

# Martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev Ji – A Watershed in History

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For Jahangir and his associates, including certain social and religious Orders, the Guru's execution was a 'case of punishment for one who indulged in an act of treason or blasphemy.' But for the Sikhs the Guru's death was uniquely a case of martyrdom and hence of a great theological significance. The Guru was preaching the Gospel as revealed to Guru Nanak and his predecessors. Everything that was in keeping with that Gospel was Truth and all else was false, something to be avoided. The morality, polity, sociology; and their respective structures, were valid and legitimate only if these embodied and reflected the Sikh ethos which could not be anything but universal – certainly not particularist being experience born out of Guru Nanak's direct encounter with God.

This has been held to be true by all the Gurus preceding him. He also stuck to this position. It was in this context that all the Gurus had made it clear in their sacred utterances (word) that heroic battle is that which was waged against untruth and the forces championing and sustaining it. And in that battle if one goes down to meet death, that death is noble and an honourable act of creation. In this connection there are quite a large number of verses in Guru Granth Sahib clarifying, elucidating and illustrating this position. For instance, Guru Nanak says "Truly brave is he who fights for righteousness."

ਸੂਰਾ ਸੋ ਪਹਿਚਾਨੀਐ ਜੁ ਲਰੈ ਦੀਨ ਕੇ ਹੇਤ ॥

[SGGS : 1105]

Guru Arjun, in Wadhans Raag himself says:

"Dying is the privilege of those brave men who die on becoming acceptable."

**True dying has always its roots in true living.** But many people in history have courted death rashly and thoughtlessly, in anger and excitement, born out of urge for revenge for some long nourished grievances or under some momentary impulse. Warriors have often died heroically in the battlefield to prove that they were fearless. Religious enthusiasts have braved death under false colours and misconceived notions.

But according to the Sikh religion such dying is not one of high order. The Guru believed in first living truly, i.e. a life of nobility, service and righteousness, and then to die for a great cause, i.e. to save dharma.

The Guru's whole life was a saga of virtuous acts, both at micro and macro levels. The social structures which he raised, the knowledge which he collected and sanctified, the integrated approach to social life which he championed – all intended for regeneration of man and to orient him in such a way that a society is evolved which is bound by faith in the oneness of God, brotherhood of human kind, non-discriminative, non-exploitative, highly humanistic, enjoying liberty of soul to blossom and to endeavour to realize itself in relation to Real-self, to enjoy aesthetic union with Him. Since the vision of the Gurus regarding man and society held high hopes to the people, to whichever religious group they belonged, they were attracted in large numbers towards the Guru and his teachings. Polemically, these teachings were not liked by not only two major religious groups, the Hindus and the Muslims, but also by all those minor sects and cults whose vision about Reality and Society was myopic and circumscribed. The state which had opted for Sunni Muslims' ideology also did not like the emerging Sikh ideology as it had the potential to offer alternative to the existing political apparatus as also the spiritual and social structure which supported it and also got support from it. As it has been made clear in the foregoing pages, Guru Arjun Dev

did not extend support to Prince Khusro, nor did he do anything blasphemous or did any thing which might be termed as political controversy. **Whatever he did or preached was all in the service of the people to illumine their consciousness and to enable them to feel free from man-made social barriers in order to trudge on the road to realize and experience godliness** and to renovate and restructure society on the principles of righteousness in the true sense of the term.

But he was arrested and put to death. At the time of his arrest he knew what was going to happen to him. Had he desired, he could have saved himself by simply stopping the work he had started and accepting the wrong verdict of the state, then headed by emperor Jahangir. He voluntarily chose to embrace death. He did not entertain any motive – spiritual social or mundane; his was purely an altruistic act. He did not seek any spiritual reward even – namely, pledge of eternal life, forgiveness of sins/exemption from the Last Judgement, as most of the martyrs before him, especially among Christians and Judaism, had done. His decision was not at all motivated by any anger/desperation/resentment against the dominant adversary, because even during the tortures, he did not utter even a single syllable reflecting his inner perturbation caused by anger – rather his was an example of perfect equipoise and calmness. The Guru also did not seek to attenuate the pain of martyrdom through a fantasy of a future life – rather he provided a meaning for dying which in Guru's case was a deliberate endeavour to explain to the world regarding the mission he or Sikhism stood for.

In Sikhism, asceticism and self-affliction have no place, because these are negatives of the principle of living 'life in wholesome fullness'. The Guru's compositions are replete with disapproval of asceticism and mortification and this being so, it is a blunder to regard Guru's death as mortification in the form of suicide, as some scholars, obviously depending upon deliberately fabricated fiction, would have us believe. The Guru also was not killed in some holocaust, like Jensburg Germany in the second World War. Such acts, according to Breslauer, "were on the whole not sacred witness but passive victims, not proud martyrs for a cause but only political pawns."

The Guru while accepting torturous death was in no doubt regarding what he was to do. No mundane motive nor even spiritual profit entered into his calculation. He regarded body as the abode of the Almighty and courting death in the service and cause of the Almighty was, according to his reckoning, an act sacred and in keeping with His Will/Hukum, which had always aimed at facilitating the growth of mankind to realize God both in his transcendent and immanent form. The latter type of realization implied ennobling and bettering the world and other creation of God.

Certainly, the Guru embraced death patiently *sans* any rancour and hatred against anyone; for the cause he held was dearer than his life and which ensured the upward march of humanity. **His martyrdom was a positive affirmation of the truth of the ideology of Guru Nanak, which he placed ahead of his physical survival and biological self-interest.** In a way his embracing of death was an open announcement that Sikh ideology was the righteous one around which if the people rallied, they would be liberated and made vibrantly pious and heralders of onward progress. This belief of the Guru became palpably visible when the Guru, while seated on the hot plate, sent a message to his faithfuls and his son that thenceforward **they should wage an incessant struggle to crush evil forces even with the help of force and to establish 'Halemi Raj' – an ideal society and state.**

Consequently the Fifth Guru was a martyr in the classical sense, and a unique example in world history - perhaps comparable to the crucifixion of Jesus.

