

Guru Amar Das: 1479-1574

Amar Das was born to Tej Bhan and Lakshami in the town of Basarke, in district Amritsar, in Northern India. His father a successful businessman was a deeply religious person (he was of the Vaishnavite faith). This rubbed off on his son who showed strong religious leanings at an early age; he visited the places of Hindu pilgrimage every year and invited a stream of holy men to his house. Amar Das married Mansa Devi at the age of 23. They were blessed with two sons (Mohan and Mohari) and two daughters (Dani and Bhani). His nephew was married to Guru Angad's daughter Amro. One morning as he passed his niece-in-law's house he heard her singing Jap ji in a melodious voice. He lingered outside her house and intently listened to the verses and was deeply moved at the wisdom contained in them. He asked Amro where did she learn those hymns. She told him that her father (Guru Angad) taught her Jap ji as she was growing up. Amar Das requested Amro to take him with her when she visited with her father next. She accepted his request. When Amar Das arrived at Khadur, Guru Angad was delivering a sermon to the Sikhs. It had a calming effect on his restive mind. He felt that his life long search for a mentor was finally over. Amar Das requested Guru Angad to accept him as a disciple; Amar Das was 63 years old when he met Guru Angad.

Amar Das dedicated himself to the service of the Guru and took upon himself the daily routine of bathing Guru Angad; he fetched water from the river Beas in a pitcher at the crack of dawn. One stormy night it rained heavily as Amar Das was returning from the river. He slipped and fell into a ditch near a weaver's house but held on to the pitcher. The loud thud awoke the weaver who asked his wife where did the sound come from. She replied, "It must be the homeless Amru, who lives off of others." Amar Das reported the mishap to the Guru along with the caustic comments of weaver's wife when Guru Angad Dev enquired why he was late that morning. The Guru was deeply moved and retorted, "Quite to the contrary, you are the home to the homeless, a pride of the deprived and a hope for the hopeless!" Guru Angad apparently decided that time had come for him to recognize Amar Das's dedicated, selfless service to him and the community for several years; he would be a worthy successor to him rather than any of his two sons. Amar Das was anointed the third Sikh Guru at the passing of Guru Angad on 29 March 1552 at the age of 73; he lived to be 95. Guru Angad's older son Datu was upset at hearing the news. He arrived at Goindwal while Guru Amar Das was delivering a sermon to the masses. He rushed to where the Guru was seated and kicked him, accusing Guru Amar Das of having usurped his inheritance. The Guru got up, touched Datu's feet and said, "Your foot must have been hurt after it struck my hard old bones! Please extend your leg so that I can massage your foot to assuage the pain." The whole congregation broke into admiration for the Guru. Datu felt ashamed and left the scene. The incident illustrates the humility of Guru Amar Das for which he was so well known.

On another occasion Sri Chand, the older son of Guru Nanak, came to visit Guru Amar Das. The first question he asked was, "Why do you have a long beard?" The Guru got up and said, "So that I may be able to wipe off the dirt from the feet of holy men such as you!" He bowed in front of Sri Chand and proceeded to wipe his feet with his beard. Sri Chand embraced Guru Amar Das and said, "I know now why my father did not anoint me his successor. Please forgive my rudeness!" Sri Chand then asked his own followers to acknowledge Amar Das as their Guru from then onwards.

Guru Amar Das was an important Sikh Guru. He made several memorable contributions to consolidate the Sikh faith and introduced lasting social reforms among Sikhs leading to a cultural and social revolution in Punjab. The marriage and death ceremonies were simplified by requiring that gurbani be recited on such occasions. He forbade the practices of Purdah (women wearing veils) and SATEE in which widows threw themselves on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands. He allowed widows to remarry and encouraged inter-caste marriages. Thereby, Guru Amar Das strengthened the social structure of the Sikhs and turned them into a very progressive community.

At that time Sikhs were scattered all over India. In order to develop cohesion among these far flung communities, Guru Amar Das set up 22 local units called MANGEES, headed by a Masand who acted as Guru's agent to coordinate the religious activities and do missionary work; women headed many such units, emphasizing an equality among Sikh men and women. Guru Amar Das also strengthened the institution of Langar (community kitchen), requiring all Sikhs (himself included) to sit down on the floor in queues and eat meals together, irrespective of the caste, creed, color, gender or social status. Even Emperor Akbar had to go through this routine when he visited Guru Amar Das at Goindwal on his way to Lahore. This tradition is unique to Sikhs. It leads to bonding among the community members.

Guru Amar Das turned the small town of Goindwal into an important Sikh pilgrimage center. He contributed 907 verses to Adi Granth, including Anand Sahib; all were written between the age of 73 when he became Guru and 95 when he passed on. He mentored Guru Ram Das from a very young age thereby he influenced the next two generations of Sikh Gurus. A sample of his writings is given below.

My body, what good deeds have you done during your sojourn on this Earth? What good have you done since coming into this world? You have given no place in your heart to the Lord who made you. It is through Guru's grace that Name dwells in human heart. The Lord's Name in human heart is a gift of past good deeds. Nanak says that mortal body is acceptable which has its heart focused on True Guru.

My mind, you are a spark of the divine light, so grasp the True source of your being. Lord is always with you. Through Guru's teachings rejoice in His presence. Understand your own true nature, inch closer to God and understand the meaning of birth and death. When through Guru's grace you have realized the Supreme One you will lose the illusion of otherness. You will abide in peace, honored and acceptable. Nanak says, my mind you are an image of God, so try to understand the true source of your being.

Those who are impure within but seem pure outside, fair without and foul within, have gambled their lives away. They have contracted the disease of desire; they have forgotten they are mortals. Though Name of the Lord is the most precious thing in the scriptures, to that they pay no attention and they wander in this world like demons. Says Nanak, he who has discarded the truth and attached himself to falsehood has wasted his life.

They are not truly husband and wife whose bodies merely come together; only they are truly wedded when two bodies have one soul.

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