

Guru Arjun's Martyrdom: A Turning Point in History

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The Martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev, the fifth Guru of the Sikhs, was an event of great significance in the annals of this ancient land. It not only marked an important turning point in Sikh history but also had a far-reaching influence upon the destiny of the Moghul rule in India. As a matter of fact, there is a close connection between the growth and progress of the Sikhs and the decline and downfall of the Mughal Empire in India.

Guru Nanak's Message:

The message of Guru Nanak was preserved and propagated by his successors. Guru Angad adapted from the old Brahmi and Landé scripts the Gurmukhi script and reduced to writing the hymns or bani of Guru Nanak. Guru Amar Das, the third Guru, took practical steps to obliterate distinctions of caste and the practice of untouchability by establishing the institution of langar. No one - not even the Emperor Akbar - was admitted to the Guru's presence without first partaking of the common meal served together to persons of all castes and creeds.

Guru Ram Das, the fourth Guru, founded the city of Amritsar to better the economic condition of his followers and began construction of the famous lake of immortality at the site where *Dukh-Bhanjani*, a pool with miraculous healing powers, had previously existed. The construction of the *sarovar* and of Sri Harimandir Sahib in its centre was completed by Guru Arjun Dev, son and successor of Guru Ram Das. Guru Arjun Dev consolidated the work of his four predecessors and organized the disciples, or Sikhs, scattered in different parts of the country, into a well-knit community.

Sikhs and Moghuls Split

Guru Arjun Dev's period of guruship is very important in Indian history. It saw the emergence of the Sikhs as an organized people and the commencement of hostile relations between the Sikhs and the Mughal rulers of the land.

As students of Indian history know, the Mughal empire grew rapidly, both in extent and grandeur, during the reign of Emperor Akbar, who was a liberal-minded and cultured ruler. He was greatly attracted by the teachings of the Sikh Gurus and paid visits to both the third and fourth Gurus. During this period the relations between the Mughal rulers and the Sikh Gurus were thus very friendly. Emperor Akbar even offered to gift some villages to Guru Ram Das.

However, the situation gradually deteriorated under the rule of Akbar's son and successor, Emperor Jehangir who was, unlike his father, a bigoted Muslim, keen to bring 'infidels' into the Islamic fold. He quickly succumbed to the propaganda carried on by his religious advisers who were envious of the growing popularity of Guru Arjun Dev. They talked against the religion and the rapid increase in the strength of the Sikhs, and the Emperor came to believe that there was real danger to the Mughal Empire if the Sikh Gurus were allowed to continue their work and to build up the organizations and strength of their followers.

He was, therefore, determined to act quickly. He wrote in his memories (*Tazuk-i-Jehangiri*) about Guru Arjun Dev:

'So many of the simple minded Hindus, nay, many foolish Muslims, too, had been

fascinated by his ways and teachings. He was noised about as a great religious and worldly leader. They called him Guru, and from all directions crowds of people would come to him and express great devotion to him. This busy traffic has been carried on for three or four generations. For many years the thought had presented itself to my mind that either I should put an end to this false traffic or that he should be brought within the pale of Islam.'

Guru Arjun's Mission:

Guru Arjun was the third son of the fourth Guru, Guru Ram Das, and was born in 1563 A.D. at Goindwal. He was of a sweet and loving disposition and was greatly devoted to his revered father. He was also intensely religious and spiritual and was fond of study and meditation, while his elder brother, Prithi Chand, was more worldly and fond of the good things of life, especially wealth and power. As Arjun grew up, Prithi Chand became envious of him as he was the favourite of his parents and was also popular with the Sikhs.

Prithi Chand controlled the offerings and the langar and plotted to capture the *gaddi*. He persuaded his father to send Arjun to Lahore to represent the family at the marriage of their cousin, Lahori Mall, and after the marriage to stay at Lahore for preaching.

Guru Arjun did as he was told, but as time passed his longing for the Guru's *darsan* increased. He wrote to his father for permission to return, but his letters were intercepted by his brother. Ultimately the matter came to Guru's knowledge, who reprimanded Prithi Chand and sent for Arjun to come back from Lahore.

On his son's return to Amritsar, Guru Ram Das appointed Arjun Dev as his successor and handed over the charge of guruship to him. This infuriated Prithi Chand and he did his best throughout his life to harm Guru Arjun, going to the extent of working in league with his enemies, both Hindu and Muslim.

However, Guru Arjun immediately took up in earnest his work as the guide and preceptor of the Sikhs. He completed the construction of the Pool of immortality and Sri Harimandir Sahib and requested his friend, Sain Mian Mir, a Muslim saint of Lahore, to lay the foundation stone of the temple. He encouraged traders of all communities to come and settle at Amritsar and thus helped to build up the life and prosperity of the city. He also founded another city of Tarn Taran and built there a shrine and a very large lake of water.

Guru Arjun next took up the work of organizing his people. The Sikhs were scattered in different parts of the country. He organized them into units or *sangats*, placing each *sangat* under the charge of *masand* or agent. He selected his Sikhs with developed religious personalities to work as *masands*. They were to carry on the work of preaching, collect and send the Guru's share or *bheta* out of the incomes of the Sikhs, to advise the Sikhs, to report to the Guru the position and difficulties of the *sangats* and to render periodic accounts.

The next important task which the Guru set himself was to compile the sacred scriptures. He collected the *bani* of the previous Gurus and of various saints of the country, both Hindu and Muslim, and with the help of Bhai Gurdas, arranged it into *ragas* and prepared the Granth Sahib. This was a difficult and stupendous work but had a great and lasting importance on the life of the Sikhs as a religious community.

However, it aroused a storm of opposition and great hostility from both the pandits and mullahs in the country. The brahman priests were furious because the scripture was

written in Panjabi-*Gurmukhi* and not in Sanskrit, and because the Granth Sahib contained banis of (so-called outcast) saints and Muslim holymen. On the other hand, the Muslim priests believed that the Granth Sahib contained verses derogatory to their Prophet and to Islam. They carried on a great tirade against the Guru and complained to Emperor Jehangir who was already on the lookout for an opportunity to take action against the Guru.

However, what acted as the last straw was the help given by Guru Arjun to Prince Khusro, the rebel son of Emperor Jehangir who had sought shelter and monetary aid from the Guru. Sitting on the gaddi of Guru Nanak, Guru Arjun could not betray the Sikh principle of offering help to all in need, so he could not refuse shelter and succour to Khusro, although the Guru was fully conscious of the risk he was taking. **He cheerfully bore the consequences of his action, knowing and believing that the time had come when his sacrifice was needed to build up the Sikh society.**

Guru Nanak had already prepared the groundwork, Guru Arjun built up the fine edifice of the Sikh church with its central temple at Amritsar, with its own scripture and with a band of devoted missionaries. The Guru had taken a prominent part in civic and public affairs as well. He had established an asylum for lepers at Tarn Taran and, due to famine, had secured remission of land revenue from Emperor Akbar. He had invited suffering on himself by refusing to pay the unjust tax imposed by Raja Birbal on the Khatri of Amritsar. And now he was prepared for the final and supreme sacrifice which was necessary for the building up of the Sikh character and nation.

And so when the call came the Guru went to Lahore to answer the charge of sacrilege and treason. The Emperor did not impale him alive, as he had done to the companions of Khusro who had himself been arrested and deprived of his eyesight. A heavy fine was imposed upon Guru Arjun and he was placed in the custody of Dewan Chandu Shah, a Hindu minister at the Lahore court, who had a personal grudge against the Guru.

The Dewan entrusted with the task by Governor of Lahore Murtaza Khan of prevailing upon the Guru to insert in the Granth Sahib verses in praise of the Prophet Mohammad, and to swear loyalty to the Mughal throne. He tried all sorts of inhuman tortures to bring the Guru round.

Guru Arjun was made to sit on a hot iron plate with fire burning underneath. Red-hot sand was poured over his naked body. He was next placed in boiling cauldron of water. And when he was taken out with his swollen body full of boils and burns, he was given a lecture by the Dewan, pointing out the way of escape from the torture.

But the Guru paid no heed to the Dewan, his mind was in tune with the Infinite, and the torture to his body did not affect the bliss of his soul. As he told Sain Mian Mir, who came to see him while he was in custody, "The Soul is immortal and is unaffected by tortures of the body." Those, O Nanak, who accept the will divine are permanently in bliss."

And with the name of the Lord on his lips, Guru Arjun passed into eternity on 16th June, 1606 A.D. His remains were immersed in the Ravi. On that spot was later built the Dera Sahib shrine - on outskirts of Lahore, to commemorate his martyrdom.

However, the true memorial to his martyrdom is the spirit of suffering, and the will to sacrifice, which Guru Arjun bequeathed to this followers and which ended the Mughal tyranny in India and made the Sikhs brave soldiers in the service of oppressed

humanity.

