

Guru Arjun's Supreme Sacrifice: The Pinnacle of Divine Purpose

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In order to halt a downstream flow of a 'body-of-water', one must build a dam; to stop a running vehicle, one must apply breaks. To let a soft vine grow upward, the support of an upright shaft is essential. Likewise, in moral terms, to turn around the tide of falsehood and uphold the truth, one must seek the insight from saints and prophets. In case of the Sikh faith, these prophets happened to be the Ten Master. One after the other, they graced this planet between the years of 1469 through 1708 and guided the human race with the sublime truth, enshrined in holy Guru Granth Sahib.

To carry on their moral and spiritual legacy for all time, the Tenth Master, before leaving for heavenly abode, made a departure from the established tradition of choosing a human-being as the next Guru. He laid down the dictum 'Sub Sikhan Ko Hukum Hai, Guru Manyo Granth' - meaning 'From now unto Eternity, all Sikhs must accept Guru Granth, the holy scripture, as their Guru Eternal'. The Guru Granth (Adi Granth) had been compiled and gifted to humanity by the 5th Prophet-Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Arjun, whose martyrdom day will be observed all over the world, in mid-June.

Guru Arjun Dev Ji was assigned the spiritual seat of the glorious Guru Nanak on September the 1st, 1581⁽¹⁾. In a life span of only two scores and three years, he brought forth a unique cultural, organizational, scriptural and doctrinal revolution within - and beyond - the growing Sikh community. His masterly skills as an organizer became evident through the progress of agriculture and trade in his native Punjab as well as the establishment of a system of tithe-collection for humanitarian services⁽²⁾. The institution of Masands, the cadre of leaders to look after the Sangat at different Sikh centers and the collection of Daswandh (one tenth of the income) was also his brainchild⁽³⁾. The funds thus collected were always used for the benefit of public works and for feeding the hungry and not for his own household. Thus a designation of 'Sachcha Padshah' was appropriately coined and used for the first time for this true 'Kings of Kings'⁽⁴⁾ - a title that the Mughal king openly resented.

It was Guru Arjun who provided the Sikh people with a most important religious place like no where else on this earth, the Hari Mandir, built within a body of water, the Amrit Sarovar that had been partially dug during times of his father, Guru Ram Das Ji. Based on later day accounts, it is believed that the foundation stone of Hari Mandir, popularly known as Golden Temple or Darbar Sahib, was laid by a Sufi Saint Mian Mir, a Muslim divine emphasizing the concept of universality and tolerance for other faiths. Its foundation was intentionally laid a few steps lower than the city level signifying that the 'House of God is exalted for it truly believes in humility'⁽⁵⁾. This concept was against the wishes of some of his followers who represented that the Temple should be higher than any other in town. Not paying much credence to a philosophy that limits the presence of God Almighty to the east or the west, the entry to Harimandir was kept open on all sides. "My faith is for the people of all castes, creeds, communities and cultures from whichever direction they come" thus openly declaring the presence of God in all directions and everywhere.⁽⁶⁾

Harimandir became a central rallying-point for Sikh pilgrimage as well as an indestructible symbol of pride under the stewardship of Guru Arjun Dev Ji.⁽⁷⁾ With construction of this most important religious place of the Sikhs, the city of Amritsar rapidly evolved into an important place of trade. Next was the construction of a Tank at Tarn Taarn, a few Kilometers south of Amritsar where many lepers would often be drawn whom Guru Ji treated with extreme love

and care.⁽⁸⁾ With the establishment of a central religious place and many other towns, the numbers of Sikh followers increased exponentially. Dr. Harbans Singh in 'The encyclopedia of Sikhism' quoted a contemporary Persian source, Dabistan-i-Mazahib, "During the time of each (Guru), the Sikhs increased but they became truly numerous during Guru Arjun Dev Ji's time and not many cities were left where they were not to be found".

While the central temple was being built, Guru Arjun started compiling the Sikh Scripture, the Adi (primal) Granth. Through this unparalleled scriptural gift of Adi Granth, that was later to be ordained as the 'Guru Eternal' of the Sikhs, albeit with some additions, Guru Arjun Dev Ji made the faith of Nanak stay the course. According to Sarup Das Bhalla in Mahima Prakash, Guru Ji undertook this huge task with the announcement "As the Panth (community) has been revealed unto the world, so must there be the Granth (book) too".⁽⁹⁾

To do so, Guru Arjun Dev Ji made great efforts to collect all the hymns of previous Gurus as well as those of like-minded Hindu Saints and Sufis. He humbly went on foot to his maternal uncle, Baba Mohan's house to seek for the Pothis (the books) containing Baanis of the first three Gurus. Several Sikhs were also sent all over the country to collect widely scattered Baanis of previous Gurus. It was a monumental task to sort out what was real from what was not. Fortunately the hymns of the fourth Guru, his father, were already with Guru Ji. Bhai Gurdas was assigned the duty of the scribe. Guru Ji then codified about 6000 hymns in thirty-one different Ragas all based on musical measures. In doing so he adopted a sequence in which all the Gurus renderings were followed by Baanis of fifteen Bhaktaas of different castes, as well as some Sufi Faquirs and bards.⁽¹⁰⁾

Guru's own hymns are the largest in number, covering almost one third of the Adi Granth. They truly bespeak of his vast talents in the understanding of the different languages of India as well as his musical comprehension. It also provides an insight into his skill as a supremely sensitive poet of divine inspiration that he was. Included in His Baani is the Sukhmani, 'the Psalm of Peace', a world-renowned rendering that had been translated in many languages.

Once the Adi Granth was completed, it was ceremoniously installed on 16th of August, 1604 on a raised platform inside Hari-Mandir with Guru seating himself at a lower level.⁽¹¹⁾ He asked his Sikhs to pay full obedience by bowing before it for this was the collection of divine revelation and spiritual inspiration.⁽¹²⁾ Baba Buddha, the only person who was blessed to have been in the company of six Gurus, was declared the first Granthi (custodian) of the Adi Granth. He opened it with great reverence to receive the Divine Command, the Hukum, while Guru stood behind in attendance.⁽¹³⁾ What is amazing about this unique treasure of the Sikhs is that it is kept open to all irrespective of the gender, status or caste. The women could equally read it, minister it and lead a congregation, no less than men.

Emperor Akbar of India maintained good relationship by visited Guru Ji in the past. Contrary to complaints made by few jealous individuals including Guru Ji's elder brother Prithiaa, Akbar found nothing derogatory against Islam in Guru Ji's preaching or in Guru Granth Sahib after personally hearing Baani from Guru Granth Sahib with the help of Bhai Gurdas and Baba Buddha. Yet Prithiaa and some other influential ministers in the Emperor's court such as Raja Birbal were continuously bothered by increasing influence of Guru's message amongst the masses. They tried to inhibit Guru's clout through a policy of revenge and wanted to levy a pilgrimage tax of Re. one per household upon the Hindu citizens of Amritsar. Guru Arjun Dev Ji humbly explained that being a trust property, this didn't qualify for taxation and its income was only meant for a service to the community such as running a free kitchen. Birbal kept on threatening to raze the city of Amritsar to the ground if the taxes were not paid. As luck would have it, Birbal had to leave for the frontier

under the regal order of Emperor where he died in a battle before he could do any thing.⁽¹⁴⁾

To alleviate the misery wrought upon by famine, Guru Ji traveled throughout Punjab to help its people dig wells and Baolies (the wells with steps going down). Guru Ji's also convinced Emperor Akbar to forgo revenue-remittance from the farmers of Punjab. Soon after death of Akbar, when his son Jehangir succeeded the throne, the equation started changing. Referring to Jehangir's memoirs, 'Tuzak-i-Jehangiri, Dr. Gopal Singh mentions in 'The History of the Sikh People', "Emperor Jehangir complained that many innocent Hindus and even foolish and ignorant Musalmans are being brought in Guru's fold by this self-appointed prophet-hood. For three or four generations, they had warmed up this shop and for a long time, I had harbored the wish that I should set aside this shop of falsehood or I should bring him into the fold of Islam"⁽¹⁵⁾.

In order to please the bigoted orthodox Ulema of the Sunnis, who were being bothered by the influence of what they perceived as a potentially rival spiritual power, Jehangir started to look for a ripe excuse to put Guru Ji down. Such an opportunity was provided by mutiny of Khusrau, son of Jehangir against his father. While passing through Punjab, Khusrau had sought Guru's blessings and joined in Langar, the free-kitchen prior to his journey onward. Once rebellion subsided and Khusrau apprehended, Jehangir wreaked his vengeance against all who came in contact with his revolting son⁽¹⁶⁾.

After Guru Ji refused to pay wrongfully imposed fine, he was arrested and taken to Lahore where the extreme torture began. Based upon conclusions drawn from personal memoirs of Jehangir, Dr. Gopal Singh mentions that the torture inflicted upon Guru Ji was primarily for religious reasons and not the political ones ⁽¹⁷⁾. "Chandu Shah, a notorious Hindu official exploited the opportunity in furthering the sufferings of Guru Arjun Dev Ji but could not have been the cause for it" so writes Dr. Harbans Singh in the Heritage of the Sikhs. Guru Ji had earlier refused Chandu's daughter in accepting her as a bride for his son at the behest of Sangat, primarily due to Chandu's derogatory remarks about 'House of Nanak'

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The extreme physical torture, inflicted upon Guru Ji persisted for five days and nights outside the Fort of Lahore on the banks of river Ravi. In the hot summer sun of May in northern India, Guru Ji was made to sit on red hot iron plate while the hot sand was concomitantly poured over his head. He was then asked to take dips in a caldron of hot boiling water. If it weren't enough, a dip in the cold water of river Ravi became the final straw for the blistered mortal body. Sanyeen Mian Mir, the saintly Muslim Faquir sought permission to intercede but was advised by Guru Ji to accept and find peace in the 'Will of God'. Guru Ji immersed himself in constant meditation throughout this ordeal and accepted that 'Will of God' a spiritual hallmark of philosophy of this Sachacha Padshah. The purest of the pure Atmaan of Guru Ji, that had been longing for its re-union with Parmatmaan finally found its ultimate flight on May 30th in the year 1606.

After this, the history of India changed for ever with Sikh psyche undergoing a unique metamorphosis. By his Shiromani sacrifice for firm moral convictions, Guru Ji set into motion a process that ultimately transformed Sikh people into a force to reckon with. From there on, they wouldn't hesitate to offer their heads and hearts to protect the meek and weak, where ever and whenever they were called upon. Many hurdles were thrown into their paths by the then bigoted and religiously intolerant rulers. Guru Ji's sacrifice for a morally correct principle proved beyond doubt that what matters at the end of a day is not the pseudo-power that a mortal seeks rather it is the courage to stand up for 'the moral convictions'.

While the regal Mausoleum of Emperor Jehangir could be collecting dust and pigeons

droppings, the simple platform that witnessed the ultimate in torture and the supreme sacrifice of this 'Man of God' transformed into a beautiful Shrine, Gurdwara Dera Sahib and became Eternally alive. Thousands and thousands of pilgrims from all over the world assemble here every year on martyrdom day, to seek blessings of this "Sachcha Padshah" whose courage and moral convictions had no parallel any where in the world. He defied death and thus lived eternally in the heart of his people, his nation and his country-men. The following couplets in the 'Song of Khalsa' penned by Livtar Singh Khalsa, born and raised in US, beautifully sums it all up:

"Many speak of courage, speaking can not give it,
It's in the face of death, that we must live it.
Guru Arjun gave His life, to stand for what was right,
He was burned and tortured, five long days and nights.
He could have stopped it at any time, just by giving in,
His strength a solid wall, He never gave an inch at all".

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