

Guru Hargobind: 1595-1645

Hargobind was 11 years old when his father (Guru Arjan) attained martyrdom at the hands of the minions of the Mughal Empire in India. In a parting advice to his only son, Guru Arjan warned him of the turbulent period ahead and suggested that he should take appropriate measures to protect himself and the Sikhs to the best of his ability. Hargobind took this advice very seriously. As a leader of the community in deep shock at the brutal murder of their beloved Guru, Hargobind decided to add a new dimension to Sikh faith; he enjoined on the Sikhs to also acquire martial arts training as a part of normal living to defend themselves against oppression and injustice. This irreversible change in the outlook and lifestyle of the community set in motion a train of events of immense historic proportions; it ended the Mughal supremacy in India. More later.

After the mourning period was over, a ceremony was held to formally confer the title of Guruship on Hargobind, with Baba Buddha in the lead. Hargobind requested that a sword be included as a part of the investiture ceremony. Baba Buddha obliged but he put the sheathed sword on the wrong side of Guru's person. Baba realized his mistake and proceeded to correct it but Hargobind stopped him and asked him to fetch another sword and put it on the other side. Guru Hargobind explained to the bewildered audience that the sword on his right side represented Piree (spiritual living) and that on his left side stood for Miree (temporal power). Guru Hargobind always wore two swords, representing his obligation to resist oppression and uphold spirituality both at the same time; a doctrine of Miree-Piree was born. He went a step further. He raised a separate building near the main entrance to the Gurudwara (constructed by his father) at Amritsar and called it Akal Takhat, emphasizing two separate but significant aspects of Sikh ideals ensuing from the Miree-Piree doctrine; it is now deeply ingrained in Sikh psyche. For a time, Guru Hargobind used to spend early morning hours listening to the Gurbani in Harmandir and afternoons at Akal Takhat, meeting members of congregation listening to their social and personal concerns as well as watching his devotees engaged in martial arts exercises; sometimes he would go out hunting in the nearby woods, a princely pursuit. Even today the tradition continues; services at the Golden Temple cater to the spiritual needs of a worshipper whereas secular matters are discussed in the courtyard of the Akal Takhat. Guru Hargobind wore a saffron colored princely outfit and people started calling him 'Sachha Padshah' (True King).

Soon after assuming Guruship Hargobind sent out an edict to his followers that he would welcome a gift of finest horses and weapons in addition to the provisions for the Langar; he set up intensive training camps for swordsmanship, archery, and physical endurance. A program for the militarization of the community thus began in earnest. Soon Guru Hargobind led a small army of 800 horses, 300 troops on horseback, and 60 men with firearms. The Ulema (fundamentalists at the Court) suggested to Emperor Jehangir that Guru Hargobind may lead a revolt against his empire. Guru Hargobind was arrested and sent to the nefarious Gwalior Fort out of which no prisoner came out alive. Guru Hargobind's period of internment at Gwalior is put at between 40 days to 12 years. The story is that Bibi Ganga Devi and Baba Buddha went to see a Muslim (sufi) saint Mian Mir at Lahore who was a great admirer of Guru Arjan and had laid the foundation stone of Harmandir at Amritsar. Baba Buddha related the story of Guru Hargobind's unlawful arrest on a suspicion that he may be encouraging a rebellion against Emperor

Jehangir to avenge the death of his father. It turned out that Noor Jehan the (favorite) wife of the Emperor was a devotee of Mian Mir. She was helpful to Mian Mir in making a case to Jehangir that he had acted in haste and committed a serious crime. Mian Mir stated, "What can be more shameful for an Emperor to think that a teenager could confront your mighty force?" Emperor Jehangir (who had by now moderated his views on religion) accepted their advice and ordered Guru Hargobind released. But now Guru Hargobind refused to leave the Fort unless his 52 fellow political prisoners were also released with him. A face-saving compromise was devised by which anyone who could hold on to Guru Hargobind's coattails could go free with him! A special robe was made for Guru Hargobind with 52 tails and the matter was resolved. His deeply grateful friends called Guru Hargobind 'Bandi Chhor, the Liberator.' Emperor Jehangir took a shine to Guru Hargobind and the two became life long friends, sometimes hunting together. This amicable situation did not last too long, however.

Shah Jehan who succeeded Emperor Jehangir renewed the empire's hostility towards the Sikhs; he considered them the main threat to empire's future. At the bidding of the fundamentalists, he ordered his minions to demolish idols in Hindu temples and convert them into mosques; they even demolished the Sikh Gurudwara Baoli Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Ram Das at Lahore. The matters did not end there. Within a year of his becoming the Emperor, contingents of the Imperial army clashed with the Sikhs, the first of many clashes to come. Although the Sikhs were victorious and inflicted heavy losses on their enemies, it became clear to Guru Hargobind that if he stayed near the seat of the Mughal power at Lahore, he would be a constant target of the Imperial army and the Harmandir may be destroyed. So, Guru Hargobind wisely decided to leave Amritsar, he was never to see Amritsar again.

Towards the end of his life, Guru Hargobind retired to the Shawalik Hills in the Eastern Punjab and set up a new town at Kiratpur; it became a famous center of Sikh activities later. Guru Hargobind possessed an impressive physique. He was an adept horse rider, an expert archer, and a skilful wielder of sword. He transformed the servility of the populace into an attitude of defiance of the autocratic oppressive rulers and infused in them a fierce pride in Sikh power to be used to resist tyranny. He thus set the stage for his grandson Guru Gobind Singh to found the Khalsa Panth, a half century later.

Guru Hargobind had three wives. He was extremely virile. His first wife (Bibi Damodari) had three children, two sons Gurditta and Ani Rai, and a daughter Veran. His second wife (Bibi Nanki) bore him two sons: Atal and Teg Bahadur (destined to become the ninth Sikh Guru). His third wife (Bibi Mahadevi) gave birth to Suraj Mal. Only two sons survived him; Suraj Mal was fond of worldly pleasures and Teg Bahadur turned into a recluse. Guru Hargobind chose his younger grandson Har Rai (born posthumously to his eldest son Gurditta and his wife Nihal) to succeed him.

Guru Nanak stressed the need for practicing religious beliefs based on truthful living and a respect for human rights rather than on meaningless rites. Guru Angad crafted a script (Gurmukhi) used by Guru Arjan in composing Sikh scriptures. Gurus Amar Das and Ram Das built Gurudwaras and organized a network of missionary centers to preach the Sikh teachings. Guru Hargobind's emphasis on martial arts to resist tyranny and oppression by despot rulers nearly completed the identity of Sikhs as a 'people.'

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