

SIKH FAITH & HISTORY

The Kashmir Connection

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Most People these days talk as if Kashmir's relationship with the rest of the country began in October, 1947. Few know that, besides being a great nursery of Indian culture and civilisation, Kashmir had been a part of the empires of Ashoka, Kanishka, Harsha Vardhan, et al. The relationship has not only been territorial but also of mind and soul.

Fewer still know that some of the crucial turns in Sikh faith and history were shaped by events that had their origin in Kashmir. It is important to know of them. For, as Cicero rightly observed centuries ago, "not to know what took place before you were born is to remain for ever a child." Moreover, "there is", to use the words of Walter Benjamin, "always a secret agreement between the past generations and the present ones".

Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom was deeply connected with developments in Kashmir. There was hardly any other event which caused as great a revolutionary impact on the Sikh faith as this one.

The great fighting force, the Khalsa, which Guru Gobind Singh created and which lives and prospers as a brave and dynamic community, was direct fallout of the barbarous and brutal torture to which a saintly soul like Guru Tegh Bahadur was subjected merely because he defended the right of Kashmiri Pandits to live in peace in accordance with the tenets of their religion.

Influenced by the narrow and fanatic outlook of Aurangzeb, Mughal Governor Iftikhar Khan (1671-1675) started the persecution of Kashmiri Pandits, with the objective of securing the conversion to Islam. Agonised by Iftikhar Khan's relentless campaign, a group of Pandits led by Kirpa Ram Dutt of Manttan went to the Holy Cave of Amarnath to pray before Lord Shive and seek His blessings in their hours of distress.

At the cave, the leader of the group dreamt that the Immortal Lord (Amarnath) instructed him to seek guidance from Guru Tegh Bahadur. Accordingly, a deputation of Kashmiri Pandits went to Chak Nanki/Anandpur Sahib to meet Guru Tegh Bahadur.

The petition presented to the Guru on May 25, 1675, said: "We suffer great atrocities, sacred threads (janeus) are forcibly taken off our persons. Cows are killed. Janeus, a man and a quarter in weight, are snapped in a single day."

Saddened by the plight of the Pandits, Guru Tegh Bahadur became pensive. At that moment, Gobind, the Guru's son, entered the room, "Why are you, dear father, in such deep thought?", enquired the nine-year-old lad. "The present day sad state of affairs-the state of Kaliyug-would abate only if a pure and pious soul comes forward for supreme sacrifice", reflected the Guru.

"Who can be more pure and pious than you?" Queried Gobind. This comment

convinced Guru Tegh Bahadur that the young boy was fit to assume the responsibility of Guruship. He made up his mind to put his life at stake. He advised the Pandits to go and tell the Mughal Governor and his Emperor that Tegh Bahadur was their Guru and if he could convert their Guru to Islam, they would all accept conversion.

The Guru's stand infuriated the Mughal establishment that Aurangzeb ordered his arrest and, subsequently, his execution on November 11, 1675. The Guru died calmly. But a volcanic upsurge erupted in the hearts of men and women and history underwent a revolutionary change. The great Khalsa emerged on the scene and sparrows turned into hawks. Thus, the tiny spark that later on turned into a great fire and warmed numerous souls, had its origin in Kashmir.

Guru Tegh Bahadur's response to the Kashmiri Pandits not only produced a revolutionary impact on the Sikh religion and outlook but also strengthened the social and cultural forces which facilitated national integration. And the Kashmiri Pandits to date feel one with the Sikh.

Later on, Kirpa Ram Dutt became a follower of the Sikh faith and died fighting the Mughal army in the Battle of Chamkaur (1705).

Another great figure of Sikh history is Banda Singh Bahadur, whom Guru Gobind Singh bequeathed the task of carrying on the valiant fight against the injustices and atrocities of the Mughals. He resorted to guerrilla warfare and wrote many new chapters in the saga of the Sikh rise to power. He dealt a crippling blow to the Mughal authority and undermined the rising influence of the Abdalis in Punjab. He was also the first leader to teach the Sikhs how to fight effectively and how to hold sway over large tracts of land. When arrested he was put in a cage and tortured savagely before being put to death. Banda Bahadur, who has become immortal in Sikh folklore, came from what is now known as the state of Jammu and Kashmir. He was born near Rajouri. During his guerrilla fight, too, he took refuge in Jammu's hills where his "Dera", known as Dera Banda Bahadur, still exists.

The return of Kohinoor to India from Afghanistan also took place through Kashmir. Wafa Begum, wife of the Afghan Amir, Shah Shuja, sought the help of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in saving the life of her husband who was deposed by his half-brother, Shah Mohammad, and fled to Kashmir. The Begum feared that her husband would be killed by Shah Mohammad's agents. Maharaja Ranjit Singh demanded the Kohinoor from Wafa Begum as the price for help to which she agreed.

Partly to rescue Shah Shuja and partly to include Kashmir in his expanding kingdom, Ranjit Singh sent a powerful force under the command of Mokham Chand. The campaign failed to establish Sikh rule in Kashmir due to the adoption of a wrong route, but it succeeded in finding Shah Shuja and bringing him safely to Lahore. At that time, Wafa Begum and Shah Shuja went back on their promise and coined excuses for not parting with the Kohinoor. But they could not withstand the rough and ready measures employed by Ranjit Singh and ultimately handed over the fabulous jewel to the Maharaja.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh thus retrieved the honour of the country. He also planned to regain the sacred portals of Somnath Temple. But illness and impending death deprived him of the opportunity. Before dying, he was anxious to make an offering of the Kohinoor to the temple of Jagannath Puri. But his courtiers, taking advantage of his grave illness, sabotaged his wish.

The 67 years of Afghan rule (1753-1819) are rated as one of the worst periods in Kashmir's history. Local feelings in this regard are reflected in a couplet which, when translated reads: "I enquired of the gardener the cause of the destruction of the garden; drawing a deep sigh, he replied that it was the Afghans who did it."

Jabbar Khan, the last Afghan Governor, relentlessly persecuted Hindus. Unable to view Kashmiris being tormented and tortured. Birbal Dhar, a Pandit, approached Maharaja Ranjit Singh for help and provided him with valuable information about the strength and deployment of Jabbar Khan's forces. Ranjit Singh had earlier made two unsuccessful attempts to capture Kashmir, once in 1812 and again in 1814. This time success greeted Ranjit Singh. The Sikh forces, under the able command of Misser Dewan Chand defeated Jabbar Khan at Shopian on July 15, 1819, and triumphantly marched into the capital the next day.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was so overjoyed at the inclusion of Kashmir in his kingdom that he ordered special illumination of Lahore and Amritsar for three nights. He cherished a deep desire to visit Kashmir. But he was not destined to visit it even when he lived for about two decades after his forces conquered the valley.

Sikh rule in Kashmir lasted 27 years (1819-1846) and 10 Governors. By 1834 Ladakh, including Zaskar and Balistan, had become part of Ranjit Singh's kingdom on account of six amazing military campaigns undertaken by Zorawar Singh, a general in the army of Raja Gulab Singh of Jammu. It is practically unknown to the people that with regard to our border dispute with China in the North-West, the validity of India's stand rests primarily on these campaigns.

Ranjit Singh was a constructive genius. Few in history have achieved so much in such a short time against such heavy odds. But an area in which he failed was his inability to bring about a culture and climate which could provide solidarity to his achievements and channelise people's energy towards constructive rather than destructive ventures. It was the uncongenial environment that destroyed Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Kingdom soon after he left the scene, and the proverbial Sikh courage and fervour flowed in negative direction.

We are living in different times and their challenges, after the disappearance of the great leadership of the Independence era, remain essentially the same; how to build a strong, sound, fair and just social and political order by strong, sound, fair and just means.●