

Pre-British Historians on the Martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev®

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@ The Shahidi Gurgurab of Guru Arjun Devji falls in June.

THE BRITISH WRITERS, EXAMINED for this study, cover a wide canvas. They are: John Malcolm (*Sketch of the Sikhs*, 1812), William Lewis M'Gregor (*The History of the Sikhs*, 1846) and Joseph Davey Cunningham (*A History of the Sikhs from the origin of the Nation to the Battles of the Sutlej*, 1849). An examination of the writings of British authors under study reveals that they have touched upon almost all the important aspects of the Sikhs. However, they differ in their approach, even though they have discussed various aspects, like their origin and development, religious faith and practices, as also their social and political life. Most have also examined the philosophy and role of Guru Granth Sahib from social and ethical aspects. *Sketch of the Sikhs* remains the chief source of information on the religion and early history of the Sikhs.

McGregor, a surgeon by profession, came to Lahore to minister to Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He focuses his attention primarily on the kingdom of Ranjit Singh and Anglo-Sikh relations. McGregor devotes the second volume of his book entirely to the First Anglo-Sikh War (1845-46). His work was dedicated to Lord Gough, the British Commander-in-Chief and 'the officers of the army of the Sutlej'. His obvious aim was to glorify the might of British arms in the Punjab and to rectify the British policy towards Sikhs.

Cunningham, in his book: *A History of the Sikhs from the origin of the Nation to the Battles of the Sutlej* (1849) aims at achieving two objectives. His main endeavour was to give Sikhism its place in the general history of humanity, by showing its connection with the different creeds of India. Secondly, to give account of the connection of the English with the Sikhs. But, for him, Sikhs were 'rude and ignorant' people!

A close study of these historical writings on the Sikhs reveal that, instead of being authentic sources of history, these turned out as absurdities in essential aspects. These scholars evidently belonged to different cultural traditions, and could not grasp the Sikh ideology and concepts in their true perspective. Being also under the influence of Christianity, combined with an inadequate understanding of the Sikhism, they conceived wrong notions about Sikhism and twisted the Sikh tradition, as a response to the existing disorderly even chaotic condition prevailing in India. On the plus side, they highlighted the reformatory character of Sikhism. In their assessment, the new faith aimed at synthesizing the positive elements from both Hindu and the Islamic traditions. Because of their own culture and traditions, their knowledge about the culture and the language of the people of Punjab is biased. Nor could they grasp the Sikh tradition in its dynamics. For this they had to depend upon some incidents and events which were said to be vague sources. The description of the beginning of Sikhism in their writings is largely based on hearsy, or source material provided by their Indian helpers, and by the persons who copied out the documents. The material provided was uncritical, doubtful and concerned only with their own interest.

Different causes of martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev are mentioned by the British writers under study. The aim of this essay is to analyse the causes of martyrdom in the backdrop of contemporary sources. Malcolm, who in the first decade of the 19th century - laid the foundation of the British historiography on the Sikhs, writes: **“It is Arjun, then, who ought, from this act, to be deemed the first who gave consistent form and order to the religion of the Sikhs: an act which, though it has produced the effect he wished, of uniting that nation more closely, and of increasing their numbers, proved fatal to himself. The jealousy of the Muhammedan government was excited, and he was made its sacrifice.”**¹

The mode of his death, which happened in the year of Christ 1606, (Samvat 1663) is related very differently by different authorities: but several of the most respectable agree in stating, that his martyrdom, (for such they term it), was caused by the active hatred of a rival Hindu zealot, Danichand Kshatriya,, whose writings he refused to admit into the Adi Granth, on the ground that the tenets inculcated in them were irreconcilable to the pure doctrine of the unity and omnipotence of God, taught in that sacred volume. This rival had sufficient influence with the Muhammedan governor of the province to procure the imprisonment of Arjun; who is affirmed, by some writers, to have died from the severity of his confinement; and, by others, to have been put to death in the most cruel manner.”²

McGregor considers the enmity of Chandu Shah the sole cause of the martyrdom of the Guru. According to him Chandu Shah was prime minister at Lahore. There was enmity between him and the Guru because Guru Arjun had refused to marry his only son Hargobind to Chandu’s daughter.³ He has mistakenly placed this event in the reign of Shah Jahan instead of Jahangir. M’Gregor makes no mention of the torture inflicted on the Guru, but gives an absurd story about Guru’s death, according to which, Guru Arjun drowned himself in the river Ravi, seeking his own end to escape any kind of punishment!

In the same context, Cunningham says, “Arjun became famous among pious devotees, and his biographers dwell on the number of saints and holy men who were edified by his instructions. Nor was he unheeded by those in high station, for he is said to have refused to betroth his son to the daughter of Chandoo Shah, the finance administrative of the Lahore province; and he further appears to have been sought as a political partizan, and to have offered up prayers for Khoosroo, the son of Jehangheer, when in rebellion and in temporary possession of the Punjab.⁴ The Gooroo was summoned to the emperor’s presence, and fined and imprisoned at the instigation chiefly - it is said - of Chandu Shah, whose alliance he had rejected, and who represented him as man of a dangerous ambition,⁵ Arjoon died in 1606, and his death is believed to have been hastened by the rigors of his confinement; but his followers piously assert that, having obtained leave to bath in the river Ravee, he vanished in the shallow stream, to the fear and wonder of those guarding him.”⁶

Thus, according to these writers; (1) Chandu was the real culprit, and Jahangir is not to blame. (2) Guru Arjun was political partisan who helped Khusrau, and - according to *Tuzk-i-Jahangiri* - applied a *tilak* on khusrau’s forehead, and (3) The Guru defaulted in payment of fine (or revenue).

However, in Jahangir’s autobiography, *Tuzk-i-Jahangiri*, the Guru was handed over to Murtaza Khan, to be “tortured to death”.⁷ “The name of Chandu Shah is nowhere found in *Tuzk-i-Jahangiri*, or any other contemporary work in the reign of Jahangir”. To say, that Chandu Shah was the Emperor’s Diwan, or financial Minister, is historically incorrect”.⁸ It is claimed that Chandu Shah was a “Khatri” of Lahore, who was in search of a groom for his

daughter. He sent messengers to find out a suitable boy. One of them suggested Hargobind, son of Guru Arjun. Chandu had spoken offensively about Guru Arjun, and remarked: he had many followers, but he lives on the offerings of his followers and had a 'dishonoured living'. He remarked that the proposal of Hargobind's marriage to his daughter would amount to: "the ornamental tiles of top storey being fixed into a gutter".⁹ But after persuasion by his wife, Chandu conveyed the proposal through a messenger. But his remarks were known to the Sikhs and they requested the Guru not to accept the proposal.

This provoked the enmity of Chandu Shah and he became bitter against the Guru. Macauliffe is also in agreement with this. Secondly, Chandu Shah - as the instigator - as well as the reason for instigation - put forward by Malcolm, is a work of fiction. There is no mention about any such (Dhanichand) person in Sikh tradition whose hymns had been rejected by Guru Arjun - for inclusion in Pothi Sahib. In Sikh tradition the hymns of four poets-saints of Lahore, namely Kahna, Chhaju, Peelu and Shah Hussain, were rejected because of ideological differences.¹⁰ They did not suit "the ideas and ethics of the proposed Sikh Canon".¹¹

Therefore, the bridal story seems to have been circulated deliberately. In all probability, the part that Chandu could have played, in this tragic episode, may be his personal feeling of resentment.

Another strange fact is that Chandu was not even known outside the Punjab, nor is his name be found in the Tuzak, or any other contemporary work on the reign of Jahangir.

G.C. Narang states: "Whether Chandu was able to do any harm to Guru Arjun or not, the Guru's fate was sealed when Jahangir ascended the throne. The torture inflicted on him and his death as the result of those tortures was directly due to the bigotry of Jahangir. This is fully borne out by the Emperor's own autobiography"¹². In this way Chandu's enmity was not the cause of the martyrdom of Guru Arjun. The story is nothing but a groundless invention.

Interference in the state affairs is another serious offence. But no mention has been made of it by the Emperor in his "Tuzhak" - or any contemporary writing like Mohsin Fani, author of *Dabistan-i-Majahib*, whom Cunningham made his chief source of information. Indeed, *Dabistan-i-Majahib* states that Khusrau while passing through Goindwal, waited upon Guru Arjun and sought his blessings, and "the Guru offered prayer for Khusrau"¹³, at the same time as *Tuzk-i-Jahangiri* states: "At last when Khusrau passed along this road, this 'insignificant fellow' (Arjun) proposed to wait him. Khusrau happened to halt at the place where he was camping and made - on his forehead - a finger-mark in saffron, which the Hindus in their terminology called (Tikka) *qashqa* and it consider propitious".¹⁴

According to Macauliffe, Khusrau, on his way requested Guru Arjun for financial help and sought his blessings,¹⁵ and adds that Guru gave him five thousand rupees to defray his expenses to Kabul.¹⁶ It seems unlikely that the Guru would apply *tilak* on the forehead of a fugitive Prince. Then, how could the *tilak*, (which the Guru himself has strongly denounced in his writings) save the prince from misfortune and put him on the throne? The Emperor's own account makes it clear that, even before Khusrau revolted, the Emperor was hostile to the Guru. He calls him an 'insignificant fellow'. His own words concede that the Guru was the most popular religious leader, visited by people of all faiths. His writings leave no doubt that he was simply looking for an excuse to put a stop to the Guru's activism, and the supposed meeting between the fugitive prince and the Guru provided this excuse.

Regarding "Tilak", Dr. Ganda Singh mentions that Sikh Gurus never applied marks on the forehead - except perhaps anointing of a successor.¹⁷ This ceremony was always held

by a pious Sikh, like Baba Budha. Thus the allegation of *tilak* was a fabrication circulated by someone jealous of the Guru's growing popularity

After the death of Akbar in 1605, his son Jahangir became the ruler of Mughal Empire. Unlike his father, Jahangir was a die-hard, keen on turning the country into an Islamic state. He came under the influence of *Naqashbandis* "who were jealous of Guru Arjun's importance".¹⁸ Jahangir promised them to uphold the Islam, and curb all those who preached un-Islamic or non-Islamic creeds, because he wanted to win the sympathy of the *Mullahs*. It is clear from the above evidence that long before the rebellion of Khusrau, Jahangir was upset with the activism of the Guru. He became jealous about Guru's propagation of Sikhism. He promptly obliged the enemies of the Guru. Baseless allegations were leveled against the Guru; one of those was: helping the rebellious Khusrau.

Hari Ram Gupta, writes 'It is certain that Guru Arjun's martyrdom was mainly a religious case, coupled with local and personal jealousy and envy. **Whatever the case might be there is no doubt that Guru Arjun set the noblest example of courage and boldness in resisting the wrongs of mightiest power on earth, and thus sowed the seed which was to bear rich fruit in due course.** Shaikh Ahmad of Sarhind expressed utmost delight at Guru Arjun's torture and assassination. In a letter written to Shaikh Farid Bukhari (Murtza Khan, the Governor of Punjab) he said: "The execution at this time of the 'accursed Kafir' of Goindwal...with whatever motive...is an act of the highest grace for the followers of Islam."¹⁹

In Late May 1606, Guru Arjun Dev was arrested and brought to Lahore where he was subjected to rigorous torture²⁰. He was made to sit on burning hot plates, while hot sand was poured over his head and body. It is said that Mian Mir (a Sufi Saint and friend of the Guru) tried to intercede on behalf of the Guru, but he forbade him to interfere in the "Will of the Almighty". The body of the Guru was blistered and burnt. For several days, the Guru was subjected to insistent torture. Afterward, Guru Arjun Dev was taken for a immersion in the River Ravi under an armed escort. Bhai Gurdas writes, the Guru was then in the river like the fish family, absorbed in the love of Lord."²¹ Rattan Singh Bhangu, the early 19th century historian, asks if Guru Arjun was not put into water?²² This brought an end to his life.

In the light of historical evidence, from direct and original sources mentioned above there is only one appealing conclusion we can draw that Guru Arjan Dev was arrested and executed for his religious preaching under the orders of Emperor Jahangir issued during the first year of his reign. Of political necessity, he had to act as defender of the Islamic faith. The British writers, however are curiously silent about the role played by Mughal emperor Jahangir in the martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev. The role attributed to Chandu Shah in this narrative, as the sole cause of the martyrdom' by them is mentioned by the modern historians as subsidiary. Jahangir hardly needed any elbowing; even before the Khusrau incident, he was thinking of taking measures against the Guru 'to put stop to this vain affair, or to bring him into the fold of Islam'.



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