

HUMAN DIGNITY BEFORE HUMAN RIGHTS: GURU TEGH BAHADUR JI 'S MARTYRDOM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621–1675), the Ninth Guru of the Sikhs, represents one of the most profound moral interventions in Indian history. His execution by the Mughal state under Emperor Aurangzeb was not the outcome of political rebellion or sectarian rivalry but an ethical stand taken to protect freedom of conscience and uphold the moral law of dharma. Although the modern discourse of human rights developed much later, Sikh ethical philosophy articulated principles closely aligned with contemporary understandings of religious liberty, human dignity, equality, and resistance to tyranny. This paper examines the philosophical foundations of Sikh ideology, the transformation of Mughal religious policy, and the historical circumstances that culminated in Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom.

KEYWORDS: Guru Tegh Bahadur, Dharma, Human Rights, Religious Freedom, Sikhism, Aurangzeb, Mughal State.

INTRODUCTION

The History of human rights is frequently narrated through Western political developments, often overlooking non-Western ethical traditions that articulated similar moral values through different conceptual frameworks. In the Indian intellectual tradition, moral and social life was regulated by the concept of dharma, which encompassed justice, duty, moral responsibility, and social harmony.¹

The martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621–1675), the Ninth Guru of the Sikhs, represents one of the most profound moral interventions in Indian history. His execution by the Mughal state under Emperor Aurangzeb was not the outcome of political rebellion or sectarian rivalry but an ethical stand taken to protect freedom of conscience and uphold the moral law of dharma.² Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji, occupies a unique and unparalleled position in Indian history as a symbol of moral courage, spiritual sovereignty, and the defence of human rights. Born in 1621, he was shaped by an atmosphere of sacrifice and resistance, being the son of Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji, who had already introduced the principle of Miri and Piri, integrating spiritual authority with temporal responsibility. Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji's life unfolded during a period of intense political and religious intolerance under Mughal rule, particularly during the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb, whose policies sought to impose religious conformity through coercion and persecution. In this challenging context, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji emerged not as a political rebel but as a spiritual guardian of human conscience, standing firmly for the right of every individual to practice and preserve their faith without fear.

The Guru's teachings emphasized detachment from materialism, inner discipline, humility, and fearlessness grounded in divine truth. Through his hymns preserved in the Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji articulated a universal philosophy of human dignity, highlighting the transient nature of worldly power and the supremacy of moral values. His message transcended sectarian boundaries and addressed the fundamental rights of humanity, especially the freedom of belief and expression. The defining moment of his life came in 1675 when he willingly offered himself to protect Kashmiri Pandits from forced religious conversion, despite not belonging to their faith. This extraordinary act transformed the Sikh understanding of Shahidi into a universal ethical principle, where sacrifice was made not for one's own community alone but for the protection of others.

Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji's martyrdom at Delhi stands as one of the earliest and clearest expressions of human rights in Indian history. His sacrifice affirmed that religious freedom, justice, and human dignity are non-negotiable values worth the highest price. In Sikh thought, human rights are not merely legal claims but moral duties rooted in compassion, equality, and resistance to injustice. Thus, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji's life and martyrdom continue to inspire global discourse on human rights, reminding humanity that true sovereignty lies in the courage to uphold truth even in the face of death.

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SIKH ETHICS:

Sikhism, emerging in the late fifteenth century under Guru Nanak, reinterpreted dharma in a socially engaged and egalitarian manner, emphasizing ethical living, social responsibility, and resistance to injustice. Guru Nanak conceived the world as dharmshala, the abode of dharma governed by divine will (Hukam)³. Human beings were expected to live morally within society, balancing spiritual devotion with social responsibility. The Guru Granth Sahib repeatedly affirms the inherent dignity and equality of all human beings, rejecting caste hierarchy, ritualism, and social discrimination⁴.

The philosophical foundation of Sikh ethics is deeply rooted in the teachings of the Sikh Gurus as preserved in the Guru Granth Sahib, presenting a coherent moral vision that integrates spirituality with social responsibility. At the core of Sikh ethical thought lies the belief in Ik Onkar, the oneness of the Divine, which affirms the essential unity and equality of all human beings. This metaphysical principle directly shapes Sikh ethics by rejecting all forms of discrimination based on caste, creed, gender, or social status, and by emphasizing universal human dignity. Sikh ethics does not promote withdrawal from the world; rather, it advocates an engaged life of grihastha (householder), where moral action is performed within society through honest living (kirat karni), sharing with others (vand chhakna), and constant remembrance of the Divine (naam japna). These three pillars form the practical ethical framework of Sikh life, balancing personal spiritual discipline with collective welfare. Central to Sikh ethical philosophy is the concept of Hukam, the divine order governing the universe, which calls upon individuals to align their actions with truth, humility, and acceptance, while simultaneously resisting injustice and oppression. Unlike fatalistic interpretations, Hukam in Sikh thought demands active moral agency and conscious ethical choice. The rejection of ego (Haumai) is another crucial philosophical element, as ego is viewed as the primary source of moral corruption, social inequality, and spiritual ignorance. Sikh ethics therefore emphasizes humility, self-control, and service (seva) as means to transcend ego and cultivate ethical character. Furthermore, Sikh philosophy integrates justice and compassion as inseparable ethical values; moral life is incomplete without standing against tyranny, exploitation, and cruelty. This integration is reflected in the doctrine of Miri and Piri, which asserts that spiritual authority must guide temporal power, making ethical resistance to injustice a religious duty. The tradition of langar, the community kitchen, embodies the ethical principles of equality, sharing, and social harmony in everyday practice. Sikh ethics also recognizes sacrifice (Shahidi) as the highest moral expression, where the defence of truth and human rights may demand personal suffering without hatred or revenge. Thus, the philosophical foundation of Sikh ethics presents a dynamic moral system that harmonizes devotion, ethical conduct, and social justice, offering a timeless framework for human dignity, freedom, and responsible living in an interconnected world.

In Sikh thought, political authority was not rejected but subjected to moral scrutiny. Kingship was considered legitimate only so long as it operated in accordance with dharma. Absolute authority divorced from moral responsibility was viewed as tyranny, and resistance to unjust power was regarded as morally justified. This principle acquired concrete expression with Guru Hargobind's doctrine of miri and piri, which symbolized the inseparability of temporal and spiritual authority⁵.

ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT OF SHAHIDI:

The word *shahid* is derived from the Arabic root *shahada*, meaning "to witness" or "to testify." In its earliest usage, a shahid was one who bore witness to truth, often through suffering. Over time, the term Shahidi came to denote martyrdom, signifying the ultimate testimony of faith and moral conviction. In India, however, the ethical idea behind Shahidi predated the linguistic term. Indigenous concepts such as Satya (truth), dharma (righteous duty), and tyaga (sacrifice) laid the philosophical foundation for martyrdom.

Indian religious traditions emphasized ethical sacrifice rather than violent extremism. Buddhist and Jain traditions offered early examples of voluntary suffering and renunciation. Jain monks practicing Sallekhana accepted death as a means of spiritual purification, while Buddhist monks endured persecution without abandoning the Dhamma. These sacrifices were inward-looking, focused on spiritual liberation rather than social justice.

The Bhakti and Sufi movements further enriched the ethical tradition of sacrifice. Saints like Kabir, Ravidas, and Guru Nanak Dev Ji challenged caste hierarchy and religious exclusivism, often facing social hostility. Their suffering functioned as moral protest, not political rebellion. Similarly, Sufi saints emphasized love, tolerance, and devotion beyond rigid orthodoxy.

In medieval India, sacrifice was also associated with honor and political loyalty. Rajput traditions glorified death in battle for the defence of land and lineage. While these acts were heroic, they remained confined to territorial or dynastic concerns and did not explicitly address religious freedom as a universal right.

MARTYRDOM OF SHRI GURU ARJUN DEV JI:

The martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev Ji in 1606 marked a turning point in Indian religious history. Executed for refusing to alter Sikh teachings under Mughal authority, his death represented martyrdom for religious autonomy. This event strengthened Sikh collective identity but remained focused on the defence of Sikh faith rather than inter-religious rights.

The martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev Ji, the fifth Sikh Guru, marks a decisive and transformative moment in Indian religious and social history, leaving a deep and lasting impact on the Sikh community and the broader moral consciousness of the subcontinent. Guru Arjun Dev Ji was the embodiment of spiritual harmony, compassion, and inclusive faith; he compiled the Adi Granth (later Guru Granth Sahib), giving permanent form to Sikh teachings while incorporating hymns of saints from diverse religious backgrounds, thereby affirming equality, interfaith unity, and devotion beyond sectarian boundaries. His growing influence, the increasing strength of the Sikh Panth, and his refusal to submit religious authority to political

power alarmed the Mughal state under Emperor Jahangir. The Guru's arrest, torture, and eventual martyrdom in 1606 were not the result of political rebellion but of his unwavering commitment to truth, justice, and freedom of conscience. Subjected to extreme physical suffering—forced to sit on a hot iron plate and scalded with boiling sand—Guru Arjun Dev Ji accepted martyrdom with calm dignity, transforming personal suffering into a powerful spiritual testimony. His Shahidi was unprecedented in Indian history in the sense that it represented sacrifice not for political ambition but for the protection of religious autonomy and moral integrity. The impact of this martyrdom was profound and multidimensional. Spiritually, it redefined the Sikh understanding of suffering, presenting it as a path to divine union rather than defeat. Socially and institutionally, it marked a turning point in Sikh history, leading to the gradual transformation of the Sikh Panth from a purely spiritual community into a self-conscious collective prepared to resist injustice. Guru Arjun Dev Ji's martyrdom directly influenced the outlook of his successor, Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji, who introduced the doctrine of Miri and Piri, symbolizing the inseparable relationship between temporal authority and spiritual responsibility. Ethically, the Guru's sacrifice established a timeless model of non-compromising resistance to tyranny, inspiring generations to uphold justice without hatred or revenge. His martyrdom also contributed significantly to the evolution of the Indian concept of Shahidi, where sacrifice is rooted in moral courage, humility, and service to humanity rather than violence or coercion. In the long run, Guru Arjun Dev Ji's Shahidi strengthened Sikh identity, instilled resilience, and laid the foundation for later sacrifices made by Sikh Gurus and followers in defense of human dignity and freedom of belief. Even today, his martyrdom resonates as a universal message against oppression, reminding the world that spiritual truth and human rights are often preserved through silent suffering and supreme sacrifice.

MUGHAL RELIGIOUS POLICY UNDER AURANGZEB AND THE MARTYRDOM OF GURU TEGH BAHADUR JI:

The Mughal Empire initially pursued policies of religious accommodation, particularly under Akbar. However, this approach weakened under his successors and was decisively reversed during the reign of Aurangzeb. Influenced by orthodox Islamic scholars, Aurangzeb sought to establish a state grounded in Sunni orthodoxy. His reign witnessed the reimposition of discriminatory taxes, destruction of temples, and coercive measures aimed at enforcing religious conformity⁶.

A survey of Indian history before the seventeenth century reveals that while sacrifice was deeply valued, it rarely extended to dying for another community's religious freedom. Tolerance existed as a social or administrative practice, not as an inherent moral right requiring supreme sacrifice⁷. This limitation highlights the historical significance of Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji's martyrdom.

Guru Tegh Bahadur's extensive travels across northern India exposed him to the suffering caused by religious persecution. The crisis reached its peak in 1675 when a delegation of Kashmiri Pandits approached the Guru, seeking protection against forced conversion. Guided by the principles of dharma, Guru Tegh Bahadur accepted moral responsibility for defending the freedom of others, even though they did not belong to his own religious community.

Guru Tegh Bahadur was arrested, imprisoned, and subjected to severe coercion. He was offered the choice between conversion to Islam, the display of miracles, or execution. Rejecting all compromises, he affirmed the inviolability of conscience. His companions were executed before him, and on 11 November 1675, Guru Tegh Bahadur was publicly beheaded in Delhi. Guru Gobind Singh later recorded this supreme sacrifice in Bachittar Natak, emphasizing that his father gave his life to protect dharma⁸.

Although the terminology of modern human rights did not exist in seventeenth-century India, Guru Tegh Bahadur's actions embodied principles now recognized as fundamental human rights, including freedom of conscience, religious liberty, equality, and resistance to tyranny. In pre-modern Indian society, ethical obligations were articulated primarily as duties; nevertheless, the fulfillment of duties necessarily implied the recognition of corresponding rights.

By sacrificing his life for another community's faith, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji universalized the tradition of Shahidi. His martyrdom transformed sacrifice into a civilizational ethic rooted in dignity, pluralism, and justice.⁹ He is rightly remembered as Hind di Chadar, symbolizing protection for all faiths.

THE ENDURING LEGACY AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE:

The legacy of Shri Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji transcends time, geography, and religious boundaries, offering profound inspiration for today's deeply fragmented and conflict-prone world. His martyrdom in 1675 was not merely a historical event rooted in the Mughal-Sikh encounter, but a universal moral statement affirming the inviolability of human conscience and the ethical limits of state power. In an age when identity-based intolerance, coercive nationalism, and ideological absolutism continue to challenge plural societies, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji's life and sacrifice remain strikingly relevant.

Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji did not sacrifice his life for political sovereignty or the protection of his own religious community alone; rather, he stood for the right of others—the Kashmiri Pandits—to practice their faith without fear or compulsion. This act transformed the concept of martyrdom into a universal ethical protest against injustice. His decision reflects a rare moral courage: defending principles without expectation of personal or communal gain. In contemporary terms, his stand aligns with the core values of human rights, particularly freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, and human dignity, long before these ideas were codified in modern international law.

For today's world, marked by growing authoritarian tendencies and shrinking spaces for dissent, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji's legacy offers a powerful lesson on the moral responsibility of individuals in the face of unjust authority. His resistance was non-opportunistic and principled, grounded in dharma—a moral order that prioritizes justice over power and conscience over conformity. Unlike violent rebellion, his resistance was ethical and sacrificial, demonstrating that moral authority can challenge even the most powerful state structures.

Equally significant is the interfaith dimension of his legacy. At a time when religious identities are often weaponized to create divisions, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji's martyrdom stands as a historical affirmation of pluralism. His sacrifice underscores the idea that protecting another's faith is not a threat to one's own religion but a fulfillment of a higher moral duty. This message holds particular relevance in multicultural societies where peaceful coexistence depends upon mutual respect and ethical restraint.

Moreover, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji's legacy serves as an inspiration for civil society, educators, and human-rights defenders. His life exemplifies the transformative power of ethical leadership rooted in humility, compassion, and fearlessness. In a world increasingly driven by material success and political expediency, his emphasis on inner strength, moral clarity, and willingness to suffer for truth offers a corrective to moral relativism.

In essence, Shri Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji's legacy is not confined to Sikh history but belongs to global moral history. His martyrdom continues to inspire movements for justice, religious freedom, and human dignity across cultures and generations. For today's world, he remains a timeless symbol of ethical resistance—one who teaches that the defence of conscience is the highest form of courage, and that true legacy lies in upholding humanity even at the cost of one's life.

CONCLUSION

Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom stands as a timeless moral act rooted in the Sikh conception of dharma. His sacrifice challenged the legitimacy of oppressive authority and affirmed the sanctity of human conscience. By laying down his life for the freedom of others, Guru Tegh Bahadur transcended religious boundaries and articulated a universal ethical principle that continues to resonate within contemporary human-rights discourse.

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