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Religion, Resistance, and Sovereignty in Early Modern North India: Re-reading Guru Tegh Bahadur as a Patriotic Figure

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Abstract

This paper revises the political value of Guru Tegh Bahadur as an actor in early modern India and challenges the history of devotionalism and nationalism that have the tendency to simplify the historical nuances of his deeds. The issue that the research proposal will solve is the marginalisation of Guru Tegh Bahadur in historical accounts of political resistance where sovereignty is often evaluated in terms of dynastic or military power and not through moral religious dissent. The conceptual way the research is incorporated is the combination of religion, resistance and sovereignty in studying how the authority of the ethics played a counter-sovereign role in the Mughal imperial rule. The paper is methodologically based on textual-historical analysis of the Sikh primary sources such as the *Guru Granth Sahib*, *Bachittar Natak*, *Bukamnamas*, early rahit literature and Persian Mughal chronicles and the current historical literature as well. It features the main thesis as re-interpretation of Guru Tegh Bahadur as an expression of patriotism whose martyrdom was the expression of an idealistic defence of plural religious legitimacy and moral autonomy, and not sectarian motive. The article has its contribution to the discourse at the social-science level since it establishes a redefinition of early modern patriotism as something other than a territory-based nationalism, thus pointing out the element of ethical resistance as a progressive form of political sovereignty in the South Asian history.

Keywords: Guru Tegh Bahadur; Ethical Sovereignty; Religious Resistance; Mughal Political Authority; Early Modern India

1. Introduction

The North Indian context with its own strong complex relations between imperial power, religious groups, and early ethical discontent was that of the seventeenth century. During the rule of Mughals, especially, the reigns of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, the embodiment of the idea of sovereignty was not only through the imposed military and administrative methods but also the control of the belief systems, ritual practice, and moral predispositions (Alam, 2004; Habib, 1999). In this politico-religious disputable quadrangular is the examination and martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675). Even though Sikh historiography assigns the central importance to Guru Tegh Bahadur as a martyr to the religious freedom, modern academic history has often had a hard time placing his actions in the context of wider political resistance and sovereignty.

The conceptual gap present in extant scholarship cannot be underestimated, as it tends to view resistance and patriotism through the prism of contemporary nationalism and impose the constructs of the nineteenth and twentieth century upon the participants of the early modern era. These anachronic constructs tend to give too much weight to the historical specificity of the time and redundant other ways of imagining politics. In the South Asian context, this subject, based on the loyalties to land and community and moral order, could not always be translated into a territorial nationalism, but quite often, it was manifested in ethical obligation and claim on power and opposition to tyranny (Chatterjee, 1993; Alam, 2004). To re-conceptualize patriotism within this milieu, a sense of non-territorial conceptualizations of political belonging and political sovereignty based on moral legitimacy and not on state power will be required.

However, the discussion of the militarization of the Khalsa during the rule of Guru Gobind Singh and the historical development of the institution of Sikh polity in the eighteenth century have been more advanced in the corpus of

Sikh historiography (Dhavan, 2011; Grewal, 1998). However, Guru Tegh Bahadur is often depicted as a place between or devotional being as opposed to a political leader whose opposition expressed a specific image of the sovereignty. Similarly, studies which oppose the idea of resistance have favored armed insurgency or peasant revolt and make ethical-religious opposition an undervalued way of political action (Habib, 1999). This gap does aid in an undergoing of the mechanisms by which moral sacrifice and religious power crept in as a threat to imperial power.

In this study, an attempt will be made to address these gaps by re-reading Guru Tegh Bahadur as a nationalist actor in the certain historical circumstances of North Indian conditions of the seventeenth century. The paper aims at both the former and the latter offering Sikh primary sources, including the *Guru Granth Sahib, Bachittar Natak, hukamnamas*, and early rahit literature, and secondary critical literature on the subject, as well as Persian Mughal chronicles. First, it tries to redefine patriotism outside of the restraints of the nationalist paradigms into one based on a moral resistance and plural ethical order. Secondly, it argues that the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur was a kind of counter -sovereignty, which challenged Mughal ethical and religious authority. With the help of this reframing, the study also has a role to play in wider social -science discussions about religion and resistance that offer a historically situated framework to the analysis of the issue of sovereignty in early modern South Asia.

2. Conceptual Framework: Religion, Resistance, and Sovereignty

In this work a conceptual framework also embraces the idea of religion, resistance, and sovereignty as being implicitly historic and constitutive types of one another instead of being considered to be fixed and modern abstractions. During the early modern North India, religion was not a privatised belief but rather a source of moral power and ethical control. The issue of political legitimacy was closely intermingled with religious norms, rituals and claims of moral order. The sovereignty of the Mughals was even premised on the religious idioms of *zill-i-lahi* (shadow of God), *ʿadl* (justice) and villages protection to stabilise the imperial power (Alam, 2004; Moin, 2012). Therefore, religion served as a state language of authority, which could legitimise the rule as well as reveal its hypocrisies.

In this context, the resistance cannot be lower to rebellion or organised violence. A pre-modern political theory identified several types of dissent such as ethical refusal, martyrdom, withdrawal of moral consent and symbolic defiance. History of early modern empires indicates that sovereignty was always negotiated in such a non-military way which was most frequently developed when imperial power was entering territories of the established moral or religious boundaries (Habermas, 1996; Alam, 2004). Resistance in South Asian seldom arose without the intervention of the saints, religious leaders and ethical community that focused against the state authority by claiming of alternative standards of justice and duty. This kind of resistance did not aim at overthrowing the state on a territorial sense but rather limited its moral jurisdiction.

In this context, the concept of sovereignty is conceived not in the context of modern nation-state model of exclusive territorial presence and centralized coercion. The early modern sovereignty was also plural, layered, and relational and the exercising of powers took the form of overlaps between the imperial and regional authority as well as the religious and communal authorities (Skinner, 2008; Grewal, 1998). The Mughal authority was intermingled with semi-independent religious establishments and ethical communities who did not have territorial jurisdiction but which professed obedience. These assertions can be conceptualized as some sort of counter-sovereignty: directives of moral authority which limited the right of the sovereign to issue orders of obedience.

Involving the field of political theory, the present work is based on the understanding that the sovereignty is grounded on legitimacy, but not on the force only (Skinner, 2008). Ethical resistance on the basis of undermining the legitimacy is politically consequential. This is the dynamic in case of Guru Tegh Bahadur. His defence of religious independent existence and readiness to die in case of martyrdom failed to explain a proto-nationalist program but claimed the supremacy of moral law over the imperial decree. Being the framing of religion as moral authority, resistance as ethical refusal, and sovereign as a disputable legitimacy, this framework can be done so that it makes it possible to re-write the history of early modern political action with neither anachronistic nationalist assumption being made, a la carte. It contextualizes the Sikh resistance in the bigger discussions of power, legitimacy and moral order of the early modern societies.

3. Historical Context: Mughal Power and Religious Authority in the Seventeenth Century

The power of the Mughal in the early seventeenth century was arguably at its height when Mughal rule was in the rule of Aurangzeb (1658-1707); but this territorial achievement came to parallel an increase in challenges to religious influence, political authority, and imperial duty. The reign of Aurangzeb represented a re-evaluation of the Mughal political theology, which anticipated Islamic legalism (sharia), righteousness, and piety of the self as the building blocks of state sovereignty. The court annals of the time such as the *Maʾāsir-i ʿAlamgiri* are projected as images of a ruling power that is dedicated to (justice) *adl* and religious discipline and thus the imperial power becomes an image of a moral trust and not a hereditary leadership (Saqi Mustaʿid Khan, 1947). This self-representation, in its turn, created some practical implications on the rule of a religiously mixed empire.

One of the most disputed aspects of the rule of Aurangzeb was the growth in the religious control. In 1679, the jizya tax on the non-Muslims was reinstated, and certain practices related to individual religious practices were banned

and some of the interventions in the endowments of the temples were made which was an attempt to ensure that the imperial policy did not conflict with the Islamic laws (Habib, 1999; Richards, 1995). The recent scholarship, however, warns that these measures should not be seen as the manifestations of unity in intolerance. Desecration of temples and patronage also took place during the Mughal era and, in many cases, they were predetermined by political factors, not doctrinal hatred (Eaton, 2000; Truschke, 2017). However, these policies transformed the ethics of the imperial rule by predetermining the religious difference in the practice of prudence.

It was in this context that the Sikh Gurus began taking a much more dubious role with respect to Mughal rule. Previous Gurus had interacted with the Mughal state by dialogue, patronage, and some sort of selective distance, especially under the rule of as Akbar and Jahangir (Grewal, 1998). By the middle of the seventeenth century, however the Sikh was able to usurp more than purely or devotional leadership, gaining wider social loyalty in Punjab. Guru Tegh Bahadur having assumed this office at a time when imperial indulgence was on the decline as also when the moral conformity was stricter than before. The Guru is depicted in Sikh literature as an ethical authority whose mandate went past sectors, especially in religious freedom (Sabathawi, 2015).

The assassination of Guru Tegh Bahadur in 1675, should, thus, be placed within a wider struggle among the boundaries of the imperial sovereignty. The event in juridical terminology by the Persian chronicles' measures against political disobedience, whereas the Sikh memory of history dealt with it considering the act as martyrdom in the name of religious liberty (Grewal, 1998). This conflict highlights how Mughal authorities were morally offended by Sikh authority to act ethically. As it is shown in the episode, despite its administrative power, the Mughal sovereignty was susceptible to the problems of moral legitimacy, which, nevertheless, eventually turned the political imagination of resistance in early modern North India.

4. Guru Tegh Bahadur: Life, Martyrdom, and Political Meaning

The ninth Sikh Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675) took the spiritual leadership at a decisive point in the political and ethical history of North India in the seventeenth century. His life transpired in the context of the rising Mughal state that tried to continue more in the regulation of religious behaviour and the concentration of the imperial power by the use of juridical politics. The primary sources in Sikh tradition depict Guru Tegh Bahadur as a moral ruler rather than a reclusive ascetic and the moral duty of power is dealt with in his teachings and behaviour. The ethical tone of his hymns, which were included in the Guru -Granth-Sahib, highlighted fearlessness (nirbhau), moral independence and aloofness to coercive power, thus providing a moral point of view through which tyrannical rule informally was challenged (Guru -Granth -Sahib).

Sikh texts like the *Bachittar Natak* by setting Guru Tegh Bahadur in a series of Gurus who came to challenge the Mughal state as Sikh power grew beyond teaching and enlightened the worldly realms. Though it was written later, as it is framed with the help of Guru Gobind Singh, the execution of the ninth Guru is explained as an ethical decision to make in order to stand in defense of righteousness (dharma) against the tyranny (Guru Gobind Singh, Bachittar Natak). Additional sources such as *hukamnamas* of Guru Tegh Bahadur also indicate that he was fully active among Sikh groups in different places, keeping a tight rein on the communal discipline and ethical accountability instead of politics (Grewal, 1998).

The developments that resulted in the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur in 1675 cannot be negated of the policies of the Mughals under the rule of Aurangzeb that pre-empted the religious adherence as an aspect of sovereignty in front of them. According to the traditions of Sikhism, Kashmiri Pandit representatives appealed to the Guru to intervene into the religious conversion. Although the arrest and execution are characterized in purely judicial language in the Persian chronicles, e.g. in the *Maʾasir-i -Alamgiri*, the act has since been understood by Sikhs as a rejection of imperial oppression of religious conscience (Saqi Musta 'id -Khan, 1947; Grewal, 1998). This complication of the concept of sovereignty as marked by the break between these two stories.

The death of Guru Tegh Bahadur can only be interpreted as the theological sacrifice even though it has a political meaning. His execution was a moral provision of not accepting the Mughal state to the ultimate moral jurisdiction. This is unstirred up as opposed to armed rebellion and it did it by virtue of withdrawing moral consent and bringing forth a different moral order. Accepting death instead of obedience the Guru Tegh old Bahadur revealed the boundaries to imperial authority, therefore, turning martyrdom into a political practice that undermined the moral principles of Mughal rule.

This act had far reached political consequences. The martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur transformed the concept of resistance in the Sikh culture, which provided the ethical basis of the subsequent institutionalization of Sikh political sovereignty under Guru Gobind Singh. On a larger scale, it expressed a vision of nationhood in the defence of a plural moral order and religious freedom, rather than based on the territorial nationalism. The demise of Guru Tegh Bahadur is one of the paradigmatic cases of counter -sovereignty: in early modern North India, when politics were negotiated by exchanging overlapping claims to the authority, the difference was that ethical law might limit the powers of the imperial. His legacy, therefore, enjoys a fundamental role in the history of political resistance, showing how moral

courage served as the powerful threat to the early modern empire.

5. Re-reading Guru Tegh Bahadur as a Patriotic Figure

Re-reading of Guru Tegh Bahadur as a nationalistic leader requires the conceptualization of breaking with the modern notion of nationalism and adopting the pre-modern notion of political obedience and moral duty. Patriotism in North India in the seventeenth century meant loyalty to a moral order that preserved social plurality and moral government, rather than loyalty to a nation-state, which had a territorial structure. Dharma, (justice) *adl* and safeguarding communal autonomy articulated political loyalty and all these defined the legitimacy of sovereignty (Alam 2004; Skinner 2008). In this historical frame, the activities of Guru Tegh Bahadur can be seen as a form of patriotism to the extent that they preserved the moral precepts that are required to be conducive to group existence in the face of the imperialist regime.

Guru Tegh Bahadur represented what can be referred to as ethical sovereignty: a kind of power that relies on moral authority and is not forceful. In the *Guru -Granth -Sahib*, his hymns are always favorable to fearlessness, moral autonomy and opposition to unfair coercion and, as an expression of his vision of power, outshine temporal power (Guru -Granth -Sahib). This ideological position was converted into political importance as, more and more, the government of the Mughal began to enforce its jurisdiction over the religious conscience. Guru Tegh Bahadur affirmed leadership of the moral law over the will of the imperial one by nonconformity to comply with their demands that were discriminatory to the plurality of religion.

Political loyalty in the traditional sense does not disappear or decline with such resistance; it is liked again, but now as conditional with justice. Both Islamic and the non-Islamic early modern political thoughts acknowledged that obedience to the ruler would depend on his compliance with moral obligation (Moin 2012; Alam 2004). Therefore, the fact according to which Guru Tegh Bahadur declined to gain the unfair power is not rebellion against the polity but rather opposition on the grounds of protection of its ethical principles. This logic is stressed by his action to defend the Kashmiri Pandits in accordance to the Sikh historical memory: defending a religious autonomy was neither religiously sectarian plea but an adherence to plural moral order in the empire (Grewal 1998).

When the moral resistance is considered in comparison to political loyalty, the unique nature of patriotism of Guru Tegh Bahadur becomes apparent. Although justice is a sovereign ideal in the theology of the Mughal politics, during the reign of the Aurangzeb, the imperial practice progressively limited the range of the tolerable religious performance. This contradiction was revealed by the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur who showed that sovereignty devoid of moral legitimacy could issue a command only through force. His death in turn was a critique of politics and showed how imperial power was weak without any ethical assent.

Such patriotism is very different as compared to the contemporary paradigms of nationalism. It did not pursue the sovereignty of the territory, or organised collective identity against the outside foe. Rather, it declared allegiance to a moral homeland that was characterized by justice, pluralism and restraint which was ethical. Guru Tegh Sahib who instead of submitting to authority chose martyrdom served to assure that genuine political membership lies in the security of conscience and a standing of the authority to act morally. Re-reading him as a patriotic leader therefore adds to historical insights into resistance and independence in early modern south Asia, and shows how ethic power could be an important and non-territorial mode of political loyalty.

6. Comparative and Historiographical Engagement

The importance of martyrdom in the politics of Sikhism has long been acknowledged by Sikh historiography but an analytical elaboration of this topic has often ranged between the devotional narration and the teleological interpretations that attach primary significance to the subsequent rise of the Khalsa. The initial historiographical syntheses - especially of the works of J.S. Grewal - place Guru Tegh Bahadur in the context of the continuously developing institutional power of Sikh Gurus to highlight continuity as opposed to disjuncture in the Sikh-Mughal relationships (Grewal, 1998). Although this method can be used effectively against hagiography, it risks the portrayal of Guru in the pre-history of Guru Gobind Singh, thus diminishing the political rationale of his political ethic.

More recent academic work has turned its attention to the topic of resistance and sovereignty in early modern South Asia. The Mughal political culture proven through the analysis can prove that the imperial power was based not only on forceful rule but also on the moral authority expressed in the terms of justice and kingship as a religious one (Alam, 2004; Moin, 2012). In this literature, resistance is also being perceived as a spectrum, which embraces the moral opposition, the figurative defiance, and the armed rebellions. However, Sikh resistance had been considered in retrospect with militarisation especially in literature that presumes the change of identity of Sikhs after 1699 (Dhavan, 2011). This kind of focus poses a risk of giving diminished attention to the previous methods of non-violent but politically decisive resistance.

Controversies over martyrdom also make martyr-historiography more difficult. Sometimes in Sikh studies, martyrdom is often a theological or communal phenomenon and when looking at resistance as a broader concept tend

to Favor peasant uprisings or elite revolts as having political significance (Habib, 1997). General work on religious violence and state power, particularly the work of Eaton (2000) and Truschke (2017), illuminates the Mughal religious policy in a more prudent way, not to simplify the issue and present it merely as a narrative of intolerance. However, the integration of Sikh martyrdom in the discourse of sovereignty and legitimacy in such studies is quite uncommon, and hence there is a conceptual divide between religious ethics and political thought.

This paper finds itself in the middle of such historiographical controversies. And by surpassing the deictic reduction of Guru Tegh Bahadur as martyrdom activism and counter-sovereignty, it discourages devotional reduction epoch and militarised teleology in the history of the Sikh reform. At the same time, it extends the studies on resistance by revealing how the moral authority worked as a challenge to imperial power. By doing this, the paper will add to an increasing range of research relocating the concept of sovereignty in early modern society as something plural, negotiated and dependent on ethical legitimacy and not merely control of territory.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, the author presents an argument in Favor of a re-read of Guru Tegh Bahadur as a patriotic leader, who lived under the particular political and moral circumstances of North India in the seventeenth century. Through placing his life and martyrdom in its proper contexts in lien to the intersecting schemes of religion, resistance, and sovereignty, the paper has shown that the Mobil execution of Guru in the year 1675 could not be sufficiently imagined in purely theological terms as a martyrdom. Instead, it was a conscious ethical rejection, which insisted on Mughal right to be morally involved and demonstrated the boundaries of the imperial rule. With political legitimacy being practised in an early modern environment, whereby justice and moral authority played a central role in enacting coercive political authority, the position of Guru Tegh Bahadur as defining a kind of counter-sovereignty; it related to the defence of religious plurality and ethical independence.

The main research contribution made by the paper is the conceptualization of patriotism outside the nationalist that is present in the modern context. With a redefinition of patriotism through its demobilization of the patriotism of the territorial nationalism and its relegation to a moral devotion to a plural social order, the study paves the way to a theoretically more salient framework of the South Asian political realities in the early modern reading. It acts also by derailing the Sikh historiography by opposing the devotional reductionism, as well as the militarised teleology, anticipating ethical resistance as a politically effective form of action that occasions the institution of Sikh sovereignty under Guru Gobind Singh.

In a larger sense, the analysis has some consequences in the domain of the Indian political thought because it emphasizes the depth of the historical development of the ethical resistance as a form of political participation. According to it, it has long been traditions of moral dissent and conditional loyalty that define the debates with regard to authority, justice and legitimacy in the subcontinent. The framework might be furthered through comparative research on religious opposition to the state in other parts of early modern South Asia or into what the influence of such ethical understandings of sovereignty taught other anti-colonial thinking in the future. Such questions would also help to clarify why moral authority should continue to be popular in Indian political imagination.

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