

## Guru Arjan Dev: The First Sikh Martyr

Arjan Dev was born in 1563, the youngest of three sons of Guru Ram Das and Bibi Bhani. Prithvi Chand, the eldest son, was very worldly wise; he managed the family affairs for his father (such as running of the langar etc); he was aware that Gurus Angad, Amar Das, and Ram Das inherited the mantle of Guruship through **SEWA** (service). Maha Dev, middle son, wanted to lead life as an ascetic. From an early age, Arjan took keen interest in religious activities; humility and selfless service were his notable traits. Arjan became a favorite grandson of Guru Amar Das.

At a point in time, Guru Ram Das received an invitation to attend his nephew's wedding in Lahore. He asked Arjan to represent the family at this joyous function and instructed him to stay in Lahore till he was summoned back. Arjan complied with his father's request but he longed to be home since he missed his father. He wrote three letters (Majh M. 5, SGGS, p. 96) to his father expressing his deep anguish at the separation but received no reply; it turned out Prithvi Chand intercepted those letters and Guru Ram Das never saw them. Arjan wrote a fourth letter but this time sent it with a trusted messenger asking him to deliver the letter to Guru Ram Das himself. The Guru was deeply moved by Arjan's love for him and he sent Baba Buddha to Lahore to escort Arjan home. This incident settled the succession issue for Guru Ram Das; he chose Arjan to succeed him; he became the fifth Sikh Guru in 1581 when he was 18 years old. Guru Arjan married Bibi Ganga Devi on the death of his issueless first wife. They were blessed with their only son Hargobind in 1595 who became the sixth Sikh Guru at the martyrdom of Guru Arjan in 1606; he was 11 years old.

Guru Arjan was a gifted poet and an excellent musician. He was also a prolific writer of Sikh inspirational religious compositions which he incorporated in a Granth (Bhai Gurdas was the Scribe) along with the utterances of his predecessor Gurus (Nanak, Angad, Amar Das, and Ram Das) and the sayings of other philosophers: Farid and Jai Dev (12<sup>th</sup> century), Namdev and Trilochan (13<sup>th</sup> century), Kabir, Beni, and Ramanand (14<sup>th</sup> century), Ravi Das and Pipa (15<sup>th</sup> century), Sur Das (16<sup>th</sup> century), etc. The Granth encompasses a wide spectrum of thoughts and castes (of the authors) to emphasize the secular and casteless nature of Sikh religion. Guru Arjan developed cities of Kartarpur, Tarn Taran, and Amritsar (the holiest city for the Sikhs) in which he built a Gurudwara in the middle of a body of water, the site of the present day Golden Temple. He installed the Granth in the Gurudwara in 1604; Guru Gobind Singh elevated the Granth to the status of Shri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS), the eternal Guru of Sikhs at his passing (after including his father's Bane in it); SGGS contains 1430 pages, it is written in the Gurmukhi script (invented by Guru Angad) with compositions are set to 31 ragas appropriate to the time of day.

Guru Arjan introduced the custom of Daswand to support Langar and fund grants for the needy. He also encouraged his followers to set up businesses in Amritsar; it became a thriving trade and pilgrimage center. Hindus and Muslims in the area turned to Guru Arjan for spiritual guidance. This did not sit well with the orthodox Muslims like Sheikh Ahmad Sarhandi who perceived himself to be on the same level as the Prophet Muhammad. He asserted that his status was higher than Sikh Gurus, a claim rejected by Guru Arjan. The Sheikh had a great influence on Jehangir (the reigning Emperor) to whom he turned for help in punishing the infidel Guru. Jehangir noted in his memoir, "A

Hindu named Arjan lived at Goindwal...simple minded Hindus and foolish Muslims have been persuaded to adopt his ways...This business has flourished for three generations. For a long time it had been in my mind to put a stop to this affair or to bring him into the fold of Islam.” Ironically, Emperor Akbar (Jehangir’s father) had cordial relations with Guru Amar Das (Guru Arjan’s grandfather); Akbar visited the Guru at Goindwal and was very impressed with Guru’s piety.

Akbar wanted his grandson Prince Khusro to succeed him; Jehangir was a drug addict while Khusro was a pious man and a liberal in Akbar’s mold. At Akbar’s death the Muslim priests at the Court conspired to foil late Emperor’s wishes; they rallied around Jehangir who agreed to restore the Sharia (Muslim Religious Laws) in return for their support. There was an unsuccessful uprising in support of Khusro but he was defeated and captured in Punjab; his supporters were put to death in a sadistic way. It happened that Khusro had visited Guru Arjan and asked for his help in fight against his father but Guru Arjan refused to intervene. Notwithstanding, Jehangir had Guru Arjan arrested after the rebellion was crushed; Jehangir continues, “ I ordered him arrested... and having his property confiscated, I commanded that he be put to death with torture.” His orders were carried out most ruthlessly on the bank of river Ravi and led to Guru Arjan’s martyrdom. The Shiekh who had influenced Jehangir’s action expressed satisfaction ‘at the execution of the kafir.’ However, the brutal murder of their innocent Guru left an indelible mark on Sikh psyche. They resolved to take a stand against tyranny; a peaceful people were thus forced to take defensive measures to resist evil.

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**Some Thoughts Preached by Guru Arjan**

“ No one is my enemy, nor is anyone a stranger to me, I am a friend of all.”  
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“ Of all religions, the best religion is to utter holy name with adoration and do good deeds; Of all rites, the holiest rite is to cleanse one’s soul in the company of saints; Of all endeavors, the best endeavor is to meditate on his name and praise it forever; Of all speeches, the best speech is to utter aloud, having harkened to it, God’s glory; Of all shrines, the most sacred shrine is, sayeth Nanak, the heart in which Lord dwelleth.”  
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“ My soul, why are you troubled, when you know that Lord will provide?  
In the rocks and stones He has set living creatures, He puts food before them.”  
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“Not on thy father and mother, not on the friends of thy household, not on thy wife nor on thy son, darest you lean for the daily bread; Lord provides all, why have fear in thy mind?”  
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“ You have acquired the human form, this is your opportunity to be one with God, all other labors are unprofitable. Seek the company of the holy and glorify his name. Prepare in earnest to cross this terrible ocean, your life is being wasted tied to world’s illusions.”  
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“ Accept to die, abandon hope of living, be dust under the feet of all, then come to me.”  
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