

Martyrdom – Substructure of Sikh Identity

SURJIT SINGH GANDHI, PES (RETD.)*

* *Currently Hony. Secretary Akal College for Women, 258 Guru Nanak Pura, Sangrur 148 001, Punjab*

MARTYRDOM HAS BEEN DERIVED from the Greek word: martyr; meaning witness. In its implied sense it signifies one who, by his supreme sacrifice for his faith, bears witness to its truth, and to his own passionate adherence to it. He or she must offer his/her life voluntarily and altruistically. To use the expression of Webster a martyr must follow “ethics of absolute ends, which involves pursuit of goals with little attention to the cost. Long before the birth of Christ, the Greek writers’ mind had been deeply influenced by the suffering of the Jewish people at the hands of tyrannical Egyptians, Babylonians and such others and they impassionedly made use of the word ‘MARTYR’ to denote their sacrifice. Christianity provoked in the early centuries a long series of persecutions resulting in the martyrdom of thousands in Rome and other parts of the Roman Empire. Excruciating torture and death continued for hundred of years to be the fate of those who stood by the faith of Jesus Christ, till it became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and later, of the Eastern (Byzantine) Empire. In the course of its long history, Christianity has seen a long string of martyrs, who resisted, what they considered to be the wrongs of the powerful establishment, the Papacy, which for several centuries, was a super State, with the zeal to suppress all non-conformity and revolt. These persecutions became particularly frequent from the sixteenth Century onwards, as the challenge to the power and privileges of Papacy grew in the protest movements in the various countries of Western Europe. In earlier centuries, those who demanded the removal of injustice in society, like the Loccords in England or semi legendry followers of Kava, were persecuted and victimized. The Papacy came down with a heavy hand also on new thought in sciences – Galileo and Bruno providing the examples, though the former escaped only by tactfully compromising with the persecutor. The brutal suppression of the Protestants in the Netherlands, France and England – the last in the reign of Bloody Mary, and the long history of inquisition as the instrument of suppression of dissent provide capital examples of determined persecution, and no less determined resistance to it by those whose spirit and temper was essentially that of martyrs. The horrible persecutions by the puritans, themselves victims of persecutions, in the seventeenth century in the American Colonies of Quaker enacted a similar drama on the periphery of the Christian world. The Christians of all denominations hold that the martyrs are “athletes of God contending for heavenly prize”. A martyr’s passion and death are considered as analogous to then passion and death of Christ, who has always been regarded as the archetype of the martyr, particularly because of the continuing influence of the crucification over the millennia and in the line countless millions.

Islam, like Christianity, has a large number of martyrs. The Arabic word for martyr “in Muslim theology is Shahid. (pl. Shuhada) the literal meaning of which is “present as a witness”. It implies all that is understood by the Greek martyr, and the English martyr, but it is also a much more comprehensive term, for, according to Mohammedan law, not only those who die in witness of or in defence of the faith, are martyrs but all those who die such deaths as are calculated to excite the compassion

and pity of their fellow men. The word occurs in the Quran, Surah iv, 71: "Who obeys God and the apostle, these are with those with whom God has been well pleased – with prophets (*Nabi Yin*) and confessors (*Siddiqin*), and martyrs (*Shuhada*) and the righteous (*Sualihin*): as – fair company are they".

A perfect martyr, or Shahid-ul-Kamil is one who has either been slain in a religious war, or who has been killed unjustly, but the schools of divinity are not agreed as to whether it is necessary or not that such persons should be in state of ceremonial purity at the time of their death, to entitle them to such a high rank.

A special blessing is promised to those who die in "jihad" or *religious war* (see *Holy Quran, Surah iii 163*) "Count not those who are killed in the way of God, as dead, but living with their Lord". And according to Muslim law, all persons who have died in defence of the faith, or have been slain unjustly are entitled to Muslim burial without the usual ablution or any change of clothes, such as are necessary in the case of ordinary persons, the rank of martyrdom being such as to render the corpse legally and religiously pure.

But in addition to these two classes of persons, namely those who are slain in religious war and those who have been killed unjustly, the rank of Shahid is given, in a figurative sense, to any person who dies in such a manner as to excite the sympathy and pity of mankind such as by sudden death, or from some malignant disease, or in child-birth or in the requirement of knowledge or a stranger in a foreign country, or dying on Thursday night. These persons are entitled to the rank of martyr, but not to the honour of being buried without legal washing and purifications.

One of the early applications of the term Shahid is to Iman Hussain, grandson of the prophet, who fell on the battle-field of Karbala along with seventy-two members from his family and his tribe Banu Hushim and from other tribes supporting his cause. This cause the Islamic world in general has regarded as just, and Imam Hussain's opponents have been branded as tyrants and aggressors. Thus the earliest application of the term "Shahid" is to those who fell fighting on the prophets side in the battle of Bad about which Allah says in the Koran that not the prophet but Allah shot the arrows that brought the victory. To fix further the connotation of the term *Hadis*, saying attributed to the prophet: Manatai Mata Babai Muhammad (in) Al-e-Muhammad (in) Mata Shahid, (one who had died for love of Muhammad and for love of the progeny of Muhammad has died a Martyr).

In the Indian context, the term "Shahid" came to be applied to those soldiers and others who fell fighting against the Hindus. Strange stories were set afloat regarding the miraculous powers of these "Shahids". It was believed that always at midnight hour, the Shahid would come out of his graves in full panoply and would harm anyone who stood in the way. He was reported to overturn cot in which an unbeliever might be sleeping and would wreak vengeance for any disrespect shown to his tomb.

While the concept of martyrdom and the term; "martyr" continued to be in the integral part of Christian and Muslim religious traditions, it did not seem to have any impact on the Indian mind as a whole.

Turning to the dictionaries of Sanskrit where such a term may be expected to figure, all that one finds are a few coinages to correspond with the English word "martyr". Apte's Students English Sanskrit dictionary has entered against: martyr:

one or two phrases-parallels, such a Deh-tyagin (sacrificer or forsaker of one's life), Deh-nyasa (surrender of body). So far this important concept is concerned, all that we find are a few, perhaps inadequate coinages which hardly reflect the great act, redolent of spiritual struggle and sacrifice that is implied in martyrdom.

Such absence of an adequate term, however, should not be supposed to imply that the spiritual attitude accompanying martyrdom was unknown to the people of India in ancient times. On the other hand, to meet the challenge posed by tyranny and evil, voluntary sufferings undertaken for self-purification or for arousing the conscience was a common phenomenon. There are instances of Brahmins, rishis and other holy persons, deflecting a tyrant from his evil designs through the resolve of self-immolation. Besides, any infringement of the code of Dharma by a tyrant would also draw to his portal, some persons held holy, who would give up food and resolve fast unto death unless the wrong was righted. It would be perfectly legitimate to list such acts as form of martyrdom, for in all these the elements at martyrdom are present, except the very last one of dying at the tyrants hands.

Dying for one's faith and presumably becoming a martyr has, however, scriptural sanction in the Gita. In the Chapter of Karm Yoga (the Yoga of action) in the context of the surrender unto God, Lord Krishna says:

“One's own dharma, though imperfect, is better than the dharma of another well-discharged;
Better death in one's own dharma
The dharma of another is full of fear.”

What is implied in the sacred Gita texts is this that Arjuna being a Kshatriya must not shun the battle. But it has also a wider implication and inculcates heroic martyrdom in adhering to the duty of sacrifice of life for one's faith. This being so, it cannot be denied that the fact of martyrdom existed. Only it was not considered that it could be very potent weapon of bringing about the ruin of the tyrants as also of the disintegrating forces. Triumph of right over wrong has been anticipated and thought to be inexorable law but such a triumph, instead of fearless sacrifice of life offered by a noble person, was viewed more directly to come through divine intervention in the form of destruction of tyrants and evil-doers. One instance, among others, of such triumph is the steadfast faith of the child-saint Prahlada, who was threatened with death by his demon-atheist (Daitya – obviously no – Aryan) father, was, however, succoured by the Lord in the form of the Lionman (Narsimha) incarnation. The story is a household word and part of the Indian people. Prahlada had all the characteristics in respect of his holy resolve, to die for his devotion, of the saint martyr only through divine intervention, he is spared the last agony and sacrifice of life.

Sikhism, borrowed the terms martyr from Islam, as it had done in cases of such terms as *Allah*, *Khuda*, *Hukam*, *Khasim*, *Deg Tegh*. One of the major reasons of doing this was the in-depth tendency of Sikhism, from its very inception to chalk out a line of orientation for itself away from Brahmanical orthodoxy and other forms of expression of the religious ideas current among sects which were rooted in Hinduism, howsoever far they might in course of time have strayed from its central path and adopted an electric attitude towards Islam, thereby giving occasion to the

urges to adopt such Muslim concepts and terms entered into the popular vocabulary of the people.

Yet the concept of Sikhism has its own uniqueness, distinctiveness, novelty and freshness, despite the fact that in a number of ways, it bears similarity with certain facts of Islamic or Christian concepts. As for instance, martyr in semitic tradition displays passionate adherence to the cause, their volunterness and altruisms like their counterparts in Sikhism. Various strands of thoughts and impulses entered into its evolution and formation. The one which is the foremost is the polemics of the progress of the society. There is evil and there is suffering. Man has constantly to struggle to defeat this evil. The man of God must not shirk from taking on himself suffering if necessary. In this struggle, God will, of course, be on the side of the righteous and the holy. His purposes must prevail but whereas the traditional Indian mythology, the Rakhshsas symbolising the evil are destroyed by miraculous intervention of the deity or the Avtar whose bold stroke smites the head of demon just when he is about to perpetuate the most heinous outrage; in the Sikh religious thought the ultimate triumph of Good is assured after long travail, suffering and self-sacrifice on the part of the good and the holy.

To the man of God, joy and sorrow are alike and he never loses equitableness in either situation. The experience of suffering is one of the constantly recurring themes of meditation of the Guru.

Guru Nanak says:

“The soul hungers after the True name
By such hunger are all sorrows consumed.”

(Asa———page 9)

In another human by the fourth Guru it is said;

“If Thou sendst me hunger O Lord,
I, feel still fitted, and in suffering too find joy”.

The word of Guru Arjun, who was subjected to unbearable torture by the fiendishly sadistic minions of Jehangir is a constant anticipation of suffering to be undergone in God’s cause. Yet his word is also one constant paeon of joy in God and in submission to His will. What is at the basis of such expression of bliss is not the hope of a miraculous annulment of suffering but the transmutation of inevitable suffering through resignation and submission into the experience of bliss. Below are a few excerpts from the hymns of Guru Arjun which illustrate the aforesaid theme;

“One who is in the extreme of difficulties,
Without succour and support from anyone.
And is beserk by implacable foes and deserted even by kith and kin.

Is bereft of all shelter and hope of finding refuge,
If such a one contemplates the supreme Lord, not a breath
Of hot air shall touch him.”

Champions of this type of approach are called mighty and when they have to offer sacrifice of their physical frames, they are called martyrs. Guru Arjun Dev was obviously first martyr to be followed by Guru Tegh Bahadur and innumerable others. Such people bear with unruffled peace in human torture at the hands of their

persecutors. Bhai Gurdas, a very close associate of Guru Arjun, vouchsafes in the following verses that the Guru while undergoing martyrdom was as perfectly placid as snow-clad tops of mountains.

“As the fish are one with the waves of the river,
So was the Guru immersed in the River that is Lord.

As the moth merges itself at sight into the flame
So was the Guru’s light merged with the Divine light.

In the hour of intense suffering, he was aware of nothing except the Divine Lord
Like the deer who bears no sound but the beat of the hunters drum.

Like the bee who is wrapped inside the lotus he passed the
night of his life in a casket of joy.

Never did he forget to utter the Lords name even as the Chatrik
never fails to utter its cry.

To the man of God, joy is the fruit of devotion and meditation with equanimity in holy company.

May I be a sacrifice unto the Guru Arjun”. (Var—24)

The theme of resignation lies at the core of the concept of Sikh martyrdom. These should not be considered in terms of retreat for the normal concerns of existence but the sacrifice of inordinate desire, and freedom from the five forms of evil enumerated by the traditional ethical philosophy implies supreme sacrifice for life to be better on this earth. In this respect the concept is existential and certainly not other-worldly. This being so the Sikh Shaheeds are never given any assurance of some sort of Heaven or some other things as Christian as well as Muslim traditions of martyrdom would promise.

The ideal of a crusader also went a long way to shape the lineaments of the concept of martyrdom.

There is repetition of such ideas in the composition of the Gurus who preceded Guru Gobind Singh, and of some of the saints whose hymns are included in the Holy Granth. Guru Nanak says:

“Shouldst thou cherish the desire to participate in the play of true love, place thy head on the palm of thy hand;

Then alone mayst thou enter this quarter;

Shouldst thou put thy foot forward on this path, hesitate not to give up thy head.”

The saintly Kabir in words which continue to this day to inspire the Sikhs with the zeal and fervour of holy and patriotic war, has made what sounds like a call of a crusader——crusader in favour of the cause of the humble, the poor and the needy.

“The sky – resounding kettle-drum (of spiritual inspiration) is struck, and the heart is pierced with the true passion (for righteousness) the hero is engaged in battle, now is the time to fight unto the last.

He alone is the hero who fights to defend the humble and helpless who even though hacked limb by limb, will not flee the field.”

(Page 1105 of Guru Granth Sahib)

The pervasive theme of heroic endeavour and crusading zeal has been lent poignancy, crispness and vigour, chiseled clarity and forceful diction by Guru Gobind Singh. He brings forth very clearly the crusading character of God. He says:

“He cherishes the humble, protects the righteous and destroys the evil-doers” (Akal Ustat).

Millions of demons such as Sumbha, Nisumbha has, He destroyed in an instant;

Dhumar-Lohana, Chanda, Munda and Mahikhasur has He defeated in a moment;

Demons like Chmara, Rana, Chichura, Rakti Chana has he slaughtered at a stroke;

And he casts his own role as a crusader and wishes His followers to emulate Him”.

At the end of the rendering of the epic of Krishna in which contrary to the usual presentation of this God (Lord Krishna) as enmeshed in dalliance in the ideallic surroundings of Braj, the ideal heroic character is thus enunciated in verse marked for sublimity and its flow.

“Praised be he whose tongue is ever uttering the name of the Lord, and who is constantly contemplating holy war; this body shall one day turn to dust, but sailing in the ship of noble endeavour, his fame shall carry him across the ocean of this world;

Abiding in the house of spiritual poise, he shall make his wisdom shine forth like a lamp, and grasping firmly the broom of divine wisdom, he shall sweep away the filth of cowardice”.

Towards the close of the stirring epic narrative of the war of Durga in Chandi Chritar, the crusading character is defined in words which inspire undying idealism;

“Grant me, this boon, O Lord, May I never turn away from righteous action,

I never know fear as I engage in battle with the foe and resolve fairly to win.

May I ever instruct myself in the passion to utter thy praises’ And at the last when the hour of destiny arrives, may it be granted to me to lay down my life fighting on the field of battle to the last drop of blood”.

A Sikh martyr, therefore, is supposed to be a crusader for the cause and he shall not acquiesce in death like a coward or a passivist rather he would court it and wed it as a last resort exhausting all other noble means to avoid it and that too with this consciousness that to suffer death is also a means to achieve the goal. Thus martyrdom in Sikhism is not self-extinction, it is, on the other hand, a sort of affirmation in the faith the martyr holds and a positive projection of the urge of the martyr to uphold virtue and to resist evil.

Martyrdom became a tradition and an attitude in the eighteenth century. It got anchored in the Sikh psyche as an instinct, indeed as a real passion. It appears that it was not derived from any other instinct, but is a principal sui generis, that is, a specific and necessary form of structural power.

This being so, it began to be represented by symbols wherein particular is represented by the general, not as a dream, not as a shadow, but as a living, and momentary revelation of the inscrutable. It also became the lineaments of myth which according to Rank, Andolf Stemer is the collective dream of the people. Many stories, some real and some mythical, began to set afloat. Martyrs began to be named "the favoured armies of the Guru who continued to wage war against all types of evil – political, moral or social – even after their apparent deaths. It began to be believed that in the battlefield, the martyr, participated in the forms invisible to the people, but very effectively. They were given the status as great as that of a saint whose words could become the immutable law of God. This being so, the martyrs became the important part of the text of the standard prayer as something to be recalled, admired and worshipped. This fact is amply borne out by the following excerpts from the text of the Sikh prayer, Ardas:

Those who, for their religion allowed themselves to be cut up limb by limb, had their scalps scraped off, were broken on the wheel, were sawn or flayed alive, think of their sweet resignation and call on God".

"Those who, to purge the temples of long-standing evils, suffered themselves to be ruthlessly beaten or imprisoned, to be shot, cut up, or burnt alive with kerosene oil but did not make any resistance or utter even a sigh of complaint; think of their faith and call on God".

(Wonderful God)

Just a casual perusal of the above quoted excerpts of the standard prayer would only confirm the statement made earlier that the phenomenon of martyrdom and the term 'Shahid' are an integral part of the Sikh tradition. So great was the veneration of the Sikh martyrs and their impact on the Sikh mind that one of their twelve Misls or federating clans came to be known as Misl Shaheedan (the clan of martyrs). The Misl was so named because of the celebrated martyr Baba Deep Singh Shaheed who fell in 1760 defending the holy Harimandir at Amritsar. As a matter of fact, the term 'Shahid' became in a special way a part of the Sikh vocabulary to designate fidelity to their faith in a manner which no other non-Muslim group in India or elsewhere had adopted. Martyrdom in course of time became a distinguishing mark of Sikh Identity.

Prior to the period in the eighteenth century, the term must already have gained wide currency among the Sikhs, but it was applied very restrictedly in cases of Guru Arjun Dev, Guru Tegh Bahadur, four sons of Guru Gobind Singh and Guru Gobind Singh. Guru Arjun Dev laid down his life but did not swerve his stand. Guru Tegh Bahadur gave sacrifice of his life for upholding the right of the people in general for freedom of conscience and worship. The four sons of the Guru courted martyrdom is resistance to the unjust efforts of the Government to impose the religion of the state on them. To stand witness of the truth of Guru Nanak's dispensation and to uphold the right of the people to be spiritually autonomous and to be deliant of the unjust

practices became the dominant themes for which martyrdom was resorted in the Gurus times.

After the death of Guru Gobind Singh and more particularly after the execution of Banda Bahadur the Mughal authorities took stern steps to destroy the Sikhs, root and branch, as they had been convinced that Sikh ideology was bound to clash with their interests. Zakariya Khan's pronounced schedule of rewards to all those who would help the Government in identifying the Sikhs, in furnishing information regarding their whereabouts or actually killing them, is a case which brings into sharp focus the attitude of the authorities vis-à-vis Sikhs. The persecution of the Sikhs during Yahiya Khan, Shah Nawaj Khan and Mir Mannu was equally fierce rather fiercer, Lakhpat Rai, the Minister of Yahiya Khan wreaked vengeance for the slaying of his brother in a fracas between a band of Sikh horsemen and the state constabulary.

The Sikh persecution at the hands of Mir Mannu was marked for its ferocity, bitterness, persistence and concentration. He sent roving columns to every nook and corner of his territory to destroy the Sikhs. His jezailis combed the villages for the Sikhs. The able – bodied were killed fighting; the non-combatants including women and children were brought in chains to Lahore and decapitated at the horse-market. Ahmad Shah Abdali also did "his" worst to snuff out the Khalsa only in a single swoop, and the Sikhs numbering over 12000 were put to sword.

In such an atmosphere, the Sikhs did not lose heart. Firm in their faith like a rock, they resisted the tyranny of the Government and laid down their lives for defence of their faith and those human values which under the despotic rule of the later Mughals were being trampled under foot.

Besides all such persons who met their end while defending their faith to be called "Shahid" the term was applied even to those who were killed in their struggle for assertion and sovereignty. As we move towards the close of the eighteenth century and after, the terms "Shahid" began to be used on a wider scale and in a rough manner, it overstepped its earlier religious association to cover all who made the supreme sacrifice in pursuit of some socially approved ideal. These days, as social consciousness has grown and the tradition of struggle against entrenched authority and privilege had taken deeper and deeper roots, any kind of sacrifice, voluntary or involuntary, had indiscriminately been described as Shahidi martyrdom.

All the same, the title of "martyr" in Sikhism could not be applied to those who dies in such a manner as to excite the sympathy and pity of mankind such as by sudden death or from some malignant disease, or in child-birth or in the acquirement of knowledge or a stranger in a foreign country, or dying on Thursday night as ceremonial books on Islam would suggest us.

Etymologically, martyrdom began to be treated as a concept or a systematic structure in the fourth century B.C. when cultural or religious identities began to be considered as independent entities and the evil and goodness were assumed as mutually oppositional poles. The Sikh martyr is a devoted servant of God. He/She is promised nothing except bliss springing from his/her feeling of oneness with God. In Islamic tradition he/she after death is promised eternal life, power to forgive sins of others, exemption from the last judgement and the intercessory ability of the souls of the martyrs. In the case of Sikh martyrs no such things are awarded.

