

# Asian Resonance

## The Martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev and Legacy



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### Abstract

The martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev is considered a watershed event in the history of Sikhism. During the period of Guru Arjan many thousands of the native people began to follow the teachings of Sikhism. Many Hindus and Muslims, including Muslim converts, were too became Sikhs. The Mughal clergy grew increasingly irate at the popularity of Guru Arjan Dev and saw their best chance at destroying the Sikh institution after the death of King Akbar in 1605. Jahangir was a Muslim fundamentalist who was very curious of turning the entirety of Hindustan into an Islamic State. The powerful Hindus associated with the Mughal Court joined the Muslim Ulema in their attempt to influence Jahangir to arrest Guru Arjan. Jahangir, with his own jealousies, promptly obliged the enemies of the Guru and many allegations were brought against Guru Arjan Dev. They accused the Sikh Granth of defaming the Hindu and Muslim religions and produced the claim that Jahangir's son, the rebellious Khusrau, was aided by Guru Arjan. Diwan Chandu Shah, who wanted the marriage of his daughter with Guru Arjan's son Har Gobind, became inflamed at the rejection of his proposal by Guru Arjan Dev Ji. He went to Jahangir and "filled his ear with poison against the Guru." On June 16, 1606, the Mughal Emperor Jahangir ordered that Guru Arjan Dev be tortured and sentenced to death after he refused preach his message of God as started by Guru Nanak Dev Ji. After enduring five days of unrelenting torture Guru Arjan was taken for a bath in the river. As thousands watched he entered the river never to be seen again.

**Keywords:** Guru Arjan Dev, Jahangir, Diwan Chandu Shah, Martyrdom.

### Introduction

Sikhism originated in 16th century as a new revolutionary force, aimed at the spiritual rejuvenation, moral upliftment and social emancipation of people. Guru Nanak, the first Guru, was imprisoned by Babar the first Mughal to invade India. Guru Nanak Dev Ji himself writes about the barbarity of the invasion in which innocent civilians were tortured, women raped, and disgraced, their hair cut off, whole families were starved and homes were razed to the ground.

The fifth Guru, Arjan Dev served as the supreme head of Sikhism for a quarter of a century and accomplished great and heroic things for Sikhism during his time. He expanded the city of Amritsar and completed the construction of the Golden temple at Amritsar. He also founded cities such as Taran Taran and Kartarpur. He constructed a Baoli at Lahore. Guru Arjan introduced the [Masands](#), a group of representatives who taught and spread the teachings of the Gurus and received the Dasvand, a voluntary offering of a Sikh's income in money, goods or service. Sikhs paid the Dasvand to support the building of gurdwaras and langars (shared communal kitchens). Although the introduction of the langar was started by Guru Nanak, Guru Arjan is credited for laying the foundation of the systematic institution of langars as a religious duty, one that has continued ever since.

The most important work of Guru Arjan Dev was the compilation of *Adi Granth*. The *Adi Granth* is regarded as the greatest work of sacred Punjabi literature. He brought together the writings of the first four Gurus and those of the Hindu Saints from different parts of India. *Adi Granth* was composed by Guru Arjan Dev in the form of sacred, soulful verses in 1604. It is, perhaps, the only book of a scriptural nature which still exists in the form first published (a hand-written manuscript) by Guru Arjan Dev. He said that the Book is the abode of God: '*Pothi Parameswar ka sthan*'. His hymns were set to divine music.

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Guru Arjan kept compiling and writing about the morality and humanity. He has left a massive volume of 2218 hymns marked their musicality and richness of imagery. They have continued to be popular with the Sikh musicians, generation after generation. He wrote in a simple, conversational language, reflecting the various stages of the spiritual journey of the human soul. His magnum opus is the Sukhmani, the Psalm of Peace, is a long poem, ranking next only to the Jap ji of Guru Nanak in popularity with the devout. Though it doesn't form part of the essential set of five hymns enjoined upon the Sikhs to be recited every day, the Sukhmani is recited by a large number of devotees every morning and also at the hour of anxiety in the family. In Guru Arjan we have the culmination of all that Guru Nanak and the three Gurus following him stood for. They combined in themselves the best of Islam and Hinduism. Rather than alienating anyone, they strove for mutual understanding. Venerated equally by the Muslims and the Hindus, they were peace-loving, devoted to meditation and prayers, and service of their fellow-beings. All rites, rituals, and worship of god and goddesses have been dispensed with. Sikhism comprises love of God and service of humanity.

*Wahe guru ji Ka Khalsa  
Wahe Guru ji ki Fateh.*

*Guru-Vani Sukhmani*, one the most popular banis (sacred hymns) revered by all the Sikhs, was composed by Guru Arjan Dev. He came to be looked upon by his disciples not only as the light or Satguru (spiritual guide) but also as Sachcha Padshah (The true king). The assembly of his followers came to be known as 'Durbar' or court and his seat as 'Takhat' or throne. It was on this account that the Harmandar also came to be known as Durbar Sahib, which emerged as a self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating institution. The use of words like 'Sachcha Padshah', 'Durbar' or 'Takhat' was thought to be fraught with dangerous motives by the state, which could no longer look upon the growing strength of the Sikh community with indifference. The expression (Sachcha Padshah) could be adapted to any circumstances and its mystic application seems to have preyed upon and perplexed the minds of the Mughals. One of the charges leveled against Guru Arjan by Jahangir was that he had called himself Sachcha Padshah or the true king and was an aspirant to sovereign power. The Guru apart from being a staunch devotee was perfect and deft in number of arts. As the Guru had a well organized central establishment which included the maintenance of a contingent of horses and elephants, he paved the way for the military organization of the Sikhs that was to follow from the time of the sixth Guru. It was during the life time of Guru Arjan that his son and successor Guru Hargobind Started learning how to wield the sword and going on trips for hunting.

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## **Torture and Execution**

Deewan Chandu Shah wielded a lot of influence at the Mughal court. Chandu Shah's wife felt that Hargobind was a good match for her daughter. Chandu Shah thus sent his agents to Guru asking them to finalize this proposal of marriage. Guru's Sikhs wanted Guru to decline this offer and Guru obliged his Sikhs by declining to accept the marriage

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asking that "Daughter of such a rich household was not fit for the house of a Saint 'Dervesh' like me". Chandu Shah could not impinge upon the idea that the hand of his daughter could be refused by anyone. In a fury of temper, he decided to avenge himself on the Guru for the indignity hurled on him.

Chandu Shah joined Guru's enemy Prithi Chand Sodhi and registered a complaint to Emperor Akbar that Adi Granth, which Guru Arjan had compiled has derogatory remarks against Muslims and Hindus. Emperor Akbar was delighted to listen to the hymn from the Adi Granth and exonerated Arjan and Sikhs of any wrong doings against any community. He bestowed honour of robes on Baba Buddha and Bhai Gurdas ji and sent them back.

When Jahangir was ascending to the imperial throne after Akbar's death in 1605, it was Shaykh Farid Bukhari who was responsible for extracting a solemn oath from the new Emperor to defend Islam. In this context, the testimony of Father Pierre Du Jarric in his book Akbar and the Jesuits is quite revealing:

*Accordingly, the leading noble, Sheikh Farid Bukhari, having been sent by the others as their representative came to the Prince (Salim, entitled Jahangir), and promised in their names to place the Kingdom (of India) in his hands provided that he would swear to defend the law of Mohammad.*

In fact, Shaykh Farid Bukhari rendered conspicuous services in the capture and liquidation of Prince Khusrau and thus earned the title of Murtaza Khan ("lord agreeable"), eventually increasing his rank to the command of 6,000 horses. It was this Murtaza Khan to whom Jahangir handed over Guru Arjan to be capitally punished according to Mongol tribal law.

Jahangir was a debauched drunken, fanatic who believed in whatever his Sunni Mullah told him. Chandu Shah complained to Jahangir again that Granth has some derogatory references to Islam and Hinduism. Jahangir issued orders for Guru Arjan to revise *Holy Granth* and remove any references to Islam and to pay two hundred thousand rupees as fine. The Guru told Mughal emperor Jahangir that his money was the sacred trust of the Sikh community and the hymns in the Holy Granth were revelation in praise of God: no one dare alter them. King was on his way to Kashmir. Emperor Jahangir was in hurry so he asked Murtza Khan to deal with Guru in the way he thought was best. Murtza Khan sent for the Subadar of Lahore and ordered him to arrest Guru Arjan. Guru Arjan Dev was arrested and put in Jail at Lahore. When Sikhs heard that Emperor wanted two hundred thousand rupees, they started collecting money to pay the fine. Guru Arjan Dev bluntly refused them to pay the fine, citing that it is against the ethics. Meanwhile, Qazi gave an injunction ordering the Guru Arjan to be tortured to death if he didn't agree to expunge the so-called derogatory references to Islam in Adi Granth or he converts to Islam.

The Mughal Emperor Jahangir wrote in his autobiography *Tuzk-e-Jahangiri* (Jahangirnama) :

There was a Hindu named Arjan in Gobindwal on the banks of the Beas River.

Pretending to be a spiritual guide, he had won over as devotees many simple minded Indians and even some ignorant, stupid Muslims by broadcasting his claims to be a saint. They called him guru. Many fools from all around had recourse to him and believed in him implicitly. For three or four generations they had been pedaling this same stuff. For a long time I had been thinking that either this false trade should be eliminated or that he should be brought into the embrace of Islam. At length, when Khusraw passed by there, this inconsequential little fellow wished to pay homage to Khusraw. When Khusraw stopped at his residence, [Arjan] came out and had an interview with [Khusraw]. Giving him some elementary spiritual precepts picked up here and there, he made a mark with saffron on his forehead, which is called qashqa in the idiom of the Hindus and which they consider lucky. When this was reported to me, I realized how perfectly false he was and ordered him brought to me. I awarded his [Guru Arjan's] houses and dwellings and those of his children to Murtaza Khan, and I ordered his possessions and goods confiscated and him executed [*siyasat o yasa rasanand*].

*Emperor Jahangir's Memoirs, Jahangirnama 27b-28a, (Translator: Wheeler M. Thackston)*

The Guru was made to sit on a red hot iron sheet. They poured burning hot sand on his body. He was also given a dip in boiling water. As the Guru was being persecuted, thus Mian Mir, the Muslim sufi divine of Lahore, who had laid the foundation stone of the Golden Temple at Amritsar, came and begged the Guru to allow him to use his mystic power to undo those who were responsible for the suffering inflicted forcibly upon him. The Guru heard Mian Mir and told him that one must accept the will of God; not a leaf moves if (God doesn't ordain it. The Guru was subjected to immense torture for five consecutive days. When the tyrants found him bearing all the pains and agony with perfect equanimity, they became helpless. They were at a loss and didn't know what to do. At this the Guru asked for a bath in the river Ravi by the side of the Mughal fort in which he was imprisoned. Thousands of his followers watched the Guru walk to the river with tears in their eyes. His bare body glistened with blisters. There were blisters on his feet and he couldn't even walk properly. "Sweet is Your will, O God; the gift of your Name alone I seek." said the Guru again and again.

*'Tera Bhhana Mittha Laage  
Naam Padhrath Nanak Mange'*

He kept chanting the 'Bani' while going to the river. After reaching the river, he bade farewell to the bewailing multitude and walked into the water as serene and as calm as ever. It is said that it was the last glimpse his devotees had of the Guru. He never came out of the river. River was flowing at very fast pace and with blisters on body, it was very tough for Guru to hold on against the tide. The tide and flow of river bore him in her longing lap and he was gone forever. Guru Arjan was only forty-three years old at the time of his supreme sacrifice on 30 May 1606. Sikhs celebrate that day every year with sweetened buttermilk stalls called *Chhabil* all over Punjab.

The great Guru Arjan Dev, before taking his final flight to heaven, thought to give his final sermon to his followers. The Guru's parting message to his people reveals a resolve to fight, recourse to arms, which gave Sikhism an urge to carry on its mission with fresh vigour: "I have succeeded in affecting the object of my life. Go to my son, the Holy Hargobind, and give him from me an ample consolation. Bid him not to mourn me, nor indulge in unmanly lamentation, but sing God's praises. Let him sit fully armed upon the Gaddi and maintain an army to the best of his ability. I bear all my torture to set a good example to the teachers of True Name, that they may not lose patience, nor rail at God in their affection. The true test of faith comes in the very hour of misery."

## Findings

The true master Guru Arjan Dev inspired the Sikhs to follow the path of divinity, morality and humanity. The Guru's words stirred the Sikhs to a grave concern of their plight. Guru Arjan was tortured to death and became the first martyr of the Sikhs. Thus, a situation was arising in which a conflict between the forces of the State and those of Sikhism was becoming more or less inevitable. The State began to consider the Sikh organization as one of immense possibilities which might at one time become a rallying point of disaffection.

Guru Arjan's martyrdom became the single most decisive factor for the crystallization of the Sikh Panth. It became an integral part of collective Sikh memory, finding its expression in Sikh art, liturgy and martyrdom tradition.

## Relevance in Today's Context

The way in which Guru Arjan gave his life for the values that he cherished is of far-reaching significance. With his martyrdom the attitude of the Sikhs toward life changed. Emulating their Guru, they would readily give their lives for any cause dear to them, whether it was a fight with the bigoted Mughals for the protection of their faith, or with the British for the freedom of the country, or even Congress after Independence for the Puniabi-speaking State. Guru Arjan's humility is almost unparalleled. There was no trace of self; he emphasized with actions that more important than the Guru were the Guru's Sikhs. The Guru respected their wishes, even when his life was at stake.

## Conclusion

To sum up, Guru Arjan was put to death with tortures according to the Mongol tribal law of Yasa by the orders of Emperor Jahangir. The principal cause of capital punishment has been presented as Guru Arjan's alleged blessings to the rebel Prince Khusrau, there were other religious, socio-cultural, and economic factors that contributed in the final order of execution. These major factors include: Naqshbandi reaction against Akbar's policy of religious pluralism, the conversion of Muslims to Sikh faith, an extensive Jat allegiance to the Panth, the growing strength of the Sikh movement as an autonomous "power center". Guru Arjan enjoyed high spiritual reputation among the Sufis and Muslim dervishes, a reputation that encouraged Prince Khusrau to seek his

blessings. The Mughal administrators of Lahore who had been carefully monitoring the Sikh movement for a number of years found their opportunity to finally act against the Guru. They moved swiftly to eliminate Guru Arjan and cripple the rapidly growing Sikh movement. Guru Arjan's martyrdom is of crucial significance in Sikh history, contributing very basically to the growth of Sikh community self-consciousness, separatism and militancy. The most important consequence of this watershed was the conflict with Mughal authorities that became a permanent feature for the next two centuries. Thus, the circumstances present at that time, enemies of Guru Arjan Dev in Sikhs community, conspiracies of Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs against the Sikhs themselves combined together resulting in martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev resulting in crystallization of the Sikh panth.

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