

The Saga of Sacrifice

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THE MARTYRDOM, of the fifth Guru Arjun Dev Ji, Ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji, Guru Gobind Singh Ji's four sons along with numerous Sikhs, is the glorious chapter of Sikh history. Another great figure of Sikh history is Banda Singh Bahadur, whom Guru Gobind Singh bequeathed the task of carrying out the valiant fight against Mughals. Brutal execution of Banda Singh Bahadur along with his associates in 1716 was followed by loathsome attempts to exterminate the whole community during the 18th century. A tempting price was put on the heads of Sikhs to ensure their extinction. The excesses and cruelties committed by various invaders, including Ahmed Shah Abdali, were most ghastly and blood curdling. Despite terrible suppression and manhunt during this period, Sikhs remained steadfast and true to their religion.

In many ways the saga of historic deeds of Khalsa brought out the best, which ultimately culminated in capture of Lahore in 1876 and paved the way to establish Sikh Kingdom in 1799 by Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839). He was the first Indian in a thousand years to stem the tide of foreign invasions.

During various Gurdwara nonviolent movements and freedom struggle of the country, a large number of Sikhs were killed, hanged, faced all the brutalities and long term imprisonment. The Sikh army has a glorious past and it has proved time and again in various wars including wars with Pakistan. During First and Second World Wars about 83,000 Sikh soldiers laid down their lives.

Sikhs suffered most during the partition of the country but with hard work they soon became India's citizen number one. They have contributed maximum in the agricultural sector.

Sikhs by nature are courageous, hardworking and enterprising. Their short span of history is full of sacrifices and hard work. But for them, the course of India's history would have been different. Volumes could be written on their contribution who constitute less than two percent of India's population. The knowledge about achievements of their ancestors would help in stopping erosion of Sikh faith taking place in the minds of the people. The Sikhs must know their rich heritage so that they can understand the greatness of their community and thus feel proud of belonging to it. This would also help Sikhs feel dignified by appearing as Sikh and living as Sikhs.

Some of the glorious and rich aspects of Sikhism and Sikhs are summarised.

Martyrdom for defence of Basic Human Values

According to Tuzak-i-Jahangiri, Jahangir, the Mughal ruler was looking for an opportunity to put an end to the ever widening influence of Guru Arjun Dev, the fifth Guru, resulting in vast increase of his disciples. Guru was heavily fined and on his refusal to pay fine and forceful conversion to Islam, he was subjected to extreme physical torture by boiling in cauldron and forcing him to sit on a hot iron plate. Guru Arjun Dev was the first martyr of the faith, who laid foundation of love, sacrifice, and

tolerance to give a new direction and purpose to his followers. His supreme sacrifice gave a new impetus to his devotees to carry on his mission with renewed vigour and passion. Guru sacrificed his life for protecting the right of an individual to practice a religion of his own choice.

Aurangzeb, the sixth Mughal king was a fanatic ruler and had started his relentless campaign for forcible conversion of non-muslims to Islam and its impact was felt in Kashmir also. The delegation of Kashmiri Brahmins in 1675 came to Anandpur Sahib, where ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur resided, to seek his help. Guru offered to sacrifice his life to uphold the right of people to follow their belief. Aurangzeb had the Guru arrested and executed in the public at Chandni Chowk, Delhi on 11th November 1675. This was an unique and unparalleled sacrifice in the annals of human history. Guru gave his life saying "I will die for the religious freedom of the Hindus, the freedom to worship the deity through idolatory and images though I myself do not believe in any of these principles." People have embraced death for a cherished ideal. Guru Teg Bahadur is unique, he sacrificed his life for a faith, he had abjured so that there could be freedom of religious worship and freedom from fear. According to Professor Noel King of California, "Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom was the first ever martyrdom for human rights in the world."

A Glorious Tradition-Creation of Khalsa

After martyrdom of his great father, Guru Gobind Singh Ji started infusing martial spirit in Sikhs along with spiritualism. He wrote to Aurangzeb saying "when all means have failed it is right to pick up the sword." For about seven centuries since the invasion of Mahmud Ghazni in the tenth century, many ruthless invaders played havoc with the life of Indians. Recurring defeats have sapped their energies so much that they have resigned themselves to their fate. It was Guru Gobind Singh Ji who infused the fearlessness amongst the Sikhs to fight against all odds.

It was on Baisakhi day in the year 1699 that Guru Gobind Singh established the Khalsa Panth at Anandpur Sahib in Punjab. He administered 'Amrit' to Panj Pyaras (five beloved ones) belonging to different castes and regions of the country with word 'Singh' (means lion) attached to their names. Thus Guru created an army of brave, dauntless, dedicated and adventurous people. He proclaimed "Call me by the name of Guru Gobind Singh only if I succeed in making the sparrow (Indians) fight against the hawks." (mighty foreign rulers)

The Guru and his army fought several battles against the tyrannical rule of the Mughals and he never surrendered and therein lay his victory. He did not fight for any territory or worldly power or against any religion and made nationalism the religion of Sikhs. Apart from numerous Sikhs who lost their lives in the defence of the country under him, his older two sons, Ajit Singh (17 Years) and Jujhar Singh (14 years) died fighting in the battlefield at Chamkaur, while two of his sons Zorawar Singh (9 Years) and Fateh Singh (7 Years) were killed by bricking them alive in the wall at Sirhind, when they refused to succumb to bribes and threats by the enemy.

Guru's famous lines- "*Deh Shiva var mohe ehey-shub karman te kabhoon na taraun*" – (Bless me O Lord that I never deter from the righteous path, with confident courage claiming the victory, when this mortal life reaches its limits, may I die fighting with limitless courage) was the motto for the Sikh which they proved time and again in the battlefield during his life time and subsequent battles during their

chequered history. This was in consonance with the spirit of Guru Gobind Singh who claimed that he would make a sparrow hunt the hawk and every Khalsa would fight with the lakh and a quarter of his enemies (*sava lakh se ek ladayun*). The saga of bravery of Khalsa, at Anandpur Sahib, Chamkaur and Muktsar, is unparalleled in the history of warfare in the world. With his unshorn hair covered with a turban, a flowing beard and a sword in his hand, every Sikh in those days assumed the personality which stood out distinctly even in the crowd of thousands. Thus Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh prevented Hindus from crossing the religious boundaries from which their return was impossible.

As Bulle Shah, the celebrated Sufi Muslim saint, a contemporary of Guru Gobind Singh Ji pays glowing tribute to Guru and has said "*Na Kahun abh kee na kahun tab kee, agar na hote Guru Gobind Singh, to Sunnat hoti sabkee.*" (I neither say of the past, not of the future, but I talk of the time of Guru Gobind Singh, and declare openly that, but for him, all the Indians would have been circumcised and converted to Islam). Giving a call to nation, Swami Vivekananda said "then and then alone you are a Hindu when you will be ready to bear everything for them like the great Guru Gobind Singh. After having shed his own blood for the defence of Hindu religion, after having seen his children killed in the battlefield-Ay this example of great Guru left even by those for whose sake he was shedding his blood and blood of his own nearest and dearest-he the wounded lion, retired from the field calmly to die in the south, but not a word of curse escaped his lips against those who had un-gratefully forsaken him. Such an ideal ought to be before us always."

In 1708, Guru Gobind Singh left this world at the age of forty two, with a life time of heroic events which changed the history of India. Guru Gobind Singh sealed the line of personal Gurus and passed on the succession to the Holy Guru Granth Sahib. Guru's last commandment to his Sikhs was "The panth was promulgated by the command of Eternal Lord. All Sikhs are ordained to hold the Holy Granth to be their Guru. Believe Guru Granth Sahib to be the 'person visible' of the Gurus. They who would seek to meet the Supreme Lord shall discover Him in the Holy word contained therein".

Such a man has perhaps, never walked on the surface of earth so far, He laid at the altar of the Supreme not only himself but whosoever called his him very own. He gave a new meaning to life by popularizing death for a cause. In 1952, the world famous historian Arnold Toynbee said in his 'History of the World' "that the forerunner of the communist principle was the Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh and community party of Lenin cannot claim as the first in the ideology". He also predicted that "on Doomsday only Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh will survive".

Universal Message of Guru Granth Sahib

The first compilation of Guru Granth Sahib was compiled and edited by Guru Arjun Dev Ji in 1604 and it included the Gurbani of the five Gurus and hymns composed by thirty bhagats (including twenty five saints belonging to different castes and creeds of Hindus and five Muslims bhagats). The final form of Guru Granth Sahib was prepared by Guru Gobind Singh at Damdama Sahib in 1706 and the Gurbani compiled by ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji was included in this final version (Total hymns 5894 and pages 1430). Before his demise, Guru Gobind Singh, on 3rd Oct. 1708, conferred the Guru-ship to Guru Granth Sahib and emphatically ordered

“Guru Granth Ji maniyo pargat Guran Ki Deh” (Reckon Guru Granth Sahib as the visible living incarnation of Gurus). Its virtuous hymns are believed to be God’s own commands conveyed by Lord’s order through the Gurus and saints. No other scripture of any religion of the world contains any kind of writings of holy men belonging to a faith, caste or creed other than that of its own. The Gurbani appearing in Guru Granth Sahib is therefore a boon for the entire humanity as its teachings and lessons are universally true morally and spiritually. Oneness of God, oneness of mankind and oneness of religions are the basic themes of Guru Granth Sahib. Its most valuable gift, to human beings, is the guidance to lead a saintly life remaining a house holder. How to get rid of ego, hatred, enmity, worries, stress, tension, depression and sinful thoughts? Answers to these problems are proclaimed in Guru Granth Sahib. It is a matchless treasure of wisdom, knowledge and practical way of life in the most unfavourable circumstances. Rev. H.L. Bradshaw of USA stated, ‘Sikhism is a Universal World Faith, with a message for all men. This is amply illustrated in the writings of the Gurus. Sikhs must cease to think of their faith as just another good religion and must begin to think in terms of Sikh being the religion of this New Age’.

Arnold Toynbee the world famous historian writes: “Mankind’s religious future may be obscure, yet one thing can be foreseen. The living higher religions are going to influence each other more than ever before, in the days of increasing communications between all parts of the world and branches of human race. In this coming religious debate, the Sikh religion and its scripture, the Guru Granth, will have something special of value to say to the rest of the world.”

Thus the message of Guru Granth Sahib is universal and practical. The opinion of non Sikh world scholars should help Sikhs to develop greater devotion to their faith and should realize the need and importance of educating the youth about it.

Martyrdom of Banda Singh Bahadur

In 1708 Guru Gobind Singh deputed Banda Singh Bahadur, under the leadership of five Sikhs, to end state terrorism in Punjab. In a short time he unfurled the Sikh flag at Sirhind within Bow-shot of Mughal capital Delhi and within six years virtually destroyed the Mughal hegemony in Punjab. He resorted to guerilla warfare and wrote many new chapters in the saga of Sikh rise to power. In 1716 he was tricked and captured along with 700 Sikhs and taken to Delhi. All efforts by the emperor to convert Banda Singh Bahadur or any of his men to Islam failed. Ultimately they were tortured savagely before being put to death. Banda Singh’s eyes were gouged, his limbs severed, his skin removed and then he was killed and thus became a martyr. The blood – curdling murders did not demoralize the Sikhs but made them more fearless and more determined for their faith rather than relinquish it.

A Muslim historian, Khafi Khan, who also observed the massacre, noted that even a boy still in his teens, who was captured along with other Sikhs, refused to accept pardon by disclaiming his faith, but offered his head to the sword. His mother appealed to the emperor that his son should be set free because he was not a Sikh. The boy replied that his mother was a liar and claimed that he was indeed a Sikh and he told the executioner “I devote my heart and soul to my Gurus. Let me join my companions”. The boy thus joined his companions and, writes Khafi Khan, “was enrolled among the truest martyrs produced by the Sikh religion”.

Dark Age of Repression

The first half of the eighteenth century was very harsh for the Sikhs. They made unparalleled sacrifices during this period. They were homeless and while living as Guerillas, demonstrated heroic acts of courage at every possible instance. Handsome cash awards were given for killing a Sikh or getting him caught. The Sikhs were subjected to worst type of persecution and drove them to abandon their houses and escape to jungles of Punjab, mountain of Sivalik hills and deserts of Rajputana. The Sikhs, who were arrested alive, were taken to Lahore in chains. They were starved, tortured and finally butchered in the horse market at a place later named Saheed Ganj. The flesh of infants, cut to pieces, bit by bit was strung together like garlands and put around the necks of their mothers before putting them to the sword.

The excesses and cruelties committed by Yahya Khan (1746-48), Mir Mannu (1748-53), and Ahmed Shah Abdali (1746-1768) were most ghastly and blood curdling. In the blood carnages of June 1746 and Feb. 1762, generally referred to as "chhota ghalughara" and 'wada ghalu-ghara' the number of Sikhs mercilessly massacred is estimated to be 10,000 and 30,000 respectively. These massacres were the heaviest blows that Sikhs have to withstand in their history. In addition Ahmed Shah blew up the Harmandir Sahib.

The Sikhs recouped their strength again within months and fulfilled their statement "The more we are cut, the more we grow" and in Oct. 1762 on Diwali day, they pushed Abdali out of Amritsar.

Some of the greatest martyrs during the period were Bhai Mani Singh, who in 1738, was tortured and hacked to pieces joint by joint, Baba Deep Singh (who vowed to either liberate the city of Amritsar and rebuilt the temple or die in service of Guru) gave up his life for Sikh principles and became a martyr in 1756 and Bhai Taru Singh, who was accused of providing ration to Sikhs, was executed in 1745 by removing his skull as he refused to get his hair cut.

Protecting the Innocent from invaders

Nadir Shah of Persia was a terror for Delhi rulers. In 1739 he murdered more than 100,000 people in Delhi and carried off a lot of gold and valuables along with hundreds of elephants, horses and thousands of young women. While he was crossing the river Chenab in Punjab, Sikhs suddenly attacked the caravan, freed many of the women and recovered part of the treasure. The women were escorted back to Delhi by Sikhs. It was a heroic act which no one else dared of fighting against the might of Nadir Shah. When Nadir Shah asked Zakaria Khan (governor of Lahore) "who these barbarians were and where they lived"? Zakaria Khan replied "they were followers of Guru Nanak and live on saddles of their horses".

Ahmed Shah Abdali, the ruler of Afghanistan invaded India nine times. During most of these invasions Sikhs attacked his returning convoys, freed thousands of Hindu men and women prisoners and escorted them to their homes. When Abdali invaded India for the seventh time in Dec. 1764, there were only thirty Sikhs at Amritsar who fought a fierce battle to the last man to defend Akal Takhat.

In spite of all these sufferings, the spirit of Sikhs remained high and soon after Abdali left for Afghanistan, the Sikhs were Lords of the state again and Khalsa occupied Lahore.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh

Reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1798-1838) stands out as the Mount Everest of the Himalaya Range. Sikhs under Ranjit Singh in 1798 brought an end to foreign invasions. He was the first Indian in a thousand years to stem the tide of invasion which came through passes in Hindu Kush – Khyber Pass from time immemorial from Mongols, Greeks, Ghaznis, Ghouris, Tughalaks, Lodhis and Mughals.

The four decades of kingdom under Ranjit Singh symbolized the crowning of Sikh efforts to seize power. It was for the first time after the defeat of Anangpal by Mahmud Ghazni in 1001 than an indigenous rule was established in the province. Ranjit Singh put the Punjab on the map of the world and stopped the tide of invasions. This was the best gift he gave to the nation which finally allowed the rest of India to breathe in peace.

Ranjit Singh was declared Maharaja in April 12, 1801. He eventually expanded his rule as far as Sulej in east, Jammu and Kashmir including Ladakh in north and Multan province in south. His General Hari Singh Nalwa, who manned the Khyber Pass for years, became a household name in Afghanistan. In 1819 Sikhs took over Kashmir and Sikh rule in Kashmir lasted for 27 years (1819-1846). By 1834 Ladakh including Zaskar and Baltistan became part of Ranjit Singh's kingdom on account of six amazing military campaigns undertaken by his general Zorawar Singh. Ranjit Singh brought back to India, the world famous Kohinoor diamond, which was looted by Nadir Shah earlier.

Though a devout Sikh, he established a secular administration. His army was fully represented by all the three communities. His generosity and broad mindedness is widely acknowledged by historians.

Saga of Saragarhi

The 12th of September every year marks the anniversary of Saragarhi, one of the most moving episodes in the annals of our military history. There are many tales of Sikh heroism in the service of the British, but none has stirred the imagination as much as the stand of a small band of 22 Sikh sepoy (including a signaller) against a 'Lashkar' of over 10,000 Pathan tribesmen at Saragarhi a post in Waziristan North – West province. The Colonel's order was "fight to the last". These brave men of 36 Sikh Regiment under inspiring leadership of Havaldar Ishar Singh resolved to defend their Saragarhi post in the best traditions of their race and refused safe passage offered by the enemy. The brave little band of Sikhs fought and all save one were dead. Only the brave son of India, Gurmukh Singh, the signaller was still alive and he flashed the message on heliograph signal "Brothers, we have shown how we have fulfilled the soldiers oath. We have served the True Guru and now we take leave of you for ever". Gurmukh Singh, cool and collected in this moment of imminent danger, face to face with certain death, this gallant soldier, with utter dedication to his duty, took his rifle and after all had gone never to return, continued to defend and shot twenty of the enemy. The enemy set the place on fire and bodies of twenty two gallant Sikhs dead or dying were consumed in flames, yes their bodies but not their souls.

The episode, when narrated in the British Parliament, drew from the members a standing ovation in the memory of Saragarhi. All the valiant martyrs of this epic battle were awarded Indian Order of Merit posthumously (Equivalent to Paramvir Chakra). Never before, or since, has a body of troops, that is, all of them won gallantry awards in a single action. It is indeed a singularly unique action in the annals of military history.

Many historians have clubbed Saragarhi action as one of the five most heroic battles in all military history. It is believed that story of this unique battle is taught in French schools, and is one of the eight stories of collective bravery published by UNESCO. The defenders of Saragarhi were simple folks, but men of honour, faith and principles. The easier way out would have been to surrender, but spirit of Sikhs has always made them do what Guru Gobind Singh said "Grant me this boon, O Lord when the end of life is near, I may die fighting in the battlefield for the sake of righteousness".

