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20. GURU TEGH BAHADUR'S ASCENSION: UNRAVELLING THE HISTORICAL BACKDROP

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GURU TEGH BAHADUR'S ASCENSION: UNRAVELLING THE HISTORICAL BACKDROP

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Punjab, the matrix of various cultures and civilizations, had been suffering a dark period in every field during the time of Guru Tegh Bahadur (Nineth Sikh Guru). It was a period of political uncertainty, social disintegration and spiritual degeneration and people were grieving. Society was taking a new and very critical turn. New elements were entering into the shaping of the religious, political and economic policies of the state and as a result, the common man's mind was gripped by a strong sense of fear and anxiety.

Sikhism and Mughal rule took their birth almost at the same time early in the 16th century. The founders of the both establishments, Guru Nanak Dev (first Sikh Guru) and Babur, were contemporaries. No doubt, Babur's invasion proved to be a scourge on Punjab and his invasions were witnessed by Guru Nanak Dev. As Guru Nanak records, "there lay in the dust, the fairy heads of the damsels and of beautiful women. He saw the vermillion at the parting of the hair on their heads (the sign of wedded life amongst Hindus) with the feeling of a wounded father." Guru Nanak did not sit down in impotent rage, he set about doing as much as the situations could permit. He advanced further and was imprisoned. There he heard the cries of aching and torment from the wounded among the people. He asked Mardana – his *rebec* player to touch the string of the *rebec*, for the hymn came from the heavens (which is recorded in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib). The celestial hymn and music appeared to calm the miserable crowd and every one forgot his suffering. Babur was overtaken by remorse. A new moral and spiritual consciousness was awakened in him and he forthwith released all the prisoners.

Guru Nanak Dev, through his raised voice in the form of hymns was successful in mobilising people against tyranny of earlier Lodhi rulers and present invader - Babur. He provoked them to prepare themselves for defence against any type of injustice done by ruling class. This light of knowledge kept on burning among people especially Sikhs. Till the time of the fourth Guru, there was no clash between the Sikhs and the Mughals.

During the long rule of Akbar (grandson of Babur) who had adopted a policy of religious tolerance and established a high model of sovereignty, Sikhism flourished. He had abolished all undue taxes like pilgrimage tax and *Jaziya* which were imposed on non-Muslims. During his time, non-Muslim community got many opportunities to rise to the highest positions in the Mughal administration. His policy of liberalism, broad-mindedness and equivalence of treatment established remarkable religious and cultural relations between Muslims and non-Muslim communities in India. But in the meantime, some forces of conservative thought among Muslims had developed against the liberal policy of Akbar. The leadership for these conservative thoughts was enhanced by the *Naqshbandi* sect of Sirhindi whose leader was Shaikh Ahmed Sirhindi. Akbar's appointment of Hindus to high positions, marriage with Rajput women, introduction of *Din-i-Ilahi* or *Sijdah* and celebration of Hindu festivals were all regarded by Shaikh Ahmed Sirhindi as a grave threat to the survival of Islam.

When Akbar died, Shaikh Ahmed Sirhindi and his successors were successful in influencing his two succeeding rulers, Jahangir and Shahjahan to their side for the cause of Islam. They took the responsibility of bringing political, social and religious affairs of the Muslims in line with the orthodox *Sunni* sect. The successors of Akbar did not maintain his liberal policy.

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