

# ***Pehla Maran Qabool:*** **How Ready are we for Sacrifice?**

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Guru Arjun, India's First martyr set up a precedent which resulted in further consolidation of the Sikhs in the socio-political sphere. Recall Guru Nanak's words when He emerged from the River Bein and proclaimed, " *Na koi Hindu, na koi Musalman*". His call for Brotherhood was mocked 100 years later, by the royal decree of Emperor Jehangir who was waiting for an opportune moment to break the backbone of the Sikhs who had declared a separate identity of their own. The patronage of liberal Emperor Akbar towards the Sikhs, in particular, resulted in the setting up of Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar and the installation of the Aad Granth which was to change the course of Sikh history.

The month of June commemorates the martyrdom of Guru Arjun, the fifth in the lineage of Guru Nanak. Historically, a martyr is a person who willingly gives up one's life for religious convictions or faith. Martyr is from *martur*, the Greek word for witness. The death of a martyr is called martyrdom. Hence, a martyr is a person who witnesses his or her own death at the hands of others without any resistance, either physically or verbally, against the persecutors. **Eager willingness** to give up one's life rather than being forced to go against one's convictions and religious faith is what distinguishes a Martyr. Steadfastness, steely determination, fearlessness, total commitment and unfaltering loyalty to one's Guru and sincere holistic attachment to the Guru's Words are the hallmarks of a martyr. The act of suffering by Guru Arjun at the hands of the Mughal emperor, created a milieu for the successive Sikh Gurus to arm themselves in order to **protect their right to freedom of faith and worship**.

"**You can save your life if you leave your religion and accept ours**" has been the set phrase uttered umpteen times in the history of the world. Not a single race has been spared from martyrdom, whether they were Jews, Christians, Muslims or Sikhs. Martyrdom in Judaism is referred to by the Hebrew phrase *Kiddush Hashem*, meaning sanctification of God's name. In Arabic, a martyr is termed "*shaheed*", literally, witness. In the earlier centuries the term martyr was often used for anyone persecuted which slowly became identified with those who died for their faith. In Sikh terminology a martyr is referred to as a "*shaheed*" and the martyrdom day is referred to as the "*shaheedi divas*".

Guru Arjun was given the choice of either to: "Embrace Islam and save your life or write words in praise of the Prophet in the Holy Granth installed at Harmandir Sahib." Guru Arjun declined both and instead, willingly embraced death turning into reality the words uttered by Guru Nanak, "*ਇਤੁ ਮਾਰਗਿ ਪੈਰੁ ਧਰੀਜੈ ॥ ਸਿਰੁ ਦੀਜੈ ਕਾਣਿ ਨ ਕੀਜੈ ॥*" .... [SGGS 1412.] Guru Arjun had firmly set foot on the path carved by Guru Nanak and stood firm in his faith for the principles set forth by his predecessor Gurus which Guru Arjun firmly believed, practiced and preached. Guru Arjun willingly gave up his life without any demur and the torture meted out to him prior to his attaining martyrdom highlights his fearlessness as He remained calm as if in a meditative mood.

Whenever there is a threat to one's life, one gets unnerved, the body metabolism changes and one panics with a strong urge to run away from the scene in order to save oneself from death. Fear of death is the greatest fear that one can have amongst other fears. To overcome the fear of death is the nirvana of life. A person for whom death holds no significance can do anything, otherwise impossible to achieve. The way Guru Arjun underwent the tortures for four consecutive days - of being made to sit on hot summer

sand, put into a pot of sizzling boiling water, placed on a hot metal plate, with hot sand poured on him and, on the fourth day, forced into the cold waters of River Ravi speak volumes of the line of thought of Bhagat Kabirji, “ਕਬੀਰ ਜਿਸ ਮਰਨੇ ਤੇ ਜਗ ਡਰੈ ਮੇਰੇ ਮਨਿ ਆਨੰਦੁ ॥ ਮਰਨੇ ਹੀ ਤੇ ਪਾਈਐ ਪੂਰਨੁ ਪਰਮਾਨੰਦੁ ॥” [SGGS 1365]

Guru Arjun says, “ਪਹਿਲਾ ਮਰਣੁ ਕਬੁਲਿ ਜੀਵਣ ਕੀ ਛਡਿ ਆਸ ॥ ਹੋਹੁ ਸਭਨਾ ਕੀ ਰੇਣੁਕਾ ਤਉ ਆਉ ਹਮਾਰੈ ਪਾਸਿ ॥” [SGGS 1102]

In spite of being threatened, coerced and tortured, Guruji remained firm in his faith. He did not concede to that which was against his freedom to exercise his determination and resolve to follow in the footsteps of Guru Nanak’s principles and ideology. When Guru Arjun set foot on the path of *Sikhi*, He had accepted the fact that death is an inevitability, that physical death holds no meaning because the soul is indestructible and lives beyond death.

Let’s reflect on Guru Arjun’s words, “ਨਾ ਓਹੁ ਮਰਤਾ ਨਾ ਹਮ ਡਰਿਆ ॥ ਨਾ ਓਹੁ ਬਿਨਸੈ ਨਾ ਹਮ ਕੜਿਆ ॥”.....[SGGS 391] Guru Nanak says, “ਨਾ ਓਹੁ ਮਰੈ ਨ ਹੋਵੈ ਸੋਗੁ ॥” ..... [SGGS 9]

The death warrant issued by the Mughal Emperor brings to light the fear which Jehangir and his aides harbored in their zealous march of converting the entire sub-continent into the fold of Islam. The different religions are like the various flowers in a garden. The beauty of a garden is due to the colors in bloom. Similarly, life becomes interesting because of different cultures and religions existing together. The need of the hour is creation of harmony amongst different religions and faiths which can be best achieved by holding inter-faith meets, seminars and fests. Sikhs in India are way behind those in the diaspora where organizing and attending inter-faith meets are a regular affair. **Inter-faith interaction can create an AWARENESS of each other’s ways of living resulting in harmony.**

The political impact of Guru Arjun’s martyrdom was the wielding of sword by the spiritual masters to defend their faith. The right to profess a religion of one’s choice, sowed by peerless Guru Nanak, was no easy thing for the Sikhs in the growing hostility of the ruling Mughals and the jealous Hindu hill rajas alike. The right to wield a sword in order to defend one’s faith was made into an article of faith by Guru Gobind Singh. The Kirpan, one of the 5K’s worn by Sikhs is an open declaration that we Sikhs have the right to defend ourselves in the face of repression. It is also an affirmation that we Sikhs are fearlessly willing to even embrace death rather than give up our faith... “ਪੁਰਜਾ ਪੁਰਜਾ ਕਟਿ ਮਰੈ ਕਬਹੂ ਨ ਛਾਡੈ ਖੇਤੁ ॥” [SGGS :1105]

A person who is in true love becomes fearless and can do anything, even face death. Fearlessness arises out of love. It is a natural outcome. A disciple gradually falls in love with the master. This love arises out of respect for the convictions and path of living shown by the master to the disciple and practiced in the day to day living, thus resulting in experienced truths both for the master and the disciple. Guru Arjun had the grace of coming into contact with his master, as a disciple of Guru Ram Das, whose impact was so overwhelming that Guru Arjun went to the extent of sacrificing his life for upholding the ideals transmitted to him. A person who is in love with someone follows every command unquestioningly, come what may!

Sixty nine years after Guru Arjun’s martyrdom, in November, 1675 A.D., the lanes and by-lanes of Delhi around Chandni Chowk witnessed three horrific killings of Bhai Mati Dass, Bhai Dayala and Bhai Sati Dass, before the execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur on 11<sup>th</sup>. November making them stand out as unforgotten heroes for future generations. The daily Ardas pays sincere tribute to all the martyrs.

In Sikhism, martyrdom gradually began to connote metaphorically for people killed in a

historical struggle for liberty and faith or those whose deaths served to galvanize a particular movement. All those Sikhs killed in the Gurdwara Reform Movement in taking control of the gurdwaras and expelling the *mahants* who were working against Sikh principles have carved a niche for themselves as martyrs. In the same vein Bhagat Singh was given the title of a *shaheed* after his hanging since he fought in the movement of liberating the land from the British.

An urgent need of the Sikh community is the compilation of martyrologies and setting up of Museums of Martyrs, at least one in each country where the Sikhs reside in sizeable numbers to preserve and cherish the memories of the martyrs and to commemorate the specific days of their deaths to goad the younger generations to imbibe the same virtues which go into the making of a martyr : steadfastness, fearlessness, determination, firm resolve, loyalty and commitment to the principles embedded in the Guru Granth Sahib which had been envisaged as the *Shabad Guru* of all, irrespective of religion.

Delving into this theme a question loomed in my mind which made me introspect: “ Am I willing to face difficulties and overcome hindrances, even to the extent of embracing death, if a situation arises where my freedom and birthright of practicing the faith is threatened as a householder, pursuing careers in an advancing world surging ahead at breakneck speed of technological advances never witnessed before?” A question which every Sikh shall have to answer, consciously or sub-consciously, to his or her conscience.

In the present day context, with the United Nations encompassing almost all the nations, charged with enforcing international human rights, one would never witness a situation whereby one shall have to make a choice of forcible religious conversion or face death! But, of course, Sikhs today, as in the past, have to face hurdles in choosing careers, availing equal opportunity in employment, or having to face discriminations in educational institutions, as in the recent turban issue in France. I cite my own personal case whereby, while working for the Taj Group of Hotels stationed at Bombay, I was called in after the 1984 Sikh *pogrom*, by the Personnel Manager, who had the audacity to tell me, “ Gurvinder, for your personal safety, and for the safety of the hotel property, I suggest you give up the turban!” I refused. As a consequence of discrimination, I faced mental harassment and I felt compelled to resign in 1986.

In spite of the changing scenario of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it seems martyrdom for Sikhs still hold true, not in the sense that they are facing death due to forcible conversions but by subtle discriminations with denials of promotions and good jobs. Those Sikhs, who remain steadfast in their faith today, sacrificing personal gain, not lured by greed in abandoning one’s convictions and principles in pursuit of material comforts, or worldly gain, I dare to call them the Living Martyrs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century !

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