

# The Life & Times of Guru Har Rai®

**MAHINDAR SINGH\***

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@ Sri Guru Har Rai Ji's Guru Gaddi Divas falls on March 14, 2010 (according to Nanakshahi calendar)

\* Our veteran contributor, author of a delightful "Diary" of his palmy days as a diplomat will be 91 years young in June 2010. His devotion to the Sikh spiritual heritage (which runs in the family) stands out as a Lighthouse of steady and gentle illumination. Ed. SR

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THE 366<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE assumption of Guruship by Guru Har Rai, the seventh Guru of Sikhs falls on 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2010. Guru Har Gobind, the sixth Guru of Sikhs and the grandfather of Guru Har Rai had five sons and one daughter. The eldest son was Baba Gurditta who had two sons, Dhir Mal and Har Rai. The last days of Guru Har Gobind's life were saddened by a series of domestic tragedies as within a few years five members of his family including two of his sons died one after the other.

The number of Sikhs had been steadily increasing with each Guru. The murder of the saintly Guru Arjun, the fifth Guru of the Sikhs and the father of Guru Hargobind, by the Mughal Emperor Jahangir was a profound shock to the people. The excuse which Jahangir gave for this great crime of killing Guru Arjun was that the Guru gave blessing to Jahangir's rebel son Khusrau, who while fleeing for his life had a halt on the way to meet Guru Arjun who received the prince Khusrau, as indeed he would have done even if the visitor had not been of royal blood. Guru Arjun did not give any assistance to Khusrau beyond wishing him well. For this Jahangir imposed a huge fine, which the Guru refused to pay and preferred to sacrifice his life.

## **From Quietitude to Empowerment:**

After Guru Arjun, his successor, Guru Hargobind changed the emphasis from a peaceful propagation of the Sikh faith to a declaration of a right to defend the faith by force of arms. Guru Hargobind infused in the Sikhs the confidence that Sikhs could thus challenge the might of the Mughal empire. And in this part of his work, Bhai Budha and Bhai Gurdas as well as Guru Hargobind's eldest son, Gurditta had a great contribution. But their deaths were a great loss for Guru Hargobind. To add to the Guru's sorrows, Gurditta's son Dhirmal, turned against his grandfather. For a long time, Guru Hargobind could not make up his mind for his successor. Although Guru Hargobind had two sons living, Suraj Mal who showed little interest in Sikh affairs and Tegh Bahadur who was withdrawn in himself to be entrusted with the leadership of a rapidly growing community. So, when the time came, Hargobind chose Gurditta's second son Har Rai to succeed him as the seventh Sikh Guru.

With the death of Jahangir, and the accession of Shahjahan in 1627 AD, Guru Hargobind had to face trouble. In 1628 AD when Shahjahan happened to be hunting in the neighbourhood of Amritsar his men clashed with the retainers of Guru Hargobind. A bailiff and a posse of constabulary were sent to arrest Guru Hargobind. They found the Guru's household busy preparing for the wedding of the Guru's daughter. The Mughal constables could not find Guru Hargobind but they plundered his property and all the confectionery prepared for the wedding were eaten by the Mughals. Guru Hargobind's guards fell on the surfeited Mughals and killed the Chief Constable Mukhlis Khan. Guru Hargobind left Amritsar and had his daughter's wedding performed in a nearby village. From this village he went to Kartarpur in the Jallandar Doab and then to Srihargobindpur, the town built by his

father Guru Arjun. Two years later he had a second clash with the Mughal troops. The Mughals were badly beaten by the Sikhs. But Guru Hargobind feared that a large Mughal force would be sent against him so he quickly retired to a tract near Bhatinda where the wild and uncharted nature of the country made pursuit difficult. After a year in the wilderness, Guru Hargobind retired to Karatpur. The Mughal troops made another attempt to capture him. With the Mughals was the renegade Painda Khan, a pathan who had been the leader of the Pathan mercenaries in the employ of the Guru. The Guru's forces were encircled at Kartarpur but were able to turn the tables on the besiegers. Fighting in the war in the Sikh forces were Gurditta and Tegh Bahadur, who later became the ninth Guru of the Sikhs. The imperial troops were again routed and Painda Khan was killed. From this time, the disciples of the Guru increased considerably. In this mountainous country, as far as the frontier of Tibet, the name of a musalman was not heard of.. Guru Hargobind realized he could not withstand the might of the Mughal army in the plains so in 1634 AD he shifted capital to Kiratpur in the Himalayan foothills. For the remaining years of his life, Guru Hargobind spent in this sylvan retreat.

### **Retreat into Hills:**

Guru Har Rai within one year of his assuming Guruship was compelled to leave Kiratpur with his family and retainers who were 2200 men at arms, and retired further into the mountains. The Raja of Bilaspur in whose territory Kiratpur was situated was having trouble with the Mughal Government and Har Rai feared that in the operations against the Raja the Mughals might turn against the Sikh as well. For the next 13 years Har Rai lived in comparative seclusion in a small village in Sirmur state.

The absence of Guru Har Rai from the main centres of Sikh activity which were Amritsar, Goindwal, Kartarpur, Khadur and Kiratpur, the hostility of the disappointed claimants to Guruship and the general disintegration of the 'Masand' organization severely prejudiced the advancement of the community. Guru Har Rai tried to make up for this by undertaking extensive tours in the Malwa and Doaba regions of the Punjab and by reorganizing the missions. During the tenure of his Guruship Guru Har Rai made some notable conversions among the landed families of the Punjab. The ancestors of princely families of Patiala, Nabha and Jind who had come into contact with Guru Har Gobind became closely associated with the Sikh community and so did the ancestors of two other notable families Kaithal and Bagarian whose descendants played a great role in the building of the Sikh power. These regions provided good opportunity for the Sikh faith to sprout. Guru Har Rai, by his these tours in Central Punjab also was able to convert to Sikhism the people of Mukandpur and Kaura tribes who used to worship cemeteries and cremation grounds, who were the ancestors of the later Phulkian chiefs. All these states of Punjab along with other states of India were annexed by the Government of India in 1947. At the end of 1658 AD Guru Har Rai returned to Kiratpur.

The Guru became friendly with Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of Emperor Shahjahan. Dara Shikoh being of Sufi persuasion sought the company of saintly men of all denominations. Famous Muslim saint, Mian Mir who laid the foundation of the Golden Temple was Dara's priest. Shahjahan had four sons – Dara Shikoh, Shuja Mohammed, Aurangzeb and Murad Baksh. Dara Shikoh was very dear to his father who wanted to make him his successor. But Aurangzeb who was harsh, cunning and ambitious came to succeed the Mughal throne.

### **The Mughal Bellicosity:**

It is said that Aurangzeb administered tiger's whiskers in a dainty dish to Dara Shikoh who became gravely ill as a consequence. The best physicians were consulted, but in vain. The emperor, filled with anxiety, sent for astrologers and diviners from every country but of no avail. The wise men arrived at a conclusion that until the tiger's whiskers were removed from Dara Shikoh's bowels there was no hope of his recovery. They were of the opinion that if a chebulic myrobalan weighing fourteen chitanks (14/16<sup>th</sup> of a pound) and a clove weighing one masha could be administered to the patient, he would be restored to health. The Emperor searched in vain for these articles in his Empire. At last someone told him that these required items were available in Guru Har Rai's storehouse. So, on the advice of his courtiers Emperor Shah Jahan, found it necessary to humble himself in front of the Guru and accordingly addressed to him the following letter:

"Your predecessor the Holy Baba Nanak granted sovereignty to Emperor Babar, the founder of my dynasty. Guru Angad was exceedingly well disposed towards his son, Humayun, and Guru Amardas removed many difficulties from my grandfather Akbar's path. I regret that the same friendly relations did not subsist between Guru Hargobind and myself, and that misunderstandings were caused by the interference of strangers. For this I was not to blame. My son, Dara Shikoh is now very ill. His remedy is in your hands. If you give the myrobalan and the clove which are only available in your store and add to them your prayers you will confer an abiding favour to me."

But when Sikhs asked Guru Har Rai why he had saved the life of Dara Shikoh who was son of Shahjahan, as Shahjahan had tormented his father, Guru Hargobind, Guru Har Rai replied: "the man breaks flowers with one hand and offers them with the other, but the flowers perfume both hands alike. The axe cuts the sandal tree, yet the sandal perfumes the axe."

After the death of Shahjahan there was a fight among his four sons for succession for the Mughal throne. Aurangzeb imprisoned his father Shahjahan and his brother Murad in Agra fort and killed Dara Shikoh.

So Aurangzeb succeeded to the Mughal throne. After making his position secure on the throne, he embarked on his religious crusade against the Hindus. As Guru Har Rai had rendered assistance to Dara Shikoh so Aurangzeb summoned Guru Har Rai from Kiratpur to Delhi due to his assistance to Dara Shikoh against him to explain his conduct. But Har Rai sent his eldest son Ram Rai to represent him in Delhi. Ram Rai by showing some miracles, which are forbidden in Sikhism, won the confidence of Aurangzeb. Ram Rai was also asked to explain a passage in the Adi Granth whose meaning is.

"The dust of a (Muslim) grave finds its way into the hands of the potter who makes pots and bricks out of it. He fires the clay, it cries out as it burns."

But Ram Rai substituted the word 'Musulman' for *Bei maan* which means faithless, to save his skin. This very much enraged his father, Guru Har Rai, because nobody can alter the word of Guru Nanak or anything which is contained in the Adi Granth. So the sycophancy of Ram Rai and the Mughal court turned his father against him and he announced his intention to pass the Guruship to his younger son, Har Kishan, only five years old. Ram Rai apologized later to his father but Har Rai's mind was made up and he did not like to see Ram Rai's face.

**Strategic Change:**

It may be stated that while Guru Arjun had practically completed the organization of Sikhs on peaceful lines and under Guru Hargobind Sikhism had added to itself an army, Guru Har Rai, although he had inherited a militant tradition and a small army, but he was a man of peace. He loved to hunt, but only to bring back wild animals for his private zoo at Kiratpur. He did not want to hurt any living thing. He said, "you can repair or rebuild a temple or a mosque, but not a broken heart." He adhered strictly to the routine of life of prayer which was exhorted by Guru Nanak. One of his disciples asked him whether there was any point in reciting the Guru's hymns without understanding them. Guru Har Rai replied yes, "as the grease sticks to the empty pot when it is emptied, so the Guru's word sticks to the heart. Whether you comprehend it or not, the word bears the seed of salvation. Perfume persists in the broken pieces even when the vase that holds it is broken. "

