

Martyrdom in Sikhism

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INTRODUCTION

Martyrdom in Sikhism is a fundamental concept and represents an important institution of the faith. In the Sikh form the institution is a complete departure from the Indian tradition, and for that matter radically distinguishes the whole-life character of Sikhism from the earlier dichotomous or pacifist Indian religious traditions. It is significant that the concept was emphatically laid down by Guru Nanak and the history of the Guru period as well as the subsequent history of the Sikhs is an open express, in thought and deed, of this basic doctrine.

THE GOAL AND CONCEPT OF MARTYRDOM

In Sikhism, Guru Nanak in the very beginning of his famous hymn 'Japu Ji', while rejecting the paths of ascetic one point meditation or withdrawal, emphatically prescribes carrying out or living according to the Will of God as the goal of man. "How to become the abode of Truth and how to demolish the wall of illusion or falsehood?", he asks, and then proceeds to answer. "Through following His will". He then

defines the Will to be the ‘Ocean of Virtues’ (gunigahira) or Altruistic. The Gurus’ basic perception of this Will is that it is Loving or Love.

It is in this context that Guru Nanak proclaims that life is ‘a game of love’, and gives a call to humanity to follow this path. He says: “Shouldst thou seek to engage in the game of Love, step into my street with thy head placed on thy palm: While stepping on to this street, ungrudgingly sacrifice your head” (GGS p 1412). Repeated emphasis is laid on this goal of following the Will of God, Who is directing the universe, in Guru Granth Sahib:

“Through perception of His will is the Supreme State attained”. (p. 292)

“With the perception of his Will alone is the Essence realized”. (p. 1289)

“By perceiving the Lord’s Will is Truth attained”. (p. 1244)”

“By His Will was the world created as a place for righteous living”. (p. 785)

“Profoundly wondrous is the Divine Will. Whoever has its perception, has awareness of the true praxis of life”. (p. 940)

It should be clear that in Sikhism the goal is not to attain personal salvation or Moksha or ‘eternal bliss’. It is instead the perception or recognition of His Will and working in line with its direction. This state is in fact synonymous with God-realization.

The concept of martyrdom was laid down by Guru Nanak. In fact, his was an open challenge and a call. His hymn calling life ‘a game of love’ is of profoundest significance in Sikh thought and theology. It has five clear facets. It expresses in clear words the Guru’s spiritual experience of God. While he repeatedly calls Him unknowable, his own experience, he states, is that He is All Love. Second, He is Benevolent and Gracious towards man and the world. Third, since He expresses His Love in the world, the same, by implication, becomes real and meaningful. Further, the Guru by giving this call clearly proclaims both the goal and the methodology of religious life in Sikhism. The goal is to live a life of love which is in line with His expression of Love and Grace in the world. Simultaneously, the methodology of whole-life activity and commitment for the goal is emphasized. The significant fact is that in the entire Guru Granth Sahib it is these principles of the Sikh way of life that are repeatedly emphasized. There are innumerable hymns endorsing one or the other of the above principles of Sikh theology. It is this couplet of Guru Nanak that forms the base of martyrdom in Sikhism. For, the commitment desired is total, and once on that Path the seeker has to have no wavering in laying down his life for the cause. In his hymn Guru Nanak has defined and stressed that

the institution of martyrdom is an essential ingredient of the Path he was laying down for man.

UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT

As explained above, this is exactly the meaning that the subsequent Gurus themselves have conveyed about Guru Nanak's thesis and thought. It is on record that one Bhai Manjh who as a Sakhi Sarvaria, a system which enjoins only ritualistic living, came to the Fifth Master, Guru Arjun, and sought his advice as to whether or not he should become a Sikh of the Guru. The latter gave a very clear answer. He advised him to continue with his old system and remain a Sakhi Sarvaria until he was ready for the total commitment demanded in the Guru's system. He explained that to be a Sikh is to tread an extremely difficult path, and one has not only to risk his wealth and property, but the commitment requires even the laying down of one's life. Thus, the institution of martyrdom is in-built in the Sikh way of life, proclaimed in the call of Guru Nanak. We have quoted Guru Arjun's amplification of the hymn, it should be understood that our interpretation is in any way not central to the Sikh way of life. Again it is important to understand that the same test was applied by the Tenth Master, Guru Gobind Singh, when he finally initiated the system for the selection of

the Five Piaras and the creation of the Khalsa through the institution of Amrit on Baisakhi Day, 1699 A.D. At that time too, the call he gave was for total commitment and the willingness to lay down one's life for the cause. The important fact is the unity of meaning and method of the system as laid down by Guru Nanak, as understood and explained by the Fifth Master, and as finally formalized by the Tenth Master for the creation of the Khalsa. No ambiguity had been left as to the requirement of the commitment and the quantum of sacrifice demanded from the Sikh or the Khalsa way of life. The above explanation of the Sikh path by three Gurus dispels the naive notion held in some quarters that the first five Gurus were only pacifist or introvertive in their outlook and method, and that they did not recommend militancy or martyrdom.

INDIAN TRADITION OF SACRIFICE AND SIKH CONCEPT OF MARTYRDOM

Because of the practice of offering sacrifices, including human sacrifices, in some old cults, martyrdom has sometimes been traced to that institution. This requires clarification. True, not only in primitive religions, but also in religions like Judaism and some Hindu, Devi and Nath cults the method of sacrifice of animals stands accepted. In

Judaism sacrifice of animals is a part of the Torah. Similarly, in Devi cults sacrifice is an approved mode of propitiating the deities. This concept is based on the rationale that expiation of sins of man is necessary, and that this can be secured only by the method of sacrifice of blood, including sometimes human blood, in order to secure one's future in heaven or on the Day of Judgement. In some of these religions life is considered a suffering or sinful, and release from it, or mukti or salvation of man is the goal. It is, perhaps, in this context of salvation from sin that Christ's sacrifice on the Cross is considered an event of redemption for all those who enter his fold. It is extremely incongruous, at least from the Sikh point of view, that while many of the Indian cults of Devi, Naths and other traditions, accept ahimsa as a cardinal virtue, they indulge in large scale sacrifice of animals. For example, at the temple of Bhairon at the annual fair at Devi Pattan, hundreds of buffaloes, goats and pigs are sacrificed, and the mark of look is applied to the Nath and other devotees. 'Kalki Purana', which is a scripture of the Skatas, has a chapter on human sacrifice also. Nath practices, too, are similar. Gorakhnath's contribution is said to be that he substituted animal sacrifice for human sacrifice. And yet the Nath has to take on initiation, a vow to observe ahimsa throughout his life time.

It, therefore, needs emphasis that the Sikh institution of martyrdom is entirely alien to the method of sacrifice referred to above. In Guru Granth Sahib there is a clear condemnation of the sacrifice of animals to propitiate gods. Guru Granth Sahib records: “Slaughter of animals you dub as religion - Then brother! Tell what is irreligion? Each of you style as saints - Then who is to be called butcher?” (p. 1103). The Sakata cult and its practices have been particularly deprecated. In Guru Granth Sahib the very system of gods, goddesses and incarnation has been rejected. There is not a trace of any event of such animal sacrifice on the part of the Gurus or the Sikhs in the entire Sikh history. Thus, the Sikh concept of martyrdom is unrelated to the system of animal sacrifices, or expiation through blood. The rationale of the Sikh concept is entirely different. Since human life is an opportunity and its goal is to carry out the Altruistic Will of God, the very concept of release from life is rejected. It is so in all whole-life religions or miri-piri systems. As the Guru’s hymn states, one has to live a life of commitment to the cause of love, and in pursuance of it one has to struggle against oppression by the powerful. Mukti, salvation or ‘release’ means freedom from egoism, selfishness and individualism, says the Guru. Two objectives have to be sought simultaneously,

namely, release from self-centredness, living a life of love, and struggle against the forces of injustice. It is this kind of love of God that a Sikh strives for. The Bible also says that one should love God with all one's heart and, simultaneously, love one's neighbour as well. Guru Nanak says "he who is fond of God, what cares he for mukti or heaven?" The goal is to fall in line with God's love of man and practise virtues in fulfilment of His Altruistic Will. On the one hand, the Guru rejects ahimsa as a creed, and states that those who consider meat eating a sin do not know what sin is. On the other hand, he lays down that love integrally involves struggle for the oppressed and against the tyrant, God himself being the 'Destroyer' of the evil and demonical. This was very clearly explained by the Sixth Master to Sant Ramdas, when he stated that he was distinctly following the path of Guru Nanak and that his sword was for destruction of the tyrant and help to the weak. Accordingly, while the institution of martyrdom is entirely unrelated to the method of blood sacrifice, prevalent in India and outside, it follows clearly from Guru Nanak's system of love and help to the oppressed and struggle against Evil, as instrument of God's Love. Explanation for the institution of martyrdom was given by Guru Arjun to Pir Mianmir, when the Sufi Saint came to meet him in prison. "I bear all this torture

to set an example. The true test of faith is the hour of misery. Without example to guide, ordinary persons' minds quail in the midst of suffering. And, if he, who possesses power within him, defends not his religion by open profession thereof, the man who possesses no such powers will, when put to torture, abjure his faith. The sin will light on the head of him who has the power but showeth it not, and God will deem him an enemy of religion".

EXPRESSION OF THE INSTITUTION

The first landmark in this field is the sacrifice by the Fifth Guru. The compiler of the Holy Adi Granth, himself became the first martyr of the faith. Here is a coincidence which most scholars from the pacifist or social science group have missed. Today, many Christian theologians like Moltmann, Metz, Liberation theologians and Black theologians emphasize and interpret Christ's martyrdom on the Cross as a fundamental political act of confrontation with the state or the Forces of Oppression. Historically it is well known now that Guru Arjun's martyrdom was an open act of confrontation with the state, initiative for which was taken by the Guru. Ample evidence indicates that Guru Arjun had created a 'state within a state'. This is recorded by contemporary Mohsin Fani and other historians like H.R. Gupta.

Today even scholars like Juergensmeyer concede that the Moghal military state considered the early Sikh Gurus to be heading a separate community. Jehangir's autobiography is clear as to how he felt disturbed about the Guru and why he ordered the extreme step of his execution by torture. Heads of state are never concerned about pacifists. On the other hand, Moghal Emperors many a time sought their blessings. Facts about Guru Arjun's martyrdom are too glaring and open to leave any ambiguity in their interpretation. Beni Parsad, historian of Jehangir, records that Guru Arjun gave an amount of Rs. 5,000 to Khusro who was heading his army of revolt against Emperor Jehangir. The Guru blessed him. It was an open support to a rebel, claimant for the throne. Obviously, the news was conveyed to the Emperor. He records in his autobiography that he had been observing this new socio-religious development and been thinking of putting an end to it. He records with obvious rancour the incident of the Guru's meeting with rebel Khusro, his rival, and his blessing him for a mark. Political and military leaders are concerned only with the political potential of a move or movement. It is this potential as adjudged by the Emperor, that forced him to take the extreme step of ordering the Guru's execution and confiscation of his property. Evidently, the Fifth

Master's martyrdom, and confrontation with the state was the result of positive initiative taken by the Guru himself, both because of his organization of the Panth and his help to rebel Khusro. It is important to know why the Guru took this step. A number of facts clarify the issue. Significantly, while he gave to Khusro a substantial sum of Rs. 5,000, collected by the system of Daswandh introduced by him, he refused to give even a penny towards the fine imposed on him by the Emperor. Not only that. He also forbade the Sikhs or anyone to make a collection of payment of the fine. He explained, as noted earlier, the role of a Sikh or a martyr, to Mianmir, who came to see him in prison. The Guru's statement, quoted earlier, embodies three elements, viz., the need for open profession, fearlessness, and readiness to die for the faith. The above is the story of the martyrdom of the Fifth Guru. The initiative for it proceeded from the Guru. It would thus be idle to suggest that the first five Gurus were pacifist, and that the militant turn in Sikhism arose because the Moghal Administration executed Guru Arjun Dev Ji.

From the Sixth Guru onwards preparations for militancy were undertaken with mounting vigour. The Guru clearly stated two things. First, that what he was doing, namely, confrontation with tyranny and

help to the oppressed, was, in pursuance of the thesis of Guru Nanak, as explained in his hymn. Second, the Guru clarified that those who lay down their lives while fighting for a cause in the Sikh struggle, perform a religious duty. Contemporary Mohsin Fani says, “The Guru told him that on Doomsday his disciples would not be asked to give an explanation for their deeds”. He adds, “The Sikhs believe that all disciples of the Guru go to Heaven”. It needs to be stated that the concepts of Doomsday and Heaven are not Sikh concepts, but they represent the way Mohsin Fani interprets the words of the Guru in terms of his own theology. It is on record that dying for a cause in the Sikh armies has always been considered dying a martyr’s death. Thus, the lead given by the Fifth Master became a major institution of the Sikh Panth resulting in heroism and martyrdom of thousands for the cause of the Guru and the Panth. The role of the Panth and the institution of martyrdom continued throughout the later Sikh history.

Here the martyrdom of the Ninth Master also needs mention. It was reported to the Emperor that Guru Tegh Bahadur was heading a new nation, and that he had virtually raised the banner of revolt with his military preparations. On this the Emperor is reported to have conveyed to the Guru that if he gave up his political and military

activities, and confined his mission to preaching and praying, he would be given state grants. The Guru declined the offer, and thus followed his martyrdom. Three things are clear. The Imperial perception was that the Guru was creating a nation in opposition to the state. Yet, despite the clear offer of grants the Guru declined to give up his political role. The consequences of rejecting the offer were clear to the Guru and everyone. But the choice was very emphatically made by him. Governor Timur Shah also mentions the offer made to the Guru. Evidently, both for the state and the Sikh Movement, confrontations between the two, with its logical consequences of struggle and martyrdom, were known continuing events. This is the path of martyrdom the Gurus laid down and led. The Sikhs have since followed it. Ultimately, the Ninth Master, Guru Tegh Bahadur, and his companions, Bhai Mati Das and Dyal Das, suffered martyrdom in reference to the oppression in Kashmir for conversion of Hindus to Islam. The subsequent struggles of Guru Gobind Singh, Banda and the Sikhs are well known. At Chamkaur Sahib the Guru himself asked his two sons to go in for the unequal battle: “My sons, you are dear to me. You are born to destroy the tyrants (Turks). Only if you sacrifice yourselves in the battle, can the tyrants be eliminated. There can be no

better opportunity than the present one. Both of you go and join the battle". And, when his elder son died fighting there, the Guru said, "Today he has become the chosen Khalsa in God's Court". Thus, the concept of martyrdom for a righteous cause was explained, demonstrated and sanctioned by the Guru.

In the Sikh tradition all the forty who died to a man in the battle at Chamkaur Sahib, and all the forty who died fighting at Muktsar are called 'Muktas', or the 'Released Ones', or martyrs by the Sikh religious definition. In fact, it is also known that with Guru Gobind Singh were a number of Sikhs called 'Muktas', who belonged to the Khalsa Order and had made a commitment to sacrifice their all for the cause of God and the Guru. They were considered Live Muktas. In contrast, the concept of Videhi Mukta in the Vedantic system is entirely different. Swami Sivananda writes about them, "Such a Videhi Mukta who is absolutely merged in Brahman, cannot have the awareness of the world which is non-existent to him. If his body is to be maintained, it has to be fed and cared for by others. The Videhi Mukta is thus not in a position to engage himself for the good of the world". It is also known that the two very young children of the Guru were executed, but refused to embrace Islam. The contribution of Pir Budhu Shah in the militant

struggle of Guru Gobind Singh, is an extremely revealing event. Here is a Pir or a divine of another religion, who joins the armies of the Guru with hundreds of his followers, involving even the loss of life of two of his sons in the battles. This outstanding and unique event could never happen, unless Pir Budhu Shah had complete ideological affinity with the goal of the Guru, and the institution of martyrdom. That institution, it is well known, is also a significant factor in the ideology of Islam. The only slight difference is eschatological. In the case of Islam the inspiration is hope of a pure life in Heaven. In Sikhism it means discharging one's responsibilities towards God and partaking in His Love for all human beings and life. On no other assumption can we explain Pir Budhu Shah's and the Sikh sacrifices in their struggle against evil. It also explains clearly that the Sikh institution of martyrdom has no historical or ideological relation with human or animal sacrifices sanctioned by some religions or cults.

Actually, in the post-Guru period there was a Misl of Sikhs called Misl Shahidan (living martyrs). They were the most respected group of Sikhs. It is Guru Gobind Singh who weaned away Banda from his ascetic life, and asked him not to die a coward's death, but to die a brave man's death, which was the real secret of life. Banda and his 700

companions faced death without flinching, and refused conversion to Islam. Even a young boy whose mother had obtained pardon for him, refused to give up his faith and instead contradicted the statement of his mother that he was not a Sikh, and courted martyrdom. Sikh history of the 18th century is full of deeds of martyrs. Thousands of them refused to give up their faith, but courted torture and death boldly because the administrative orders were to destroy all Nanakpanthis or Sikhs, root and branch.

In sum, in Sikhism the institution of martyrdom is an integral part of the system enunciated by Guru Nanak, and the lead in the matter was given by the Fifth Master. The Sixth Master explained how destruction of the tyrant and protection of the weak were parts of the religion of Guru Nanak, and the dictates of God.

Here it is not just incidental, but very logical in Sikh religion and the Sikh tradition, to state that during the period of Independence Movement, of the 121 persons hanged, 2644 imprisoned for life, and 1300 massacred in the Jallianwala Bagh protest meeting, 93, 2047, and 799, respectively, were Sikhs. Also, of the soldiers who fought under Subhas Chander Bose in the Indian National Army, 60 percent were Sikhs. Again, in 1975, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed the

Emergency Laws curtailing all human rights and liberties, the Sikhs were the only people who sustained an organized struggle against this invasion on human freedom, involving the arrest of over 40,000 Sikhs, when in the rest of India not even one tenth of that number offered arrest as a protest. The movement was run from the Golden Temple, meaning thereby that for Sikhs the struggles against injustice and oppression and consequent martyrdom are a religious responsibility and have religious sanction.

INDIVIDUAL V/S COMMUNITARIAN RIGHTS

It has often been said that ideologies that lay emphasis on rights of the community, the state or the nation, are far more concerned about the society as a whole than the individual, and for that reason tend to sacrifice individual rights. From the Sikh point of view, the tendency is there in all national states, whether secular or religious. True, in modern states in the West there is an increasing emphasis on securing individual rights. But patriotism everywhere continues to be an important social virtue, although the right of the conscientious objector is being increasingly recognized. The main criticism of dictatorships by Western democracies has been on this score, suggesting that the excesses committed by secular rulers like Hitler and Stalin are really due to their

concern for the community and not the individual. The Sikh understanding on this issue is entirely different. It is evident that the working of free market economies or capitalism can be equally oppressive, both for the individual and the community. The increasing gaps between the rich countries and the poor countries, and the rich and the poor in the same countries are, as lamented by the authors of the 'Limits of Growth', due not to any lack of concern for the individual or the community, but follow squarely from ego-centricism of man, which needs to be curbed. The Sikh understanding is that no amount of external pressure or even freedom of the individual can secure over-all justice for all, until man's sense of moral or self-discipline is well developed. And there is no reason to believe that Enlightenment, Science or Technology or individual freedom has in any way enhanced his sense of self-control or morality. In fact, it has often been argued that overemphasis on individual rights has only loosened man's moral brakes, instead of strengthening them. The phenomena of Hitler, Stalin, and Hiroshima could never happen, if there had been any real rise in the level of moral discipline either in Secular Democracies or in Secular Dictatorships.

In Sikhism the villain of peace is the egoism of man, which, it is believed, is due to his present level of development, and not due to any in-built deficiency or sin. Hence, while Sikhism has been the foremost in emphasizing equality between man and man, and between man and woman, it has been equally emphatic on two other scores. First, that there is hope for improvement and that this improvement towards a higher level is man's destiny. This gives abundant optimism or 'Charhhdi Kala', which is a Sikh religious doctrine. Second, that a balance is necessary and the individual sense of internal discipline has to be developed. The institution of martyrdom, the Sikhs believe, is a distinct step towards creation of that internal discipline. Since God loves one and all, all individual effort, howsoever seemingly expensive to the individual, only serves God's Love for the individual and all. This is the lesson Guru Arjun and Guru Tegh Bahadur gave by their martyrdoms, and Guru Gobind Singh demonstrated when he sent his two sons to die in the battle at Chamkaur.

CONCLUSION

The above narration makes it plain that in a whole-life religion, where the spiritual perception is that God is Love, and Destroyer of the evil, martyrdom is an essential institution. For, life is a game of love; and in helping and protecting the weak from oppression, confrontation with the unjust and tyrants, as explained by the Sixth Master himself to Sant Ramdas of Maharashtra, becomes a religious responsibility, in the

discharge of which martyrdom of the religious man or seeker sometimes becomes inevitable. It is, therefore, no accident of history that Guru Arjun was the first prophet in the religious history of India to be a martyr of faith. Nor is it an accident that Guru Tegh Bahadur and the Tenth Master sacrificed their all for the cause of truth or religion. Similarly, it is no accident that for over a hundred years, the Gurus kept an army and struggled with the oppressive Empire involving the loss of life of thousands of Sikhs who are considered, as in the case of Islam, another whole-life religion, martyrs. Secondly, the Sikh Gurus have demonstrated that not only is martyrdom a religious and essential institution, but it is also the most potent method of education and training a people for making sacrifices for the cause of righteousness, love and truth. This is amply proved by the capacity of the Sikhs to make maximum sacrifices for the cause of religion and man. Thus, the prominence of this institution in Sikhism not only shows its whole-life or character; but also clearly distinguishes it from dichotomous, quietist or pacifist systems where this institution is conspicuous by its absence. Hence, the institution of martyrdom in Sikhism, on the one hand, forms its fundamental feature, and, on the other hand, proves its class and character