

Guru Arjun Dev Ji's Martyrdom: A Quatercentennial Tribute

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June 2006 marks the 400th anniversary of the martyrdom.

Guru Arjun Dev, the fifth Sikh Guru (spiritual prophet), was a rare mix of a man of letters and spiritual wisdom. His vision, persistence and spirituality underpinning his poetic skills, came together to produce the *Holy Granth*, a sacred scripture of the Sikhs, though it's a spiritual illumination for the whole of mankind.

The spiritual light that illuminates the world begins in Amritsar which grew around the holy tank and the Harmandir, the holiest of holy Sikh shrines, and possibly, the most famous, known as the Golden Temple or Darbar Sahib, the divine court. It's majestic presence in the centre of the water tank called *Amrit Sarovar*, the pool of nectar, set it apart. The temple with its golden domes dominates the city of Amritsar, which takes its name from the pool of nectar.

Guru Arjun had the construction of the tank and the temple completed before installing in 1604, the *Holy Granth* called the *Adi Granth* (original edition) in the centre of the inner sanctuary of Harmandir with due honour and ceremony. He had passionately worked for five years to produce the Granth.

The Granth preserves the holy word (hymns) of Guru Nanak, the first Guru and founding-prophet of the Sikh Faith, and four Sikh gurus after him, including Guru Arjun, as also the spiritual verses of many medieval *bards* and *bhagats* (holy men) and saints of different religions and strata of society, like the Muslim Sufi saints, Sheikh Farid, and Kabir, and the Hindu saints Namdeva and Ravidas.

Their spiritual quest and thoughts are closer to those of the Sikh Gurus, as for example, the concept of social justice, based on the equality of all mankind. They spoke out against social injustice. Since their hymns are held in equal reverence with those of the Sikh Gurus, it shows the universality of the Sikh scripture.

An eminent poet and lyricist, Guru Arjun has the largest number of hymns, 2218, out of a total of 5894 hymns in the Granth. His poetic insights find finest expression in his long masterpiece, *Sukhmani*, a Psalm of Peace, devoted to the remembrance of the Lord. Next only to Guru Nanak's celestial *Japji*, it is reverentially recited by the devout. Guru Arjun set to music all the hymns in various Indian *ragas* (musical measures).

The *Adi Granth* was recompiled, in 1704, by Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last Sikh Guru, to include the sacred hymns of the ninth Sikh Guru, Guru Teg Bahadur, without disturbing the pattern and order set by Guru Arjun.

Before his demise, Guru Gobind Singh, a true visionary, declared in 1708, the final volume of the holy scripture, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, as the "supreme living Guru of the Sikhs". "*Guru Granth Ji Manyo, Pragat Guruan Ki Deh*". (Accept Sri Guru Granth Sahib as the visible living Guru.) Thus, he ended the line of living Gurus.

Ever since, Sri Guru Granth Sahib has been revered as the embodiment of the revealed teachings of the Gurus and the spiritual and religious guide of the Sikhs for all time. The *Gurbani* (Gurus holy words), enshrined in the Granth, is regarded as sacred and revelatory. It's of divine origin and revealer of divine truth.

The religion that emerges from the Holy Granth is the universal religion of man. Its doctrines and concepts are progressive and pragmatic. It has a Catholic and tolerant attitude towards other faiths. It's free from any inhibition:

'None is our foe nor anyone is a stranger. With all are we in accord' (Sri Guru Granth Sahib, page 1299)

Towards the end of the scripture, Guru Arjun uses the metaphor of salver and heavenly food to underscore the universal application of the Granth to all mankind.

'In the Salver Gurbani, are lying the virtues – truth, contentment and contemplation.

Also lying in it is Lord's ambrosial Naam, Sustenance of all existence.

Whoever partakes of it consumes it.

Saved shall be.'

(Sri Guru Granth Sahib, page 1429)

As predicted by Guru Amar Das, his maternal grandfather, Guru Arjun's life was a gripping tale of jealousy, deception and self-sacrifice though he was destined to be a "universal saviour".

Prithi Chand, Guru Arjun's eldest brother, did not accept him as his father's choice to be the successor. He terribly annoyed him. Guru Arjun perforce left Amritsar and shifted to Wadali, a close by village where a son was born to him, named Hargobind, who was later to become the sixth Sikh Guru. Bhai Budha, a venerable old Sikh, predicted that he would "possess both temporal and spiritual powers and crush the enemy."

There was great rejoicing among the Sikhs. They persuaded the Guru to return to Amritsar, ignoring the antics of Prithi Chand.

Guru Arjun was bewildered at his brother's capriciousness, who had alleged that the Granth contained derogatory references to Hinduism and Islam. This was exploited by a resentful and wealthy Chandu Shah, whose offer of his daughter's hand in marriage to Guru Arjun's son, Hargobind, was turned down by the Guru. He intrigued to bring it to the notice of the Mughal ruler, Akbar.

When the hymns were read out to Emperor Akbar, he was delighted that the hymns inculcated love and devotion and not hatred. He complimented Guru Arjun on the "highly inspiring" hymns.

However, Akbar didn't live long and was succeeded by his son Jehangir. Chandu didn't fail to instigate him to summon Guru Arjun to Lahore.

Upon receiving the summons, Guru Arjun intuitively felt what was in store for him. He had Hargobind installed as the sixth Sikh Guru in the presence of leading Sikhs before leaving for Lahore.

Guru Arjun was asked to expunge the so-called derogatory references from the Holy Granth or else he would be tortured to death. The Guru's response was vehement, saying, "The Holy Granth is a revealed scripture and no one dare change it."

He was imprisoned and mercilessly tortured, made to sit on red hot iron plates, burning sand poured on him and dipped in a boiling cauldron. But the Guru would not compromise.

It is said that Mian Mir, a Muslim divine of Lahore, whom Guru Arjun had invited to lay the foundation stone of Harmandir, the Sikh temple, at Amritsar, came to meet him in prison. The Guru counselled against the use of mystical power saying, "One must accept the will of God".

Guru Arjun suffered the inhuman torture stoically, as "ordained by God".

Allowed to bathe in the nearby river Ravi, the Guru tottered in blisters and finally made it to the river, watched by thousands of devotees. He was heard chanting:

"Oh God! Sweet is your will.

The Gift of thy Name I Seek"

He never came up! A great saintly life was brutally cut short. He was only 43 years of age. His martyrdom shook the Sikhs. They were stunned. It inspired them to fight tyranny. They

vowed to sacrifice their lives.

Under compulsions of changing times, Guru Hargobind, the sixth Sikh Guru, was to take over the struggle against oppression and tyranny, after the martyrdom of his father, Guru Arjun, in 1606. He conceptualised the authority of Miri (temporal) and Piri (spiritual). He took two swords: One was to smite the oppressor and the other to protect the virtuous and innocent. Henceforth, the Sikhs were to arm themselves. It was a turning-point in Sikh polity.

No one can forget the heart-wrenching account of the savage treatment meted out to Guru Arjun Dev and how he was compelled to die a martyr's death in the river.

The great prophets of mankind, according to the historian, APJ Taylor, are remembered for a book. Guru Arjun Dev, a spiritual prophet and a man of peace, will, forever, be remembered for the Holy Granth, which Professor Arnold Tonybee described as "part of the mankind's spiritual treasure."

The wonder of Harmandir Sahib, the sacred Sikh Shrine at Amritsar, which has become a unique and an unmissable place of pilgrimage for people of all faiths, is another monumental achievement of Guru Arjun, to be cherished.

Guru Arjun faced death in a peaceful manner. He upheld the importance of Guru Nanak's message of universal love and brotherhood of man. His martyrdom raised world awareness of the enormous suffering of the people under unjust rulers. It was a source of inner strength. It made people courageous and fearless to check human oppression with implicit faith in God. Guru Arjun is rightly regarded as the "saviour of humanity".

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