

The Legacy of Guru Arjun Devji@

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@ Excerpted from his magnum-opus: The Sikhs in History.

Martyrdom - Shahidi of Guru Arjun Devji usually falls in June.

The era of Guru Arjun Dev (September 1581-May 1606) was marked by a rare liveliness, vitality and high spirit in the realm of Sikhism. He was an exceptional genius. He belonged to the new generation, born after the passing away of Guru Nanak.¹ Sikhism during his period made rapid strides to come into notice as a powerful third force, independent of both Hinduism and Islam. Above all, he raised the level of Guru to that of *sachcha padshah* (true king)² as against the worldly kings whose position was ephemeral.³

The achievements of Guru Arjun are to be viewed in the context of the fierce resistance he met from within the family – his elder brother Prithi Chand who externalized the conflict and sought assistance of the hostile elements to contain the growing influence of Sikhism. But it had little impact, if at all, on Guru Arjun who remained calm and composed till the very last.

Guru Arjun tried to defuse the crisis *en famille*. He transferred all the property of his father to Prithi Chand who was not appeased. Prithi Chand at the moment was being instigated by high caste Hindus who already were on the lookout to contain the Sikh movement. Assisted by a wily Brahmin, Mahesh Das alias Bir Bal, one of the nine gems of Akbar's Court, the detractors tried to fish in the troubled waters. At Bir Bal's instance, the district revenue official, Sulhi Khan, too aligned himself with the detractors.

With the help of some misguided *masands*, Prithi Chand started preaching that he had been invested with the Guruship and not Arjun Dev. He was able to mislead some simple-minded Sikhs. The state of his meanness could be judged from the fact that he would collect their offerings and direct them to the *langar* of Guru Arjun to take their meals. That rather contributed to his undoing.

The efforts of Bhai Gurdas who, by now was back from Agra, to persuade Prithi Chand to adopt the path of sanity fell through. Bhai Gurdas in disgust gave him and his collaborators the plural epithet of *miné*, deceitful or highway robbers, which stuck to the clique. The leading Sikhs successfully combated misleading propaganda of Prithi Chand, who otherwise met series of setbacks.

Prithi Chand with the assistance of detractors prepared a Memorandum (*mahjar*) leveling charges against Guru Arjun and presented it to Emperor Akbar who treated it with the contempt it deserved.⁴ The wily Bir Bal was killed in 1586 when on a campaign against Pathans in the Frontier. Sulhi Khan marshaled his resources to attack Guru Arjun but, on the way at Haher

whereto he reverted to confer with Prithi Chand, met unholy death when his horse along with him jumped into a brick oven.⁵

Guru Arjun was least distracted by these goings on. Right from the beginning, he concentrated on the missionary tours and the construction work, which went hand in hand.

Ramdas Sarovar shortly afterwards renamed *Amritsar*, the pool of nectar, *Santokhsar* and *Guru ke Mahal* (Guru's residence) all left midway by Guru Ram Das were completed around 1588. The foundation of Harimandir, now also known as Golden Temple, was laid on Maghi, Sunday, December 28, 1588, - the foundation stone being laid by the renowned Sufi Saint of Qadiry Order, Mir Mohamed Khan, known as Hazrat Mian Mir of Lahore.⁶ Harimandir, unlike Hindu and Muslim places of worship, was built at a *lower* level than the surrounding area. It had doors on all the four sides, signifying both humanity and universalism and that it was open to people of all the denominations.⁷

Side by side, during his extensive missionary tours of *Majha* and *Doaba*, Guru Arjun founded the towns of Sri Gobindpur on Beas. Tarn Taran, Kartarpur, apart from the city of Amritsar for which he invited people of all trades and professions. The religious centres established at these places became centres for consolidation of the Guru's following. Tarn Taran had the privilege of having the biggest *sarovar*, tank, and emerged as the centre for cure of leprosy victims. The Lt. Governor of Jalandhar Doab, Syed Azim Khan, who became Guru Arjun's disciple, played a leading role in establishment of Sikh centre at Kartarpur.

Guru Arjun also built a *Baoli* at Dabbi Bazar Lahore, (it was paid for by Wazir Khan, Governor of Lahore), a couple of wells at Tarn Taran, Gangsar well at Kartarpur which had as pure water as that of Ganges, a huge well with six wheels at Chheharta near Amritsar and another well with three wheels at Amritsar. He also laid *Guru ka Bagh* apart from some other constructions like Ramsar at Amritsar. Guru Arjun's missionary tours were a great success in attracting disciples, cutting across religious lines. These included hill Rajas of Kulu, Saket, Haripur and Chamba who visited him at various times. The Malwa was aptly covered by Masands.

The widespread building activity was indicative of sharp increase in the number of Sikhs, who according to Mohsin Fani of *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* were found in all parts of Hindustan and beyond. It also invited a reorganization of *Masand* system to channelise the funds for construction work. With the consent of the Sikhs, *daswand*, i.e. one-tenth of their earnings was fixed. It was carried by *Masands* to the Guru on Baisakhi day. He also encouraged the Sikhs to enter into trade activity, especially those of Turki horses, and also probably himself entered that trade. It made the Sikhs to have trade encounters with tough Pathans of the trans-frontier region. Afghanistan and beyond. It enriched them and also the Guru's treasury. Besides, the hazards of horse trading made them some of the finest horsemen of Asia.

That was not an incidental development. His son Hargobind, born on 21 *Asarh*, June 18, 1590, as part of his education got thorough training in horse riding, swordsmanship and warfare at the hands of Baba Buddha. Guru Arjun could foresee the need for the new orientation in view of the persistent hostility of local muqaddams and faujdars on their own and at the instigation of Prithia and malignant upper caste Hindus. They were hand in glove with one another.

Guru Arjun's perception of the times to come was notwithstanding Akbar's high regards for him. According to the Court historian, Abul Fazal's *Akbar Namah*, Guru Arjun accorded a profuse reception to Akbar on November 24, 1598, at Goindwal. **Akbar was really impressed by Guru Arjun's "bewitching and handsome appearance, sweet and melodious voice and fascinating and charming manners, his princely style of living, his warm reception and his singing of hymns" in praise of God.**⁸ At Guru Arjun's instance, Akbar issued orders to remit the revenue by one-sixth.

It may be mentioned that Guru Arjun was a great lyricist. His hymns had a rare quality to touch the symphony of one's heart. He mostly composed short hymns in simple language of the people. These straightaway affected the emotions of the singer and the listener. His *Sukhmani*, psalm of peace, still remains a masterpiece to put at ease a disturbed mind and provide it instant solace. Guru Arjun's *bani*, hymns, captivated the heart of the people and proved an effective instrument in spreading the Sikh panth.

By the time, Prithia's attempt to compose his own hymns in the name of Guru Nanak posed a threat to corrupt the Sikh philosophy. The compilation of *Guru Granth* had already been on the agenda of the Sikh panth. Guru Nanak had passed on the collection of his hymns to Guru Angad who had them copied and widely distributed. Guru Nanak had also collected Farid's compositions. Guru Angad enlarged the collection by adding those of some more Bhaktas. Later, Guru Amar Das had collected the hymns of his predecessors and his own as also of a number of Bhaktas, into *pothis*, volumes.

Guru Arjun, shortly after Akbar's visit, early in 1599, began the project of compilation of *Adi Granth*.⁹ Bhai Gurdas was appointed amanuenses. Guru Arjun took five-years to completed the project. *Adi Granth* was ready in 1604 when it was installed in the Harimandir with Baba Buddha as the first granthi.¹⁰ It was placed at a high pedestal while Guru Arjun himself sat at a lower level to emphasize that *shabad*, Word, is the Guru. It was embodiment of the Guru himself.

The compilation of *Adi Granth* was a major achievement of Guru Arjun.

Guru Arjun, like his predecessors, was a connoisseur in music and put it to good use in organising the *Adi Granth* including the hymns of bards and Bhaktas in various *ragas*, musical meters.

He also exercised great caution in selection of hymns of Bhaktas for inclusion. He rejected compositions like Pran Sangli obtained after considerable effort from Ceylon, being spurious. His ideological parameters were clear.

The *Adi Granth* enunciated unadultrated monotheism and humanism. It reflected pan-Hindustani and beyond, matter of fact, existence of Sikhism.

The death of Emperor Akbar in October 1605 marked a sea change in the policy of his successor, Prince Salim alias Nuruddin Jahangir, who out of political necessity was forced to uphold

Islamic Puritanism of Naqashbandi revivalists led by Khwaja Mohammad Baqi-Billa (1564-1603) of Turan.¹¹

Shaikh Farid Bukhari, one of his followers had emerged as a strong force in Akbar's Court by the end of the latter's reign, while the spiritual mantle fell on Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi also known as Mujadid Alif-i-Sani (1561-1624).

After Salim's revolt, and Akbar's forgiving his errant son and proclaiming him heir-apparent, the leading nobles of Akbar's Court were divided into two factions. One, favouring Akbar's policy of *Din-i-Ilahi* and *Sulha-i-Kul* (Peace for All), favoured liberal minded Prince Khusrau, Salim's son, and held Salim unsuitable for kingship. The other, of Islamic fundamentalists, sick of Akbar's policy of religious tolerance, aligned with Salim and extracted promises to reverse Akbar's religious policy and further the cause of Islam at the cost of the non-Muslims.¹² They were to be humiliated and shown no quarters. Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi's letters, *Maktubat-i-Emam-i-Rabani*, fully reflect his philosophy of contempt for the non-Muslims.

In Punjab, the Hindu position was listless except that they would hobnob with the convenient officials against the growing Sikh influence.

Guru Arjun's high profile, active, missionary preachings, and pan-Hindustani aspirations rankled in the mind of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi who, in one of his letters, described Guru Arjun Dev as Chief of Infidels – *Rais-i-ahl-i-Shirk* – and a leader of the *Kafirs* – *imam-i-kufr*.¹³ Gokal Chand Narang describes Guru Arjun Dev as "the first great organiser of the Sikh nation."¹⁴ In the words of Mohsin Fani, the Sikhs had by now "become accustomed to a form of self government within the Empire".

Khusrau's indiscreet revolt against his father on April 6, 1606 and his hurrying to the Punjab, on way to the North West Frontier, to gain adherents greatly helped to strengthen the position of Islamic revivalists. Khusrau was pursued by Shaikh Farid Bukhari who in turn was being followed by Jahangir. The persons who directly or indirectly helped Khusrau were immediately punished.

Khusrau crossed river Beas and was followed by Shaikh Farid Bukhari who inflicted on him a crushing defeat near Bhairawal Khusrau was captured on April 27, 1606, near Chenab and brought as prisoner to Lahore.

Jahangir crossed to Beas on April 26, and was encamped at Jhabal. Upto May 22, i.e. for 27 days, there was no mention at all of Khusrau's calling on Guru Arjun much less the latter's blessing him.

Around May 23, a report about Guru Arjun's blessing Khusrau and affixing a saffron mark on his forehead poured into Jahangir's ears. That made him to call for Guru Arjan into his presence.

That sets the stage for Jahangir's entry in his memoirs, *Tuzak-i-Jahangiri*, which reads: "There lived at Goindwal on the bank of the river Biah (Beas) a Hindu named Arjun in the garb of a Pir and Shaikh, so much so that he had by his ways and means captivated the hearts of many simple-

mindful Hindus, nay, even of foolish and stupid Muslims and he had noised himself as a religious and wordly leader. They called him Guru, and from all directions, fools and fool-worshippers were attracted towards him and expressed full faith in him. For three or four-generations they had kept this shop warm. For a long time the thought had been presenting itself to me that either I should put an end to this false traffic or he should be brought into the fold of Islam.

"At last during the days when Khusrau passed along this road, this insignificant fellow made up his mind to see him and conveyed preconceived things to him and made on his forehead a fingermark in saffron which in Hindu terminology is called *qashqa* (teeka) and is considered propitious. When this came to the ears of our Majesty, and I fully knew his heresies, I ordered that he should be brought into my presence and, having handed over his houses, dwelling place, and children to Murtza Khan (Shaikh Farid Bukhari) and having confiscated his property. I ordered that he should be put to death with tortures."¹⁵

The first part about popularity of Guru Arjun and his mission was correct. The second part about Guru Arjun's blessing Khusrau was a pure concoction,¹⁶ probably the work of Shaikh Farid Bukhari who might have used Chandu as a tool. As Ganda Singh points out, "Never in the whole history of the Sikh Gurus, there has been any occasion for any Guru to anoint anyone, Sikh or non-Sikh, with a *teeka*. Even the succeeding Guru was never *teeka*'d by any Guru himself. The *teeka* or *tilak* ceremony of the succeeding Guru was always performed by a leading Sikh. In the case of Gurus Angad to Hargobind, the ceremony was performed by Bhai Buddha, a venerable old Sikh coming from the days of Guru Nanak. And the same practice was followed upto the time of Guru Gobind Singh, tenth and last Guru."¹⁷

From the details in *Tuzuk-i-Jehangiri*, it is obvious that Jahangir was looking for an opportunity to fix Guru Arjun. He left the details of punishment to be worked out by Shaikh Farid Bukhari on whom he had conferred the high title of Murtaza Khan – one who had gained the royal pleasure. *Tuzuk* does not mention of any fine being imposed on Guru Arjan, as has been mentioned by some contemporary sources like *Dabistan-i-Mazhaib* and Jesuits. That seems to be the result of a mix up.¹⁸

Guru Arjun nominated Hargobind as his successor and left for Lahore. He was subjected to a number of tortures. The Sikh traditional accounts mention that Guru Arjun was made to sit on hot iron plate, hot sand was thrown over his body, and he was boiled in a cauldron. *Dabistan-i-Mazhaib* mentions of his being deprived of food and water and put into the hot blazing sand and stoned which caused blood to ooze out of his head. He was tortured for 3 to 5 days.

With wounds blistering on his body, on May 30, 1606, tied hand and feet, he was thrown into river Ravi wherein he disappeared.¹⁹ In the words of Bhai Gurdas, Guru Arjun though in great pain on the night of May 29- 30 was fully composed, with hymns in praise of God on his lips.

Guru Arjun's martyrdom, the first of its kind in the history of Hindustan, the sub-continent, caused great resentment and indignation among the general body of Hindus and Muslims, apart from the Sikhs. One tends to agree with Ganda Singh that "much of the Chandu-story was given currency to in those very days to shift the responsibility of tortures inflicted on the Guru from the

Mughal Officials to the *Kafirs*.²⁰ Chandu was only a minor official at Lahore, and hostile to the Sikh Panth.

The non-implementation of Jahangir's orders about taking over of Guru Arjun's property and children remains inexplicable, notwithstanding Sikh tradition accounts about intervention of Mian Mir who at that stage had no influence either with the Emperor or Shaikh Farid Bukhari, the main actors in Guru Arjun's martyrdom.



References

1. The first three successors of Guru Nanak were at various stages of their life at the time of his passing away in 1539.
2. Rattan Singh Bhangu in *Panth Parkash* relates a popular tradition that power and pelf of the world kept 12 kos (30 kms) from Guru Nanak and six kos from Guru Angad. It knocked at the door of Guru Amar Das and fell at the feet of Guru Ram Das, while in Guru Arjun's time it got admission into the house.

The fable beautifully describes the gradual evolution of the social and political power of the Sikhs. Cf. Gokal Chand Narang, *Transformation of Sikhism*, (Delhi, 1989 ed), p.44.
3. The idea was extant in Guru Amar Das's time, but took concrete shape under Guru Arjun Dev.
4. Gauri M. 5, 99, A.G., p.199.
5. Bilawal M. 5, 104, A.G., p. 825 According to Muslim belief one, who is burnt to death, goes to hell.
6. For a bio-sketch, see Dr. Surinder Singh, "*The Life and Times of Miyan Mir*.", PP&P, Vol. XXII, October 1986, pp. 243-72. There are assertions by some scholars that the foundation stone was laid by Guru Arjan himself.
7. This made Prithia to construct a corresponding centre at Haher, wherefrom his wife came.
8. Cf. Hari Ram Gupta, *History of the Sikhs*. Vol. 1, The Sikh Gurus. 1469. 1708, (Delhi, 1984), p. 134. It was during this visit. Akbar looked into the complaints about the Guru's *bani* being tinged with anti-Muslim or anti Prophet expressions.
9. Ibid. p. 135.
10. It included hymns of Guru Arjun and his predecessors. Rababis and Bhatts associated with various Gurus, and Bhaktas both Muslims and Hindus, including Shudras and Outcastes from different parts of Hindustan.

The hymns in Adi Granth were arranged according to Ragas, musical meters and their sub-meters. This resulted in intermixture of the hymns of all the Gurus in a particular Raga. Then followed the hymns of Bhaktas beginning with those of Kabir and ending with those of Farid. At places there was interspersing of hymns of Gurus and Bhaktas. It was an integrated compilation which gave equal importance to each contributor.

11. Khwaja Mohamad Baqi Billa (1564-1603) arrived in India by close of the 16th century, and established new Sufi order which advocated the use of state power for Islamic preaching.
12. Ganda Singh, "The Martyrdom of Guru Arjun", PP&P. Vol. XII, April 1978, p. 163.
13. Ibid, p. 171.
14. Narang, n.67, p. 46.
15. Ganda Singh, n. 77, p.160.
16. Bhai Vir Singh while editing *Gurpratap Suraj Granth* (pp.1189-92), holds a prolonged discussions and comes to the conclusion that Khusrau never called on Guru Arjun, and rather it was the work of Guru Arjun's opponents, including Prithi Chand, Brahmins and high caste Hindus and Maulvis. Cf. Narang. N. 67, p. 48.
17. Ganda Singh, n. 77, p. 165.
18. In the very next item in *Tuzuk*, Jahangir mentions of cases of Raju and Amba, one of whom was fined Rupees, 1,15,000. This caused some confusion about Guru Arjun being fined. Ibid, p. 175, also Gopal Singh, *A History of the Sikh People*, 1469-1988, (Delhi, 1988), pp. 194-95 for Jesuit Letter of 1606-07 published in Lisbon in 1609.
19. Ganda Singh, n. 77, pp. 169-70.
20. Ibid. p. 172. It may be mentioned that Sikh traditional accounts mention of Chandu, a Divan as the main tormentor. They were not aware of *Tuzuk-I-Jahangiri's* mentioning of Guru Arjun which came to light only in 1931. Or of the Naqshbandi order.