

Guru Tegh Bahadur: 1621-1675

It is a matter of record that the families of the Sikh Gurus were dysfunctional, starting with Guru Nanak himself. This difficulty assumed an unusual importance with the passing of the eighth Sikh Guru Har Krishan, who did not name a successor. The sixth Sikh Guru Hargobind left behind a large family. Things would have turned out differently if he had chosen Tegh Bahadur (his youngest son) to succeed him as the seventh Guru. Guru Hargobind's eldest son Gurditta (who predeceased him) left him two grandsons, Har Rai and Dheer Mal; Har Rai, in turn, had two sons, Ram Rai and Har Krishan, the former was disowned by his father Har Rai when he misinterpreted Guru Nanak's word in Asa di Var to curry favor with Emperor Aurangzeb; Ram Rai and Dheer Mal were to play nefarious roles in the evolving Sikh history.

Since the time of the fourth Sikh Guru Ram Das all Gurus came from Sodhee family. When word got out that Guru Har Krishan had stated that the next Guru was to be found in the town of Bakala, near Goindwal (on River Beas), 22 Sodhees (all relatives of Guru Hargobind) set their claims to be the next Sikh Guru, including Dheer Mal and Ram Rai; Tegh Bahadur was not among the clamants, he lived in isolation at Bakala tending his farm. A great deal of unrest existed in the Sikh community; it was divided into cults of self-styled Gurus. There is an interesting story how the devout Sikhs decided that Tegh Bahadur was the intended one; he was anointed the ninth Sikh Guru at the age of 44. Dheer Mal was upset at the elevation of Tegh Bahadur; he arranged new Guru's house to be ransacked and tried to have him killed. Fortunately, he failed. The angry Sikhs in turn looted Dheer Mal's house and took possession of the original copy of Adi Granth but Guru Tegh Bahadur returned the holy book to Dheer Mal; it is now a prized possession of Dheer Mal's descendants at the town of Kartarpur in District Jullundur.

At the outset Guru Tegh Bahadur met with a lot of opposition from his relatives; he was even denied entry (by the custodians) to the Golden Temple at Amritsar when he went there to pay his homage. He left Bakala and went to Kiratpur, the town founded by his father, but was harassed there by Dheer Mal's followers. So, he bought a piece of land from the Raja of Kuhloor and founded a town called Anandpur; the town played a role in the Sikh history later.

Tegh Bahadur was 13 years old when he married Gujari, the daughter of Lal Chand of Kartarpur in District Jullundur. After becoming Guru, he left on a preaching tour of Eastern India, leaving his pregnant wife and mother at Patna, in Bihar. He was gone for several years. During those years Guru Tegh Bahadur was politically active. For example, he arranged a peaceful settlement between Ram Singh a Rajput general of Aurangzeb and the Raja of Assam, averting a blood bath on both sides. While he was gone, Gujari gave birth to a son who was named Gobind Rai. Guru Tegh Bahadur invited his family to join him at Anandpur when Gobind Rai was 5 years old.

In the meantime Ram Rai was active trying to convince Emperor Aurangzeb that Guru Tegh Bahadur may be plotting against his rule. An incident occurred which made his arguments more plausible to Aurangzeb who was a fanatic Sunni Muslim. Aurangzeb had come up with a clever idea of converting the Brahmins in Northern India to Islam, thinking that the lower castes would then follow suit and become Muslims too. This pressure was felt very strongly by Brahmins in Kashmir. They formed a delegation under the leadership of Kirpa Ram and visited Guru Tegh Bahadur at Anandpur seeking relief. [Kirpa Ram became Kirpa Singh when baptized a Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh; he was

killed at Chamkaur along with 3 Pyaras and 2 older sons of Guru Gobind Singh]. The commotion caused by the presence of the delegation caught Gobind Rai's attention. He asked his father why those people were there. Guru Tegh Bahadur (absorbed in a deep thought) said, "Emperor's minions are converting the Brahmins forcefully to Islam and they seek protection." Gobind Rai enquired whether something could be done to protect them. Guru Tegh Bahadur replied, "Yes, if a person of a very high moral stature agreed to sacrifice his life, these atrocities could be stopped." Gobind Rai retorted, "I know of no one of such a high stature except you!" Guru Tegh Bahadur was deeply moved by his (nine year old) son's compassion, it made it easier for him to make a fateful resolve. Guru Tegh Bahadur told the Pundits that they should let it be known that if the Guru could be persuaded to embrace Islam they all will follow suit. When this news reached Aurangzeb he was hopping mad and ordered Guru Tegh Bahadur arrested. The Guru was brought to Delhi in chains, accompanied by several Sikhs. The Guru expected that there might be a chance of a discourse between him and the Emperor in which he might succeed in convincing Aurangzeb to abandon his policy of forceful conversions. But things turned out differently. The Emperor sent a message to Guru's party ordering that either he embrace Islam or he will be put to death. The Guru realized the hopelessness of the situation and asked his Sikhs to return to Anandpur since his end was near; five of them stayed behind with him. They were: Mati Das, Gurditta, Diyala, Uda and Cheema. The Guru refused to embrace Islam. Aurangzeb ordered him to be put in an iron cage and put him on a public display at Chandni Chowk, near the Red Fort. To set an example for other refusniks, a scheme of torture procedures was formulated. First, Mati Das was asked whether he would embrace Islam. When he refused, he was sawed alive, thereby becoming a martyr, in plain view of the Guru. Next day it was the turn of Diyala. The same question was put to him. Diyala refused. He was made to stand in a large vessel filled with water and a fire was lit underneath it, boiling Diyala's body to a martyr's death; also, in plain view of the Guru. On third day, the same question was put to Guru Tegh Bahadur again. Predictably, he refused. He was let out of the cage and seated on a platform. An executioner was summoned. With a huge crowd watching in horror, the executioner severed the Guru's head in one stroke. The crowd fled in terror. This ghastly scene was enacted on 16 November 1675. The body of the Guru lay in that place for several days since Sikhs in Delhi were fear stricken and no one came forward to claim Guru's remains; Gurudwara Sisganj now stands at that place.

The Sikh community in Delhi was very upset at the shabby treatment meted out to Guru Tegh Bahadur. However, their immediate task was to find a way to retrieve Guru's remains being guarded by the Mughal soldiers. An enterprising Lubana Sikh thought of a clever scheme. He had a house near the public square where Guru Tegh Bahadur's corpse lay. He set it on fire one night and distracted the guards. In the stampede that followed, Lubana loaded Guru's torso onto a cart and carried it away and cremated it; Gurudwara Rakabganj now stands at that place. Another Sikh by the name of Jaita got hold of Guru's head and carried it to Anandpur where it was cremated by Gobind Rai and the Sikhs with due respect. Shortly thereafter, Gobind Rai was anointed the tenth Sikh Guru.

While he was imprisoned in Delhi, Guru Tegh Bahadur composed verses that I consider to be an 'Ode to Life'. Later, Guru Gobind Singh incorporated them in the Adi Granth. They have been my favorite since I first heard them recited in high school.

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