* (comb), *Kara* (steel bangle), *Kirpan* (sword) and *Kachh* (knee length breeches used by soldiers) as the symbolic attire of the *Khalsa*. Once a Sikh was initiated to the *khalsa* by the *khande ki pahul* ceremony he was expected to maintain these symbols of his belonging to the fraternity. He was also to observe a certain code of conduct which was specially compiled by the Guru and was called the *Rahitnama*. The *Rahitnama* did not merely frame certain moral guidelines to keep the Sikhs on the right path like abjuring intoxicants like tobacco, eating of halal (processed in the Islamic way) meat or having illicit connections with other people's wives. It also strictly defined a distinct identity for the Sikhs by passing strong strictures on casteism, idol worship and all kinds of pluralism, Vedic rites and puranic mythology. It clearly provided a distinct code governing the birth, death, marriage and initiation rites of the Sikhs charting an original course of life independent of either Hindu or Islamic practice. The Guru thus expected to forge a nation of steel, based on the ideal of *sarab-loh* (all-steel) out of the *khalsa*. He then significantly decided to repose all the powers of the Guru in this *sarbat khalsa*.

The torch which had been lighted in the heart of Nanak and which had been passed from generation to generation through the different *mahals* (bodies) of the Gurus was thus finally passed on to the entire *khalsa*. It was laid down that wherever five members of the *khalsa* would meet together, they could invoke the authority of the Guru or the *Gurumatta* and decide upon a course of action for the *khalsa*. Thus instead of keeping one Guru as the fountain head of all authority in the *Khalsa*, Guru Gobind Singh ignited the entire Sikh nation with the fire of determination to create a place for themselves under the sun. The Mughals and their successors might attempt the physical liquidation of one Guru, but thousands of Sikhs would take the

place of the one Guru and together they would carry forward the torch of enlightenment to the coming generations.⁹

The remaining days of Guru Gobind Singh's life confirmed the vision and wisdom of the Guru. The hill rulers suddenly turned hostile to the Sikhs and invaded Anandpur. The Sikhs offered valiant resistance but the Guru lost two of his sons in the ensuing encounter at Chamkaur. The Mughal army was also heard to be advancing towards Anandpur and the Guru thought it wise to evacuate Anandpur and leave for Malwa giving troops the slip in the disguise of a Muslim divine. Meanwhile Guru Gobind's two infant sons barely nine and seven stranded with his mother Gujari in Machchhiwara in the custody of a few Sikhs. The Mughal subedar Wazir Khan at Sirhind got hold of them and put them to death in a very cruel manner by erecting the foundation of a house on their bodies.¹⁰

Guru Gobind Singh reached Kotkapura but was refused shelter by the Jat Sarpanch. Thereafter he moved on to Muktasar where he had a skirmish with the Mughal army. The Mughal army besieged Mukatsar but had to retreat for want of supplies. The Guru continued to live in Malwa, constructed a place to live in at Damdama and gained many converts. From Damdama he addressed a personal letter to Aurangzeb called 'Zafarnama' (letter of victory) condemning persecution and advocating peace.

Bahadur Shah could become Emperor with the help and blessings of the Sikh Guru and Sikh relations with the Mughals improved towards the last years of the Guru's life. [Before he died, the Guru settled his scores with the hill rajas at Bhiana which was later named Dera. Here a handsome building was erected and the Guru Granth Sahib was kept in it.

Many verses in Guru Granth Sahib taught the Sikhs to embrace death without any fear or hesitation for the defence of their faith.

*Maran na manda loka akheesai
Je mar janai aisa koi
Maran maunsa sooria haque hai
Je hoe maran parvanu
Soore se-ee aagai akheean
Dargah pavah saachee maano.*

[SGGS: 579]

[O people of the world, do not call death (for the righteous cause) bad. There is hardly any person who knows how to die (for Dharma) Holy is the death of heroic men where death is divinely approved. Hereafter only they alone are acclaimed as heroes who receive true honour at the divine portal].

Sikhism stood for an egalitarian casteless society believing in the oneness of God, deprecated ascetic withdrawal; while promoting and pursuing worldly callings (like commerce and agriculture) while being aware of the ephemeraeism of life (*maya vich udas*). But the widespread popularity of this movement brought the scourge of oligarchic persecution by the ruling kings, as they began to apprehend an alternative centre of power within an awakened citizenry. Guru Arjun Dev (in 1606) and Guru Teg Bahadur (in 1675) laid down their lives at the altar of suspicion generated by the success of their preaching. Guru Gobind Singh sacrificed four of his sons to quench the political authority's thirst for blood. Earlier Guru Hargobind

had taken up double swords, one symbolizing spiritual power and the second for worldly justice to fight his lone battle on two fronts. Guru Gobind Singh widened and deepened this tradition of martyrdom in the entire community of believers (*khalsa*) instead of keeping it confined to the Guru alone. In his vision all believers who were ready to lay down their lives for the *khalsa* and lead the *khalsa* way of life were Gurus. The defence of the Sikh way of life was no longer the responsibility of a corporal Guru. It was the collective concern of all members of this pure fraternity to be handed down century after century. The challenge to the faith is present everywhere, every moment, at every hour of life and this challenge is to be met by pledging every drop of blood of a Sikh's life however great might be the hurdle.

[Concluded]



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