

ARTICLE

GURU TEG BAHADUR JI'S MARTYRDOM: The Real Message And The Efforts To Obscure It

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ABSTRACT

The motivation for the supreme martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur ji, his message for the entirety of mankind, and the philosophical underpinnings of the unprecedented sacrifice are found within the writings of the ninth Guru as recorded within the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS). This has however, not stopped a whole gamut of individuals, institutions and the ruling elite from making efforts to obscure, corrupt or hijack the truth of the event, its motivation and its philosophical foundations for a whole host of reasons. Four sources of such efforts are identified in this brief essay. The earliest attempts at such corruption can be discerned in the classical Sikh historical literature, which serves as the primary source. The second source is Sikh clergy, institutions, intellectuals, and leadership that propagate the corrupted narratives unthinkingly and uncritically, failing to apply the touchstone of Gurbani in their analysis. The third source comprises the Hindutva-led movements within India, whose primary aim is the co-option of Sikhi and Sikh Gurus. The general Sikh population, large proportions of whom have broken away from reading, critical thinking, and the ability to analyze information objectively and form reasoned judgments, cannot be without blame and hence comprises the fourth source.

INTRODUCTION

The Sikh world generally accepts Chandar Sain Sainapat's account of the martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur in *Sri Guru Sobha Granth* (written in 1711 AD) as the earliest attribution towards the motivation and philosophical underpinnings of the event (Singh, 2014 & Singh, 2017). Counted as a contemporary of the tenth Guru, his attribution is captured herein: *ਤੇਗ ਹੀ ਬਹਾਦਰ ਜਗ ਚਾਦਰ ਸਭ ਤੁਹੀ ਹੈ।* Teg Hi Bahadur Jug Chador Sabh Tuhi(n) Hai. Teg Bahadur, You Are The Shield Of Humanity. (Chap 2, 5:56); and again herein: *ਪ੍ਰਗਟ ਭਏ ਗੁਰੁ ਤੇਗ ਬਹਾਦਰ। ਸਗਲ ਸ੍ਰਿਸ਼ਟਿ ਪੈ ਜਾਕੀ ਚਾਦਰ।* Pargatt Bhaye Gur Teg Bhadur. Sagal Srishtti Paiy Jaki Chador. The Advent Of Guru Teg Bahadur Served As The Shield For The Universe Of Mankind. (Chap. 1:14). His use of the word *Chador* (Lit. Cover, Metaph. Shield, protector) points to a poetic depiction of the concepts of "protection, defense, cover and shield." His use of the words *Jug Chador* and *Srishtti Ki Chador* illustrates Sainapat's belief that a universal objective was the philosophical underpinning of the event. His

choice of words further points towards the defense of humanity and protection of mankind as a whole being the philosophical foundation and message of the martyrdom.

As will be argued later in this essay, Sainapat's account is in line with the writings of the ninth Guru pertaining to humanity, mankind and universality as found in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS). He appears to have been aware of the ninth Guru's bani.

CLASSICAL SIKH LITERATURE.

The gamut of texts that are generally (and erroneously) put into the category of "Classical Sikh History" are plagued with intrinsic problems that are beyond the scope of this essay. Questionable authorship; unverifiable time frames of their actual writing; anti-Sikh and anti-Guru slants; and agenda-based accounts are just some of the problems.¹ A significant number of them are written by non-Sikhs, anti-Sikhs or individuals or organizations with particular agendas. It was thus normal that classical Sikh literature would occupy a foundational and

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pivotal position in obscuring, corrupting and distorting the truth, motivation and philosophical foundations of the martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur ji.

A cursory yet systematic examination of some of the classical literature provides us not just with the pattern of the distortion, but the underlying purpose of the obscuring and distortion. It appears to be motivated by the desire to drown Sainapat's depiction and replace it with a parochial analysis that the martyrdom was inspired by a particular group of people and undertaken in the defense and protection of a specific belief system. The foundational objective is the *co-option* of both Guru Teg Bahadur ji in particular and the Sikh faith in general: aimed at absorbing or assimilating both into the narrower fold of a specific belief system.

Kesar Singh Chibber's *Bansavalinama* of 1769 relegates the martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur to within the narrow and parochial scope of "religion" (Padam, 2005). He does so by using the term *dharam* in his depiction of the event, but stops short of specifying the belief system. He writes of Guru Teg Bahadur telling Sikhs during his imprisonment: *ਇਸ ਦਾ ਅਸਾਡਾ ਹੈਸੀ ਸਦਾ ਲੇਖਾ, ਧਰਮ ਰਹੇ ਅਤੇ ਸੀਸ ਜਾਉ*। Chapter 9 verse 157. This is my account; religion gets saved at the expense of my head.¹ He further writes of Mata Gujri ji saying to Guru Gobind Singh *ਤੇਰੇ ਪਤਿਆ ਧਰਮ ਰੱਖਿਆ ਤੇ ਸੀਸ ਕਟਾਇਆ*। Chapter 9 verse 163. Your father was beheaded in protection of religion.

To be fair, Chhibber does not specify the one particular "religion" for which Guru Teg Bahadur was martyred. That task is undertaken seven decades later, in 1841, by Ratan Singh Bhangu in *Pracheen Panth Parkash*. He writes: *ਤੇਗ ਬਹਾਦਰ ਫਿਰ ਗੁਰ ਭਯੋ / ਪਰਸਵਾਰਥ ਹਿਤਿ ਜਿਨਿ ਸਿਰ ਦਯੋ / ਕਲਯੁਗ ਮੇ ਬਡ ਸਾਕਾ ਕੀਯਾ / ਧਰਮ ਕਰਮ ਰਖ ਹਿੰਦੂ ਲੀਯਾ*। Episode 11, verse 7. Teg Bahadur then became Guru, who gave up his life for the protection of the rights of others. He made the supreme sacrifice in Kaliyuga, and protected the religious rights and rituals of the Hindus (Singh, 2006).

But it would fall on the shoulders of Nirmla Kavi Santokh Singh's *Gurpartap Suraj Granth* to relegate, not just the objective of the martyrdom to the protection of Hinduism, but that the motivation and inspiration of the supreme sacrifice came from a particular group of Hindus - namely the Kashmiri Brahmins who were being forced to convert out of their religion by the narrow-minded tyrannical Aurangzeb (Aulakh, 2006).

He writes that a delegation of Kashmiri Brahmins went to Shivji to seek his intervention in the tyranny. Shivji is said to have composed a personal letter with instructions and handed it to the Brahmins to deliver to Guru Teg Bahadur. Santokh Singh writes: *ਪ੍ਰਾਨ ਅੰਤ ਲਉ ਦਿਜ ਭਏ ਜਾਨੈ ਰਿਦੈ ਤ੍ਰਿਨੈਨ। ਕ੍ਰਿਪਾ ਧਾਰਿ ਪੱਤ੍ਰੀ ਬਿਖੇ ਲਿਖਿ ਉਪਾਏ ਕਿ ਬੈਨ। ਸ੍ਰੀ ਨਾਨਕ ਜਹ ਗੁਰੂ ਬਿਸਾਲਾ। ਅਪ੍ਰਮੇਯ ਸਮਰਥ ਕਲਿ ਕਾਲਾ। ਤਿਨ ਗਾਦੀ ਪਰ ਬੈਠਯੋ ਜਾਇ। ਕਾਜ ਤੁਮਾਰੈ ਸਾਰੈ ਸੋਇ। ਇਹੀ ਪੱਤ੍ਰਕਾ ਲੈ ਤੁਮ ਜਾਵਹੁ। ਬਿਰਥਾ ਅਪਨੀ ਸਕਲ ਸੁਨਾਵਹੁ। ਸੋ ਰਾਖਿਹਰੋ ਧਰਮ ਤੁਹਾਰਾ। ਇਨ ਬਿਨ ਅਨ ਤੇ ਹਵੈ ਨਾ ਉਬਾਰਾ।* 3 / Suraj Parkash Vol 9 Chapter 28. Shivi realized the predicament the Brahmins were in. He became benevolent and wrote the following instructions in his letter. Guru Nanak was a great Guru in Kaljug, all capable. Whoever is now sitting on his throne will help resolve your problem. Take this letter of mine to give to him and narrate your problem. No one other than him can save you.

Then we have the text of Bachittar Natak (Dasam Granth) which further relegates the underpinnings of the martyrdom not just to a particular religion, but to two very specific symbols of that religion (Dasam Granth, 2004). The verses read: *ਤਿਲਕ ਜੰਝੂ ਰਾਖਾ ਪ੍ਰਭ ਤਾਕਾ। ਕੀਨੋ ਬਡੇ ਕਲੁ ਮਹਿ ਸਾਕਾ। ਧਰਮ ਹੇਤ ਸਾਕਾ ਜਿਨ ਕੀਆ। ਸੀਸ ਦੀਆ ਪਰ ਸਿਰਰ ਨਾ ਦੀਆ।* Tilak Janju Rakha Prabh Taka. Kino Bdo Klu Meh Saka... Dharm Heyt Saka Jin Keeya. Sees Diya Par Sirer Na Diya. (Dasam Granth page 54). Translated these verses mean: The massive event of the sacrifice in Kalyug was in defense of the sacred mark *tilak* and the sacred thread *janju*. He gave his head in the name of religion for these symbols, but not his faith in them (*Sirer na diya*). These verses do more than just tie the martyrdom of the Guru to the two symbols, but pin the Guru's faith onto the same symbols - neither of which were adorned by the Gurus or prescribed by them for Sikhs.

The obscuring, corrupting or distorting the truth, motivation and philosophical foundations of the martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur ji does not stop there. Other classical texts have gone so far as to assert that the execution of Guru Teg Bahadur at the hands of the tyrannical regime never took place.

Parchian Seva Das (written in 1709 AD as claimed) has 4 *sakhis* pertaining to Guru Teg Bahadur (Qadian, 1963). The third one pertains to his arrest and sacrifice. The *sakhi* says that Guru Teg Bahadur ji left Anandpur with 3 Sikhs for a hunting trip and ended up in Agra where they were all arrested. Two of the Sikhs pleaded with him for their release and their leg irons opened up miraculously, while the third one remained with the Guru. The narrative

continues: *ਫਿਰ ਗੁਰੂ ਬਾਬੇ ਇਹ ਕਾਰਨ ਕੀਨਾ। ਕੈਦ ਹੀ ਬੀਚ ਸਿੱਖ ਕੋ ਹੁਕਮ ਹੂਆ, ਜਬ ਹਮ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਵੇਲੇ ਇਸ਼ਨਾਨ ਕਰਕੇ ਜਪ ਕਾ ਜਾਪ ਕਰੋ, ਤੇਗ ਪਾਏ ਕਰ, ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰ ਆਗੇ ਅਰਦਾਸ ਕਰੋ, ਮਸਤਕ ਟੇਕੁ, ਤਬ ਤੁਮ ਤਿਸ ਸਮੇਂ, ਧੜ ਸਿਉ ਸੀਸ ਕੋ ਜੁਦਾ ਕਰ ਛੇੜੋ।* English translation: Then the Guru Baba did as follows. While imprisoned, he ordered his (remaining) Sikh: when I wake up at dawn, complete reciting the Jap, do an ardas, and then bend down to bow, you should then proceed to behead me (at that point).

In essence, then, Guru Teg Bahadur ordered his own Sikh to behead him. When the Sikh expressed his reservations, Guru Teg Bahadur assured him that he would suffer no consequences. The *sakhi* (story) concluded with *ਹੁਕਮ ਹੂਆ, ਸਿਖਾ, ਕਾਰਜ ਕਰ ਲੈ। ਤਬ ਸਿਖ ਬਚਨ ਪਾਇ ਭਗੋਤੀ ਸਿਉਂ ਕਾਰਜ ਕਰ ਲੀਆ। ਧੜ ਸਿਉਂ ਸੀਸ ਕੋ ਜੁਦਾ ਕਰ ਛੇੜਿਆ।* English translation: The command was given: O Sikh, undertake the deed (now). And following the command, the Sikh used his sword, severing the head from the body. In reality then, the writings of Seva Das reduce the martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur ji to suicide through a command to his loyal disciple. The narrative concludes that when the emperor came to know, he had the Sikh executed. The emperor was ostensibly furious that the Guru had escaped his death at the hands of the emperor's executioner.

DISCUSSION

SIKH CLERGY, INSTITUTIONS, INTELLECTUALS AND LEADERSHIP

It is evident that our clergy (*ragis, parcharaks, kirtanias, kathakars*), institutions and intelligentsia has failed to play their respective roles. The narrative that had been provided by this group has largely relied on that provided by Nirmla Kavi Santokh Singh and of the Bachittar Natak. Even then, the reliance on these two sources has been selective at best and dishonest at worst.

For instance, this group owes the Sikh world an explanation as to why Suraj Parkash's narrative of a specific group of 500 Brahmins being the motivators for the martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur is accepted as fit for propagation. Still, the part about Shivji's role in the episode, in effectively instructing the Guru to sacrifice himself, is left out.

One could argue that our clergy, institutions and intelligentsia have consciously chosen not to expose the true level of corruption and co-option within the narrative of Santokh Singh. In essence, Santokh Singh is linking the entire motivation of martyrdom to an instruction from Shivji. In so doing,

this Nirmla Kavi is turning the ninth Guru into a devotee of Shivji or at least someone who is inclined to be loyal to Shivji's instruction. It can be argued that our Clergy have "decided" to leave out the part concerning Shivji. This reasoning is as dubious and dishonest as it is corrupting. After all, the best thing to do would be to drop the entire narrative altogether.

Another reason our clergy, institutions and intelligentsia leave out the Shivji part is to preserve the sensitivities of the devotees of Shivji. An argument may be made that Shivji is made to come across as helpless by Santokh Singh. One wonders why it is acceptable to paint the Brahmins of India as sufficiently helpless to go to Guru Teg Bahadur – a non-Brahmin and non-Hindu – but not their deity. In any case, the selective acceptance of a narrative and then basing the selection on dubious reasoning is a problem in itself.

A Sikh would be hard pressed to find a Gurdwara celebrating the martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur ji wherein the *ragis, kirtanias, parcharaks* and *dhadees* are not singing, reciting or sermonizing the verses of the Bachitar Natak: *ਤਿਲਕ ਜੰਝੂ ਰਾਖਾ ਪ੍ਰਭ ਤਾਕਾ / Tilak Janju Rakha Prabh Taka*. (Dasam Granth page 54) – thus tying the event to the sacred mark *tilak* and the sacred thread *janju*; and saying, unequivocally, that the Guru gave his head for these symbols, but not his faith in them.

The dishonesty here is baffling. Our clergy assert that the above verses were composed by Guru Gobind Singh ji – saying outright that the tenth Guru is in effect imprisoning Guru Teg Bahadur's universal underpinnings within a parochialism that does not benefit both the ninth and tenth Gurus. By attributing these verses to the tenth Master, our clergy further suggest that the Guru was ignorant of the banni of his father, as contained in the AGGS (to be discussed below). Our clergy, institutions and intelligentsia need to tell us this: if indeed the tenth master had written these verses, how did Sainapat, a contemporary of the Guru, escape being aware of them to write an account that was so fundamentally contradictory to these verses.

Had our clergy, institutions, and intelligentsia played their respective roles honestly, the Sikh world at large would not have been at the quagmire it is in – believing and accepting the lie that the martyrdom of the ninth Guru was at the behest of 500 Kashmiri Brahmins, for the purpose of protecting a particular religion, and its two symbols.

At every commemorative event of the martyrdom, our clergy ingrain this *false* narrative, our institutions go along with the *concocted* narrative, and our intelligentsia either see no hope in correcting the narrative or have themselves come to subscribe to it. The Sikh world has been ingrained with the narrative that Guru Teg Bahadur is *Hind Dee Chador* – the protector of Hind – protector of the Hindu nation to whom the symbols of *Tilak* and *Janju* belong. One wonders if Sikhs will ever come out of this virtually impossible-to-exit situation.

THE HINDUTVA ENTERPRISE

The Hindutva designs of forces within the government and ruling elite who have the agenda of co-opting Sikhs and Sikhi into their bigger fold end up as the biggest beneficiaries of the corruption and distortion that has befallen the narrative of martyrdom. These forces go around making public statements to the effect that if not for the sacrifice of Guru Teg Bahadur, Hinduism would not have survived. They make public calls for this or that road, institution, or structure to be named or renamed after Guru Teg Bahadur ji. Case in point is the call to remove the word Aurangzeb from existing structures and to replace it with the name of the ninth Guru. They set aside public funds for monument construction and commemorative events.

Sikhs feel proud and honored that non-Sikhs are honouring their Guru. Little do they realize that any such honor cannot exist if the basis for such honor is a distorted, corrupted and hijacked narrative to begin with. Little do they realize that there can be no honor in relegating a martyrdom of universal stature to one that happened merely for the protection of one religion and two symbols. Little do they realize that such honor may be driven by the Hindutva agenda of fostering ill-will between Sikhs and Muslims.

Hindutva designs have infiltrated deeply into a number of Sikh institutions, in particular *deras* and *taksals*. At the time of this writing, Hanam Singh Dhumma of the Damdami Taksal is said to have first inspired and then encouraged popular Punjabi entertainer Satinder Sirtaj to write and sing a song depicting the martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur ji. The song is conspicuous in its mention of the 500 Brahmins, the *Tilak* and *Janju* and “Hind di Chador.” While it can be argued that entertainer Sirtaj can be excused for not being aware of the truth of the martyrdom and the Hindutva agenda, the same cannot be said of Dhumma, who has taken great pains to publicly display his loyalty to the agenda.

THE MARTYRDOM, ITS MOTIVATION AND ITS PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS.

Guru Teg Bahadur ji was put to death – by the order of then Emperor Aurangzeb – in the public square of Chandni Chowk, Delhi on the 11th of November 1675 (Dhillon, 2022). The ninth Guru thus became the second of the two Guru martyrs in the Sikh faith. The first was Guru Arjun ji.

In 1670 Emperor Aurangzeb announced his policy of *Ek Mazhab* – or one religion. The foundational justification of this policy was that the only way to have peace and unity was for everyone to profess just one religion. Aurangzeb had decreed the destruction of all places of worship and education belonging to faiths other than the one he subscribed to. He further ordered the discontinuance of all customs, rituals and practices that contravened his *Ek Mazhab* dictate.

In the mind of Guru Teg Bahadur, the notion of a single *mazhab* was anti-thesis to the foundational principle of nature – which was diversity. This principle of diversity was a foundational belief of Guru Nanak's Sikhi as encapsulated in the verse on page 385 of the AGGS:

ਏਕੁ ਬਗੀਚਾ ਪੇਡ ਘਨ ਕਰਿਆ ॥

ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਨਾਮੁ ਤਹਾ ਮਹਿ ਫਲਿਆ ॥ 1 ॥

Eyk Bageecha Peyd Ghan Kariya.

Amrit Nam Tha Meh Faliya.

English translation: The Orchard – meaning Humanity – is One, But the Vegetation Within it – meaning the people – is Diverse Aplenty. It is Within Such Kind of a Diverse Creation That Divinity Comes to Fruition.

Here is yet another verse on page 1056 that says that diversity was the foundational tenet of creation.

ਮੇਰੈ ਪ੍ਰਭਿ ਸਾਚੈ ਇਕੁ ਖੋਲੁ ਰਚਾਇਆ ॥

ਕੋਇ ਨ ਕਿਸ ਹੀ ਜੇਹਾ ਉਪਾਇਆ ॥

Mairaiy Prabh Sachaiy Ek Kheyl Rchaya.

Koye Na Kis Hee Jeha Upaya.

English translation: The Creation Of My Master Lord Is Such: No Entity Is Created Like The Other.

Guru Teg Bahadur thus decided, on his own accord, and according to his own humanist convictions, to take a stand on the issue in a very public way. He went to Aurangzeb on his own to convey that his *One Mazhab* dictate was unacceptable. That Aurangzeb would stand by his

narrow, extremist, and intolerant beliefs and resort to torture and death was known to Guru Teg Bahadur.

An ultimate martyrdom thus became necessary to convey an ultimate message to humanity at large that defending the right to one's beliefs was an unassailable right. And for such a stand and message, he laid down his life.

CONCLUSIONS

The Sikh world celebrates the 350th anniversary of the martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur ji on the 24th of November 2025. It's a timely occasion for us to ask if we have understood and presented the *true* reasons for the martyrdom of our beloved Guru in the real and accurate sense. It's a timely occasion to pledge to stop unthinkingly presenting martyrdom in a way that reduces its significance and narrows its importance. The narrative of the Guru laying down his life for one particular religion its two particular symbols is akin to encapsulating the depths of an ocean into a tea-cup. It's an attempt to fit the heights of a mountain into a wheelbarrow. Any particular religion, belief or symbol was inherently irrelevant. What was relevant was standing up for the oppressed – no matter their faith and beliefs. What was relevant was to stand up even when faced with certain tyranny and death. And that Guru Teg Bahadur ji stood up on his own, not at the behest of any number people in a concocted number from any particular religion. The Sikh world needs to realize that we are reducing Guru Teg Bahadur ji to *Hind Dee Chadur*, when even to address him as *Manukhta Dee Chadur* or *Insaniyat Di Chadur* or *Sresht Di Chadur* would be an understatement.

The 350th anniversary is also an occasion to ponder over the *real* messages that emanate from the supreme sacrifice. Messages that are relevant to Sikhs in particular and humanity in general. It is further an occasion to be aware of the systematic and organized efforts that have been undertaken for the past 264 years and continue unabated even today to obscure the truth of the matter. This essay is an effort towards these two objectives.

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