National Research Journal of Social Sciences
Volume-11, Issue-1, January-June 2026
PP: 383-386

ISSN: 2348-473X
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 6.74)
Journal Website: www.nrjss.in

GURU TEGH BAHADUR'S MARTYRDOM: A TURNING POINT IN THE GLOBAL NARRATIVE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Sukhjit Kaur

Assistant Professor
Department of History, Guru Nanak College, Budhlada, Mansa, Punjab

ABSTRACT:

Guru Tegh Bahadur ascended the Gaddi as the Ninth Sikh Guru in an unbroken line of spiritual succession from Guru Nanak Dev through Guru Angad Dev, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan Dev, Guru Hargobind Sahib, Guru Har Rai, and Guru Har Krishan. His life was marked by a fearless pursuit of the highest ideals of human existence, and his martyrdom represented the culmination of this lifelong commitment to truth, justice, and righteousness. Three hundred and fifty years ago, Guru Tegh Bahadur calmly and consciously laid down his life for the freedom of conscience, an act whose moral and spiritual significance has only deepened with the passage of time. Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom in 1675 represents a seminal intervention in the historical evolution of religious liberty and human rights discourse in early modern South Asia. Arising in response to the Mughal Empire's intensifying policies of coerced conversion under Emperor Aurangzeb, his decision to defend the persecuted Kashmiri Pandit community positioned the ninth Sikh Guru as a critical actor in the contestation of imperial authority and ideological hegemony. By refusing conversion and accepting execution, Guru Tegh Bahadur articulated a principled theology of freedom of conscience that transcended sectarian boundaries, foregrounding an ethic of universal human dignity. This episode not only reconfigured the Sikh community's socio-political orientation—culminating in the later institutional development of the Khalsa—but also prefigured normative frameworks that would emerge in modern human rights theory. These principles and values were further strengthened and institutionalized by his son and successor, Guru Gobind Singh, the Tenth Sikh Guru, culminating in the creation of the Khalsa. From this point onward, the struggle for righteousness and justice assumed a collective and organized form. The martyrdom thus constitutes a pivotal case study for examining the interplay between religion, state power, and emergent rights-based paradigms in the 17th-century Indo-Islamic world. The paper further challenges Eurocentric narratives of human rights by foregrounding a South Asian contribution that remains profoundly relevant in contemporary debates on religious freedom and minority rights.

Key Words: Guru Tegh Bahadur, Martyrdom, Human Rights, Freedom of Conscience, Religious Pluralism, Sikhism, Oppressed, Justice, Religious Freedom, Khalsa.

INTRODUCTION:

The discourse on human rights has largely been shaped by Western intellectual traditions, commonly tracing its origins to documents such as the Magna Carta (1215), the English Bill of Rights (1689), the American Declaration of Independence (1776), and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789). While these milestones undeniably contributed to the modern legal articulation of rights, they do not exhaust the global moral history of human dignity and freedom. Such a linear and Eurocentric genealogy marginalizes non-Western traditions that articulated universal ethical principles long before the advent of modern constitutionalism.

Within this broader and more inclusive framework, the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur emerges as a landmark event in the history of human rights. Executed in Delhi in 1675 by the Mughal authorities, Guru Tegh Bahadur sacrificed his life not to protect the institutional interests of Sikhism but to defend the religious freedom of Kashmiri Brahmins facing forced conversion under imperial policy. His act transcended sectarian boundaries and articulated a universal moral claim: that freedom of conscience is an inherent right of all human beings, irrespective of faith or community. Guru Tegh Bahadur, the fifth and youngest son of the Sixth Sikh Guru, Guru Hargobind Sahib, was born into an environment shaped by spiritual discipline and martial responsibility. According to *Gurbilas Patshahi Chhevin*, on the auspicious occasion of Tegh Bahadur's birth, Guru Hargobind invoked Akal Purakh to bless the child with unwavering courage to confront the forces of evil and to uphold truth and dharma until his last breath. During this period, Guru Hargobind maintained a measured rapport with the Mughal Emperor Jahangir and even accompanied him to Kashmir, fostering hopes of lasting cordial relations.

However, the political climate altered significantly after Jahangir's death in 1627 A.D. and the accession of Shah Jahan, whose reign was marked by increased intolerance. Under the new emperor, Mughal attitudes toward Guru Hargobind deteriorated, initially manifesting in minor confrontations during Shah Jahan's visit to Lahore in 1628 A.D., and later culminating in armed engagements, including the first major clash on 14 April 1634. By the time of Guru Tegh Bahadur's

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birth, Guru Hargobind had already laid the foundations of a balanced spiritual and temporal authority, shaping the ethos that would later define Guru Tegh Bahadur's own mission and sacrifice.[i]

The second armed encounter between Guru Hargobind Sahib and the Mughal forces occurred on 16 December 1634, in which the Guru's forces once again gained the upper hand. This was followed by the third battle on 26 April 1635 A.D. at Kartarpur, where the rebel general of Guru Hargobind, Painda Khan, along with the Mughal commander, was killed.[ii] The victory decisively favored the Sikhs and further demonstrated their growing military capability and resolve. Apart from the policy of persecution pursued by Shah Jahan, several additional factors contributed to the deterioration of Mughal–Sikh relations.[iii] These included the Sikh attempt to establish a new township on the banks of the river Beas and the alleged theft of royal horses that had been presented to the Guru. Collectively, these developments deepened imperial suspicion and hostility toward the Sikh Gurus.

Despite these tensions, Shah Jahan's eldest son, Dara Shukoh, was known for his liberal outlook and admiration for Guru Har Rai. During the Mughal war of succession, Dara Shukoh sought the Guru's blessings and assistance in his struggle against his brother Aurangzeb. However, Aurangzeb emerged victorious, executing his brothers, imprisoning his father Shah Jahan, and ascending the Mughal throne in July 1658 A.D. After consolidating his authority over the next six to seven years, Aurangzeb radically altered the religious policy of the empire.[iv]

This paper argues that Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom represents a turning point in the global narrative of human rights. It was a conscious ethical intervention against state tyranny and religious coercion, grounded in a spiritual vision that affirmed the equality and dignity of all humanity. By examining the historical context of Mughal religious policy, the ethical philosophy of Sikhism, and the transformative consequences of the Guru's sacrifice,[v] this study seeks to reposition Guru Tegh Bahadur within global human-rights historiography.

This research adopts a historical-analytical and interpretive methodology, drawing upon a combination of primary Sikh sources, Persian chronicles, and modern historiography. Sikh textual traditions such as the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, *Bachittar Natak*, and *Gurbilas* literature are examined alongside Mughal court histories and European travel accounts to reconstruct the political and religious milieu of the seventeenth century. Secondary scholarship by historians such as J.S. Grewal, Ganda Singh, W.H. McLeod, and J.D. Cunningham provides critical perspectives on Sikh history and Mughal-Sikh relations.[vi]

The study also employs a comparative and theoretical approach by engaging with concepts from human-rights philosophy, including freedom of conscience, minority protection, and resistance to tyranny. While avoiding anachronism, the paper situates Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom within a broader moral continuum that anticipates later human-rights formulations. The ethical vision that underpinned Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom was deeply rooted in the teachings of Sikhism as articulated by Guru Nanak and his successors[vii]. Central to Sikh thought is the belief in the oneness of humanity, the equality of all human beings, and the rejection of religious exclusivism. Guru Nanak's emphasis on *Sarbat da Bhala* (the welfare of all) established a moral framework that transcended communal boundaries.

The Sikh Gurus consistently opposed ritualism, caste hierarchy, and coercive authority, advocating instead for ethical living, social responsibility, and fearless devotion to truth. Guru Arjan's martyrdom in 1606 introduced the principle of *Shahidi* (martyrdom) as a moral response to injustice, while Guru Hargobind institutionalized the doctrine of *miri-piri*, harmonizing spiritual authority with temporal responsibility. Guru Tegh Bahadur inherited this ethical legacy and gave it universal expression through his sacrifice.[viii]The reign of Emperor Aurangzeb (1658–1707) marked a decisive departure from the relatively accommodative policies of earlier Mughal rulers such as Akbar and Jahangir. A staunch adherent of orthodox Sunni Islam, Aurangzeb viewed the empire as *Dar-ul-Harb* and sought to transform it into *Dar-ul-Islam*. His policies included the re-imposition of the *jizya*, destruction of Hindu temples, restrictions on non-Islamic worship, and active encouragement of conversion.

Kashmir became a focal point of these policies due to its strategic location and its population of orthodox Brahmins. Under the governorship of Sher Afghan, coercive measures intensified, threatening the religious and cultural survival of the Kashmiri Hindu community.[ix] It was under these circumstances that a delegation of Brahmins sought the intervention of Guru Tegh Bahadur. The appeal of the Kashmiri Brahmins to Guru Tegh Bahadur was unprecedented in inter-religious history. Instead of seeking armed assistance, they sought moral protection. Guru Tegh Bahadur's response—asking them to inform Aurangzeb that if he were converted, they would follow—was a strategic and ethical masterstroke. It exposed the coercive nature of imperial religious policy and transformed the issue from a local dispute into a universal moral question.

Guru Tegh Bahadur's arrest at Ropar and his subsequent execution in Delhi were the direct consequences of his unwavering refusal to either embrace Islam or perform miracles to authenticate his spiritual authority. The Mughal state, operating within a framework of absolute political and religious sovereignty, sought to reduce dissent to submission through coercion and spectacle. In this context, the Guru's public execution in 1675 A.D**.** was deliberately staged as an instrument of terror, intended to deter resistance and reaffirm imperial supremacy over conscience.[x] However, this act of

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state violence produced results profoundly contrary to imperial expectations. Instead of extinguishing dissent, Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom transformed him into a moral symbol of resistance against tyranny. His calm acceptance of death, without hatred or retaliation, elevated the act beyond the realm of political defiance and into the domain of ethical testimony. The execution exposed the moral fragility of authoritarian power when confronted by an unyielding conscience, thereby undermining the legitimacy of coercive rule. The significance of Guru Tegh Bahadur's sacrifice lies in the universal principles it articulated—principles that resonate strongly with modern human-rights discourse. At its core was the affirmation of freedom of belief, asserting that faith cannot be imposed by force without violating the dignity of the human person. By defending the religious rights of Kashmiri Brahmins rather than his own community, the Guru established the principle of minority protection, emphasizing that justice must transcend communal boundaries. His martyrdom also underscored the moral limits of state power, asserting that political authority forfeits legitimacy when it intrudes upon conscience and spiritual autonomy. Unlike many historical acts of resistance driven by political ambition or sectarian interest, Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom was grounded entirely in ethical responsibility. He neither sought political authority nor mobilized armed rebellion. Instead, he confronted imperial coercion through moral courage, offering his own life as a witness to truth. This dimension distinguishes his sacrifice as a rare and exceptional moment in global history, where ethical resistance was enacted without recourse to violence or self-interest. Moreover, Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom anticipated key elements of later human-rights philosophy, including the concept that rights are inherent rather than granted by the state. His death affirmed that conscience represents an inviolable domain beyond the reach of political authority—a notion later articulated by thinkers such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant, and eventually codified in modern human-rights instruments. In this sense, the Guru's sacrifice represents a proto-human-rights moment, emerging from a spiritual and moral worldview rather than from secular legalism. The ripple effects of this martyrdom extended far beyond the immediate Sikh community. It reshaped Sikh collective consciousness and transformed suffering into resolve, moral witness into institutional action. Under the leadership of Guru Gobind Singh, the ethical legacy of martyrdom was translated into organized resistance through the creation of the Khalsa. This evolution did not negate the Guru's commitment to non-coercion; rather, it acknowledged the necessity of self-defence when peaceful assertion of rights is met with systematic violence. Thus, Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom stands as a foundational episode in the global history of human dignity. It demonstrates that the struggle for human rights does not originate solely in charters or constitutions but often begins with the courage of a single individual willing to confront injustice at the cost of life itself. In a world still grappling with religious intolerance and authoritarian overreach, his sacrifice continues to offer a timeless reminder that the defence of conscience remains the bedrock of a just and humane civilization.

The execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur profoundly shaped the vision of his successor, Guru Gobind Singh. In 1699, the creation of the Khalsa transformed the Sikh community into a disciplined collective committed to justice, equality, and resistance against oppression. The Khalsa embodied the moral legacy of martyrdom in institutional form. When compared with figures such as Socrates, Thomas More, and Martin Luther King Jr., Guru Tegh Bahadur emerges as a pioneer whose sacrifice predates modern rights discourse. His martyrdom challenges Eurocentric assumptions about the origins of human rights. In an era marked by religious intolerance and state coercion, Guru Tegh Bahadur's example offers enduring lessons on moral courage and pluralism. His life affirms that the defence of human rights often begins with individual conscience.

CONCLUSION:

Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom represents a decisive turning point in the global narrative of human rights. By sacrificing his life for the freedom of conscience of another community, he articulated a universal ethic of justice and human dignity. His legacy reshaped Sikh identity, inspired institutional resistance through the Khalsa, and continues to resonate in contemporary struggles for religious freedom and minority rights. The execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji and the subsequent creation of the Khalsa constitute a decisive turning point in Sikh history. Together, they articulated and defended universal principles of justice, human dignity, and freedom of conscience. Sikhism emerged as a powerful moral force committed to the unity of humankind, transcending divisions of caste, race, ethnicity, and belief. It affirmed the sanctity of human dignity, equality between men and women, freedom from religious and racial prejudice, commitment to knowledge and learning, restraint of greed and ego, harmony between faith and reason, and faith in a progressive and humane future for all societies. The institution of the Khalsa bears the unmistakable imprint of this emancipatory vision. It continues to offer hope to oppressed peoples across the globe, inspiring them to cast off fear and servitude with courage and dignity. Recognizing his contribution enriches global human-rights historiography and affirms the universality of moral resistance to tyranny.

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