INTRODUCTION

Death is inevitable. It may come due to disease, accident, calamity or in a natural way. Being imminent, death is taken as an accepted truth. At the same time, there are some who do not wait for death rather they sacrifice their lives for a cause. Such men do not want to remain inert or inactive. They refuse to live under any kind of tension or repression—political, social, religious or economic, and they intend to bring about a change which is conducive for the welfare, growth and development of humanity. During this process of self-sacrifice, the masses are awakened. There are still others who die for personal causes e.g. for the acquisition of land, for gaining more power, for amassing wealth or for women.

In ancient India, people who died fighting in the battlefield were respected and their act appreciated; on the other hand a death in bed passed unnoticed. The spirit of sacrificing one's life has been kept alive since times immemorial by lighting one flame by
another enkindled flame. The number of known enkindled flames is negligible in some communities and is far beyond human expectation in other communities. Who is ignorant about the battle of "Mahanbharta" which was fought between Kaurvas and Pandavas for power, for the lost kingdom and to redeem the lost honour. The battlefield witnessed countless killings, endless stream of human blood. This battle was fought between two opposing forces of near and dear ones. Individuals, tribes and rulers fought for establishing their individual identities and gave up their lives.

In Christianity, men who died for their faith were called 'martyrs'. In Islam people who sacrificed their lives in defence of their faith were known as 'Shahids'. In India the word 'Shahid' was unknown till the advent of Muslims. It was only during the formation of Sikhism that the most important institution of martyrdom was established firmly by the Sikhs by sacrificing their lives in large number. In fact, Sikhs had gone one step further that they died for principles which are universally acknowledged and applicable. The chief characteristics of these martyrdoms are that they are achieved not only for freedom of conscience or freedom of worship but also for saving
the communities from extinction. The martyrdom of Ninth Sikh Guru, Tegh Bahadur, stands alone unparalleled as a glorious example in this respect. This type of growth of consciousness—offering one's life in order to save suffering humanity from tyranny and oppression, is unique in the history of mankind. Unfortunately, this aspect of Sikhism has not captured the attention of the intelligentsia, what to speak of others, even the Sikh intellectuals have failed to understand the touch of that heightened sense which actually inspired them for the sacrifice.

In this background to capture the latest thought in the growth of human consciousness, the Sikhs sacrifice their lives for high principles. A martyr is one, who is not afraid of death and is fearless. Fearlessness depends upon the teachings and the ways of life propagated by the religious preachers. On the other hand the religious principles of Sikhism also propagate to live and let others live a life of fearlessness. By observing the principles of Sikhism in one's life, the trait of fearlessness comes automatically. It is this salient characteristic of a martyr that makes him lay his life for others. He
always safeguards and protects the higher values and
principles of life at the cost of his own life. He
lives and dies for the glory of human dignity and the
unlifitment of society and humanity. In an ordinary
way of life everything is sacrificed to save one's
life but in the case of a martyr he sacrifices his
life to protect the higher principles of life and
religion.

In the Sikh religion which is the most latest
in its origin, the Sikh Gurus laid the foundation of a
society which would uphold the higher values of life
in selfless and united ways. Their main aim was to
formulate a society which would strongly believe in the
dictum of equality and peaceful living. Such a
society would not have any faith in propagating
casticism, separatism and disparity among masses.
Every individual, in such a set up, should have high
moral qualities of a religion, a deep faith in the
oneness of God and should uphold the highest values
of life.

As soon as the Sikh Gurus started doing the
spade work among the masses through their preachings,
the then rulers and other religious heads stood against
them in protest against their teachings. The
powerful rulers feared that this type of teaching would work as a damper to shake the very foundations of their power and religion. Not to talk of stopping the movement they could not even slow down the pace with which the new principles laid by the Gurus swept over the length and breadth of the country, winning the very hearts of the masses - the dumb driven cattle. The Gurus infused new vigour, fervour and strength in masses to fight determinedly against the so called caretakers of the political and religious power. The resistance against the new religion by the political and religious heads was tremendous and they fought tooth and nail but of no avail, proving thereby the often quoted saying that truth ultimately triumphs.

Before achieving this goal, the Gurus and their followers had to pay high prices of their lives. During this long drawn out process, a situation arose when no other alternative was left but to sacrifice life after life, sometimes individually and sometimes in the mass. Nothing could deter the Gurus and the Sikhs from sacrificing their lives, their sons lives and the lives of their near and dear ones in order to uphold the principles they believed in. In the context of Indian history, a similar situation arose during
the time of the fifth Sikh Guru, Arjun Dev. The situation developed between the rulers and the ruled to such an extent that a unique sacrifice was a must to change the social, political and religious conditions while propagating the ideals for which the Sikhs were struggling hard. On the canvas of the Indian history, such a sacrifice of one's life was to be made by the Guru himself, a spiritual personality of high stature, in order to maintain individuality of the Sikh religion and to create an atmosphere of love and respect among the masses. The hitherto unheard of the noble sacrifice by the Gurus had the desired effect and the followers gathered courage and an unending chain of sacrifices started. As a result of this, countless Sikhs sacrificed their lives and attained martyrdom.

The present research venture is to deal with the type of situation where the rulers and the ruled furthered the long series of sacrifices in Sikhism. In this thesis, the institution of martyrdom is discussed which was started by the Sikhs and was unknown before them in Indian history. It has tried to cover the social, political, economic and religious
circumstances for which the Sikh Gurus and later on the Sikh masses sacrificed their lives to bring about a change. A diligent effort has been made to highlight the effect of martyrdom on society.

In the first chapter of the research work, the life histories, circumstances and the philosophies which Socrates, Jesus Christ and Mansur-Al-Hallaj propagated have been traced. While doing so they faced opposition at the hands of their opponents and were put to death. They attained martyrdom when it was realised that they were on the right path of truth. The second chapter deals with the concept of martyrdom from the various angles as it was taken up by religious groups from time to time. The concept of martyrdom specifically has been traced in Sikhism in its true sense especially stressing its origin, growth and the transmission of its spirit among the masses while keeping up the high tradition of life and religion. The third chapter deals with the prominent Sikh martyrs. Their life histories, the social, political, economic and religious circumstances and the principles they believed in have been viewed thoroughly which forced them to sacrifice their lives selflessly and fearlessly.
The fourth chapter deals with the ideals and principles which the Sikh Gurus preached to their disciples so that they may become true men by imbibing the required traits of Sikh personality which are needed to attain the level demanded of them. In the fifth chapter, in order to trace out the emergence of Sikh ideology, the background of the prevalent religious shades have been discussed. It has been clarified that the Sikh history had to pass through many phases where the events of sacrifices changed the normal course of life and created new trends in history. The martyrdoms of Sikhs from time to time had and will have direct bearings on the making of Sikh history. In the sixth chapter, it has been traced out how the Sikh martyrs raised their voice against the political and social slavery of the Indian masses of varied religions. The Sikh martyrs infused martial spirit in the masses in order to enjoy equal political, social and economic status and that they would never bow before injustice, despotism, tyranny and oppression.

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