

Guru Hargobind Sahib - The Great Liberator

BHUPINDER SINGH*

* 15022 Berkshire Green Drive, Houston, USA. Email: singhbo@gmail.com

GURU HARGOBIND JI WAS incarcerated in Gwalior fort by Emperor Jahangir between the years 1617 and 1619. As Guru Ji was born in June 1595, he was twenty-two years of age when he was imprisoned in Gwalior. In that prison there were another 52 Rajas who had been incarcerated by Jahangir, after he had defeated them in wars and usurped their kingdoms.

The superintendent of the prison was Hari Das. When Guru Ji arrived at the Gwalior Fort, Hari Das came forward to meet and welcome the new inmate. He prostrated before Guru Ji in a sign of respect and reverence and, in that instant, a transformation took place in him and he became the Guru's devotee. But Guru Ji refused to eat the food provided for him at the fort. After three days, Hari Das came to Guru Ji and begged him to eat. Hari Das pleaded that food provided sustenance and he was quite disturbed that Guru Ji was not partaking of it. He also expressed his grave concern that, as the Superintendent of the jail, the health and welfare of the inmates were his primary concern and, if any untoward incident happened, he would be held responsible by the ruler.

Guru Ji said the rich meals from the state exchequer were not earned with honest labor, but was the tax money collected by the state, so he would not eat the food. Guru Ji asked his Sikhs to go to the city of Gwalior and earn by laboring with their own hands and prepare food from that earning. Interestingly Hari Das acceded this request and permitted the Sikhs incarcerated with Guru Ji to earn their wages.

This incident serves as an epic reminder of the incident from Guru Nanak Dev Ji's life where he refused to partake of food at the lavish feast hosted by Malik Bhago, a high government official of Saidpur (Aminabad) in honor of his ancestors. Guru Nanak preferred the simple bread of Bhai Lalo as it was prepared from earnings by honest labor and not forcibly extracted from others. Hari Das by his ready acceptance of Guru Hargobind Ji's suggestion not only showed that he was a conscientious person, concerned about Guru Ji's welfare, but also that the transformation had been brought about on him because of Guru Ji.

Behavioural Study:

In order to get a better picture of how the jail authorities develop their persona, let us look for clues in the book: *The Lucifer Effect*, by Philip Zimbardo. In the summer of 1971, social psychologist Prof. Zimbardo randomly assigned male college students to play role of prisoners and guards, in a mock prison he built in a basement at Stanford University. The students had been screened for their mental health balance and lack of criminal records. In exchange for participation, they were paid \$ 15 a day. It is interesting to know how this 'low-key experiment' turned into hell.

The guards took to their duties with an appetite unanticipated by the psychologists who ran the study. The guards asserted their authority by banging doors; belittled inmates verbally, abused them, humiliated them, and kept them awake at night. In fact within thirty-six (36) hours of the experiment, one of the "prisoners" broke down and had to be released. Even Zimbardo, who designed the experiment, became a captive of his 'grand design'.

Operating as prison superintendent he forgot that he was a psychologist doing a study and like an autocratic ruler would not abandon the project.

The main point that this study established was how good people even those with doctorates in psychology can collaborate in doing evil things to others. Zimbardo contends, in his book, that it is not a few bad apples that ruin others, but the barrel is what does it, i.e. **the prisons are toxic.**

Now if we look at what Guru Ji did in Gwalior, from this perspective, then it can only be described as a miracle. **Guru Ji transformed the ruthless jail superintendent whose charge included 52 defeated rulers into a compassionate, devoted and a service oriented person.** In addition, the 52 inmates, who were leading a miserable life in the prison, now had hope because of support, encouragement and counseling provided by Guru Ji. They started following Guru Ji in spending time in devotional singing and meditation. This feat is beyond the human endeavor and only **an enlightened soul** can perform this transformation.

Another interesting fact that Guru Ji established, in what Guru Ji told Hari Das during their conversation, is: ***"I am not a ruler who is lamenting at the loss my kingdom here in my incarceration. I am a mendicant of God. I spend my time in His remembrance and in His presence. The ruler can imprison my body, but my mind cannot be imprisoned."***

Now if we can imagine when the spinning wheel of life puts us in such a situation, like imprisonment, or even a solitary life, because of family circumstances as death of the spouse, and children having moved away because of work, then life becomes a nightmare for us. We will be blaming others, including God, and trying to impress that we have been wronged and made victims.

But now we can see how Guru Ji deals with the situation, we find that he is thankful as now it has afforded him the opportunity to spend quiet and quality time in meditation. It is an inspiration for us to learn to embrace the situation that may not be to our liking or even when it has been wrongfully thrust upon us. Acceptance of the life's situation in such circumstances is not easy, as we will be constantly reminded of the 'good old days' and then mind will start wondering; why has this happened to me? Why I always get picked for such adverse life scenarios? We can learn from Guru Ji to use such situations in service of God and mankind. It is only when solitary life becomes loneliness or, more precisely, a haunting loneliness that it can have a debilitating effect on one's mind and body.

But Guru Ji set an example, and showed us that there is an alternative and also a healthier one that has a positive effect. In fact Guru Ji turned the lives of the princely other 52 princely inmates from despondency, depression at loss of kingdom, power, and position, into oasis of hope and thankfulness. Guru Ji, by his own example, set a model of how to turn incarceration and solitary confinement into an uplifting experience. How Victor Frankl, the Austrian Psychiatrist of Jewish descent, learnt this lesson from his imprisonment by Germans during the World War II, can be best described in his own words: ***"The one thing you can't take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one's freedoms is to choose ones attitude in any given circumstance."*** This is the model of mental fortitude that Guru Ji has set for us.

Through the good offices of Mian Mir and Wazir Khan; Jahangir was moved to release Guru Ji. Jahangir sent Wazir Khan to Gwalior, and he personally delivered the message of release. But Guru Ji refused to go, and told Wazir Khan that his stay in prison has provided

succour to other inmates and improved quality of their lives, so he was quite happy here with them.

Wazir Khan made three trips back and forth negotiating and, finally, Guru Ji agreed to leave if all the prisoners incarcerated were released with him. **Jahangir put a condition that only those incarcerated rajas who hold to Guru Ji's tassel will be released, in anticipation that these** rajas, being Rajputs, will not accept such a humiliation of acceptance of authority over them. Guru Ji got a special gown made with 52 rajas and all the 52 rulers came out with Guru Ji, with each holding one tassel of Guru Ji's long gown.

Thus, Guru Ji was hailed at Gwalior as “Bandhi Chhor” – The Great Deliverer or Liberator. Even in his release Guru Ji provided succour to other royal inmates as he snapped their prisoners' fetters.

When Guru Ji returned to Amritsar his arrival was greeted with showers of flowers and fragrances, followed by lighting up of whole town in the evening. As Guru Ji returned there on the Deewali day, every year this day is celebrated there with lighting of the entire Golden Temple Complex. While it was celebration of release of Guru Ji and his return back to Amritsar, it was also a symbolic celebration of the fact that when Guru's light shines inside our house, which is human body; then all the darkness of ignorance is dispelled and there is light everywhere.

No wonder that Bhai Gurdas Ji, who was a contemporary of Guru Arjun Dev Ji and was an eyewitness to the unfolding of life of Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji describes him as:

“ਏਕੰਕਾਰ ਅਕਾਰੁ ਕਰਿ ਗੁਰੁ ਗੋਵਿੰਦੁ ਨਾਉ ਸਦਵਾਇਆ ॥”

“*Aekankaar akaar kar gur govind naao sadhavaeia.*”

(Bhai Gurdas; Vaar 25, Pauri 1)

Meaning: The formless Brahm assuming (human) form has got himself called Guru (Har) Gobind.

It is only such an enlightened soul who is one with God, can bring about such transformation in lives and inspires others. We are privileged to have such Gurus. Even today their acts provide inspiration, positive outlook and strength. Every year when we celebrate *Deewali* and light lamps, let the memory of “*Bandhi Chhor*” be refreshed in our minds, and a prayer for such mental strength and our own deliverance well within us.

□

References

1. Singh, Bhai Vir. *Shree Asht Gur Chamatkar*, Volume 3 (In Punjabi)
2. Singh, Ranbir. *Glimpses of Divine Masters*.
3. Singh, Joginder. *Gurmat tae Gurdarshan*
4. Berryhill, Michael. *Of Crime and Punishment*. Book Reviews. The Houston Chronicle, August 12, 2007.
5. www.sikhs.org
6. Frankl, Victor. *Man's search for Meaning*