

Guru Ram Das: 1534-1581

Hardas Sodhee and Anup Devi were blessed with a son at Lahore (now in Pakistan); his father named him Jetha (first born). Hardas barely eked out a living to meet family needs. Jetha lost his parents, one after the other within days, when he was only 7 years old. His maternal grand mother took him to her village 'Basarke,' now in district Amritsar. The family had no money, so Jetha was asked to start earning living selling roasted grams.

It turned out that Guru Amar Das also lived in Basarke then. Jetha went to Guru's Ashram regularly. He sat outside selling grams to the congregants while listening to the wisdom dispensed by Guru Amar Das to his devotees, occasionally he helped out with the chores at the Ashram. Jetha was a handsome lad with winsome ways, courteous manners, and a compassionate heart. He came across as a very likeable young man. Jetha caught Guru Amar Das's eye, beginning a relationship of mutual attachment. He became a favored errand boy for the Guru who called on him regularly when something needed to be done. For his part, Jetha performed his assigned duties with utmost diligence to Guru's complete satisfaction, treating Guru's word as a command from God. Thereby, he earned the respect and love of the congregation; they started calling him Bhai Jetha.

Guru Amar Das later moved to Goindwal where Bhai Jetha undertook more challenging tasks such as supervising the digging of a well for use by the populace. Since the water table was low there, Jetha built 84 broad steps to water's edge; in the process he carried baskets full of dirt on his head to a disposable site, day after day. Impressed by his dedication to the task Guru Amar Das renamed Jetha as Ram Das (servant of God). In due course of time, Guru Amar Das chose Ram Das to marry his daughter Bhani, a religious minded lass who looked after the creature comforts of her (very) old father with exceptional devotion. For example, she bathed Guru Amar Das every morning. In due course of time Guru Amar Das, very pleased with the service provided by Ram Das, anointed Ram Das the fourth Sikh Guru in 1574. Guru Ram Das's ministry lasted only for seven years. He in turn chose his youngest son Arjan Dev to succeed him as the fifth Sikh Guru in 1581

Emperor Akbar once stopped by at Goindwal on his way to Lahore. He visited Guru Amar Das and partook of Langar where the local community members all sat down on the ground and were served free food on tree leaves irrespective of the caste, creed or economic status of the person. The Emperor was moved by Guru's piety. He offered him a land grant to provide resources for the Langar. Guru Amar Das politely declined the kind gesture saying, "The Langar must depend on small voluntary offerings of the devotees and not on imperial gifts." The Emperor then made out the land grant to Bibi Bhani and Guru could not refuse the gift to his daughter. Baba Buddha was appointed to manage the estate.

Guru Ram Das was a great organizer. Soon he realized that Sikh community needed to be made self sufficient, with its own distinct social customs, places of pilgrimage, and economic sustenance. He went about achieving these goals in a very systematic manner.

He wrote 'Lavan' for his own wedding to Bibi Bhani; it has now become the Sikh way for a couple to exchange the wedding vows. It consists of four stanzas, at the reading of each stanza the couple goes around Shri Guru Granth Sahib. After the fourth round the couple is declared man and wife. It is an impressive ceremony! The quality of the composition is also a testimony to Guru Ram Das's poetic skills and mastery of rhythm.

Guru Ram Das built a new town with a tank of water and invited business people to settle it. He encouraged them to set up a variety of businesses. The Guru asked his Sikhs to

help each other in founding business houses and prayed for their success. Thus, he created an environment in which Sikhs took to commerce with a rare zeal to create wealth while at the same time availing themselves of the spiritual benefits by being near their Guru. The Sikhs acquired skills as carpenters, masons, jewelers, embroiderers, bankers, wholesalers, etc. They went looking for trading opportunities as far as Kabul in the North and Delhi in the South. These activities transformed the town into a prosperous business center of Northern India. In due course of time the town, originally called Ramdaspur, came to be called Amritsar because Arjan Dev the youngest son of Guru Ram Das built a Gurudwara in the middle of the tank. The worshippers were required to bathe and cleanse themselves before going to meditate and participate in the recitation of Gurbani at the Gurudwara, now called the Golden Temple; it is the holiest shrine for the Sikhs who believe that Gurbani transforms the water in the tank into life giving nectar (Amrit).

Gurus Amar Das and Ram Das decided that Guru Nanak's teachings should be preached to a wider audience. They appointed and trained Sikh Missionaries and dispatched them to far off places. They came to be known as Masands. Bhai Gur Das Bhalla was the first Masand chosen. For his benefit Guru Ram Das defined a Sikh's daily routine as follows.

“A Sikh of the True Guru rises before sunrise and contemplates the Naam. In the early morning hours he rises, bathes, cleanses his soul in a tank of water and repeats the Naam the Guru taught him, thereby he washes away his misdeeds. At dawn he sings the hymns of the Guru and throughout the day he holds Naam in his heart and repeats Naam with his every breath. Such a Sikh is dear to the Guru.

Sikh who wins the favor of the Lord has received the gift of Naam from the Guru Nanak seeks the dust from under the feet of such a Sikh who meditates on Naam and inspires others to do so. Those who worship God acquire God-like virtues”

The Masands preached Guru's teachings and collected tithes from the Sangat to be remitted to the Guru for charitable work. In time, the institution became corrupted. The Masands embezzled the money for their own indulgent lifestyle. So, the tenth Sikh Guru Gobind Singh abolished the institution.

There are 679 hymns composed by Guru Ram Das in 'Shri Guru Granth Sahib' (SGGS); they invoke rich imagery and emotions. Consider the following (SGGS, p. 164).

“A mother loves to watch her son eat, a fish loves to be always in the water, the Guru loves to see his Sikhs, Lord make us of the holy company on meeting whom all our sorrows are vanquished.

As a cow shows love to its strayed calf on finding it, as a wife shows love to her husband when he comes home, so those who love God are delighted when they sing the praises of the Lord.

The Chatrik loves the raindrops, the King loves his wealth and imperial power, a worshipper of God loves only to meditate on the Lord. A worldly man desires to amass wealth, the Guru's Sikh longs for his Master's embrace, Nanak, the slave, desires to kiss the feet of the saints of God.”

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