

BHAI AVTAR SINGH GURCHARAN SINGH, THE OLD-GUARDS OF DHRUPAD BASED GURMAT SANGEET

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Bhai Avtar Singh and Bhai Gurcharan Singh, formerly of village Saidpur near the holy town of Sultanpur Lodhi in erstwhile Kapurthala State (presently Kapurthala district of Punjab) are considered a live-wire between the music of the era of the great ten gurus and the modern day Sikh community and the World. Worthy sons of Late Bhai Jawala Singh ji (a highly accomplished Kirtania of his time), they started learning vintage "Gurmat Sangeet" from their iconic father. By the time they formed an independent "Kirtan Jatha", after getting blessings to do so from their father, they had already mastered the art of unadulterated rendition of approximately five hundred "Reets" (tunes) spanning into all the thirty one "Raagas" mentioned in the holy "Sri Guru Granth Sahib". All the meticulous training they received from their father reflects in their style and substance. Bhai Avtar Singh, the younger of the two brothers, went to his heavenly abode in November of 2006. Throughout his life as a "Kirtania", he (Bhai Avtar Singh) remembered all those five hundred "Reets" and had recorded all of them for the Punjabi University Patiala and approximately three hundred and eighty of these "Reets" he recorded for T-Series Recording Company for commercial release.

For a layman, it will be appropriate to tell the difference between the "Gurmat Sangeet" rendered and propagated by Bhai Jawala Singh ji and his sons Bhai Avtar Singh and Bhai Gurcharan Singh ji and the "Sikh Sangeet" of their other contemporaries and present day "Kirtanias". Bhai Jawala Singh and his sons were acknowledged to be truly "Dhrupadis" and most of the other stalwarts are called "Khayali style Gayaks". These are two distinctly independent streams of classical music. The "Dhrupad" stream of music is "Taal" centric and is now dying all over India including Punjab. But "Khayal" stream of music, which is relatively new, is flourishing in virtually every "Gharana" of India including Patiala Gharana.

"Dhrupad" is the oldest known form of rendition of the North Indian Classical Music. This form of music was prevalent during the times of the ten Gurus of the Sikh faith. Some scholars are of the opinion that "Dhrupad" style of classical singing was evolved by the "Pandits" (Hindus of Brahmin {upper} Caste descent, who used to be the scholars of old Sanskrit language and classical musicians) thousands of years ago and they kept evolving and sophisticating their music over the medieval centuries. But as far as the Sikh music is concerned, there is no denying the fact that during the life time of the founder of our faith "Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji", "Dhrupad Shalley" of classical music was alive and flourishing all over Indo-Gangetic heartland. The great masters like Tansen and Baiju Bawara were both exponents of the "Dhrupad Shalley" of music. Even legendry Hazrat Amir Khusro had undergone training in "Dhrupad" format of classical music. Guru Nanak Dev ji was by no means alien to this sophisticated form of classical music. "Dhrupad" is a distinct "Taal" for drummers and the singing revolves around this distinct "Taal". In "Khayal Gayaki" the singer has the liberty to choose any one of

the “Taals” (beats) for the slow tempo of music and switch over to other “Taal” for medium tempo and switch over to another “Taal” for fast tempo of music. This makes “Khayal” singing full of several permutations and combinations of “Taals”.

Bhai Avtar Singh and Bhai Gurcharan Singh have been vehemently asserting all through their life that the original “Gurmat Sangeet” prevalent during the times of the “Ten Sikh Great Gurus was “Dhrupad” and “Dhamar” format based “Gurmat Sangeet” and the “Kirtan Chowkis” during the times of the gurus were invariably performed in “Dhrupad” and “Dhamar” styles. For me at least there is no reason to question the wisdom and research of Bhai Avtar Singh and Bhai Gurcharan Singh. Even Late Bhai Samund Singh ji often agreed with this claim. My father (Late Sardar Sochet Singh) was of the view that the “Khayal” format of North Indian Classical Music started taking shape during the life time of the tenth master of the Sikh faith Guru Gobind Singh ji. Bhai Balbir Singh former Hazoori Raagi of the Golden Temple Amritsar, an “Ustad” (master of the trade who can teach also) Sikh musician and former “Shiromani Raagi” (chief musician) also confirms this view. If we go by the “Baani” enshrined in “Sri Guru Granth Sahib ji”, most of it was composed by the first five gurus with a small portion was added from the “Baani” composed by the ninth guru. As such the originally sung Sikh music was of course composed to be sung in “Dhrupad” style of classical music. Considering all this, the music often rendered by Bhai Jawala Singh ji and his brilliant sons was indeed the original form of “Sikh Religious Music”. For the Sikh community, it is important to keep this stream of music alive.

Bhai Avtar Singh and Gurcharan Singh have been claiming that one of their ancestors (some 11 to 16 generations ago) had been regularly present and participating in the “Diwans” held in the presence of Sri Guru Gobind Singh ji. According to these two brothers, their ancestor had learnt the music of the “Guru’s Darbar” especially from the “Rababi” musicians of the times. This music was essentially in the “Dhrupad”, “Dhamaar” and “Partal” formats. After Guru Gobind Singh ji left Anandpur Sahib for the South of India (Sri Hazoor Sahib Nanded in Maharashtra), Bhai Jawala Singh’s ancestor returned to his family home Saidpur near Sultanpur Lodhi, where he kept this unique and valuable musical tradition alive from generation to generation by imparting training to the coming generations within the family and keeping them tied to the not so lucrative profession of a “Kirtania”. Roughly during the same timeframe some other musicians at Tarntaran and Kapurthala were also performing “Shabad Kirtan” in “Dhrupad” and “Dhamar” style, but they somehow missed the limelight. With the passage of time, the “Dhrupadias” of stations other than Sultanpur Lodhi vanished from the scene, or they shifted to more common “Khayal” style.

This article will not be complete unless we make adequate mention of the virtues and characteristics of Bhai Avtar Singh Gurcharan Singh’s brilliant mentor, guide and father Bhai Jawala Singh ji. Bhai Jawala Singh, for his own professional satisfaction, had also learnt and clarified some finer points of this music by learning from his contemporary and senior “Brahmin Ustads” of Tarntaran.

Bhai Jawala Singh was a devout Sikh who was very strict, punctual and regular in "Nitnem". In addition he spent several hours everyday in "Riyaz" of the "Raagas of Gurbani". This hard daily routine, from impressionable childhood onwards cultured his voice so much that he developed a special echo type of vibration, which was unique to him alone. His style of rendition had a unique continuity too, which is akin to a string instrument like "Sarangi". At times he used to perform with a group exceeding ten musicians. Bhai Gurcharan Singh, the elder son was born in 1915 and at the young age of six to eight years he was initiated into rigorous training in classical music and by the age of ten he was inducted into his father's "Kirtan Jatha" initially as a drummer (Tabla player). At the same time, he was made to cram up as much "Gurbani" as possible. Later on Bhai Gurcharan Singh did learn several other instruments, including "Taus" and "Suranda". Bhai Gurcharan Singh switched to "Harmonium" round about in 1936.

Bhai Avtar Singh was born in 1925. Even he was inducted into his father's "Jatha" around 1936. For the next twelve years both brothers were an integral part of the "Jatha" of their father. Bhai Jawala Singh's "Jatha" originally consisted of several "Taus", "Saranda" and other string instrument players. Close to 1936, his "Raagi Jatha" also, in line with other "Kirtani Jathas" adopted "Harmonium" and "Tabla" as the main instruments. But every member of the original "Jatha" had its basic training in the string instruments of the time. Bhai Avtar Singh switched back to playing "Taus" after year 2000 and he received acclaim for that.

Amongst the great Sikh singers of his time, Bhai Jawala Singh was recognized as the leading "Dhrupad" style "Kirtania". All other leading "Kirtanias" of his era were trained and adept in "Khayali" school of Hindustani Music.

Bhai Jawala Singh's other great contemporaries included Bhai Lal (Senior) of the Golden Temple, Bhai Chand of the Golden Temple, Bhai Sham Singh, Bhai Hira Singh, Bhai Santa Singh of the Golden Temple, Sant Sujan Singh of Lyallpur, Bhai Samund Singh of Gurdwara Janam Asthan Sri Nankana Sahib and Bhai Gurmukh Singh Bhai Sarmukh Singh Fakkar of Nankana Sahib. Although by the turn of the century (1899 to 1901), the musicians of the two most important Sikh shrines, the Golden Temple and Gurdwara Janam Asthan Sri Nankana Sahib had switched to "Khayali" school of classical music, yet there were listeners of "Dhrupad" style of "Kirtanias" at smaller places like Goindwal Sahib, Khadoor Sahib, Baba Bakala, Patti, Sarhali and Khemkaran in the hinterland of Amritsar district and several remote pockets of Kapurthala State including Sultanpur Lodhi,. On the special requests from the congregations, Bhai Jawala Singh used to go to all these places to perform "Kirtan". Several times he used to go to these places by riding a bi-cycle and for crossing the Beas at Goindwal Sahib, he and his group used to get down from the bi-cycle and used to drag the cycle through sandy river-bed and knee deep waters. Many times huge gatherings, numbering in thousands, could hear Bhai Jawala Singh's full throated voice without the

assistance of microphones and loud-speakers. Bhai Jawala Singh had always been a dedicated “Pracharak” of his faith.

Bhai Jawala Singh’s name and fame had spread so far and wide that even Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala took notice of his talent. The Maharaja’s “Patiala Gharana” of classical music had completely switched over to “Khayali” style of “Gayaki”. But he wanted the sacred “Dhrupad Gurmat” style of music not to die especially in the “gurdwaras”. So he sent his brilliant resident musician Mahant Gajja Singh to learn “Dhrupad Gurmat Sangeet” from Bhai Jawala Singh at Sultanpur Lodhi. Later on Mahant Gajja Singh became a leading “Taus” and “Saranda” player and a good vocalist in “Shabad Gayan in Dhrupad” style.

It is an irony that no recordings in the voice of Bhai Jawala Singh have been made. Similarly no recordings in the voices of Bhai Lal (Senior) and Bhai Chand are available. My father used to say that Bhai Avtar Singh’s voice has been similar to that of his father, but not as rich. Bhai Jawala Singh was a towering personality amongst his colleagues and was respected by all the musicians of his time, including leading musicians of other faiths. At one time, in 1930s, Bhai Jawala Singh formed an association of “Kirtanias” and he was chosen as its president. Periodically they used to hold their meetings and passed resolutions.

When the “Singh Sabha Movement” for the liberation of “Historic Gurdwaras” was launched towards the end of World War II, Bhai Jawala Singh took a very active part in it and underwent imprisonment too as a part of the “Jaito Morcha”, “Guru Ka Baag Morcha” and “Nankana Sahib Morcha. During this prolonged agitation, he suffered financially too, but his steadfast faith in the movement was never shaken. Ultimately, the British Colonial Rulers relented, the “Mahants” were dislodged from the historic shrines and the democratically elected body of the Sikh community the “Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee was formed in 1925. Bhai Jawala Singh had a lucrative offer to become a “Hazoori Raagi” from the newly established Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee Amritsar, which he declined politely. He never demanded money for performing “Shabad Kirtan”. Whatever the hosts offered him, was accepted as the “Gurus Kirpa”. A lot of people during those days in Punjab were living in abject poverty, but they all had desires to get “Shabad Kirtan” performed in their homes. Bhai Jawala Singh was always ready to perform “Shabad Kirtan” at the homes of the poor, without caring for what he got or did not get in return. This unique quality of selflessness endeared him to one and all in Majha and Doaba regions of Punjab.

Bhai Jawala Singh’s contemporary ruler of the Princely State of Kapurthala was Maharaja Jagatjit Singh. He himself was not a practicing Sikh, but nevertheless he was an admirer of classical music. During 1930s, he built an architectural marvel the State Gurdwara Sahib of Kapurthala. When the first “Parkash of Sri Guru Granth Sahib” was done in this gurdwara, Bhai Jawala Singh was especially invited to perform “Shabad Kirtan” in the inaugural program. Many Sikh courtiers of the maharaja, including my late father, were great admirers of

Bhai Jawala Singh ji and they all patronized him. Even the Muslims of Kapurthala were great admirers of the music and other qualities of Bhai Jawala Singh ji.

One Muslim commanding officer of the Kapurthala State Forces Colonel Asghar Ali Khan had become a great admirer of Bhai Jawala Singh ji's musical genius. One day he told my father (Late Sardar Sochet Singh) to invite either Bhai Jawala Singh of Sultanpur Lodhi or Bhai Santa Singh of the Golden Temple to his house and he (Asghar Ali) will cancel all engagement to listen to their "Kirtan". Asghar Ali Khan used to give ten rupees (in 1930s and 40s) to Bhai Jawala Singh, whenever he attended his "Kirtan". So did Diwan Jarmani Dass another top bureaucrat of Kapurthala state.

After separating from their father's umbrella "Raagi Jatha" and doing several "Shabad Kirtan" programmes on their own, around 1948 – 49, Bhai Gurcharan Singh and Bhai Avtar Singh's group applied for and received approval from All India Radio Jalandhar – Amritsar as casual artists with "B" grade. This gave them both name and fame and the radio listeners started liking their renditions. Within the next two years, they moved to Delhi and got employment as "Huzoori Ragis" at Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib in Chandni Chowk Old Delhi. In seniority next only to Bhai Santa Singh ji, their "Jatha" received their due acclamation from the lovers of "Gurmat Sangeet" not only in Delhi but in Punjab and the neighbouring states too. While performing "Shabad Gayan" in old tunes at All India Radio Delhi, Bhai Gurcharan Singh most of the time played "Tanpura" instead of harmonium and for some time Bhai Gurcharan Singh was also the lead singer in the group. After a few years, Bhai Gurcharan Singh bestowed the honour of lead singer "Jathedar" on his younger brother Bhai Avtar Singh.

After about a decade they were joined by their nephew Bhai Swaran Singh, who used to play "Tabla". Bhai Gurcharan Singh was responsible for training his nephew (Bhai Swaran Singh) in the art of performing "Tabla" in most of the "Taals" used by the Sikh religious musicians. Whatever Bhai Swaran Singh learnt from Bhai Gurcharan Singh, he used to rehearse for hours everyday. This trio served the historic Sikh shrines of Delhi for almost half a century. During this period they received several state and national honours including that of "Shiromani Kirtania" from the Languages Department of Punjab Government.

Around 1995, Bhai Gurcharan Singh took retirement from the "Jatha" and in the new millennium Bhai Avtar Singh's younger son Bhai Kultar Singh, an engineer by profession, joined the "Jatha". Although Bhai Avtar Singh had been bestowed with the award of "Shiromani Raagi" during the nineteen eighties, his elder brother Bhai Gurcharan Singh got it belatedly in 2008.

After forming a new "Raagi Jatha" with the inclusion of Bhai Avtar Singh's younger son Bhai Kultar Singh, Bhai Avtar Singh quickly started imparting the family's ancestral education in Sikh music to his technocrat turned musician son.

Bhai Kultar Singh was still midway in the learning process, when Bhai Avtar Singh left for his heavenly abode in the feet of the "Guru"..

About three decades ago a few "Raagi Jathas" in Punjab were alive which were capable of performing "Shabad Kirtan" in "Dhrupad" style, but at present only the "Jatha" of Bhai Avtar Singh and his son is capable of performing this unique kind of "Shabad Kirtan". Bhai Kultar Singh is a quick learner, but he still has to go a long way. He has to maintain a regime of "Riyaz" of all the "Reets" he has learnt.

Gurdwara Bridgewater in Somerset County of New Jersey, U.S.A. has a special relationship with the "Raagi Jatha" of Bhai Avtar Singh Gurcharan Singh. They visited the United States for the first time in 1979, the year during which the building of the oldest gurdwara of New Jersey was purchased. After that they have been visiting the USA once in every three years and every time they have been performing "Shabad Kirtan" at Gurdwara Bridgewater. Once during the eighties the management of Gurdwara Richmond Hill New York sponsored the visit of the Raagi Jatha of Bhai Dilbagh Singh Gulbagh Singh. During the same year, Gurdwara Bridgewater sponsored the visit of Bhai Avtar Singh Gurcharan Singh. Sardar Pargat Singh, himself an accomplished musician and a student of a great maestro Master Rattan of Phagwara, was the general secretary of Gurdwara Richmond Hill New York. Sardar Pargat Singh wanted to hold a "Kirtan Darbar", where both great Jathas should perform "Kirtan". We finally decided to hold this "Kirtan Darbar" at Gurdwara Bridgewater and Sardar Pargat Singh was also invited to perform "Kirtan". The programme started at 7:00pm and ended well past midnight. When Bhai Gulbagh Singh performed a difficult "Taan"m Bhai Gurcharan Singh applauded. Similarly when Bhai Avtar Singh Gurcharan Singh started a "Partal" in "Raaga Darbari Kanrha", Bhai Dilbagh Singh gave compliments. Sardar Pargat Singh came with his musician daughters and sons. They had "Tanpuras" in their hands. They not only used Tanpura for their own accompaniment, they also gave company to the "Jathas" of Bhai Dilbagh Singh Gulbagh Singh and Bhai Avtar Singh Gurcharan Singh. It was a memorable evening of Sikh devotional music.

Bhai Avtar Singh left for his heavenly abode, after a brief bout with cancer, on November 23, 2006. The void that he has left in the field of "Gurmat Sangeet" is rather difficult to fill. We will all miss him. On the day of his funeral thousands of mourners included those families, where he had performed "Kirtan" during happy and sad occasions. Bhai Avtar Singh was a very sweet and friendly individual, who always greeted people with a broad smile. Bhai Avtar Singh may have gone, but his memories will linger for ever. His legacy is still alive. His brilliant son Bhai Kultar Singh accompanied by his cousin Bhai Swaran Singh is still keeping the unique ancient tradition alive. May God bless them with talent good health and fortitude for keeping this great ancient musical tradition alive for the unborn posterity.

One of the nephews of Bhai Avtar Singh and Bhai Gurcharan Singh is Bhai Baldeep Singh. He is an accomplished drummer "Tabla player" and he sings most of the "Reets" of the family quite well. In addition, he is a historian in his own right. Several times Bhai Baldeep Singh has accompanied his uncles in performing "Shabad Kirtan". Once in Gurdwara Bridgewater, he accompanied Bhai Avtar Singh and his party and he played "Tabla". It was also another memorable event.

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