

MARTYRDOM IN SIKH TRADITION

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Abstract

Present paper titled “Martyrdom in Sikh Tradition” basically comprises the concept of martyrdom. It was Guru Nanak who through his teachings made martyrdom an integral part of Sikhism. In Sikhism this concept or tradition of martyrdom became continues to save the religion or religious beliefs. Different faiths in the world (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) also adapted this concept from time to time but in Sikhism this concept became fundamental belief so to devote this tradition the fifth Guru of the Sikhs (Guru Arjan Dev) laid down his life just for the sake of religion and faith. After this ninth Guru (Guru Teg Bahadur) and Sahibzada’s of tenth Guru (Guru Gobind Singh) also laid down their lives for this righteous cause. By these sacrifices the martyr’s life became source of inspiration for others in Sikh religion which preserves the religion for generations.

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Martyrdom in Sikhism was a fundamental belief. Martyrdom in Sikhism is known as its purest form was voluntary, conscious and altruistic readiness to suffer and offer one's life for a cause.¹ It means that no fear or material inducement underline as the driving factors in such extreme sacrifice of life.

"Martyrdom or voluntarily laying down of one's life for one's faith or principles considered a noble death in any society, is especially prized in Sikhism which has a long and continuous tradition of such adherence to religious belief and sacrifice for it"²

The etymology of the word 'martyr' is derived from Greek word, *Shuhda* which means to witness. Its translation *shahid* is of Arabic and Persian origin which also, according to the Steinga's Persian-English dictionary means witness or martyr. A martyr is considered to stand 'witness' to truth. The *shahid* is one who, by the supreme sacrifice for his faith, bears witness to its truth. A martyr is generally defined as one who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce his or her faith. The term 'martyrdom' is riot identical with death. Persons die of various causes on which they have no control or from they have no escape. Martyrdom, on the other hand, is offering one's life for some noble principle knowingly and deliberately."³

It is said that martyrdom or a *shahidi* happened when a pious man was being shadowed down by others to impose on him maldesings or to deflect from certain fundamental rights and freedom.⁴ so freedom was a natural right of a man and he made efforts to gain it.

Martyrs have ever since the dawn of history been providing inspiration, sustainance, strength and self-regenerative force to their respective faiths and sense of honour and pride to their followers as one who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce his or her faith. In Christianity Physical death is not essential. According to Saint Jerome, "It is not only the shedding of blood that is accounted as a confession. The spotless service of devout mind is itself a daily martyrdom."⁵

Among the different faiths in the world, the Semitic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) adopted the idea of martyrdom. But in Hinduism and Buddhism did not seem to have accepted this idea. In Buddhism they do not believe in heaven and hell, not does it profess violence. They believe only in '*ahimsa*'. So there was no idea of martyrdom in any form in this faith.

In Hinduism they believe in theory of *karma* and punishment according to the actions. Even in ancient vedic Hindu religion there was no word equivalent or close to martyrdom. Only

the semantic range of the term *balidan* has been expanded to bring to close this concept. So in Hinduism human life was considered as a gift from God and they do not believe in human sacrifice.

In Judaism the interpretation of the concept of martyrdom seems to be different from Semitic faiths. It simply means, "Standing up to the Principles of faith, even when one has to face hardships and oppressions."

In Christianity this term came as a result of death of Jesus Christ, this event is considered by the followers of this faith as the highest act of martyrdom. So in fourth century the idea of dying for Jesus Christ had morphed into the idea of martyrdom in which dying for one's faith was considered not just a duty but an honour and a privilege.⁶

It is from the Muslim tradition that the term *Shahid* came into India and, like so much else from the Muslim cultural background, got acclimatized in the social milieu of the Sikh people in a manner as to acquire a new and extended significance among them because of the peculiar turns the history of the Sikh people took since quite an early period in the growth of their church. All the classical elements of the phenomenon of martyrdom have been present in the religious history of the Sikh people in a remarkable degree.⁷

With the beginning of Islam came the Arabic word 'Shuhada' or 'Shahadat' which was known as similar to word martyrdom. It means to see, to witness, to testify or to become a role model.

But in Sikhism this concept of martyrdom elevated to new heights when Guru Nanak the first prophet said, "Should you have no urge to play the game of Love, step into my lane with your head placed on your palm."⁸

So when Sikhism began in early sixteenth century as a religious brotherhood open to all, irrespective of caste, colour or race. In Sikhism, religious scheme the concept of martyrdom forms a part of the doctrine itself. It carried spiritual meaning. In the teachings of Guru Nanak we find many reference referring to the fact that true devotee should followed the will of God and should not hesitate from the '*Bhana*'.

If one fears death, he cannot be a martyr. A martyr has to die not for his own self may be protecting the other/religion or freedom for faith. In Sikhism there was only one prominent fear that was fear of God. Guru Nanak says in mool-mantar that the "true Greater is fearless and without enmity." Liberation from fear is described in Sikhism as *mukti*. A martyr died in the

battle field for protecting *dharm*a or truth and gets martyrdom for higher attainment i.e. *mukti*.⁹

Bhai Jodh Singh a prominent historian looked upon as martyrdom as grounded firmly in Sikh Ideology. He explained that Guru Gobind Singh's "*Jin Prem Kiyo Tin hi Prabh Payo*" was an echo of Guru Nanak's '*Jau Tau Prem Khelan Ka Chao*'. So the total term revolved around the '*prem*' which showed by Guru Nanak as willing acceptance of God's will or true faith towards Guru at any cost or in any circumstances. With this faith Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Teg Bahadur gave their lives for conception of sacrifice in love, so the cause was faith only.¹⁰

Guru Nanak's Goal of life was not a passive state of bliss but a lie of action in accordance with the will of God who is all love.¹¹ Guru Nanak was aware of the tradition of *Shahid* in the Islamic culture.

Guru Nanak always preached the devotees that bravery, courage and fearlessness should use for men's welfare and for the sake of community.

When Babur invaded Indian and carried on an indiscriminate slaughter at Eminabad. It was Guru Nanak who expressed fearlessly that he was a tyrant and sinner. In Guru Granth Sahib many references referring the fact that a true devotee should not hesitation for making supreme sacrifice. The Sikhs followed sacredly this noble idea of martyrdom in the course of their history in a true spirit. Guru Nanak expressed with deep concern on the holy sacrifice in his *Bani*.¹²

Guru Nanak Dev here explained that the fear of death is the greatest of all fears in the mankind but in Sikhism there was no compromise with the fear, death is inevitable and death for the cause of *Dharma* is lauded in Sikhism.¹³

Guru Nanak also explained the Idea that how a man could get liberation or (*mukti*) by acting accordance with God's will.

Guru quaffs the cup of love and attains liberation. The faith of the Sikh Guru (*Gursikhi*) is hard in the extreme. It is sharper than the edge of double edged sword. It is narrower than the width of a hair. So they who drink the cup of love and bear the unbearable they live in accordance with divine order and follow the Sikh way of life by cherishing the '*Bhana*' of the master.¹⁴

The vars of Bhai Gurdas are regarded as the key to Guru Granth Sahib. He stated that among myriad other qualities, a martyr possess unlimited patience, complete faith in God and freedom from superstition and fear.¹⁵

Bhai Gurdas talks of love and fear (*bhia-bhav*) as the means of liberation and by

following the Guru he became '*hukmi banda*' who lives in accordance with the divine order.¹⁶

Like Guru Nanak Bhai Gurdas underscores the importance of honest living and to die unto oneself is to get rid of the humai and became *par upkari*. So according to Bhai Gurdas, "A martyr is one who has cultivated and vealour" which we had already discussed.

In Sikhism Guru Arjan who initiated the Sikh history as a history of martyrs. First he wore the crown of the martyrdom within the faith. Guru Arjan emphasized this point when he wrote.

First accept death as inevitable.

And attachment to life discard.¹⁷

Bhai Gurdas also in his pauri exhorted the Sikhs till the end that they should never forget the updes of the Gurus. He regarded *sadh-sangat* as the source of comfort, love and the blissful state so Guru Arjan did not care anything but God while he was bearing the extreme physical tortures.¹⁸ As a contemporary Christian missionary recorded this "good pope died overwhelmed by the sufferings torments dishonours "heaped on him by a fanatic ruler".

After the martyrdom of fifth Guru, the Shahadat became an integral part of the Sikhs because it was the need of time to save Sikh religion and Sikhs from the cruelty of the Mughal Emperor. The brave Sikhs took the sword and fought against the Mughals for their faith; while fighting they got martyrdom not bothering about the oppressions of the mughals but keeping faith in 'the words of the Gurus, they represented the true spirit of martyrdom.'¹⁹

So in Sikhism, a martyr before martyrdom recited bani, to be intone with ultimate reality and also to get rid from the mundane fear, Guru beared unbearable pain, or suffering as a will or *Hukum* of God. Then a martyr submitted himself total surrender to before will of God, a basic postulate in Sikhism. Thus a martyr is in the hands alone of God and addressed his inner voice only to God. *Tera Bhana Meetha Lage*.²⁰

Guru Teg Bahadur gave their life for the sake of another religion. Guru's martyrdom and his three devotees who were burnt, boiled and sawn alive was another example of paramount sacrifice for preservation of human justice and religious freedom. In *Bachittar Natak* there was account of the Guru's martyrdom. The Guru laid down his life to save *tilak* and *Janju* his head was severed but not a groan did he utter.

The martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur was a deliberate act. Guru Teg Bahadur gave his life to uphold the right to religious belief and worship. Here it is relevant to mention that the Sikh

religious system was otherwise opposed to Brahmanical beliefs and practices as also the caste system. Here Guru Gobind Singh has rightly said that his father gave his head, but did not flinch from the path of truth. So both Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Teg Bahadur gave life voluntarily in a peaceful manner for an ideal and kept no rancor in mind. So Guru Teg Bahadur let this tragic event happen for the sake of *Dharma* (truth) he gave his head but never deviated from the path of truth.²¹

He stood for those values and decencies which the soul of India has evolved and Cherished for mellinnia, and which are some of the noblest ideals held by humanity. His sacrifice therefore was for a cause than which none could be higher.

In the *Gursobha* there was mentioned *karam-dharm*, *dharmsala* and *sarb-dharm* were protected along with *tilak* and *janju* by Guru Teg Bahadur. Guru Teg Bahadur was generally known '*Hind di Chadhar*' (the protector of Hind) and the savior of

'Hinduism' but Sainapat called him *Jagg Chadar* (The Protector of the World) as well as Hind di chadar. Therefore Guru Teg Bahadur may be seen as defending with his life the principle of the freedom of conscience.²²

The *Gursobha* is significant in another way too as he explained that the call made by Guru Gobind Singh for sacrifice in the cause of dharm and story of the *panth*. From now onward demand for offering one's life for the sake of one's faith became inseparable part of the tradition. When *Sahibzada* Ajit Singh died fighting in the chamkaur. Guru Gobind himself remarks as '*aaj khas bhae khalsa satgur ke darbar*'. So the khalsa institution was based on the double edged sword and *Khandedhar Pahul* symbolized the determination to lay down one's life in a righteous cause. The game was total preferring their faith over their life.²³

Rahitnama Chaupa Singh suggested that after the Idialsa' *Pahul*, *kesh* and martyrdom become interrelated, many Sikhs gave their life for *kesh* and *kesh* became the outward symbol of the inner faith of the Sikh. Through the Guru's grace the *kesh* symbolizes Sikhi. The Sikhs of the Guru should preserve Sikhi till the end of their life. So the *Pahul*, *kesh* and martyrdom go together. They serve as the markers of Sikh identity.²⁴

Sukha Singh is emphantic about the unique identity of the Khalsa and its egalitarian character as much as about the unicity of the Supreme Being. Having imbibed amrit, the khalsa roared like lions in battle and never stepped back. By giving up their lives for the sake of *dharm* became immortal. So martyrdom was built into its institution. Even at the time of the departure

of Guru Gobind from the world he also told to Khalsa to fight against the tyranny. Their heroism was inspired by '*Dharmyudh*'. So this faith which included the fight for sovereignty so far as the khalsa was concerned.²⁵

The Sikhs as saint soldiers started *Dharmyudh* religious war, a war for righteousness, which was not for conquests or territorial gain but war for truth or to protect *dharma* or religious freedom. This has been valiant explained by Guru Gobind Singh. Such as

"For this purpose did I create the Panth
ordaining for Holy war and fostering war like character,
keeping arms and meditating on true man.

Those who will fighting in the holy war attain eternal truth.²⁶

In eighteenth century there had been countless Sikhs who died for the Sikh dharma. Prominent among them were Bhai Mani Singh, Bhai Taru Singh, Bhai Tara Singh Van, etc. In *Wadda Ghallughara* of 1762, it was, estimated that twenty thousand Sikhs were killed. But this could not crush the spirit of the Khalsa. Even Rattan Singh Bhangob, author of *Gum Panth Parkash*, explained that, "Sikhs had fondness for death."²⁷ To court death they had now found the opportunity. Their lives they held not dear. They did not feel pain if their bodies were slashed and even they die on the field of battle never to turn their back and mingle with the *shahids* as water mingled with water."

So there was hardly any doubt that martyrdom for Rattan Singh Bhangob was the core of Khalsa tradition which was the same thing for him as Sikh tradition. It was linked with '*Parsuarth*' or self sacrifice. In the case of Guru Teg Bahadur the sacrifice was made for the *Panth*. So martyrdom was closely linked with the idea of the sovereignty of the *Panth*.²⁸

In this context Bhagat Kabir praised for Martyr as in Guru Granth Sahib that a martyr never gave his faith "those who fight for the cause of the weak or their faith and suffer getting cut 'limb by limb but never flee the battle field."²⁹

Since a Sikh has been taught never to compromise truth, to shed selfishness, and always engaged in service and sacrifice, even at the cost of his life martyrdom, willingness to die was also included in the syllabus, Sikh Gurus and Four *Sahibzadas* became the role models and known in glorious Sikh history of character building and righteous living along with the selfless and temptation free. In Sikhism martyr faced death as a result of common ideas. The martyrdom as a seal on the life of righteousness, which aimed at not only willingness to die but remaining

always attached to love for man kind and selfless life working for '*Sarbat da Bhala*' in the love and service of Guru and God.³⁰

Besides all such persons who met their end while defending their faith to called *shahid*. The title of 'martyr' in Sikhism could not be applied to those who died in such manner as to excite the sympathy and pity of mankind.

The martyr is life blood of the Sikh community without the sacrifices of the martyr the shape of the perennial source of inspiration for leading a faithful life without fear and enmity.

There was at least one particular feature of martyrdom that is uniquely characteristic of the Sikh tradition that martyrs in other religion have sacrificed their lives for affirmation, for defence of their respective religious beliefs and practices. But in Sikhism we had already discussed the martyrdom laid down by Guru Teg Bahadur who protect the religious marks or frontal marks of another religion.³¹

So martyr with his supreme sacrifice creates a value that becomes eternal for the coming generations. It symbolized the sacred heroic death.

"The blood of the martyr is the potent seed of the faith that keeps the Church alive."³²

Guru Gobind Singh's four sons the Sahibzadas who gave their lives at the alter of faith. The beauty of the situation was that they were fully conscience of that fact despite their tender age. So this was clearly came as account that they were strictly in accordance with the definition of a martyr given by the previous martyrs.³³

Bani of Guru Granth Sahib were the main source of Sikh ideology. The Sikh Gurus lives with this ideology in practical life because an, ideology without practical adoption became useless. So to prove this Guru Arjan Dev started the tradition of martyrdom and this incident became as watering the *martyr's* community after this till the eighteenth century Sikh history was filled with numerous examples of martyrdom-; The ideology get the first seed from Guru Nanak who gave the real mean of life as attainment of true path of true love with the grace of true Guru.

The only wish and hope of the Sikh martyr was to have an abode for his undying spirit in the '*Sach-khand*' the region of truth, where he believed God lives, to look athim and glorify him ever and ever.³⁴

Even a martyr after sacrifice never wants any regard or discontentment. Guru Gobind Singh sacrificed many of his Sikhs whom he held as dear as his own sons. But he had no complaints and expressed complete contentments in the will of God. So in Sikhism there was a

deeper and more fundamental faith and devotion to God which was basic in religion love implies sacrifices, with total surrender a Sikh enjoined to love and willingly submit to the one God. So his or her faith alone faith came the path towards martyrdom.³⁵

The Sikh Guru Condemn such a person who engaged in self mortification by performing torturous, mention and physical exercised by showing hard meditation at holy places and by undergoing Penances with their bodies reversed, believing that there were all meritorious and pious acts. The references with a view to enable the faithful to stand by their commitment through the vicissitudes of life based on *Akal purakh da Bhana*, as an ideal of life.³⁶

"The survival of the Sikhs in the eighteenth century was due to their commitment towards their faith and their trust in the Guru their sincerity, honesty and integrity for their faith was totally inter connected with the cup of love.

But the martyrdom of the great Sikhs saved the Sikh nation from the total onslaught of the Sikh from the Mughals. It was an era full of martyrs who by their martyrdom provided, not only honour but also sovereign state for the Sikhs.

It was an admitted historical fact that martyr of a religion usually arises from persecution. They refused to submit to their faith, but endeavoured rather to maintain their freedom and rights with the sword. The persecution which ensued had the effect of welding community and organization in its origin purely religious, into a militant order and nation of soldiers.

The Sikh concept of martyrdom, a deliberate choice to suffer death for the sake of religious belief is crucial, "martyrdom and heroism both involve exemplary courage, but the courage in a martyr was more deep rooted, more moral than physical and is born out of spiritual conviction. So in Sikh tradition faith alone was supreme and Guru particularly refused to perform miracles.

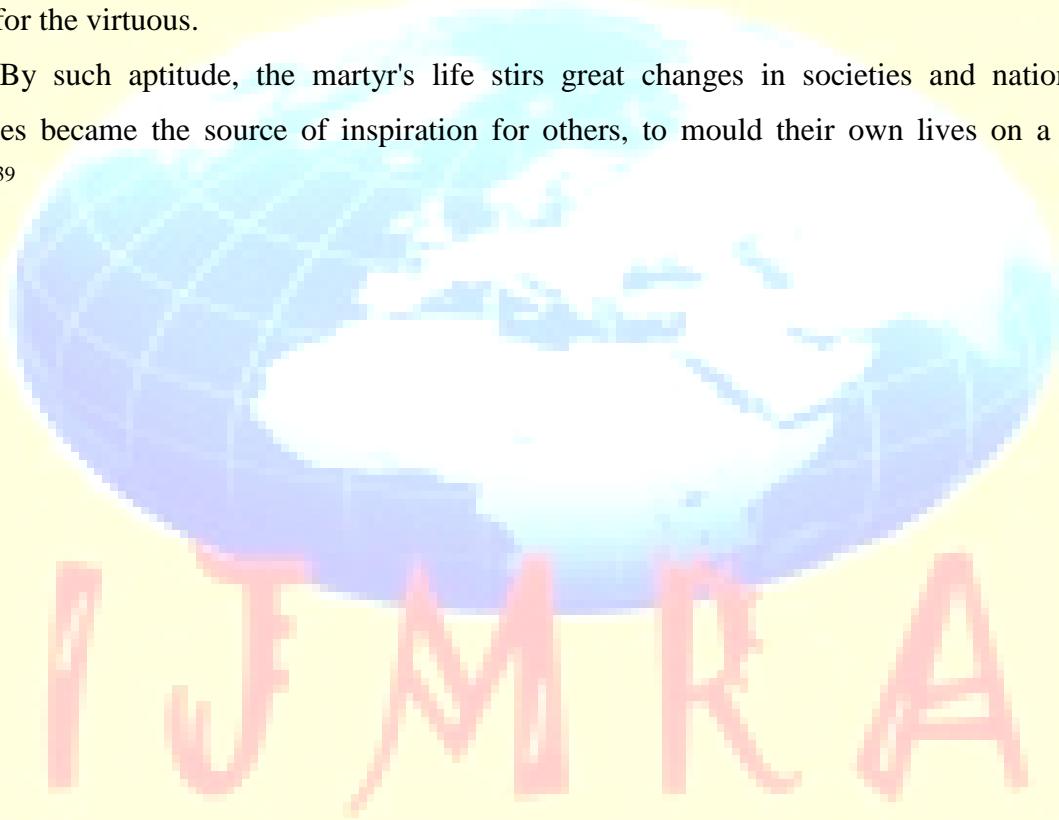
They did not drew attention to their own glory but rather to the glory of *Akal Purdkh*, the Timeless one.³⁷

Prior to this period in the eighteenth century, the term must already have gained wide currency among the Sikhs. Since then and after, it has been applied to all those who wore the crown of martyrdom within faith and to recalled the sacrifices of the martyrs throughout the course of sikh history is a part of the Sikh tradition while offering ardas' or the daily supplicatory prayer in morning and evening and, as a matter of fact, at all times, *Shahids* are in this context mentioned along holy Gurus. The details of the persecution suffered by them are recalled on

these occasions, such as being sawn alive, boiled to death, broken on the wheel, having them flayed alive and suffering such other tortures. The sacrifices of the women who, 'under the Mughal Governors of Lahore were martyred. So all Gurus and their followers even four Sahibzadas and forty immortals were recalled too. So in this way the phenomenon of martyrdom and the term *Shahid* are thus an integral part of the Sikh tradition.³⁸

So the valour shown by Sikh Martyr and fidelity to faith display by them continued to provide Sikh youth strength enough to stand against evil and oppression. At the same time it inspired them to hold high the standard of Sikh faith symbolizing supremacy of the word and power for the virtuous.

By such aptitude, the martyr's life stirs great changes in societies and nations. His examples became the source of inspiration for others, to mould their own lives on a similar model.³⁹



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