

Guru Arjun Dev: The Prophet who chose Martyrdom

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PART I

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Preface:

As an Architect by profession, I am trained to look at the world around me holistically. My perception of Objective Reality, vis-à-vis the inner world of subjectivity, is very different from professionals of other disciplines. I tend to view even scholarly works from the point of view of human creativity rather than as an exercise in transferring bones from one grave to the other. Without seeming to belittle the value of serious scholarship in the making and advancement of human knowledge I must stress that Gurbani, as the Revealed Word, is Creative Mysticism, that it would be an unpardonable sacrilege to pollute it by the vulgar touch of familiar tools we all tend to draw from one or more of these disciplines of fields of human endeavour: Poetry, Philosophy, Mythology, Mysticism, Science. Let me begin by emphasising, therefore, the little-known fact that Guru Nanak's *Bani*, as also of his nine holy successors, is none of these things: Poetry, Philosophy, Mythology, Mysticism, or Science.

Key Disciplines Defined:

Poetry is produced by the human imagination by the use of literary rules and standards. But the **Poetry**, as we find in Guru Nanak's Bani, is the **Language of Prophecy; it surfaces from the depths of the human soul in direct communion with God in a state of meditative trance as a spontaneous outburst of Revelation. Philosophy** rests on a premise [a proposition stated or assumed for after-reasoning] which is ratiocinatively developed through arguments to reach a logical conclusion. **Mythology** has been called the purest creation of the human imagination. **Mysticism**, as religion of the elite, is reputed to be a highly individualistic experience that is incommunicable in the same sense as it is not possible for the dumb to express the taste of sweets to others. **Science** works on hypotheses, theories, observations, instruments, experiments, and laboratory findings, strictly with respect to the Objective [or the mundane] World. It is a pity that, for want of better, or alternative words or deeper experiential understanding of the Subjective [or the spiritual] World, we continue to relate Gurbani, which is the Revealed Word, to one or other of the stated disciplines of the mundane world.

GS Talib's View:

Prof. Gurbachan Singh Talib has rightly observed that there is no set philosophical system, as for example in the *Upanishads* and the *Shastras*, no code as in the books of some other religions. *Upanishads* are part parable, part poetic vision, which expresses the essence of philosophy. **But Gurbani is the Revealed Word: exclusively spiritual experience communicated in Poetry as the Language of Prophecy.** The philosophic basis is always there, according to Talib, as the ideal and directive of the soul. Thus, the experience is always mystical [in the sense of Revelation], realising what in Philosophy are found only as aphoristic, dessicated formulas. Above all, unrelenting emphasis on 'Grace',

as the ultimate arbiter of man's spiritual ascent, places Gurbani on a pedestal not at all accessible by the ratiocinative mind.

Limitations of Existing Terminology:

As far as possible I have religiously avoided the use of the terms I have discussed before. But wherever they unavoidably occur their connotations should be read in the light of my foregoing exposition. The very fact that they do appear here and there in this discourse substantiates my claim that better and alternative words are yet to be invented, such as would do full justice to an inspired exegesis of Gurbani without sounding esoteric or incomprehensible!

As the Legend has it:

When Babar was exhorted by Guru Nanak Dev to give up drinking, he promised to do so if he would be successful in the battle of Deccan. His victory deepened his faith in the Holy Guru whose blessings he then sought for the establishment on a firmer footing of the Mughal Empire in India. In his infinite graciousness Guru Nanak Dev put in the hands of the founder of the Mughal dynasty seven pinches of dust symbolising that Babar's empire would last for seven generations. A Sikh who was watching this strange dispensation of beneficence reminded the Guru that the Mughals, despotic as they were, would wreak havoc if they continued to rule the country for such a long time. **Guru Nanak Dev smilingly replied that if they did so, the Mughal Empire would be decimated in India by seven sacrifices corresponding to the gift of a seven-generation dynasty he had bestowed on the Mughal Emperor.**

The Prince of Martyrs:

As ordained by the founder of the Sikh faith, the Fifth Master, Guru Arjun Dev, became the first martyr to shake the foundations of the mighty Mughal Empire. The six martyrs who followed him in the lineage of martyrdom were: Guru Tegh Bahadar, the Ninth Master, the four sons of Guru Gobind Singh (the Tenth Master), and his mother, Mata Gujri. **As the "Prince of Martyrs" and "Prophet of Peace", Guru Arjun Dev's life was an inspired compact of sublime sacrifice and beatific bliss born out of his sweet submission to the Divine Will.**

Pivotal Role:

Guru Arjun Dev played a pivotal role in the development of the Sikh faith by giving a definite form to the exemplary work that his four predecessors had done. It is pertinent to observe that a new religion can be founded only when the following three things are established in the first place: *granth* (scripture), *tirath* (place of pilgrimage or worship), and *lipi* (script). The Fifth Master's contribution is thus incomparable insofar as he fulfilled for the Sikh faith two of these three imperatives: one, as the author-compiler of *Guru Granth Sahib* (The Sikh Bible), and two, as the architect-builder of Harmandir Sahib (popularly known as the Golden Temple: the sixth most favoured holy place in the world, reverentially visited by foreigners and Indians alike) at Amritsar. In short, **the Sikh faith acquired from Guru Arjun Dev the unique signs and symbols of a distinct spiritual entity.**

Personification of Humility:

Born at Goindwal on 15 April 1563, Guru Arjun Dev was the youngest and noblest of the three sons of the Fourth Master, Guru Ram Das. He was endowed with a deeply religious temperament and quintessential creative afflatus, and his life was distinguished by

immeasurable compassion, humility, and mercy. He was a true Personification of Humility. Giving the Sikh movement a definitive direction, a comprehensive perspective and a pragmatic programme, he made the new faith coeval with the whole gamut of existence, thereby raising its magnificent edifice on values which would know no death or change. Guru Arjun Dev adorned the spiritual throne of Guru Nanak Dev from 1581 to 1606.

The *Adi Granth*:

The compilation of the *Adi Granth* (The Primal Book) was Guru Arjun Dev's epoch-making achievement. The writing of the sacred volume was completed sometime in 1604. Less than two years of the mortal life of the Guru remained at the time when he was to wear the crown of martyrdom at the hands of the bigoted Mughal Emperor Jahangir. With a prophetic insight into what the future held in store for him, the Guru completed two grand projects with ceaseless labour to impart **two distinctive features to the new faith: the holy Temple that must serve as the centre of its devotion, and the sacred Scripture which must enshrine the timeless-universal spirit of its divine instruction.**

The Contents of the Holy Book:

According to the extant recension of *Guru Granth Sahib* to which the *Bani* (literally, The Word) of Guru Tegh Bahadar was added at Guru Gobind Singh's command in 1705-06 at Damdama Sahib, there are 5751 *shabads* (verse-units). Out of this total, the largest number (2312 verse-units) is the magnificent contribution of Guru Arjun Dev. He incorporated in the *Adi Granth* compositions of Muslim Sufis (mystics) like Sheikh Farid and Bhikhan, along with those of the *Bhaktas* (saints), the so-called *shudras* (untouchables) such as Kabir, the weaver; Ravidas, the cobbler; Sain, the barber; and Sadhna; the butcher. Altogether sixteen such *Bhaktas* and Sufis have been represented in the Holy Book, making it a truly cosmopolitan Bible of the world's youngest religion.

Ragas as Musical Vehicle of the Revealed Word:

Guru Arjun Dev arranged the selected compositions in 30 different *ragas* (musical modes or patterns). A precise method was followed in the setting of the verse-units. First came *shabads* by the holy Gurus in the order of their succession. Then came *chhands*, *vars*, etc. by the Gurus. The compositions by the Gurus in *ragas* were followed by those of the *Bhaktas*. Immense labour was expended on the preparation of the huge volume whose present-day standard version runs into 1430 pages. The first copy of the *Adi Granth*, which was transcribed by Bhai Gurdas under the supervision of Guru Arjun Dev, is preserved by the family of the descendants at Kartarpur.

Installation at Harmandar Sahib:

The Holy Book was installed at Harmandar Sahib with appropriate ceremony. Sikhs came in large numbers to pay obeisance to the *Adi Granth*. Baba Budha was appointed the first *Granthi*, (reader-custodian). Guru Arjun Dev enjoined on the Sikhs to revere the Holy Book as the embodiment of the message and spirit of the Gurus. The *Adi Granth* is to the Sikh faith as The Holy Bible is to Christianity and The Holy Koran to Islam. But followers of no world religion revere their Scripture with such undiminished intensity of love as the Sikhs do. This unique fact was highlighted with a memorable punch when one foreigner described the Golden Temple at Amritsar as "the costliest book-cover in the world".

A Unique Scripture:

According to Gurbachan Singh Talib, “‘Granth’, which is derived from a Sanskrit word, implies, like the ‘Koran’ and the ‘Bible’, a Book—the *Book par excellence*. Unlike some other scriptures, it is neither history nor mythology, nor a collection of incantations. Its contents are spiritual poetry, the vision of the Cosmic order and exhortation to the higher life. In that respect it is a unique scripture among the source books of religion. It remains unique in consisting solely of the meditations of God-inspired men who have communicated the Divine Word in a spirit of deep humility and compassion for mankind.”

The Golden Temple:

The Golden Temple, or Harmandir Sahib (the Lord God’s Temple) or Darbar Sahib (the Court of the Venerable Lord), is the sacred shrine of the Sikhs. It is a paragon of religious architecture, symbolising devotion, love, peace, and universal brotherhood. The Holy Temple stands for all that is sublime and noble in the Indian religious tradition. The Golden Temple was built in 1604 AD. It is an incomparable specimen of Sikh Architecture which represents the best and the finest of the late-16th-century style of monumental architecture and decorative building arts.

New Centres for Sikh Congregations:

The idea of creating a place of pilgrimage was conceived by Guru Amar Das, the Third Master. This was to continue the practice of founding new centres for Sikh congregations — a tradition which had been established by his predecessors. The spot was discovered by Guru Ram Das, the Fourth Master, during one of the itineraries undertaken by him in search of a suitable site for establishing a new Sikh centre. He found the present site in a jungle to the west of Sultanwind village on a piece of land lying bounded by the villages of Sultanwind, Tung, Gumtala, and Gilwali. Existing on the site was a pond whose water had been known to have curative properties. Though its idea was mooted by Guru Amar Das, the execution of the project was left to Guru Ram Das. Arrangements of funds for the purpose and their control were entrusted to Baba Budha.

Guru’s Architectural Design:

While the holy tank was under construction, Guru Arjun Dev thought of building a Sikh shrine in its midst, and conceived the architectural design of the Holy Temple that was destined to become an all-time spiritual marvel in Architecture for religion. The object of Guru Arjun Dev in planning the structure of Harmandar Sahib in the midst of the *Amrit Sarovar* (Pool of Nectar) was to combine human life’s spiritual and temporal aspects, thereby bringing about a new synthesis of the varied strands of Indian religious tradition.

The Construction:

The construction of the holy shrine was carried out under the direct control and supervision of Guru Arjun Dev. He was assisted by Baba Budha, Bhai Gurdas, and other prominent Sikhs available on the site. The tank and the temple, when completed, presented a beautiful sight. It became a spot of unparalleled beauty, splendour, and glory.

An Inspired Commemoration:

Guru Arjun Dev commemorated the achievement in the ecstasy of deep divine inspiration thus:

I have seen all places; but there is
None other like thee,
For thou were established

By the Creator-Lord Himself
Who blest thee with glory.
Ramdaspur is thickly populated
Unparalleled and supremely beautiful.
He *who takes a dip in the Tank of Ram Das*
Is cleansed of all his mortal sins.



**[End of Part I]
(to be concluded)**