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TRADITION OF OBEDIENCE & MARTYRDOM IN SRI GURU GRANTH SAHIB

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I have deliberately chosen and combined two terms i.e. obedience and martyrdom as these two have intimate dialectical relationship. Without gaining the power of obedience one can never achieve the great goal of sacrifice. A martyr is the person who has given up ego (*haumai*) and has surrendered absolutely before the divine will. He who obeys well shall command perfectly. Martyr rules the society even after his death, for his death is his life and through his death society survives. The person who has come to know that there is no difference between life and death kisses noose of the gallows smilingly, allows to move through his person the sharp blades of swords and remains unscathed, undaunted is known by the people as a martyr.

Saint Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*¹ tries to explain that :

1. Martyrdom is an act of virtue
2. It grows out of charity, sympathy, patience, endurance
3. It is an act of the greatest perfection

4. Death is essential to achieve it
5. Faith alone is its cause

1. Page 1715.

Discussing the issue in detail the saint says, sometimes acts do not appear virtuous for all acts of virtue are required to be voluntary. During holy war innocent children meet death without knowing its cause. Certain holy women jumped into river to save their chastity, ended their lives and their martyrdom is honored in the church. In fact they have committed suicide which is not an act of virtue. However to be more judicious, one could say that these babes in being slain obtained by God's grace the glory of martyrdom which others acquire it by their own will. So far as the women are concerned, act of the molesters was an evil. To save virtue is a virtuous deed which those holy women did.

Charity is the chief incentive to martyrdom as Maximus, says – 'The charity of Christ is victorious in his martyrs'. According to John (XC. 13) – "Greater love than this no man hath that a man lay down his life for his friends. If I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing" (Cor. XIII.3). Augustine says in a sermon on S. Cyprian, "It is easy to honor a martyr by singing his praises, but it is great thing to imitate his faith and patience". Cyprian honors the martyrs with the term 'warriors', saying. "Blessed martyrs, with what praise shall I extol you? Most valiant warriors, how shall I find words to proclaim the strength of your courage? The crowd of onlookers wondered to see an unearthly battle, and Christ's servants fighting erect undaunted in speech with souls unmoved and strength divine".

It appears that greater perfection lies in the act of giving soul to God which is done by obedience rather than giving one's body to God which is done by martyrdom. A few say, through martyrdom, one gets liberated according to scripture but it is always better to liberate the whole society by delivering sermons rather than individual benefit. He who suffers martyrdom profits himself alone, whereas he who teaches that path does good to many. Thus teaching and guiding the subjects may be accepted as more perfect than the act of martyrdom.

It is to be noted that man loves life more than anything else and hates death especially when it is accompanied by the pains of torture. A martyr loves his fellow brethren, so deep that pains are welcome to him. Martyrdom embraces highest possible degree of obedience, namely obedience unto death. Hence, it is evident that martyrdom is of itself more perfect than obedience considered absolutely. The martyr prefers death for the sake of faith than life without faith. He is the person who knows strength of the invisible more than the visible. A sick, injured and a dejected person does not want to die, prefers pain than death. Man is always prepared to leave everything for the safety of life. It is the martyr who knows and honors treasure of spirituality by surrendering life for a noble cause.

"I will show thee by works, my faith. (James ii. 18)

"They profess that they know God but in their works they deny Him.

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Christians refrained to use this term for warmongers of the state who died fighting against some other state.

The Semitic holy term martyrdom was polluted by the Islamic crusaders. The word *Jehad* was coined to make every crusade 'holy war' and declared that a fighter if wins a battle be termed as '*Gaazi*' if dies, '*Shahid*' i.e. a martyr. *Gaazi* is a title conferred upon him who kills the infidels (*Kafirs*). For *Musalman* crusaders, everybody else who was not *Musalman*, was a *Kafir*. During his crusades, Baber used these two terms frequently addressing his troops. Guru Nanak was the first person who in his *Babarvani* condemns cruelties of these *Mughals* declaring them 'a gang of sinners' who mercilessly killed and looted everyone, insulted the chastity of women belonging to any caste or creed. Not by chance or mistake, Guru Nanak was arrested. He deserved it because he openly opposed repression and tyranny of Babar. In his arrest we see all the social & political syllabus Guru Nanak set for the coming centuries. Keep deepest faith in God the Almighty, surrender before His Divine will and opposing every sort of injustice of the state be ready to drink the nectar of martyrdom. This is what Guru Nanak taught :

*Jau tau prem khelan ka chao
Siru dhar tali gali meri ao
Itu marg pairu dharijay
Siru dijai kan na kijai²*

(if you aspire to play the game of love, bring your head on the palm of your hand when you come to me. When you tread the path of love, give up your head without hesitation).

That is exactly what Guru Arjan did. He was first prophet of India who did not hesitate in treading a path of martyrdom with all endurance and peace. Bhai Gurdas paying tribute to the Guru says – He walked

calmly on

2. M.1, GGS-1412.

sharp double edged sword, absorbed in the remembrance of God, he mingles with the supreme light. As the black bee remains enrapt in the petals of flowers to enjoy fragrance, the Guru spent night of suffering by keeping joyfully his concentration on the feet of Lord (XXIV-23).

Up to now we have enough literature before us that state repression was the main cause of Guru's sacrifice. Scholars have presented documents of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhandi and *Tuzke Jehangiri* in its proof. Beni Parsad a historian of Jehangir records that Guru Arjan helped Khusro giving him an assistance of Rs. 5000 and blessed him. When arrested, the Guru was asked to pay the fine which he refused to pay, for he did no wrong. He instructed Sikhs not to collect money for payment of fine. He preferred torture and death.

When I used the term 'obedience' alongwith martyrdom, a few among my friends differed with me. They opined that martyr is the

person who disobeyed. He disobeyed state, sometimes disobeyed established but stupid traditions of the creed, the church. Hence martyr is a rebel. This is terminology of the state. The state enacts laws suitable to it. Before killing saints, prophets, through pseudo trial, it frames the charges which suit to the situation, declaring the holy person a rebel or a criminal; it kills through various ways. Socrates, Mansur, Sarmad and Sikh Gurus all met their fate in the same manner.

Jesus or Guru Arjan, peace loving most ardent and obedient followers of God if charged and convicted by the state as rebels, nothing is strange in it. It always happened and will go on happening in future too. Martyr is the hero of the oppressed, a hope to the downtrodden and a beacon of light to the coming generations. How can we agree with the state which declares a person disobedient who loves his fellow brethren more than his own life. He proves his love, faith and obedience to God with the seal of his blood, meets the death face to face undaunted, having no grudge against the state, never curses the ruler or the hangman. Read the *Baani* of Guru Arjan Dev, see in it an unlimited ocean of love, spirituality and good wishes for one and all :

Let it be clear that martyr is given an option to survive if he is ready to deviate from the path he has chosen. Fifth, ninth Gurus and young sahibzadas were given the chance of survival if they were ready to embrace Islam which they declined. They were neither against Islam nor against any other creed but they had their own faith which could flourish

by virtue of martyrdom. A martyr and his followers know this fact whereas state knows not. The ruler feels that death penalty will strengthen the state, on the contrary it causes its fall. Baba Banda Singh could succeed conquering Sarhind within a two years' short span of time only because of the strength of the blood of the Sahibzadas which had become the greatest ideal of the Khalsa Panth for ever. Banda Singh declared that he had no money to make payments, no weapons, no bread, no horses for the persons entering his troops; anyone ready to die without thinking anything in its return could join him. More than 25 thousands strong joined him. They were all living martyrs. They drew no line between life and death. They considered life under tyranny a miserable death, and facing death in the battle field, the most glorious act. The lesson was taught by Guru Nanak Dev :

He alone lives in whom liveth the Lord.
None else is alive O Nanak
If one loseth honour in life.
Impure is all that one eats. M.1, GGS 142

Blessed is the dying of the hero who are Honoured
Truly in the Lord's court.
Yea, he leaveth with Honour and in Honoured in the Lord's
Court and he is afflicted not by pain in the Yond.
Yea, Blessed is the dying of a hero whose death
is approved by the Lord. M.1, GGS 579-80

Guru Nanak describes the presence of brave warriors in God's
Karam Khand i.e. realm of action where they live with dignity :

And then is the domain of Grace
Which expressed through Power is
There are heroes brave and mighty
Throbbing with the spirit of the Almighty

Jap M.5, GGS-8

In the fourteen attributes of God in the *mulmantra* there are two, *nirbhau* (fearless) and *nirvair* (enmity with none). These two terms are root of the Sikh tradition of martyrdom. A person under any kind of fear or pressure can never be free from enmity because some one else is there to direct him. We see the paid armies fighting to defend those whom they don't love, killing those whom they do not hate. They kill and die at the command of someone else who is their employer i.e. state. Therefore paid soldiers died fighting on the border can never be termed as martyrs. Martyr, being true son of the God stands firmly before any power to eliminate injustice, cruelty or hatred. Guru, for a Sikh, is *Sacha Padshah* i.e. true emperor, every other ruler of mundane world is a false raja :

There is no other king equal to my God
The kings of the world stay but for a few days
And all their show is illusory and false. Kabir, GGS-

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After the advent of Khalsa Panth we see a galaxy of countless Sikh martyrs. They met most horrible circumstances during eighteenth century when *mughal* and *pathan* rulers bent upon their genocide. Everyday when they were face to face with death, not only they could

survive, they declared to protect anyone facing persecution. The most cruel time of this century is termed as golden age of Sikh history. All these martyrs are remembered by the Sikhs twice a day, in the morning and evening prayer. Their abode is as high as sacred as of the Guru and of the God. They are one with Guru as Guru is one with God. The term *shahid* became so popular that we see *Shahid Ganj* , *Shahid Bilas*, *Shahidi Jor Mela*, *Shahidi Bir*, *Misl Shahidan* etc. in Sikh history.

Brahmgyani is the highest religious status a Sikh hopes to achieve after long meditation and disciplined life. A person, died for a holy cause attains the same status of *brahmgyani* as Sikh faith believes. The seeker transforms into 'knower' i.e. *brahmgyani*.

In Indian culture we see absence of this term shahid. There exists a term *bali* in *vedic* literature. Bali is a sacrificial ritual performed during a *yagya(yajña)*. Priests used to kill an animal and put a part of it into sacred fire pleasing the deity who will shower prosperity in its return. There are instances of human sacrifice too. This was not an act of a volunteer. Many a times, man so sacrificed used to be a person who forgot his way and caught by the local administration as trespasser and sacrificed him at the alter or he may be a criminal already convicted on account of some offence. Worshippers of *Kali* goddess used to sacrifice animals presented by the worshippers in large numbers at particular festivals. *Nath* cult also had this practice although they claimed to be non-violent devotees. *Kali* worshippers were known as *sakats*, i.e.

worshippers of power, *shakati*. Gurbani condemns the *sakats* to the maximum extent. Before Sikh Gurus this ritual was condemned by *Jains* and *Buddhists*. Bhagwan Mahavir said, "You say the animal or man so sacrificed shall go to heaven. If this is so, why don't you sacrifice your father or your son who shall be benefited?" Unable to face this criticism, *Brahmans* started sacrificing a symbolic animal made of wheat flour.

"Slaughter of animals you dub as religion, then brother, tell what is religion? You style as saints, who is to be called butcher than?"¹ It is enough to prove that Sikh concept of *Shahadat* has no relationship with *vedic* ritual of sacrifice. In *Sikhism* it is a byproduct of state repression. Guru Nanak started developing a peace-loving but coward community into enlightened group of self respecting people always ready to strike when need be without caring for the calculation of numbers. Sikhs always were and are in minority everywhere in the world. They today are international minority who are nowhere in majority.

Traditional Indian culture never allowed dissension or rebellion against state, for they believed that ruler whosoever be, was an envoy of God. Fanatic *Musalman*s got highly provoked when Akbar initiated a new greeting,

~~Alla hu Akbar~~ thinking he declared himself Allah which is blasphemous
1. GGS, p. 1107

words was 'God is Great'. A *Hindu* scholar Pundit Jagan Nath Mishar told emperor Shah Jahan that it is right to respect a ruler of Delhi just like ruler of the cosmos – Dillishvarva

Jagdishvara".¹ its literal meaning is – King of Delhi should be respected as God.

Mahatma Gandhi knew that Hindu society was ignorant, poor, superstitious, backward and being weak, unable to give a direct fight to the British, therefore, he chose the path of non-violence. He started non-co-operation movement and civil disobedience followed it. He was criticized and condemned by some hardcore *Hindu* leaders for his act, because disobedience against the state was against *Hindu* culture. Let me quote JPS Oberoi,

"It must be such considerations that led Gandhi to confess already in 1924 that his claim to Hinduism had been rejected by some 'because I believe and advocate non-violence in its extreme form. They say I am a Christian in disguise (VDS Savarkar's contrary *Hindutva* had been published in 1923). Gandhi's own view remained to the end that God would make him an instrument to save the religion that he had loved, cherished and practiced. He believed that no religion in the world can live without self sacrifice. The tree of life has to be watered with the blood of martyrs, who lay down their lives without killing their opponents or intending any harm to them."²

Gandhi, who dislikes Guru Gobind Singh saying him, misguided patriot who went astray as he reacted and retaliated against the state.

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1. Kapur Singh, Sachi Sakhi, 1983, p. 25.
 2. JPS Oberoi, The Legacy of Martyrdom, article published in – Relevance of Khalsa Value System in the 21st Century, Chandigarh, 2000.

countless soldiers. How violence turns virtue in these cases is best known to Gandhi.

Peace loving Sikh sings and listens these hymns :

The battle drum is beat in the mind's sky
And lo the target of the heart is pierced through
The God's hero hath descended upon battlefield
yea, now is the time of strike
The God's hero is the he who fighteth for the oppressed
And though battered into bits he abandoneth not to fight.
Kabir, GGS-1105

Guru Nanak Says :

Shouldst thou seek to engage in game of love
Step into my street with thy head placed on thy palm
While on to this stepping
Ungrudgingly sacrifice your head. M.1, GGS-1412

According to Guru Ram Dass

If joy shouldst thou grant to Thee would
still be devoted
In suffering too on Thee would I meditate
Should it please Thee to give me hunger
still would I feel fulfilled
And in suffering feel joy
Cutting body and person to pieces would I make offering
And in fire immolate myself M.4, GGS-757

Guru Arjan Dev sings the song celestial when being tortured, placed in most inhuman conditions receiving all the cruelties without complaint, remaining in highest state of bliss –

Now I am jealous of no one
Now that I have attained unto the society of the saints
Yea, I am estranged with no one: nor is my one a
stranger unto me.
Indeed I am the friend of all
All that the God Doeth with that I am pleased

this is the wisdom I have received from the saints
Yea, the one God Pervadeth all : and seeing Him, I am
wholly in bloom. M.5, GGS-1299

Guru Tegh Bahadur defines a Sikh :

One that strikes not terror in others
Nor of others stand in fear
Saith Nanak : Listen my-self
Know such a one to be literated. M. 9, GGS-1427

In his youth Guru Tegh Bahadur was a good fighter who participated bravely earning appreciation in all the battles led by his father Guru Hargobind Sahib against Shah Jahan. Firm in the battle field, he was firm in the faith unto the last while facing death ordered by Aurangzeb. Bhai Mati Das, Bhai Sati Das and Bhai Dyala Ji, after inhuman torture were killed before the eyes of Guru, terrorising him so that he may give up his faith. None else more than Guru Gobind Singh could give such a tribute to this martyr of the greatest honour :

To defend the righteous path he spared no sacrifice
Gave away his head, but uttered not a groan
For defending righteousness he enacted this great deed
Sacrificed life but not his ideal

Breaking potsherd of his body on the head
of the monarch of Delhi
He departed for the celestial realm.
None ever performed a noble deed like Tegh Bahadur's
At Tegh Bahadur's departure the world was plunged in grief
The world wailed but the celestial realms resounded with

glory.

Bachitar Natak 5.13-16

The foundation of Khalsa is sacrifice. Addressing a large congregation at Anandpur Sahib on the day of Ist Baisakh 1699, the

Guru demanded heads of five persons who one by one stood up, taken by the Guru in the nearby tent. This is a sublime moment of sacrifice when a nation came into being. S. Kapur Singh forbade the Sikhs speculating what happened inside the camp, saying, "The Guru never concealed anything from Sikhs, he showed and gave the most precious things of the world, father, mother and children, keeping nothing for himself. Only at one situation i.e. at the time of advent of the *Khalsa* he completed the act under veil. Nobody has any right to unveil this sacred mystery of the father".

From this day onwards Sikhs consider this life a gift given to them by the Master for a short time who may command at any time to give it up for the sake of *dharma*. A Sikh taking Amrit and bowing before Guru Granth surrenders his head. The brave Sikhs not only respected the word *Shahadat*, they practiced it in a most glorious way. *Amrit*, stirred by the double edged sword is a symbol of sacrifice. Touching *Karah Parsad* with sword again symbolizes sacrifice.

Eye witness accounts from the enemy side like Kazi Noor Mohammad praises courage, faith and respect of Sikhs for moral values even in the battle field. Similar comments are recorded by the Britishers when they fought two Anglo Sikh wars. Not their own faith or honor alone they saved their fellow beings irrespective of their caste or creed, following Guru Teg Bahadur who himself considered *Tilk* and *Janeu* as obsolete useless symbols but kept the *brahamans* under his wings.

Nature and personality of Guru and his beloved Sikhs prove that obedience was their first choice, obedience to the Lord Almighty, obedience to the *Shabad*, obedience to the holy cause was their everlasting desire, everything else secondary. Obedience is the first gate to enter the realm of Guru's bliss, martyrdom being the last. Keeping faith in their hearts they spent life, and if death came in the way to stop them, they welcomed it. Oberoi comments, "The final lesson of martyrdom then, whether one studies it in history, theology or sociology, is that it works at once both the limit of power, especially the state's power, and the limitlessness of self-sacrifice conceived as salvation in society".¹

Bhai Nand Lal in this couplet reminds us that the faithful obeys and surrenders, shuns arguments, avoids bargaining :

I said to the Master - To have once a glimpse of your face, I, in return,
am ready to give up this life.

Smiling, the Master replied - In my house bargaining is not permitted.²

1. JPS Oberoi, *The legacy of Martyrdom* p. XIII.

2. Ganda Singh (ed), *Bhai Nand Lal Granthavali*, Malakka, Malashia, Singapur, 1968, p. 21