

WHO LAID THE FOUNDATION STONE OF HARMANDAR?

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The *Harmandar* is the centre of the universe of Sikhism; distinctive in its existence, unique in its function, matchless in its form, inimitable as a representation of Sikhism and above all, only one of its kind, even in name. In more ways than one, the story of the *Harmandar* is the story of Sikhi; glittering in resplendence, non-stop reverberation of the song of God, unbroken charity in its service to mankind and an unexplainable pull for anyone seeking peace on earth. The Golden Temple is to *Sikhi* what gold itself is to the meaning of value. It is only natural therefore that the Sikh psyche contain a collection of historical, spiritual, sacred and sacrosanct minutiae that hold this Temple of Spirituality as the Golden standard of what Sikhi stands for.

One extraordinary detail regarding the *Harmandar* has to do with the laying of its foundation stone. Sikhs have been told by our *parcharaks* and historians alike that the foundation stone was laid by the Muslim sage and close friend of the architect of the *Harmandar*, Guru Arjun Dev ji. His name is recorded as *Sain Mian Meer*. In such historical narration lies yet another example of the acceptance in Sikhi, of other faiths. The Sikh Scripture – containing the *banees* of Muslim and Hindu *bhagats*; and that too irrespective of caste – is the everlasting proof of the inclusiveness or *Sanjhivaalta* – that the GGS is the common spiritual heritage of mankind. That a Muslim saint had been invited to lay the foundation stone of the *Mecca* of the Sikhs is just another bead in the rosary of unity of spiritualities that Sikhi stands for. It is unprecedented in the religious history of the world – past and present.

WAS IT REALLY MIAN MIR ? There is a growing body of Sikh researchers and theologians who have come to the conclusion that the foundation stone was laid by Guru Arjun himself, and that the story of Mian Meer is patently fictitious. Such a conclusion has come about from the examination of the myriad of Sikh historical record relating to the event. One noteworthy examination has been undertaken by Singh Sahib Gyani Kirpal Singh – who served three decades in as *Granthi*, Head *Granthi* and *Jathedar* of

Akaal Takhat beginning 1958¹. With unreserved access to original documents and other secondary sources as contained in the Sikh Reference Library at the *Harmandar Complex*, Gyani Kirpal Singh began writing a series of essays on this subject in *Gurmat Parkash* – a monthly journal in *Gurmukhi* published by the SGPC. These essays which began appearing in January 1988 received responses from a variety of contemporary Sikh historians which helped the process of examination. Kirpal Singh's rewritten essays were subsequently published as *The Golden History of the Golden Temple* by the SGPC in 1991. There is little doubt that Gyani Kirpal Singh's book stands as a golden standard of sorts for the history of the *Harmandar*.

The oldest historical record relating to the construction of the *Harmandar Sahib* is by Bhai Santokh Singh in *Gurpartab Suraj* (1843AD). A translation of the poetic rendition - *Em Ardas Karee Bridh Jabhey, Sri Arjun Kar Pankaj Tabey. Gahee Eent Theh Kkaree Tikawan, Mandir Avchal Neev Rakhavan* - made with regard to the event is as follows:

“Guru Arjun set the construction date as 1 *Magh*, 1645 *Bikermi* (1588 AD) and sent out notices to Sikhs to attend...the *Sarowar* (pool) was emptied prior to the event and a *diwan* held at the site of the dry bed of the pool...The Guru gave a discourse on the objectives of the *Harmandar* project...The *Karah Parshad* was brought in...The Guru instructed Baba Budha Ji to do an *ardas* who in the name the four Gurus requested God for permission to lay the foundation of the *Harmandar*...Then Guru Arjun put down the first brick with his holy hands...The Guru then proceeded to explain the construction plan and layout to the assembled builders and Sikhs...”²

The earliest *Sikh* historical record that puts Saint Mian Mir as the person who laid the foundation stone is Gyani Gyan Singh in his *Sri Guru Panth Parkash* which comes some 40 years after Bhai Santokh Singh's work, namely 1883 AD. A translation of the poetic rendition by Gyan Singh is as follows:

¹ Giani Kirpal Singh was appointed *Granthi* at *Harmandar* beginning April 2, 1958. He was simultaneously acting *Jathedar* of *Akaal Takhat* from May 1963 for two years. From June 1974 he was Head *Granthi* and from 1982 once again simultaneously *Jathedar* for two years. He then served as *Jathedar* till 24 December 1986. He has written / edited some one dozen books.

² Ras 2, Ansu 53, Paras 4 – 14. Bhai Vir Singh (Ed), *Sri Guru Partap Suraj by Bhai Santokh Singh 1900 (B)* 1843 AD, Published 1935.

“The Guru had Mian Mir lay the foundation stone of the *Harmandar*...The stone was mislaid...A brick layer (*kareegar*) removed and re-laid the brick...Seeing this the Guru remarked...The foundation laid by the Turk will not remain...”³

The debate on the subject initiated by Singh Sahib Kirpal Singh unearthed a litany of arguments that go on to establish that Gyan Singh’s research is all but defective. While the fact that Gyan Singh’s work is four decades after Santokh Singh’s is not by *itself* a defect, but the fact that he had omitted mention of Mian Mir in his first and second editions published in Delhi and Amritsar ten and twenty years prior to the third edition respectively is a valid criticism. Why Mian Mir suddenly appears in the third edition is an equally valid question. Gyan Singh himself offered no explanation with regards to his newly discovered “fact.” We thus have to ascribe a possible explanation for such an omission by Gyan Singh.

In any event, such omission did not prevent notable post-Gyan Singh Sikh scholars such as Principal Teja Singh, Prof Ganda Singh, Prof Sahib Singh, Prof Piara Singh Padam et. al. from repeating that Mian Mir indeed laid the foundation stone. Why these scholars had chosen to accept Gyan Singh’s third edition and not Santokh Singh or even Gyan Singh’s first two editions remains a question. Kirpal Singh’s explanation is in the form of the Punjabi idiom “ *makhee tay makhee marnee*.” Literally swatting and heaping flies upon flies. The repeat of a defective fact caused by a lack of resolve to check its accuracy is one plausible explanation. Intellectual laziness may be another. For the record, however, Piara Singh did subsequently reject the Mian Mir story.

The second problem with Gyan Singh’s writing is more fundamental. Gyan Singh’s work comes a full 300 years after the foundation stone of *Harmandar* was laid. The Singh Sahib Kirpal Singh debate established the fact that the variety of Sikh historical literature that came about in these 300 years contains no mention of Mian Mir at all in relation to the construction of *Harmandar*. Everywhere that the foundation is mentioned – it is attributed to Guru Arjun.⁴ Even Muslim historians of the Mian Mir sect who have written about their sage have failed to mention anything relating to him laying the foundation stone of *Harmandar*. It is difficult to fathom why Mian Mir followers

³ Kirpal Singh (Ed), *Sri Guru Panth Parkash by Giani Gyan Singh 1946 (B)*, (1883 AD), Manmohan Singh Brar Publishers, 1974.

⁴ Kesar Singh Chibbar’s *Bansawalinama, Gurpartab Suraj Dus Patshahee, Pracheen Panth Parkash*, Rattan Singh Bhanggu etc.

failed to bring such an extraordinary achievement bestowed upon the sage to the saint's biographers.

Principal Satbir Singh's contribution to the debate is especially noteworthy. Writing in the 9 December 1932 AD edition of the weekly *Khalsa Advocate* Journal, he traced the first mention of Mian Mir within the context of *Harmandar* to writer Butey Shah. Writing in *The History of Punjab* (Persian) in 1848 AD, (four years after Santokh Singh and 25 years prior to Gyan Singh) during the period of British rule in the Punjab, this Butey Shah, whose real name is Gulam Mahayu-deen, narrates the following story:

"Shah Mian Mir was invited by Guru Arjun and arrived at Amritsar. With his holy hands, he laid out four bricks in four directions and within the centre of these four bricks he laid the foundation and base bricks..."

This effectively makes Butey Shah, the first person *ever* to state that Mian Mir had laid the foundation stone. Having had no credentials on Sikhs and matters pertaining to Sikhi, having written nothing else with regards to Sikhs, and being on the pay roll of the British (he was a member of the British Army's Muslim Corps and served as *Maulwi* in Punjab) was only the beginning of Butey Shah's problems regarding his writing. The Singh Sahib Kirpal Singh debate raised a number of important points over Butey Shah's writing. Of particular importance is the revelation of Rattan Singh Bhanggu, Butey's contemporary.

Rattan Singh writes that he was an acquaintance of Captain Murray of the British Armed Forces in Punjab and knew Butey Shah personally. Butey is described as an individual with a personal vendetta and agenda which predisposed the *Maulvee* to passing off fiction as fact to please his masters. Rattan Singh has recorded that he read Butey's work, which was undertaken at the request and expense of the British through Captain Murray, and that he (Bhanggu) handed his own work *Pracheen Panth Parkash* to the Captain; in an attempt to correct Butey's transgressions. Bhanggu's version is that of Santokh Singh; namely that Guru Arjun performed the foundation laying himself.

The Singh Sahib debate further questions the strange description of the process of foundation stone laying as described by Butey. The business of putting four bricks in four corners and then two in the centre is bizarre and comes across as an after thought. The completed *Harmandar* clearly stands as having four doors in four directions; hence it is very likely that Butey's foundation laying description appears to have been concocted to fit this highly

visible reality of the architecture of the Harmandar. Seen in this regard, Butey fits into Rattan Singh's description of the former as predisposed to concocting.

Butey Shah has been spun 37 years down the road by Sohan Lal Suree in his 1885 Urdu work *Umda-tu-Twarikh*. Suree's story is as follows:

"Guru Arjun himself went to Lahore to invite Mian Mir for the purpose of getting the Muslim Sage to lay the foundation stone of *Harmandar*. The Guru requested that Mian Mir come to Amritsar."

It is worth noting that both Butey and Suree do not provide the sources of their stories. Both have serious contradictions – one says Mian Mir came on his own or was already in Amritsar, the other writes that the Guru went to get him from Lahore but then fails to say if Mian Mir actually accompanied Guru Arjun to Amritsar. One says that 6 bricks were laid as foundation, the other does not. Neither has explained why the Guru would leave out important Sikhs like Bhai Gurdas and Baba Buddha ji and undertake travel to Lahore just to invite Mian Mir. But these concerns did not stop the Municipal Bodies of Amritsar (under the direction of the British Administration) to record in their books that the foundation stone was laid by Mian Mir. Such eagerness on the part of the British official action lends credence to another plausible explanation regarding the import of Mian Mir into the *Harmandar* issue – that for some reason or other it served their colonial interests.

So in essence, what we have are two divergent accounts. One of Guru Arjun doing the job and the other of Mian Mir. The former is traced back to Sikh historian Bhai Santokh Singh and the latter to the non-Sikh Butey Shah. This is where Singh Sahib Kirpal Singh's own research during his three decades at *Harmandar* becomes relevant.

According to the ex-*Jathedar*, Bhai Santokh Singh's spiritual and family ties are of relevance.⁵ He traces these ties meticulously through the records available at the Sikh Reference Library and establishes a generation by generation direct lineage that connects to the *Harmandar* either as *Granthis*, *Kathavachaks*, *Ragees* or *Jathedars* up to Bhai Mani Singh Ji who was the third *Granthi* of *Harmandar* (after Baba Budha and Bhai Gurdas ji). Bhai Mani Singh himself lived through the periods of the seventh through tenth Gurus. The grand father of Bhai Mani Singh, Bhai Ballu was a contemporary of Guru Hargobind. Bhai Santokh Singh's

⁵ Kirpal Singh's *The Golden History of the Golden Temple*, SGPC 1991, pp 89-91.

conclusion that Guru Arjun laid the foundation stone and that such historical knowledge came his way by way of dissemination through this privileged lineage is valid. It is difficult to accept that anything to the contrary could have escaped mention in such direct dissemination of knowledge.

On the other hand, Butey and Suree (and or their ancestors) were not even remotely connected to *Harmandar*, Sikh *parampara* (practices), Sikh history and Sikhi. For this reason alone, both were most likely unaware of Bhai Santokh Singh's work, the eminent positions of Bhai Gurdas, Baba Budha ji, and most importantly had no knowledge of the past practices of the Sikh Gurus laying the foundation stones of their handiwork by themselves. Bhai Santokh Singh makes clear that the foundation stones of projects such as Kartarpur, Khadoor Sahib, Goindval, Santokhsar, Taran Taran, Akaal Takhat, Kiratpur, Hargobindpur, Anandpur, Paonta. Anandgarh, Lohgarh, Fatehgarh, and Kesgarh were laid personally by the Gurus who founded these places. If Amritsar is an exception, there must be an explanation and that has not been provided by Gyan Singh, Butey and Suree. The alternative explanation for Butey's contradiction with Santokh Singh is that he knew the truth of the matter but was acting upon ulterior motives (either his own or that of the British) for distorting it. Suree and Gyan Singh picked up from Butey, and modern Sikh writers jumped on the bandwagon.

THE BRICK THAT WAS RE-LAID. There is one other issue with Gyan Singh's narration. He says the foundation brick was "mis-laid by Mian Mir" and that a brick layer "picked it up to re-lay it correctly." He also writes that, witnessing this episode, the Guru remarked that the "foundation laid by the Turk (meaning Muslim) will not stand/remain." Some Sikhs have embellished this story in a variety of ways ranging from a "curse" by Guru Arjun that the *Harmandar* will suffer destruction and a "prophecy" by the Guru that it will be rebuilt.

Gursikhs who have studied *Gurbani* and the lives of their Gurus will detest tales of our Gurus "cursing" and "prophesizing." The Guru's alleged comment of referring to Mian Mir as "the Turk" instead of his name is derogatory on the surface and not in accordance with the Guru's humanity. Further, why the Guru, as architect of the project, would want to curse it to destruction over a minor error (if indeed such did happen) is beyond fathom. He had inherited the *Harmandar* project from his Guru-father and provided an unparalleled commitment to see it through. There is ample evidence in *Gurbani* that the Guru *blessed Harmandar* as one whose beauty would be unmatched.

Dithey Sabhey Thaar Nahi Tudh Jayhea (GGS page 1362)

The re-laying of the foundation stone therefore comes across as an afterthought – along the lines of Butey's four foundation six brick story. The *Harmandar* was indeed destroyed in 1753 AD after the Big Sikh Holocaust. The *Sarowar* was filled up with dirt by Ahmad Shah Durani who was irked by continuing attacks from Sikh *jathas* even after he had killed 20,000 in the holocaust. In 1762 AD he inserted dynamite underneath the foundation and had *Harmandar* blown up. It was rebuilt by the Sikhs and this time, the foundation stone was laid by Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. It thus appears that Gyan Singh has attempted to fit these subsequently known facts into his narration. The embellishing by our *parcharaks* appears to be an attempt to provide additional reverence to the Guru, in that the Fifth Master was able to see the future relating to *Harmandar's* subsequent destruction.

Unwittingly though, the real reverence in such a story is to Mian Mir and the brick layer who re-laid the brick. It was the actions of both these *two individuals* (and not the Guru) that decided the fate of *Harmandar*. Had Mian Mir placed the brick correctly, there would have been no destruction! Had the brick layer not picked up and re-laid the crooked brick, there would have been no re-construction! The *Harmadar* and *Sarowar* was twice destroyed *because* Mian Mir placed the brick crooked. It was twice re-built *because* the builder hurriedly picked up the crooked brick and straightened it. The Guru had no say in these events. He was a helpless by stander. All he could do was to remark "well, since one of you have laid a crooked brick and because another has re-laid it, the *Harmandar* will *have to* face destruction and re-construction." Sikhs who accept such stuff are in reality saying their Guru was subject to the effects of the crooked brick and its laying, and was unable to do anymore than offer bleak prophecies relating to his own project. They are also saying that the fate of *Harmadar* was subject more to Mian Mir's inability to put down a brick and to one conceited brick layer, than to the Guru, Sikhs and God. So much for our attempt to provide reverence to the Guru!

If Sikhs accept that the Guru foresaw destruction of the *Harmandar* in the crooked laying of a brick, why did he not foresee that the brick itself will be put down crooked by Mian Mir in the first place? And if he could foresee that Mian Mir had no skills whatsoever in foundation brick laying, why invite him to do the job to begin with? Why did the Guru also not foresee a conceited brick layer rushing to re-lay it? Why allow a vain brick layer to sit next to Mian Mir, within

easy reach of grabbing the brick the moment it was laid crooked? And if he did foresee all these, then why proceed to be party to the laying of the foundation stone in such a snafu way? Sikh historians and our *sakhi* narrators have a great deal of thinking to do! Part of such thinking involves accepting the fact that the Gurus, to qualify as Gurus, and by definition, would have to be placed above such petty stuff. At the very least our *sakhi* narrators must be able to distinguish which part of their fable praises the Guru and which denigrates him – even if unintentionally.

WHO WAS MIAN MIR? Sikhs have been told that Mian Mir was a close friend of Guru Arjun. Modern Sikh historians have placed this sage at the scene of Guru Arjun's martyrdom. Yet the classical Sikh historical texts do not speak of Mian Mir at all. As mentioned above, Mian Mir's first mention is by Butey Shah. The first *Sikh* historian to talk about Mian Mir is Gyan Singh whose source is Butey. This effectively means that for the 250 year period that followed the great sacrifice of Guru Arjun, Mian Mir has not been mentioned. Santokh Singh, in his narration of the sacrifice talks about the presence of sages (in the plural). On page 2370, he writes about a scene in the *haveli* of Chandu, where Guru Arjun was being tortured:

“After time, some pirs (sages) came. They compared Guru Arjun's ability to endure the unbearable tortures as beyond explanation (*kramaat*) and beyond the ordinary (*kamaal*)...”

Given that the soul being tortured was a man of religion, it can be expected that other spiritual people were deeply affected. Many would have summoned the courage to witness the event with their own eyes. Some would have spoken out against it. They are hence mentioned as a collective *group* by Santokh Singh. He has chosen not to mention any particular individual, presumably because no one individual stood out. Mian Mir's presence at the torture session is possible or even likely, yet there wasn't anything extraordinary in this individual, *at that point in time*, to deserve special mention by Santokh Singh.

Going by official records, Mian Mir was thirty years of age when the foundation stone was laid. If the Guru did indeed desire that the sage lay the stone of *Harmandar*, then it is logical to assume that he ought to have been close to the Guru's at least a decade or two prior to the event. He would have been a regular visitor of the Guru *Ghar*. However, there is no mention of him in such terms in classical Sikh historical literature.

If the Guru desired to maintain humility in wanting someone else to lay the foundation stone, and that chosen individual was 30-year-old Mian Mir, the Guru would have to have strong reasons to by-pass Baba Budha who was 82 years of age then and Bhai Gurdas who was 37. After all it was in Bhai Gurdas's handwriting that the GGS – which was to be installed in the *Harmandar* - had been written. And Baba Budha ji had been around from the time of Guru Nanak. The by-passing of both these very special souls would have to be on account of an *extraordinary* mutual relationship between the Guru and Mian Mir – presumably on account of the young saint's extraordinary Godliness. How such an extraordinary relationship escaped mention in classical Sikh literature is telling. It can further be argued that if indeed there was an extraordinary relationship; Mian Mir could have made Jahangir aware that the allegations by Chandu and others against Guru Arjun were a fabrication and possibly halted the execution or at least the brutal torture. He was unable to persuade Jahangir on any of these three issues. It is logical to accept that at 30 years of age, Mian Mir did not *yet* have the extraordinary spiritual awareness that would have made Guru Arjun choose him over other eminent individuals to lay the foundation of *Harmandar* (IF indeed the Guru did not want to lay it himself.) Mian Mir further did not have the links and influence with Jahangir as evidenced from his failure to stop what was in perfect clarity an unjust killing of a man of peace. Mian Mir also did not stand out in any particular way for classical Sikh historians to mention him by name, even at the torture chamber. It is entirely possible that Mian Mir acquired all of these qualities in later years. But on the day on which the foundation stone of *Harmandar* was laid, he simply had not acquired the credentials necessary.

WHY THE FIXATION WITH MIAN MIR THEN? Butey Shah's introduction of Mian Mir in relation to the *Harmandar* can be attributed to his dubious agenda, or that of his pay masters. But why have modern day Sikh historians swallowed this un-substantiated and un-attributed claim and churned it as "fact." Given that many of these modern historians are of repute, the answer probably lies somewhere outside of the realm of their historical research and fact finding abilities.

Gyan Singh's decision to accept Butey's version sheds light on the problem. In his *Panth Parkash*, he has strong words for Butey's lack of credentials and has justifiably ridiculed the British Government decision to task Butey with writing on Sikh affairs. He further exposes Butey's agenda and the *Maulwi's* anti-Sikh sentiments. So it is not the case that Gyan Singh did not possess the ability to be discerning when it came to historical judgements. He was acutely aware of Butey's agenda, yet he *accepted* the Mian Mir part introduced by Butey. Why so?

The answer probably lies in the attraction of the story. A Muslim sage laying the foundation of a Sikh *mandar* is appealing, not only in its uniqueness, but also in its potential to portray Sikhi as an inclusive religion. The message is right – even if the story is very obviously untrue. The moral of the story is attractive – even if some dishonesty is required to spin it.

It probably has been the intention of every believing Sikh historian, *parcharak* and *ragee* to put forth a facet of Sikhi we are truly proud of, namely its acceptance of people of other faiths and recognition of their contributions to Sikhi. There is a desire to let the spiritual world know that Sikhi and Sikhs strive for mutual understanding, inter-faith dialogue and the sharing of spiritual awareness. We want all people of God to know that *Sikhi* truly values equality of mankind, is inclusive in nature and does not discriminate on any basis whatsoever. These goals are noble and commendable. But they require hard work on the part of Sikhs to bring them to life. Such hard work includes an in-depth study of the core messages of the Guru Granth Sahib and their sharing and propagation.

The unfortunate reality is perhaps that while being proud of their heritage, Sikhs are prone to the easy way out. One easy way, for instance, is to simply repeat ad-nauseam that the GGS contains the writings of non-Sikh *bhagats*. True, but what are the **messages** of these non-Sikh *bhagats*? For what specific spiritual **purposes** did the Gurus bring these non-Sikh *bhagats* into our scriptures? Surely they are not there as window dressing. Surely it is not sufficient that we keep harping on the *number* of non-Sikh *bhagats*, their religions, and their castes. It is in their messages that the true heritage lies. But to understand and then talk about their messages requires an investment of time and energy.

That the foundation stone was laid by a Muslim sage falls perfectly into this pattern of wanting to find the easy way. While the goal of wanting to portray *Sikhi* as inclusive is noble, the means are not. Noble goals are hardly achieved by distortion of fact, even if done inadvertently or with good intent. Modern day Sikh historians have accepted Butey Shah and Suree's fiction, not because Sikh researchers were lacking in discernment. This acceptance is also not because Sikh historians were unable to see the defects in the narration of the latter, or that they did not have authoritative alternative accounts to dispute Butey. If nothing else, Butey's bizarre description of Mian Mir (or anyone else for that matter) laying 6 foundation stones at one go is sufficient to awaken even an apprentice historian from his deep slumber. We accepted Butey blindly but

willingly because his account conveniently fitted our “easy way out” towards a noble goal. We felt good narrating this fiction to ourselves and the rest of the world. Our aim was to share - with the rest of humanity - the inclusive virtue of Sikhi. But the real propagation may be of the fact that at least some of our virtues are based on fiction. Seen in this light, we may stand guilty of a travesty of justice, not just towards the history of *Harmandar* and our own Guru, but towards *Sikhi* in general. We need to correct this. End.