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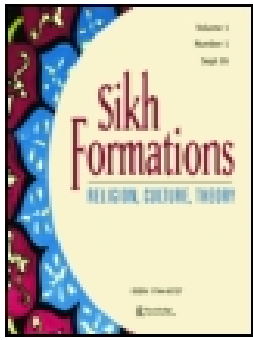
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Fearlessness and human justice: Exploring Guru Tegh Bahadur's teachings and sacrifice from a fresh perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the state of fearlessness and human justice through an examination of five celebrated couplets from Guru Tegh Bahadur's *bānī* ('inspired utterances') by placing them in their immediate historical context, followed by an understanding of their wider significance from a global perspective. The main arguments of this essay revolve around the critical situation in Mughal India leading to the ninth Guru's execution at Chandni Chowk in Delhi on 11 November 1675, by the orders of Emperor Aurangzeb. Rectifying skewed perspectives offered by modern historians in which the death of the ninth Guru is simply an accident of history and therefore of no consequence to wider humanity, this essay offers a critical review of historical readings of events that forced Guru Tegh Bahadur to intervene in the flow of history on behalf of downtrodden and minority voices. To bring the people out of their vulnerability he inspired them with a bold message of resistance against the tyrannical regime by cultivating the spirit of fearlessness and carefree optimism.

KEYWORDS

Aurangzeb; *bānī*; Chandni Chowk; European Enlightenment; Freedom of Conscience; Guru Tegh Bahadur; Human Rights

Introduction

The year 2021 marks the 400th birth anniversary of Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621–1675), the ninth Guru of the Sikh tradition, providing us with an opportunity to explore his teachings and sacrifice from a fresh perspective. The principal aims of this article are fourfold: first, it makes the case for constructing Guru Tegh Bahadur's teachings and sacrifice from his own works and other contemporary and near contemporary sources, particularly focusing on the thematic analysis of his five celebrated couplets. Second, it offers critical review of historical readings of events that forced the ninth Guru to intervene in the flow of history on behalf of downtrodden and minority voices, and to stay true to his ideals at the cost of his life. Third, it forcefully takes issue with modern historians like Audrey Truschke and others who consider the ninth Guru's death as simply an accident of history and therefore of no consequence to wider humanity. The correction and rectification of their perspective is clearly important because it nullifies sacrifice as a form of interventionist justice into yet another state execution. Finally, this study contests the erroneous assumptions of generations of Sikh scholars who attributed Guru Tegh Bahadur's couplet to the tenth Guru based upon traditional sources. To justify my novel readings, I have provided the

photographs of certain folios of the manuscripts of the *Adi Granth* ('Original Scripture'), including an early portrait of Guru Tegh Bahadur from Dacca. In this study, I have relied upon the information supplied by several *bhaṭṭs* ('bards of Brahminic origins') who recorded genealogies in their *vahīs* ('record-books') of the Guru period from the sixth Guru, Hargobind (1595–1644) through the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh (1666–1708). These *vahīs* provide a wealth of historical and sociological information. Bhaṭṭ Sarup Singh Kaushish's *Gurū Kīān Sākhiān* ('Narratives of the Gurus' written in 1790 CE) is predominantly based on these early sources (Piar Singh 1976, 14).

In the process of constructing Guru Tegh Bahadur's life and teachings there is an urgent need to look at his own compositions, his epistles (*hukam-nāmās*), and other contemporary sources simultaneously. No historian can afford to ignore his authentic *bāṇī* ('inspired utterances') recorded in the Sikh scripture, the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* (GGS). It provides us with a literary evidence in the form of a 'style of feeling' that can help us in understanding his life and his role in history, including the contemporary situation of the Sikh Panth. Surjit Hans has skillfully argued that the compositions of the ninth Guru have a simplicity of expression. There is no obscurity in his descriptions, ideas, and expression. These compositions reflect his 'elemental vision' of human beings concerning birth, life and death that is the foundation of his religious sensibility, thought, and ideology. This very vision gave him clarity in grasping the political situation of the Sikh Panth that was highly faction-ridden at that time. His reaction, too, had an elemental power. With his anticipation, he was more-than-ready for martyrdom (Hans 1988, 221–227). A superficial reading of Guru Tegh Bahadur's *bāṇī* may give the impression that the elemental vision underlies a sense of pessimism, producing the sense of detachment (*vairāg*) in the hearts and minds of both the readers and listeners. However, its careful examination reveals an eternal optimism with an implicit faith in the future.

Guru Tegh Bahadur's vision is outlined in his compositions, consisting of 59 *shabads* ('hymns') and 57 *saloks* ('couplets'). The *shabads* are organized in 15 different *rāgas* ('melodies') and they are meant to be performed in *kīrtan* ('devotional singing'), and thereby 'to create a sustained mood, often around a theme stated in the refrain and gradually reinforced in the verses' (Schomer 1979, 79). The *saloks* on the other hand are succinct and sharp, and 'they are forceful statements of an experience, a belief, or a strongly held opinion' (Schomer 1979). Guru Tegh Bahadur himself laid emphasis on the performance of *kīrtan* 'to sing the divine virtues without which life becomes worthless' (GGS 631, 726, 1426, 1429). He composed the maximum number of twelve hymns in his favorite *Sorathī* raga, a melody that is performed in the first quarter of night. The mood of this raga is light and cheerful with a pleasing sound touching the heart: emphasizing in its performance that the words of the Guru can enlighten the mind in the face of darkness of ignorance by vanishing all fears and filling the heart, mind, and soul with bliss. Guru Tegh Bahadur's second chosen raga is *Gaurī* in which he has composed nine hymns. This is an evening raga assigned to autumn and its mood is contemplative (Curtiss 1996, 170). The third preferred raga is *Basant* in which he has composed five hymns, reflecting his joyous attainment of the wealth of the divine Name. This raga belongs to the spring season during which it can be performed at any time of the day or night. Guru Tegh Bahadur's remaining hymns are organized in different ragas in the following sequence: *Āsā* (1), *Dev Gandhārī* (3), *Bihāgarā*

(1), *Dhanāsari* (4), *Jaitsari* (3), *Ṭoḍī* (1), *Tilaṅg* (3), *Bilāval* (3), *Rāmakaḷī* (3), *Mārū* (3), *Sāraṅg* (4), and finally *Jaijāvantī* (4) respectively.

It should be emphasized that *Jaijāvantī* raga is the sole contribution of Guru Tegh Bahadur in the Sikh scripture. No other Guru has employed this melody for his compositions. It is majestic and highly arresting raga that is assigned to the night hours (Curtiss 1996, 178). Its performance is associated with the feeling of victory (*jai jai*) over temptations. Guru Tegh Bahadur had to deal with dark forces in the social arena over which he attained his victory through his noble sacrifice. Notably, the image of death looms large in his compositions and his *saloks* are described by Surjit Hans ‘as a long poem “Waiting for Martyrdom”’ (Hans 1988, 226). In fact, his fifty-seven *saloks* can be divided into two sections: the first section (*saloks* 1–52) belongs to an early period in the Guru’s life when he was traveling and preaching in different parts of east India, including the Malwa region of the Punjab; the second section of last five *saloks* (53–57) belongs to the critical moment when he made the decision to confront Mughal authorities in Delhi in response to a plea made by a group of learned scholars (*paṇḍit*) from Kashmir. He designated his only son, Gobind Das, to the office of Guru through the imprimatur of *salok* # 54 and urged him to include his works in the Adi Granth to finalize the canon. In this study we will focus only on five famous *saloks*, numbering 16, 51, 53, 54, and 56 respectively, to explore the following major themes: (1) The spiritual state of fearlessness; (2) Carefree optimism; (3) Powerlessness, captivity, and vulnerability; (4) Power, freedom, and successful strategies; and finally (5) Truth prevails ultimately. Taran Singh brilliantly pronounced the first four of these couplets as *mantakī salok* (‘potent verses’), which like the sparks (*changīāṛe*) had the power to fire the imagination of common people from rural areas to rise against an oppressive regime (Taran Singh 1976, viii–ix). Let us now examine the historical context of Mughal India in which Guru Tegh Bahdur’s activities took place.

Historical context

Guru Tegh Bahadur assumed the office of leadership on 11 August 1664 CE during the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) who had already become antagonistic towards the Sikh Gurus when he came to know from the Mughal courtiers that the seventh Guru, Har Rai (1630–1661), had helped the fugitive prince Dara Shikoh. He asked Raja Jai Singh of Amber to have the Guru summoned to Delhi. The Guru sent instead his elder son, Ram Rai, along with his minister Dargah Mal, who escorted him. In the Mughal court, Ram Rai deliberately misread one of the lines from the Adi Granth and strayed away from the teachings of the Gurus against the performance of miracles. The seventh Guru designated his youngest son, Harkrishan (1656–1664), to succeed him before he passed away at Kiratpur on 6 October 1661 CE. This decision was a direct challenge to Aurangzeb who had kept Ram Rai as hostage in Delhi on the assumption that Ram Rai would be the heir apparent of Guru Har Rai and could be manipulated into bringing the Sikhs under control. Again, the emperor summoned the young Guru to Delhi through Raja Jai Singh who hosted Guru Harkrishan in his bungalow. Anticipating that the emperor would insist that he demonstrate miraculous feats, the Guru refused to meet him in person. Meanwhile, an epidemic of smallpox was raging in the city of Delhi, and the Guru came out of Raja Jai Singh’s bungalow to tend the sick. During the service of healing the sick Guru Har Krishan was himself afflicted with the

disease of smallpox, which ravaged his tender body. He made the pronouncement of designating his successor as 'Bābā Bakālē,' meaning that the next Guru would be found in the town of Bakala. He was specifically referring to his great-uncle, Tegh Bahadur (youngest son of Guru Hargobind), who lived at the town of Bakala at that time. Guru Har Krishan passed away on 30 March 1664.

Assuming the office of authority Guru Tegh Bahadur built a new town on the mound of Makhawal in 1665, named after his mother as Chakk Nanaki that became famous as Anandpur. Thereafter, the Guru departed on an extended journey to the east of India. He was, however, arrested for the first time from Dhamdhan, *pargana* Bangar, under imperial orders by Alam Khan Ruhila and brought to Delhi on Wednesday, 8 November 1665 (*Bhaṭṭ Vahī Jādavbansīān*, Harbans Singh 1982, 65). During his detention Kanwar Ram Singh, son of Mirza Raja Jai Singh of Amber, 'became a surety for him' (Bhuyan 1947, 162–163) and the Guru was released on 17 December 1665 to resume his interrupted eastward journey. Towards the close of 1668, Guru Tegh Bahadur met Mirza Raja Ram Singh again in Dacca who requested the Guru to accompany him on his campaign to subdue the rebellious Ahoms in Assam, an expedition in which the Guru eventually 'acted as a mediator and brought about reconciliation between the warring forces' (Harbans Singh 1982, 78).

When the Guru was at Dacca the mother of Bulaki Das of Saṅgat Tolā hired a local artist to draw the Guru's portrait on which the Guru gave finishing touches with his own hand. This early painting of the ninth Guru from Dacca was reproduced in the beginning of *Guru Tegh Bahadur Commemorative Volume* (Satbir Singh 1975b, 15; See Figure 1). Surely, this portrait was painted in the courtly Mughal style, representing the Guru in a royal manner and dignity. The Guru was holding a hunting hawk on his hand, a symbol of aristocracy in those days. The plume on his turban represented the sovereignty of the 'True King' (*sachā pātishāh*) who ruled over the hearts of the people. It should be emphasized that the works of art provide documentary evidence to make sense of the religious life and cultural context of early Sikh community. Following the *miri-piri* tradition of his father, Guru Tegh Bahadur had assumed the characteristics of a spiritual leader as well as a temporal ruler who had specific responsibilities to protect righteousness (*dharam*). Unsurprisingly, his royal figure, with a plume setting off his turban and a horse underneath, had an irresistible appeal to his followers, while creating suspicion among the Mughal authorities who read in his activities the danger to established authority (Harbans Singh 1982, 93). Thus, the Sikh notion of sovereignty was a serious challenge to the Mughal state. Let us now turn to the five major themes one by one by placing them in their historical context.

The spiritual state of fearlessness

In his works Guru Tegh Bahadur employs the phrase *nirbhai pad* for 'the spiritual state of fearlessness.' This is the ultimate state of freedom, peace, and equanimity. The person who has achieved the gift of fearlessness does not grieve in grief and is never affected by pains and pleasures in life. For such a one gold is as good as dust. Rising above praise and blame, and all hopes and desires, one remains untouched by the temptations of flesh and anger. The self of such a person merges with the Divine as water mingles with water. Guru Tegh Bahadur proclaimed this message of fearlessness in his *Sorathī* hymn (GGS 633) in the



Figure 1. I took the photograph of “Guru Tegh Bahadur’s Portrait received from Dacca,” reproduced in *Guru Tegh Bahadur Commemorative Volume* published by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar, to mark his 300th martyrdom anniversary in 1975. This is a retouched version of the actual painting discovered by Dr. Trilochan Singh in 1958 in the possession of Mrs. Kanchan Devi (Shikar Maa) from the family of Bhai Bulaki Das in Dacca. The family had preserved it for more than 250 years. Its original version was reproduced by Dr. Trilochan Singh in his book *Guru Tegh Bahadur: Prophet and Martyr* published by Delhi Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee in 1967. Its replica is available at both Victoria Museum, Calcutta, and British Museum Library in London.

form of a *vāk* ('commandment') to his audience when he assumed the office of Guru on 11 August 1664 CE (Singh Satbir 1975b, 11). The preamble to the foundational text of the Sikh tradition defines the two most important divine attributes of being 'fearless and devoid of enmity' (*nirbhau-nirvair*, GGS 1) enunciated by Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of the Sikh tradition. Guru Tegh Bahadur's life was a witness to this ideal state of fearlessness in which there was no enmity or hatred for anyone. What he preached was actualized in the events of history. I will elaborate these points by sharing my personal experience of participating in an international conference more than two decades ago on the scope of reforming the criminal justice system.

In August 1998 there was an eight-day research retreat at Sorrento, British Columbia, in Canada, on the fascinating topic of 'The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice.' In addition to academic scholars of various religious traditions, it was attended by the Chaplain for the Correctional Services of Canada, a Judge of Provincial Court of Saskatchewan, Police Officers, representatives of different ethnic groups, schoolteachers, and leaders of native communities in Canada. The project was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the University of Victoria, and some other organizations. This international and interdisciplinary research project was meant to explore what major religions say in text, tradition, and current practice about criminal justice system in general, and Restorative Justice in particular. While criminal justice system is based upon the principle of retribution and the letter of the law, Restorative Justice focuses on the process of healing the victim and the community as well. I made my presentation on 'Sikhism and Restorative Justice: Theory and Practice' (Pashaura Singh 2001, 199–216). I vividly remember an episode that took place during my presentation. I was talking about Guru Tegh Bahadur's ideas of a just society depicted in his celebrated couplet on fearlessness:

bhai kāhūm kau det nahi nahi bhai mānat ān//

kahu nānak suni re manā giānī tāhi bakhāni//16//

The one who holds none in fear,

Nor is afraid of anyone else.

Says Nanak, listen my mind:

Acknowledge that one alone as a sage of true wisdom.

(M9, *Salok* 16, GGS, p. 1427).

This is the ideal state for human beings, both individually and socially. In this condition,

no one submits to highhandedness and exploitation and no one has the chance to dominate, despoil or demean another. In this state there is no aggression, nor any fear of aggression. Peace is the value prized most: peace is thus ensured. (Harbans Singh 1971, 125)

Thus, Guru Tegh Bahadur's notion of fearlessness is accompanied by compassionate love without any prejudice or hatred for anyone. By contrast, a tyrant can be fearless too, but he is full of hatred for the people whom he wants to oppress by misusing his political power.

During my presentation Dr. Arthur Blue, a psychologist, and an active leader of native professional organizations in Canada and the United States, raised his hand and admired

the most significant scriptural passage on fearlessness by Guru Tegh Bahadur, saying ‘Frighten none and fear none’ is a wonderful statement. To my surprise, the whole audience looked towards him and listened to him patiently when he vented his cry for social justice: ‘This is what we want. We do not want to be exploited by anyone. We are the masters of this land, but we are treated like slaves.’ The audience was stunned. At that point, the moderator of the conference intervened and urged me to continue my presentation. I suddenly realized the power of Guru Tegh Bahadur’s revolutionary message that infused the spirit of resistance among the representatives of native people in Canada in modern times. Undoubtedly, the First Nation’s encounter with Euro-Canadians resulted in a trauma that impacted the Aboriginal population, creating fear and uncertainty in their living experience. It is no wonder that they have kept this trauma within themselves most of the time. They only speak about it in hushed comments within the sweat lodges (Blue and Blue 2001, 61). Let us now turn to the original context of Guru Tegh Bahadur’s scriptural passage.

About three and a half centuries ago, the same message of fearlessness by the ninth Guru fired the imagination of the rural population of the Malwa region of Punjab. It posed a direct challenge to Emperor Aurangzeb who had imposed Islamic laws and taxes throughout the empire and ordered the replacement of Hindu temples with mosques. According to *Ma’āsir-i-Ālamgīrī* by Sāqī Mustā’ad Khān, the emperor had issued a general order on 8 April 1669 to all provincial governors in which he decreed that all schools and temples of non-Muslims were to be demolished:

The Lord Cherisher of the Faith learnt that in the province of Tatta, Multan and especially at Benaras, the Brahman misbelievers used to teach their false books in their established schools and that admirers and students both Hindu and Muslim, used to come from great distances to these misguided men in order to acquire this vile learning. His Majesty, eager to establish Islam, issued orders to governors of all provinces to demolish the schools and temples of the infidels and with utmost urgency put down the teaching and the public practice of the religion of these misbelievers (Sirkar 1947, 51-52; Fauja Singh 1977, 68, n. 4; Harbans Singh 1982, 82-83).

In this context, there is firm evidence in old Persian sources about the desecration of Sikh places of worship. For instance, a contemporary Persian source, *Ahkām-i-Ālamgīrī* (MS.), written by Munshi Inayatullah Ismi, records:

Muhammad Aulia, of the town of Buriya, in the *parganā* [an administrative unit in Mughal India] of Khizarabad, *sirkār* Sirhind, reported to His Majesty that, under royal orders, and with the consent of the Qazi, the temple of the worshippers of Nanak [*nānak prastān*] had been pulled down and a mosque built on the site. Sayyid Zafar was appointed to take charge of that mosque and lead prayers and benedictions.

(Ismi, Rampur State Library, MS: 514-515; Harbans Singh 1982, 84-85)

Here, Emperor Aurangzeb was directly dealing with the matter of a Nanak-panthi *dhar-amsālā* that was destroyed by the Mughal soldiers, followed by the building of a mosque on its ruins. Ganda Singh painstakingly compiled such reports from Persian sources about Aurangzeb’s antipathy towards the followers of Guru Nanak (Ganda Singh 1949, 73). In this ominous situation, Guru Tegh Bahadur was exhorting his followers to acknowledge only such a person as the true sage who frightened none and feared none. His bold message had a deep impact on his audience. As a matter of fact, the rural peasantry had always retained its hereditary love of freedom. The Guru’s whole activity in the Malwa

region was suspect in the eyes of state news-writers, who perceived it as a danger to established authority. It is no wonder that they sent 'alarming reports to Delhi of Guru Tegh Bahadur's travels and of the following he commanded' (Harbans Singh 1982, 93).

Carefree optimism

Guru Tegh Bahadur infused a new spirit among the rural people of Punjab during his preaching tours. His letters (*hukam-nāmās*) written to various congregations in east India and Punjab bear testimony to the fact that he was received very well wherever he went. The Guru set up a network of relations between different Sikh congregations (*saṅgats*) under his authority. The congregations in east India not only served the Panth under his leadership but also became its backbone under his successor (Sagar 2002, 41). In his letters, Guru Tegh Bahadur's main concern for the 'means of livelihood' (*rozgār*) of Sikhs in Patna and Benaras to ameliorate their economic condition and their protection in difficult circumstances (*saṅgati kī bāhurī hogu*) may be seen in his blessings to those congregations (Pritam Singh 1976, 13–28). He used to address some prominent Sikhs like Bhāi Baṭhā as his sons, to strengthen their local authority. To remove internal dissensions within the competing groups, the Guru raised the status of a loyal Sikh in the eyes of the congregation: 'Let the congregation consider Bhai Dyal Das' instructions as the command of the Guru. All their desires shall be fulfilled' (Sagar 2002, 123). His compassion for his favorite horse, Sri Dhar, gifted by Nawab Saif Khan, may be seen from his letter to Benaras congregation, expressing his humane concern for the animal who fell ill:

In the name of the Lord Eternal, addressed to Bhai Jawehri. The Lord shall protect the entire *saṅgat*. We enjoin upon the *saṅgat* to look after Sri Dhar. Let him be fed well and let him be conveyed to Patna as soon as he recovers. The *saṅgat* shall be blessed. (Ganda Singh 1967a, 81)

From his letters, it is quite evident that Guru Tegh Bahadur was as much concerned with worldly affairs as he was anxious about the spiritual matters of his followers. He always inspired them to cultivate carefree optimism in life, worrying only about those matters which were out of their course. The mundane world is like a road where no one stays forever. Note the following striking couplet:

chintā tām kī kījīai jo anahonī hoi//

ihu māragu saṁsār ko nānak thiru nahī koi//51//

We should only become anxious

if something unexpected happens.

This is the way of the world, O Nanak,

Where nothing is stable or permanent.

(M9, *Salok* 51, GGS, p. 1429)

The keyword in the present context is *chintā*, which means 'care and anxiety.' People experience these worries in their daily lives while participating in worldly affairs. Guru Tegh Bahadur exhorts his audience to be aware of the reality of the world where

nothing is permanent. Everything happens according to the divine will, and there is no need to worry at all. People should worry only if something unexpected happens. They should rather put their faith exclusively in the indwelling God who looks after them in their mundane affairs. Thus, by submitting to the divine will cheerfully one can become 'carefree' (*achintu*) and can gain confidence to cope with any situation of anguish and despair, because every happening is then seen to be coming from God. The acceptance of anxiety is regarded by the Guru as an act of showing positive attitude towards life. In fine, the immediate impact of Guru Tegh Bahadur's *salok* on his followers was to make them so resolute and lighthearted (*beparvāh*) that they did not worry about anything while facing the dire circumstances.

Powerlessness, captivity, and vulnerability

There is a unique title *Doharā* amidst Guru Tegh Bahadur's couplets (*saloks*) in the Sikh scripture. Why is this *salok* so special that it needed a new heading to represent a pause in the continuous poetic narrative? At this point, there is a clear-cut break in the thematic flow of the narrative that separates it from the previous section of couplets. The present *doharā* represents an existential crisis in which the elite group of Brahmins in the Hindu community found themselves under the threat of conversion to Islam during the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb. The original couplet reads:

Doharā//

balu chhutkio bandhan pare kacchū na hot upāi//

kahu nānak ab oṭ hari gaj jium hohu sahāi//53//

Doharā ("Couplet")

The strength is exhausted, and we are in captivity.

Nothing is going to work at all.

Says Nanak, the Lord is the only support now.

May he come to our rescue as he did the elephant.

(M9, *Salok* 53, GGS, p. 1429)

In this new reading, we find the description of the pathetic condition of powerlessness and captivity, in which human beings become vulnerable. The keyword *gaj* ('elephant') in the text refers to a famous story in Hindu mythology. There is a popular legend of *Gajendra Mokṣa* in which Lord Vishnu (Hari) frees the elephant in trouble. While wandering in the hills, the lord of elephants, Gajendra, felt thirsty and entered a lake in the *Trikutā* hill. While the elephant was drinking water, a crocodile caught hold of its feet. Finding himself on the brink of death, Gajendra cried out for help by raising his long trunk upwards and pleading Hari to save him. Answering his prayer, Hari flew promptly on *Garuḍa* (a mythical bird or vulture, half-man, half-bird, on which Vishnu rides) and killed the crocodile with his *chakra* (a discus type weapon) to release the animal from its clutches. According to the legend, the elephant was in his previous birth a Pandyan king by name Indrayumna devoted to Hari but cursed by saint Agastya he was born as

elephant. Hari blessed Gajendra who ultimately attained liberation (*mokṣa*) by remembering the divine Name (Dogra and Mansukhani 1996, 150).

This unique couplet illuminates how the *paṇḍits* of Kashmir represented their woes to Guru Tegh Bahadur by invoking the story of *Gajendra Mokṣa* in their plea and how they begged him to ‘hold their hand’ in their distress. A contemporary source, *Bhaṭṭ Vahī Talaunḍā Parganā Jīnd*, provides us with firm evidence that a group of sixteen Brahmins from Kashmir led by Kirpa Ram went to see Guru Tegh Bahadur at Chakk Nanaki (present day Anandpur Sahib) on 25 May 1675:

Kirpa Ram, son of Aru Ram, grandson of Narain Das, great-grandson of Brahm Das, of the house of Thakur Das of Bhardwaj *gotra*, Saraswat Datt Brahmin (Mulal), resident of Matan, *parganā* Srinagar, Kashmir, came to Chakk Nanaki, *parganā* Kahlur, on Jeth Sudi Ikadasi 1732 *samvat* / 25 May 1675, bringing with him sixteen leading Brahmins of Kashmir. Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru ... consoled them. (Harbans Singh 1982, 95)

Evidently, a group of Brahmins had met with the Guru at Chakk Nanaki to seek his help against religious persecutions being carried out in the Kashmir valley by its Mughal governor. Most interestingly, Guru Tegh Bahadur summed up succinctly the nightmare of those Brahmins in his own striking *Dohrā*, providing a glimpse of what Harbans Singh adroitly described as ‘the gathering gloom’ in Mughal India during Aurangzeb’s regime. During those gloomy days, the Sikh center at Chakk Nanaki had become a beacon and the refuge of whoever wished to live with faith and dignity (Harbans Singh 1982, 86). After a deep reflection on the situation at hand, Guru Tegh Bahadur agreed to do whatever was necessary to defend the people’s right to wear their religious symbols. Before the visiting Brahmins took their departure, the Guru according to the *Gurū Kīān Sākhīān*, consoled them by saying: ‘Baba Nanak Ji will protect you’ (Harbans Singh 1982, 96; Padam 2003 [1986], 79).

Power, freedom, and successful strategies

Guru Tegh Bahadur had been contemplating on the issue of Brahmins from Kashmir for over a month and realized the need for the empowerment of the subjugated people through a strategic plan. To awaken their conscience, he made the decision to lay down his life by confronting the Mughal authorities in Delhi. He was pleased to receive spontaneous positive response from his young son to his resolution to protect the right of the people to practice their faith freely at any cost. According to *Gurū Kīān Sākhīān* (# 28), Guru Tegh Bahadur assembled the congregation (*saṅgat*) at Anandpur on *sāvan* 8, *sambat* 1732 / 8 July 1675, and asked Diwan Dargah Mall to bring the customary emblems of succession to consecrate Gobind Das as Guru. The Guru arrayed his son in ceremonial apparel and weapons and seated him in his own place. Diwan Dargah Mall laid the articles in front of Gobind Das and bowed in obeisance. Baba Gurdita, a descendant of Baba Buddha, applied the *tikkā* (‘ceremonial mark’) on Gobind Das’s forehead. Guru Tegh Bahadur spoke: ‘Brother Sikhs, acknowledge Gobind Das in our place. He who does so will be rewarded. We must now go to Delhi ...’ (Harbans Singh 1982, 96-97; Padam 2003 [1986], 79).

Addressing the newly designated Guru, Gobind Das, Guru Tegh Bahadur recited the following couplet to ameliorate the pathetic condition of powerlessness, captivity, and vulnerability. In the context of the political situation of his times, this unique *salok*/

doharā was his specific answer to the prayers of the elite group of Brahmins in the contemporary Hindu society:

balu hoā bandhan chhutṭe sabhu kichhu hot upāi//

nānak sabhu kichhu tumarai hāth mai tum hī hot sahāi//54//

The strength is restored, and the shackles are broken.

All the strategies are now doable.

O Nanak! Everything is in your hands, Lord.

You are my helper and support.

(M9, *Salok* 54, GGS, p. 1429)

This is a particularly illuminating instance of recitation of this couplet by Guru Tegh Bahadur at Anandpur when he passed on the office of Guru to his nine-year old son, Gobind Das, by providing instructions with an optimistic note to empower the Sikh Panth so that it could break all the shackles of slavery. He used the imprimatur of this *doharā* to transfer his spiritual authority to his only son before leaving for Delhi. The tenth Guru issued this couplet as a commandment (*vāk*) to his audience, resolving to empower the Sikh Panth. It is no wonder that this couplet was recorded in some early manuscripts of the *Adi Granth* under the distinctive symbol of ‘*Mahallā* 10’ (Pashaura Singh 2000, 73). We will return to this point after looking at the actual practice of transference of authority in the Sikh tradition.

This novel reading of Guru Tegh Bahadur’s couplet is based on the well-established precedent since the beginnings of the Sikh Panth at Kartarpur. First, Guru Nanak transferred his authority to Guru Angad through the imprimatur of the *bāṇī* and institutionalized the office of Guru to ensure its survival and permanence. Before he passed away in 1539, Guru Nanak recited the concluding *salok* of *Japī* (GGS: 8) while giving final instructions to Guru Angad, who repeated it in the form of a *vāk* or commandment to the congregation. Unsurprisingly, it is written under his distinctive symbol in *Vār Mājh* with minor variations (*M2//paunū gurū pāṇī pitā mātā dharati mahatu ... //*, GGS: 146), stressing the continuity and unity of the office of Guru. Second, the third Guru transferred his spiritual authority to his son-in-law by means of the following *salok* as the final instruction: ‘The Perfect Guru has implanted the divine Name within me, dispelling my doubts from within. I sing the divine Name and the *kīrtan* of the divine praises; the divine Light now shines brilliantly to show me the way ...’ (*M3//guri pūrai hari nāmu dīṛāiā ...*, GGS: 86-87). Remarkably, this verse is repeated under the symbol of Guru Ram Das as *salok* 28 with minor linguistic variations in *Salok Vārān te Vadhik* (*M4//guri pūrai hari nāmu dīṛāiā ...*, GGS: 1424). Proclaiming it as a commandment (*vāk*) to the congregation, the fourth Guru made it the principal source of inspiration while performing *kīrtan* in classical melodies during his spiritual reign. He was an accomplished musician who added eleven new ragas to the existing system of nineteen ragas in which Guru Nanak performed.

Third, Guru Ram Das transferred his spiritual authority to his youngest son through the imprimatur of an illuminating stanza (#12, *M4//nānak vīchārahi sant*

jan chāri ved kahande//...) from his *Vār Gaurī*, which Guru Arjan repeated with a slight variation (# 31, M5//*nānak vīchārahi sant muni janām chāri ved kahande//...*) under his distinctive symbol in the same text as *Paurī Mahallā 5* ('Stanza by Guru Arjan', GGS, 316–317). The early occurrence of this stanza (GGS: 306) is ascribed to Guru Ram Das, since the actual ballad belongs to him. Here, one may raise the following questions: Why would Guru Arjan use his father's composition under his own signatures? What is so significant about this stanza that he repeated it? At the succession ceremony of Guru Arjan his father gave him the piece of advice on how to deal with the detractors. After assuming the office of Guru, the fifth Guru proclaimed it in the form of a *vāk* or commandment. The dominant theme of this stanza is certainly related, first, to the proclamation of the divine Word by the saintly people, and second, to the condemnation of those who do not accept their authority. The last line provides a warning against the threat to the central authority (Pashaura Singh 2000, 160–161).

Fourth, Guru Hargobind transferred his spiritual authority to his grandson by means of Guru Arjan's *salok* as the final instruction: 'Keep your hope of succor focused only on the One Divine, my soul, and discard all other hope. Meditate, Nanak, on the divine Name and all your tasks will be accomplished' (*Saloku//dhar jāre ikk ṭek tu lāhi biḍānī ās//...*, GGS: 257). Guru Har Rai inscribed these words on a piece of paper and issued a commandment (*vāk*) to the congregation. Fortunately, this important historical information is preserved in a manuscript of the *Adi Granth* completed in 1667 CE (*sambat 1724 māgh vadī ekam 1*) by Jograj, who died in 1671 CE (*sambat 1728 magh vadī chauth 4*) on a Sunday. The piece of information given on folio 3b of the manuscript is said to be a copy of Guru Har Rai's writing (*satave mahal kiām akharām kī nakal*):

Saloku// dhar jāre ikk ṭek tū lāhi viḍānī ās// nānak nāmu dhiāi tu tere kāraju āvahi rās//1//.
These words were proclaimed in writing by the Guru at the time of succession to the throne [of Guru Nanak] in the morning hours of Tuesday, in the month of the last days of *poh* [December/January], at Thapul Dera in Sirmor. He who reflects on these words will be blessed. His cycle of birth and death will be broken. This is the Guru's *vāk*. (Pashaura Singh 2000, 71)

This note refers to an important moment in Sikh history when Guru Har Rai went to Thapul in Sirmor (Nahan) soon after his succession to the throne of Guru Nanak and proclaimed his first teaching in the form of a *vāk* (commandment). It also throws a considerable light on the well-established tradition of receiving a *vāk* from the reigning Guru. Jograj seems to have felt the need to record this for posterity in his volume of the *Adi Granth* (See Figure 2). Moreover, this note corroborates the testimony of the contemporary Persian chronicle *Dabistān-i-Mazāhib*:

In the year one thousand and fifty-five (Hijri), when Najabat Khan, son of Shah Rukh Mirza, having mobilized an army, under the orders of Shah Jahan, invaded the territories of Tara Chand and made the Raja a prisoner, Guru Har Rai went to Thapul in the territories of Raja Karam Chand near Sirhind. (Ganda Singh 1967b, 67–68)

Evidently, the seventh Guru did not want to 'embroil himself in an armed conflict between the chief of Hindur (Nalagarh) and the Mughal commandants who invaded his territories' (Grewal 1990, 67).

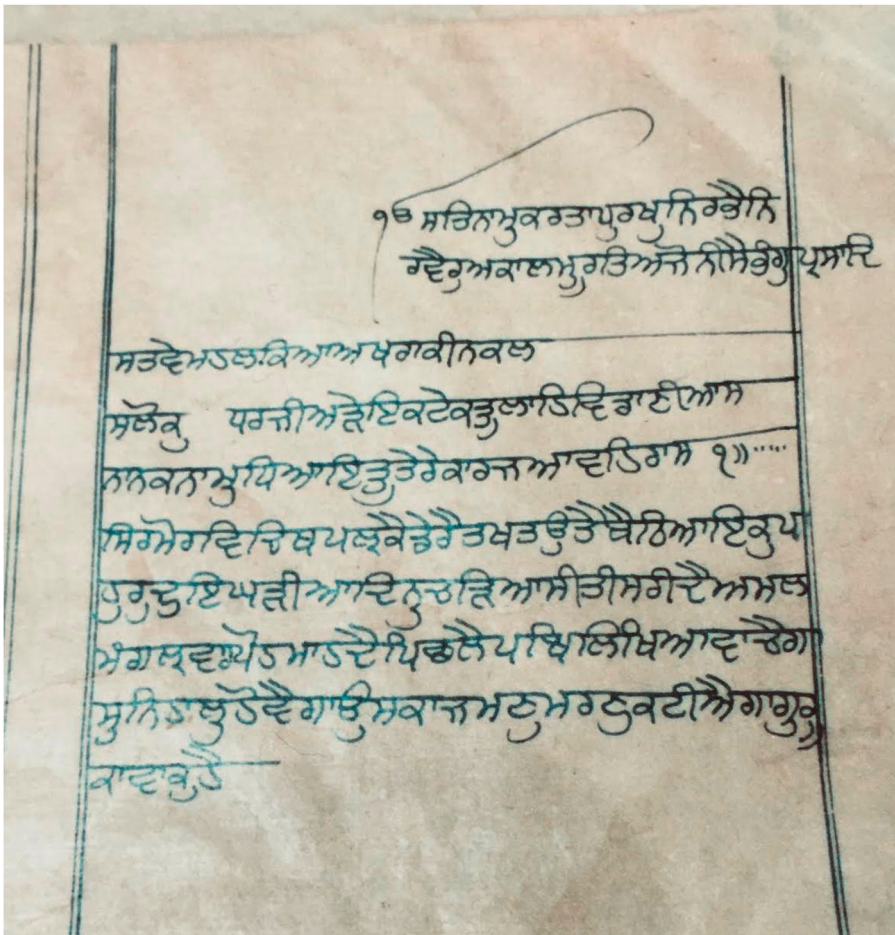


Figure 2. Punjabi University Museum MS # 2, containing Jograj's entry of the copy of Guru Har Rai's words in folio 3b. This photograph was taken by the author during his examination of the manuscript at Punjabi University, Patiala in 1990.

Contesting erroneous assumptions

Here, I have shared four impeccable instances of a long-lived praxis of the transference of authority to justify my new interpretation of Guru Tegh Bahadur's *salok* # 54 in its original context for the following reasons. In the first place, most of the traditional Sikh sources, namely *Mahimā Prakāsh Vārtak* (1741–1773 CE; Bajwa 2004, 176), *Bansā-valī-nāmā* (1769 CE; Padam 1997, 117–118), *Mahimā Prakāsh Kavītā* (1776 CE; Vedi 1989, 381–382), and *Sūraj Prakāsh* (1843 CE; Vir Singh 1991, 4460–4463) have attributed this couplet to Guru Gobind Singh as a reply to his father who was assumed to have sent the previous couplet in a letter from Delhi to his son, reflecting his condition before his execution: 'My strength is gone, I am in chains. Says Nanak, the only help is God who rescued the elephant in a moment.' Both these assumptions are completely wrong. In this context, Surjit Hans raised the question that 'if this sloka is not taken to be anticipatory composition it would mean that God helped the elephant but failed Guru Tegh

Bahadur' (Hans 1988, 226). However, Hans omitted perhaps consciously the exegesis of *salok* # 54 in his analysis, because he was not sure of its authorship. Uncritical use of traditional sources has led generations of Sikh scholars to continue to accept this *salok* as Guru Gobind Singh's response to his father's final communication (Trilochan Singh 1975, 219–220; Singh and Talib 1975, 195–196, n. 7).

Secondly, there are several manuscripts of the *Adi Granth* in which *salok* # 54 is attributed to Guru Gobind Singh. For instance, Punjabi University Museum Manuscript # 1 was written in 1687 CE (*sambat* 1744 *māgh vadī* 1), during the period of Guru Gobind Singh. It contains one *salok* attributed to the tenth Guru among the couplets of Guru Tegh Bahadur in folio 700b. There is evidence that this manuscript was converted to the Banno tradition. Another example is that of Punjabi University Museum Manuscript # 6, which was completed in 1692 CE (*sambat* 1749 *sāvan sudī ekam* 1) on a Tuesday during the days of Guru Gobind Singh (See Figure 3). It is very neatly written, has few corrections, and appears to be in a single hand. There is one couplet attributed to the tenth Guru (*Mahallā Dasavān* [10]// *balu huo bandhan chhuṭai sabhu kacchu hot upāi// sabh kachhu tumare hāth mai tum hī hoi sahāi* [54//]) in folio 576b (See Figure 4). This manuscript belonged to the Lahore tradition, which was also known as Kangarh or Kiratpur recension of the *Adi Granth* (Pashaura Singh 2000, 72–74, 79–80). Thus, a perception of the tenth Guru being the author of *salok* # 54 was popular among certain groups within the Sikh Panth in the last two decades of seventeenth century.

Finally, G.B. Singh examined a manuscript of the 'Complete Granth Sahib' (*pūran granth sāhib*) in 1915 belonging to the old 'loyal Sikh congregation' (*hazūr sikh saṅgat*) of Dacca / Dhaka, present-day Capital of Bangladesh. He called it Damdama recension (*damdame vālī bīr*), completed on 28 November 1675 (*sambat* 1732 *mitī agahan vadī* 7), just seventeen days after Guru Tegh Bahadur's execution on 11 November 1675. He asserted that this *bīr* was written in Makhoyal, a place which is now called Damdama Sahib in Anandpur, and that it was taken by a Sikh belonging to Dacca congregation when Anandpur was attacked by the Mughal forces in 1704. He further claimed that Guru Tegh Bahadur himself gave instructions to three scribes to include his compositions at their proper places in the *Adi Granth*. His fifty-nine hymns were arranged in different raga sections, with one exception that his four hymns in *Jaijāvanti* raga came after the *Jait-sirī* raga. Guru Tegh Bahadur's fifty-seven *saloks*, with minor linguistic variations, were placed in *Salok Vārān te Vadhik* section in the epilogue. One couplet was attributed to the tenth Guru (*Mahalla* 10//*balu hūo bandhan chhuṭte sabh kachhu hoti upāi// sabh kachhu tumrai hāth mai tum hī hoi sahāi* [//]). Since all the unauthorized compositions were available in this manuscript, it belonged to the Banno recension of the *Adi Granth* (G.B. Singh 1944, 215–234). Similarly, another court-scribe (*darbāri likhārī*), Bhai Haridas, who had started writing the copy of the *Adi Granth* with the blessings of Guru Tegh Bahadur by including his autograph, completed his volume with all the compositions of the ninth Guru (*Jaijāvanti* raga coming after *Jait-sirī* raga) at appropriated places on *vai-sākhī* day of *sambat* 1733 / 29 March 1676 CE. This volume also contained all the extra-canonical compositions of Banno recension (Harbhajan Singh 1981, 117–121, 203).

In sum, Guru Gobind Singh knew perfectly well that *salok* # 54 was the composition of his father who gave him as a piece of advice at the time of his succession to the throne of Guru Nanak, and that he himself delivered it as a commandment (*vāk*) to the

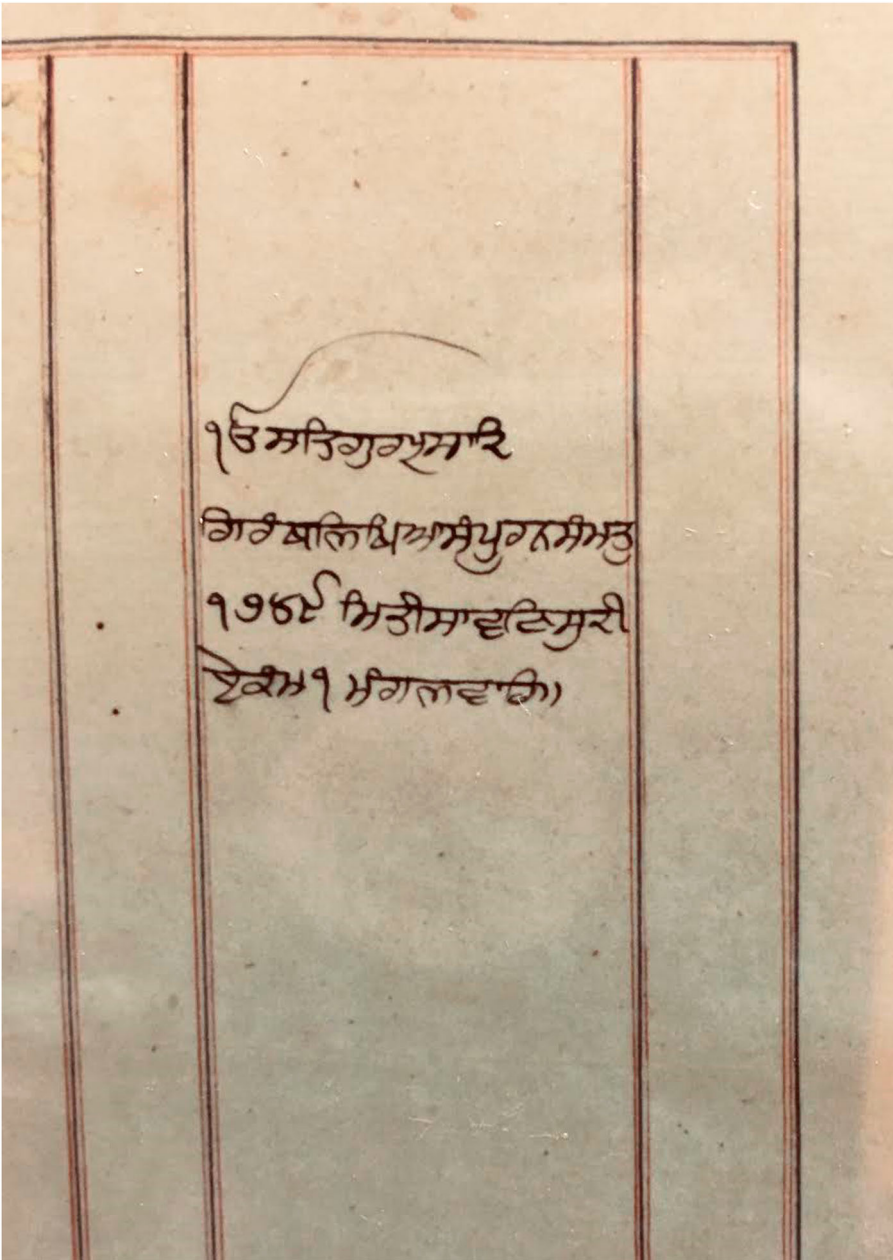


Figure 3. Punjabi University Museum MS # 6, containing the completion date of this manuscript, *sambat 1749 sāvan sudi ekam 1* (1692 CE) on Tuesday. This manuscript is very neatly written in a single hand by an accomplished scribe during the period of Guru Gobind Singh. This photograph was taken by the author during his examination of the manuscript at Punjabi University, Patiala in 1990.

congregation at Anandpur, creating the impression of his authorship among the audience. The manuscripts of the Damdama *bīr* ('recension') written under his direct supervision at Anandpur and later at Damdama Sahib in Talvaṇḍī Sābo, attribute *salok* # 54 to

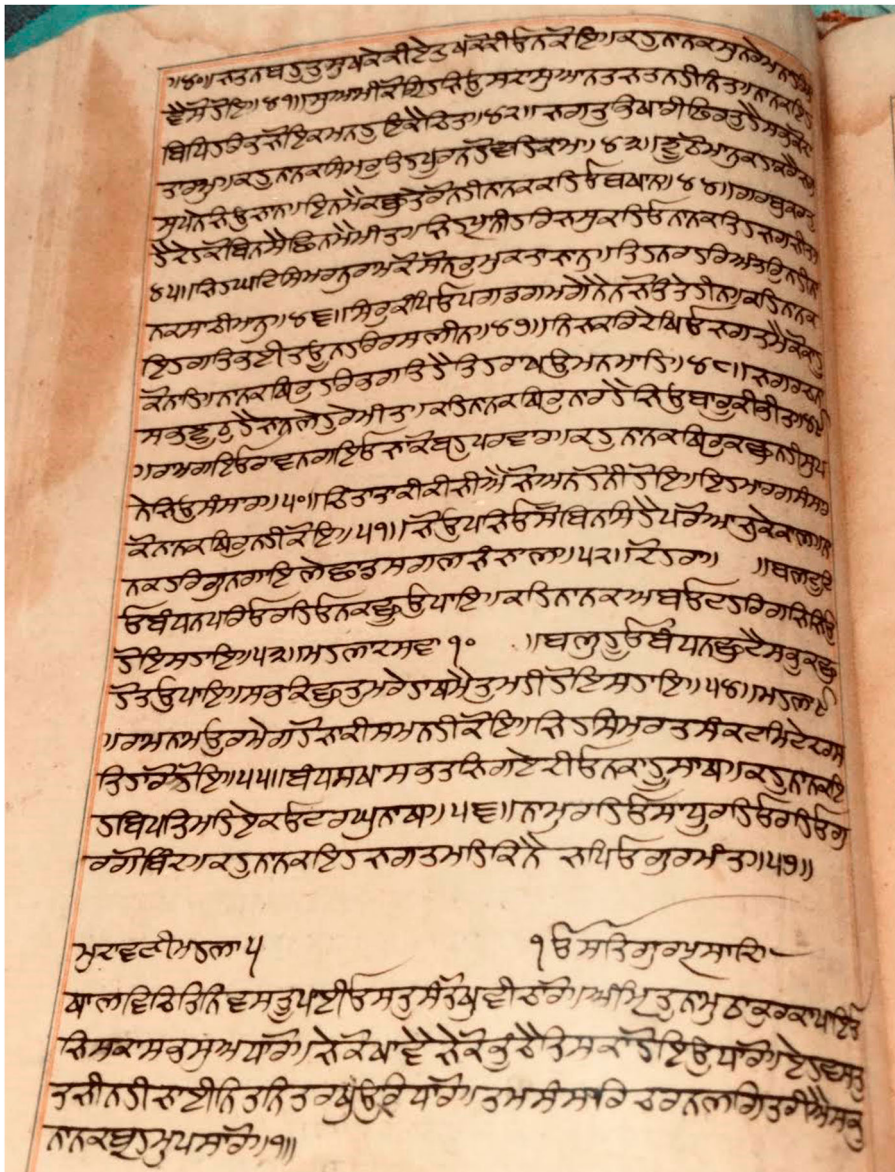


Figure 4. Punjabi University Museum MS # 6, containing the specific title of “Mahallā Dasvān 10” among Guru Tegh Bahadur’s couplets in folio 576b. This photograph was taken by the author during his examination of the manuscript at Punjabi University, Patiala in 1990.

Guru Tegh Bahadur. For instance, two manuscripts of the Adi Granth, written in *sambat* 1739 (1682 CE) and *sambat* 1748 (1691 CE) respectively, contained the works of the ninth Guru at appropriate places with raga *Jaijāvanti* following the *Prabhātī* mode in the standard way. These two volumes did not contain the extra material of the Banno version (Harbhajan Singh 1981, 121–123). These two manuscripts (with catalogue numbering # 97 and # 14) were housed in the Sikh Reference Library, Amritsar, and were destroyed or stolen in 1984 during Operation Blue Star (Pashaura Singh 2000, 223–

224). There still exist several manuscripts of this standard Damdama version around the Anandpur and Bathinda area, the main centers of Sikh activities in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. I examined the digital copy of a rare manuscript of Damdama version prepared in *sambat* 1764 (1707 CE) and preserved at *Toshākhānā* ('Abode of Precious Items') of Takhat Sachkhand Sri Hazur Sahib Abchalnagar in Nanded, Maharashtra, in which there is no mention of 'Mahalla 10' to reflect the authorship of *salok* # 54 as that of Guru Gobind Singh. Another beautiful 'Golden Cover Volume' (*sunahiri bīr*) of this version prepared by Baba Dip Singh in *sambat* 1783 (1726 CE) at Damdama Sahib in Bathinda is preserved at *Toshākhānā* of Darbar Sahib, Amritsar (Pashaura Singh 2014, 130). Let us now return to the final theme in the sequence of our examination of the ninth Guru's couplets.

Truth prevails ultimately

Guru Nanak had declared the ultimate victory of Truth over falsehood explicitly: 'Falsehood will come to an end, O Nanak, and Truth will prevail in the end' (GGS: 953). He equated Truth with the divine Name (*satinām*). He further remarked: 'Truth is the highest virtue, but higher still is truthful living' (GGS 62). Any dichotomy between spiritual development and moral conduct is not approved in Sikh practice (*Sikhī*). Indeed, truthful conduct (*sach achār*) is at the heart of the Guru's message. The only way to become truthful is to bring oneself into harmony with the divine Order (*hukam*) by eradicating ego or self-centeredness (*haumai*, 'I-ness, my-ness') through the constant practice of meditation on the divine Name (*nām simaran*). In line with Guru Nanak's teachings, Guru Tegh Bahadur highlighted the everlasting power of truthful living in his final optimistic note:

nām rahio sādḥū rahio rahio guru gobindu//

kahu nānak ih jagat mai kin japio gur mantu//56//

The divine Name prevails; the saintly people prevail.

The Guru and the Lord of the Universe prevail.

Say, O Nanak, how rare are those

Who recite the Guru's Mantra in this world?

(M9, *Salok* 56, GGS, p. 1429)

Here, Guru Tegh Bahadur's anticipatory experience reaches the climax of optimism. He envisioned that his martyrdom would not be the end of things. For him, the divine Name, the saintly people, the Guru and God would stay forever. Providing an exegesis of the above couplet, Surjit Hans remarked: 'After his martyrdom *nām*, *sādḥū* and Guru Gobind would stay. The ambiguity in the use of 'Guru Gobind' is significant because it could mean both God and Guru Gobind Singh' (Hans 1988, 227, *emphasis added*). In fact, Guru Tegh Bahadur wanted to dispel any ambiguity about his successor in the face of competing claims made in the past by the pretenders to the office of Guru. He gave his final advice to the congregation through the tenth Guru that the constant remembrance of the divine Name would be the only panacea for all the predicaments (*saṅkaṭ*) in life.

Guru Tegh Bahadur's execution

According to *Gurū Kīān Sākhiān*, Guru Tegh Bahadur departed from Chakk Nanaki along with his three companions on 11 July 1675. They stayed for the night at 'Guru Har Rai's Fort' (*koṭ gurū har rāi*) at Kiratpur where Dip Chand and Nand Chand, sons of Baba Suraj Mall, came to pay homage. Mata Sulakhani, wife of Guru Har Rai and her daughter Bibi Rup Kaur, grieved when they came to know that the Guru was determined to go to Delhi. Guru Tegh Bahadur, the very embodiment of tranquility, calmed them with words of consolation (Padam 2003 [1986], 79; Harbans Singh 1982, 97). When the Guru and his companions crossed the stream Sirsa the following day, they were arrested soon after entering Mughal territory in the *parganā* of Ropar, as described in *Bhaṭṭ Vahī Multānī Sindhī*:

Guru Tegh Bahadur, the Ninth Guru, ... was taken into custody by Nūr Muhammad Khān Mirzā, of Ropar police post, on *sāvan pravishṭe* 12, *sambat* 1732 / 12 July 1675, at Malikpur Rañghrān, *parganā* Ghanaulā, and sent to Sirhind. Along with him were arrested Diwān Matī Dās and Satī Dās, sons of Hirā Nand Chhibbar, and Dyāl Dās, son of Māi Dās. They were kept in custody at Bassī Paṭhānā for four months. The pitiless captors imposed many atrocities on the Guru. The Guru abided by God's Will. (Harbans Singh 1982, 98; translation slightly amended)

Evidently, the ninth Guru and his companions were kept in custody for nearly four months before they were taken to Delhi in November 1675. Three of his companions – Bhai Mati Das, Bhai Dyal Das and Bhai Sati Das – were put to death before his eyes to frighten him about the terrible consequences of a refusal to accept Islam. When he still refused to abandon his faith, he was publicly beheaded in the main market square of Chandni Chowk close to the Red Fort, on 11 November 1675 (Grewal 2017, 33).

A unique entry of the ninth Guru's death is recorded in an early manuscript of the *Adi Granth* written in *sambat* 1749 (1692 CE), providing us with minute details of the time of the day and place of execution explicitly:

sammatu 1732 mañghar sudī 5 vīrvāri bārah ghaṛī din gudare teravī ghaṛī de amal sṛī satgurū tegh bahādur jī samāṇe kotwālī chaute agge//

On the 5th light day of moon of mañghar in *sambat* 1732 (11 November 1675 CE), when twelve gharis (i.e. twelve times of the unit of 24 min become 4.8 h) of the day of Thursday had passed, Sri Satguru Tegh Bahadur's light mingled (*samāṇe*) with the divine Light during the active duration of the thirteenth ghaṛī (i.e. early afternoon) on the platform in front of the Kotwali ("prison" in Mughal times).

The contemporary Sikh community knew very well about the specific details of the ninth Guru's execution. In particular, the usage of the phrase *kotwālī chaute agge* ('platform in front of the Kotwali') in the text of this entry on the death-dates of the Gurus (*chaliṭr jotī jotī samāvaṇ ka*, 'Play of mingling of the Guru's light with the divine Light') referred to the famous market square of Chandni Chowk in Delhi where Guru Tegh Bahadur was beheaded in front of the gathered public (See Figure 5). As part of material culture, a magnificent Gurdwara Sisganj in Delhi marks this historical site today. We will have more on the nature of the Guru's execution as a public spectacle later in the text. It should, however, be emphasized that Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom made the Sikhs bolder who reacted sharply to express their antipathy towards Aurangzeb. The

author of *Ma'āsir-i-Ālamgīrī* recorded an incidence in which a 'disciple of Guru Tegh [Bahadur] Singh hurled two bricks at the emperor' as he made his way back from Jama Masjid to the Red Fort in Delhi on Thursday, 27 October 1676 (Sirkar 1947, 94; Fauja Singh 1977, 135; Piar Singh 1976, 45).

In a recent study on Aurangzeb, Audrey Truschke provides an imperial perspective that the emperor 'had the Sikh guru Tegh Bahadur executed in 1675 for taking up arms against the Mughal state' (Truschke 2017, 38). Later, she acknowledges that the execution is not mentioned in any Persian texts from Aurangzeb's period but still she speculates that it happened 'for causing unrest in the Punjab' (Truschke 2017, 54). Surely, Guru Tegh Bahadur's message of resistance against state oppression was the sufficient reason for his elimination even though there is no contemporary evidence that he took up arms against the Mughal state. Truschke's skewed account is based upon certain Persian sources written a century after the actual event that invented a counter narrative that the Guru was taken as a brigand who was executed for his rebellious activities. In the commemorative volume on Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom

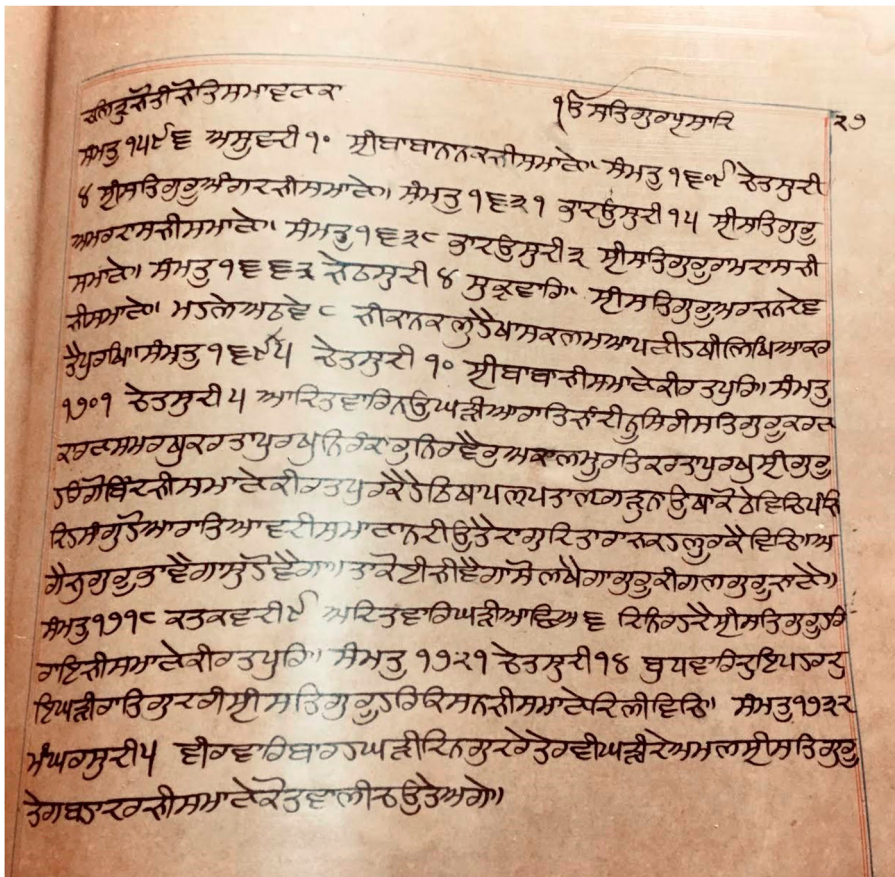


Figure 5. Punjabi University Museum MS # 6, containing the death-dates of nine Gurus, with a special entry of Guru Tegh Bahadur's passing on the platform in front of Kotwali in Delhi. This photograph was taken by the author during his examination of the manuscript at Punjabi University, Patiala in 1990.

tercentenary anniversary, Ganda Singh questioned the veracity of the Persian text of *Siyarul-Mutākhirīn* completed in 1781 CE by Mir Ghulam Hussain Khan, by highlighting the historical inaccuracies in the text (Ganda Singh 1975, 35–54; Also see Piar Singh 1976, 47, 68–70).

The contemporary Sikh sources, however, vigorously resist the Muslim claim made in the Persian sources. For Guru Gobind Singh, it was for ‘the protection of the sacred thread and frontal mark of Hindus that Guru Tegh Bahadur performed a tremendous deed in the Dark Age’ (DG 70). The tenth Guru further remarked:

For the sake of righteousness (*dharam*), he performed a unique act by giving his head but not his resolve [to defend the freedom of faith]. He performed this sacrifice for the sake of the pious (*sādhān*) and did not lose his composure while sacrificing his head. (DG 70)

The reference in this extraordinary passage to the ‘pious’ (*sādhān*) and ‘righteousness’ (*dharam*) would signify that the ninth Guru sacrificed his life to protect the religion promulgated by Guru Nanak and disseminated by his successors. Again, Guru Tegh Bahadur refused to perform a miracle in keeping with the teachings of Guru Nanak (GGS 6, 14), claiming that ‘the bogus miraculous tricks of conjurers are shameful for the true devotees of God’ (DG 70). When he was given the final option between Islam and death, he chose death deliberately in response to the oppressive policy pursued by ‘the rulers of Delhi against whom he dashed his mortal frame by performing an exceptional act that no one else could do’ (*ṭhīkar phor dilīs sir prabh pur kiā payān//tegh bahādur sī kiriyā karī nā kinhūm ān//*, DG 70). Thus, Guru Tegh Bahadur made a supreme sacrifice to defend a general principle of what J.S. Grewal has superbly described as ‘the freedom of human conscience’ (Grewal 2017, 34). For the Sikh Panth, therefore, the ninth Guru’s martyrdom helped to make ‘human rights and freedom of conscience’ central values to its identity.

The usage of modern phrases such as ‘human rights’ and ‘freedom of conscience’ becomes an issue for scholarly discussion because these ideas had not yet become part of popular discourse in pre-modern times. In particular, the notions of freedom of thought and expression became an integral part of scholarly conversation in the western world because of European Enlightenment in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The contemporary international doctrine of human rights is principally an outgrowth of World War II, resulting in the formation of the United Nations serving as the main vehicle for adopting three key documents – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and two international covenants, one on Civil and Political Rights and the other on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights [both 1966] (Ilesanmi 2005, 501). These key documents today constitute an authoritative catalogue of internationally recognized human rights. Notwithstanding the evolution of modern ideas and universal values, there is an urgent need to contextualize Guru Tegh Bahadur’s teachings and sacrifice in a global framework.

A French thinker Francois-Marie Arouet (1694–1778), popularly known by his pseudonym Voltaire, continues to be held in worldwide repute as a courageous crusader against tyranny, bigotry, and cruelty. His work is celebrated for its critical capacity, wit, and satire, and it vigorously propagates an ideal of progress to which people of all nations have remained responsive. His long life spanned the last years of classicism and the eve of the revolutionary era of Enlightenment. During this age of transition

his works and activities influenced the direction taken by European civilization. As a French Enlightenment writer, historian and philosopher Voltaire was known for his attacks on the established Catholic Church, and his advocacy of freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and separation of church and state (Pomeau 2021: *Encyclopedia Britannica* online). Much before the US Constitution enshrined the principle of free speech in the very First Amendment, Voltaire had said, 'I may not agree with what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it' (Mankoff 2015). This is the most significant Voltairean statement on free speech that has become the foundational principle of liberal democracy.

Almost two and a half centuries before the dawn of European Enlightenment Guru Nanak had advocated the values of human equality (GGS 2, 6, 349, 504, 730), social justice (GGS 74, 723, 1240), gender equality (GGS 473), human rights (GGS 141), self-respect (GGS 142), and speaking Truth to Power by raising one's voice against tyranny (Pashaura Singh 2020, 1–19). He was vastly ahead of his times. In this context, W.H. McLeod aptly remarked that 'Guru Nanak's words carry us well beyond the conventional view of his time or, for that matter, the present time as well' (McLeod 1997, 242). His successors faithfully followed his message of cultivating the spirit of eternal optimism by being 'fearless and devoid of enmity' (*nirbhau-nirvair*) simultaneously. At the age of nine Guru Nanak refused to wear the 'sacred thread' at the traditional ceremony of becoming the member of the twice-born class of Hindu society formally, providing him with an opportunity to criticize external ritual and to affirm inward cultivation of ethical virtues of compassion, contentment, modesty, and truth as comprising the true sacred thread of the soul (GGS 471). Interestingly, Guru Tegh Bahadur's nine-year-old son, Gobind Das, inspired his father to protect the right of Brahmins to wear their sacred threads and frontal marks. The Guru did not simply give verbal assurance to Hindu *paṇḍits* to defend their right to wear their sacred symbols, he laid down his life for their cause. A century later Voltaire assured his opponent verbally that he will defend to the death his right to free speech even though he did not agree with him. However, Voltaire did not die for anybody or for his principle of free speech. Thus, from global perspective Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom acquires an incomparable position in the annals of world history.

Conclusions

In this study, I have contextualized the five celebrated couplets of Guru Tegh Bahadur and offered their novel readings. These texts originated in the historical context of Aurangzeb's rule in which he imposed Islamic laws and taxes on non-Muslims and ordered the replacement of Hindu temples with mosques. Guru Tegh Bahadur delivered his message of fearlessness without hatred or enmity towards anyone during his travels in the Malwa region of Punjab. His growing popularity among the rural people became a matter of grave concern for the intelligence agencies in Mughal India who sent alarming reports to Delhi. Meanwhile, a group of Brahmins from Kashmir who were under the threat of conversion to Islam approached Guru Tegh Bahadur at Anandpur and besought his help by invoking the story of Gajinder *mokṣa* from Hindu mythology. The Guru consoled them and made the decision to confront the Mughal authorities in Delhi. He designated his only son to the office of Guru and instructed him to empower the Sikh Panth so

that it could break the shackles of slavery. He gave specific instructions to him along with the scribes at Anandpur to include his compositions at appropriate places in different raga sections and the epilogue. He delivered the message of hope, optimism, and faith in the face of persecution by the Mughal authorities.

One of the outcomes that emerge from this analysis is the diversity of the Sikh Panth during this period reflected in the popularity of three recensions of the Adi Granth among the competing groups. The Damdama recension consisted of the original Kartarpur text prepared under the direct supervision of Guru Arjan in 1604 plus the works of the ninth Guru. The Lahore recension differed from the Kartarpur version only in its concluding section. It had a different order, sometimes ending with the *saloks* ('couplets or stanzas') of Kabir and Farid, and sometimes with the panegyrics by the Sikh bards in praise of the Gurus. In 1642, a Sikh named Banno traditionally prepared another recension of the Adi Granth at Khara Mangat in the Gujarat district. The Banno *bīr* consisted of the Kartarpur text plus some unauthorized additions. It originated at a time when the main center of Sikh activities shifted from Amritsar to Kiratpur under Guru Hargobind who had to withdraw to the Shivalik hills due to the pressure of Mughal authorities. The central place of Amritsar fell into the hands of *Mīṇās* ('Scoundrels'), the followers of Prithi Chand (Guru Arjan's elder brother) and his descendants. The Banno group swayed the later Sikh literary tradition with its dominant narrative that *salok* # 54 was the reply of the tenth Guru to his father's letter he wrote from the prison in Delhi as if it were so easy to communicate so fast in those days in the late seventeenth century. This narrative originated from the presence of the title of '*Mahallā* 10' in the Banno recension of the Adi Granth completed in 1675 soon after the ninth Guru's martyrdom, a title which may have been consciously inserted by the scribe to lend weight to this story. Unsurprisingly, stories circulate fast in any community because of their simplicity and popular appeal than the complex historical facts. On Guru Tegh Bahadur's 300th martyrdom anniversary scholars nurtured in the Singh Sabha mode of rational interpretation started questioning this dominant narrative and accepted the ninth Guru's authorship of *salok* # 54 (Gurcharn Singh 1975, 77–78; Satbir Singh 1975a, 131–132; Taran Singh 1976, xvi). Here, the noteworthy point is that the manuscripts of the Damdama *bīr* written under the direct supervision of Guru Gobind Singh did not have the title '*Mahallā* 10' to reflect his authorship of *salok* # 54. Thus, the tenth Guru closed the canon after including the works of his father that were given to him before he left for Delhi.

Guru Tegh Bahadur's public execution took place in the premodern age of an absolute monarch in India. In his influential work *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault provides us with a model of punishment for public ritual from seventeenth century France, explaining the dynamics of power in premodern societies. The punishment had its logic or rationale. Power belonged to the king and when one of the king's subjects acted against him, the infamy of his crime had to be 'written' on his body through torture. Punishment in this manner was a way of signaling to or performing for the people both the power of the king and the consequences of opposing it. For Foucault, public execution was to be understood as a political ritual, because it did not re-establish justice, rather it reactivated power (Foucault 1979, 34–35, 47–49). However, Foucault's model of punishment has already come under criticism from J.R. Knott, who maintains that it 'does not address the kind of *agon* [struggle; contest] one finds in the accounts of

religious suffering’ (Knott 1992, 9). In the case of Guru Arjan’s tortures, for instance, Foucault’s model cannot be applied completely because his execution was not a public spectacle. In fact, the Mughal authorities themselves felt ‘powerless’, fearing a public backlash because of his high spiritual reputation (Pashaura Singh 2006, 232). By contrast, Guru Tegh Bahadur’s and his three companions’ executions were public spectacles. Whereas Jahangir had written his order to execute Guru Arjan in his memoirs, *Jahān-gīr-nāmā* (Thackston 1999, 59), Aurangzeb had completely kept every order in this regard secret. Muhammad Ahsan Ijad in his Fragment of the *Farrukh Siyār-nāmā* recorded that Emperor ‘Alamgir had issued the *farmān* for Tegh Bahadur’s arrest, but the order was kept secret’ (cited in Harbans Singh 1982, 98). This was the principal reason why Guru Tegh Bahadur’s execution was not mentioned in any Persian texts from Aurangzeb’s period, since the emperor used to censor the histories initially produced in his court before his declaration to limit their production in 1669 CE (Kulke 2016, 122). The willful silence in contemporary Mughal records has forced Louis E. Fenech to use caution that

Guru Tegh Bahadur was executed, if not under the direct orders of the emperor, then certainly with emperor’s approval, put to death as he was in front of the imperial edifice of the Lal Qila or Red Fort, in Shahjahanabad [Delhi], an enduring symbol of the military and cultural might of the Mughal empire. (Fenech 2021, 29)

It is incumbent upon modern historians to pay critical attention to the conscious suppression of evidence by the powerful to erase the histories of the victims from subaltern groups.

In sum, Guru Gobind Singh described his father’s martyrdom as a ‘unique event’ in which he gave his head but not his resolve to defend the freedom of faith by refusing to embrace Islam. In this context, Wilfred Cantwell Smith has tellingly remarked that

the attempt forcibly to convert the ninth Guru to an externalized, impersonal Islam clearly made an indelible impression on the martyr’s nine-year old son, Gobind, who reacted slowly but deliberately to eventually organizing the Sikh group into a distinct, formal, symbol-patterned, boundaried community. (Smith 1981, 191)

Tradition holds that some of the Sikhs who were present at the scene of Guru Tegh Bahadur’s execution shrank from recognition, concealing their identity for fear that they might suffer a similar fate. To respond to this new situation, the tenth Guru resolved to impose on his followers an outward form that would make them instantly recognizable. Following his father’s last instructions to empower the community he restructured the Sikh Panth and instituted the *Khālsā* (‘Pure ones directly under the jurisdiction of the Divine Sovereign’) on Vaisākhī Day 1699, an Order of loyal Sikhs bound by common identity and discipline. The creation of the Khalsa by the tenth Guru was unique in two senses: first, it invited all Sikhs to join the Order of the Khalsa regardless of their background, and second, it had a coherent vision of political sovereignty. All Sikhs were encouraged to become spiritual warriors of righteousness (*dharam*) engaged in a struggle against tyranny, social injustice, and economic exploitation. They were infused with a new spirit to help the weak and confront the powerful. They were further inspired to establish the sovereign rule of the Khalsa. A new era of political and social awareness dawned with Guru Gobind Singh, ‘not as a departure from Guru

Tegh Bahadur but as a step forward’ (Hans 1988, 227). Guru Nanak’s fundamental message of cultivating in life the values of human equality, self-respect, justice for all, human dignity and fearlessness found its practical expression in the lived experience of the Khalsa. Thus, Guru Tegh Bahadur’s martyrdom laid the foundation of modern ideas of defending the universal values of freedom of conscience and human rights, much before the dawn of European Enlightenment.

Dedication

The essay is my humble tribute to Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji on the auspicious occasion of his 400th birth anniversary.

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