

BHAI DIDAR SINGH, A SELFLESS AND HIGHLY ACCOMPLISHED SIKH MUSICIAN WHO NEVER GOT HIS DUE

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Bhai Didar Singh was a totally selfless (faqir) Kirtania, who devoted his entire life to the singing of the Guru's Hymns in the finest classical traditions without seeking any monetary rewards. He lived in poverty and died in poverty, without ever complaining about his plight. Most of the modern day Sikhs have forgotten him completely, but his merit as a maestro and his extreme simplicity deserves that his story, as I understand it, must be told

During the sixties my father late S. Sochet Singh once attended a post Akhand Path Kirtan programme in rural Hoshiarpur. He was a true connoisseur of "Gurmat Sangeet" and was thoroughly impressed with the sweet versatile voice of a blind black bearded young musician named Bhai Didar Singh. After that cursory reference, I did not hear about this maestro. He was never heard of in a "Kirtan Darbar", or at any private religious function. To me his name and faint memory remained dormant in a remote corner of my brain for years to come

Around 1983 someone in Vancouver gave me a tape with handwritten title Bhai Didar Singh Raagi on its cover. On hearing an enchanting unheard of voice, the old memories of my father's words sprouted up again. I once again recollected my father's words of the late sixties. The longest duration Shabad in the tape was entitled "Aappe bauh bidh rangla, sakhiye mera laal". It turned out to be a very professionally rendered "Shabad" in difficult to perform "Guldasta" format and it simply mesmerized me. I listened to this tape again and again and was never tired of it. I made a spare copy of this tape to guard against any damage to the original tape.

A few months later I met Giani Gurdip Singh ji, the then Head Priest of Gurdwara Richmond Hill New York. This gurdwara was a de-facto place of pilgrimage for all the Sikhs living North of Washington D.C. on the Eastern seaboard of America. I made a casual mention of this newly obtained tape to Giani Gurdip Singh ji. His eyes lit up. He was very knowledgeable and he had already heard this tape. He told me that Darshan Singh Komal had three highly accomplished "Shagirds" (pupils). Out of them Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi was very comfortable in lower musical notes, Bhai Beant Singh Bijli is more comfortable in higher notes, but Bhai Didar Singh is so versatile, he moves at ease like a fish between the highest and the lowest notes and does full justice to the intricacies of "Raaga".

Bhai Gurdip Singh further said Bhai Didar Singh's voice is something similar to that of K.L. Saigal and Bade Ustad Ghulam Ali Khan. A few months later I talked of Rabinder Singh Bhamra, the scholarly Vice President of Gurdwara Richmond Hill New York, he told me that their Gurdwara management has sponsored Bhai

Didar Singh's Jatha's visit to New York for the second half of 1984. Bhai Didar Singh at the head of a four man Raagi Jatha came in October 1984. Sardar Tejinder Singh Kahlon, the long time president of that gurdwara told me that Bhai Didar Singh will stay in Gurdwara Richmond Hill New York for one and a half months and after that I could take his Raagi Jatha to Gurdwara Bridgewater New Jersey. I was thrilled to hear about the offer and on the appointed day I drove this Jatha to Gurdwara Bridgewater sometime in December of 1985.

Gurdwara Richmond Hill New York is approximately eighty miles away from Gurdwara Bridgewater New Jersey and it was a good two hours plus journey. I had several questions to ask and Bhai Didar Singh had the answers. I seated him on the front seat and his three companions Ajit Singh, Sarbjit Singh and Sukhdev Singh were seated on the rear seats. I started the curious conversation by asking about his initiation into classical music or "Gurmat Sangeet". Bhai Didar Singh told me that he being blind had a lot of handicap, a blind man cannot read or write, so he was made to cram up as much "Gurbani" as possible before attaining the age of ten. By age twelve he had crammed up more than eight hundred "Shabads". These "Shabads" he still remembers and sings. Roughly at the age of ten, he was initiated into classical music and by the age of fifteen he had become adept in rendition of close to eighty "Raagas" and "Raaginis".

Bhai Didar Singh told me that learning a "Raaga" is the easy part, its repeated "Riyaz" and sticking to its true character like discrete application of "Komal" and "Teevar" "Surs" is the most difficult part of its rendition. He told me that he had been doing "Riyaz" for several hours everyday till the age of twenty five, after that "hours of "Riyaz" were curtailed and daily "Kirtan" in different "Raagas" became a substitute for longer hours of "Riyaz", but still some "Riyaz" is necessary. Bhai Didar Singh told me that he can proficiently play most of the "Taals" on "Tabla". In addition, he was groomed to play two string instruments "Sarangi" and Violin.

His "Ustad" Professor Darshan Singh Komal trained him as a versatile musician. Professor Darshan Singh Komal taught him to play a difficult string instrument "Sarangi" with ease. According to his tutor "Sarangi" was an instrument which could come to his rescue during the worst of times. After imparting adequate knowledge in singing and instrument playing, his "Ustad" established him (Didar Singh) as the lead singer and he himself became his "Saathi" on "Tabla".

Bhai Didar Singh lamented that since the nineteen sixties, the appreciation and respect for real good musicians has been declining steadily. Those with virtually no training and having uncultured voices, but possessing good managerial skills, are in great demand. The genuinely good musicians are always seen struggling and the not so good ones are flourishing. At one extremely bad time in his life, the "Sarangi" indeed came to his rescue. When no one wanted to listen to classical music, he improvised a "Dhadi Jatha". He himself became the "Sarangi" player and two of his students became "Dhadi Singers". This hurriedly assembled rag-tag "Dhadi Jatha" became very popular, in rural Punjab, within a very short

duration of time and this switch over earned a lot more money that he could not earn as a professionally trained “Kirtania”. He told me that he has brought a “Sarangi” for this tour also. He confided to me that there may be some places in America, where proper classical “Kirtan” may not find acceptance. At such places “Sarangi” will come to his rescue. He told me that his new companions on current tour Sarbjit Singh and Sukhdev Singh have been trained as “Dhadis” and they can make good money. I asked him as to why his voice has never been heard on the airwaves of All India Radio. He told me that no body from the radio station ever approached him and the idea of going uninvited to the radio station did not occur to him. But he said some of the folks who took lessons in music from him are now radio artists. Later on I did hear his voice from All India Radio Jalandhar. In an answer to another question, Bhai Didar Singh said that he has been invited every year to perform “Shabad Gayan” at the famous “Guru Ram Dass Birth Anniversary Kirtan Darbar” at “Gurdwara Manji Sahib” located within the Golden Temple complex, but his “Shabad Kirtan” has never been broadcast from the sanctum sanctorum of the Golden Temple. He said that some genuine lovers of music in Punjab have really given him a lot of respect and he is thankful to them.

Bhai Didar Singh was all praise for Late Bhai Samund Singh ji. According to him Bhai Samund Singh was the only “Kirtania” who will render all the “Shabads” in a “Chowki” in pure classical formats, everybody else renders the first “Shabad” in a classical “Raaga” and then switches to semi-classical or light “Reets”. Bhai Didar Singh lived most of his life in village Nangal Khurd in Hoshiarpur District. On the death of his illustrious “Ustad” Darshan Singh Komal, Bhai Didar Singh became the successor of his legacy. Bhai Didar Singh continued to teach “Shabad Kirtan” to the prospecting “Raagis”. Occasionally he visited foreign lands too. In reply to another question, Bhai Didar Singh said that he has a lot of admiration for the Rababi Kirtanias and they have certain advantages too. Being musicians by profession, their kids are introduced to “Pakka Raag” at very young ages. This grooming at an early age gives them a lifelong advantage.

We did not know how two hours went by and how we reached the parking area of Gurdwara Bridgewater. We were not sure of the “Sangat’s” response to his voice and art. But contrary to our fears, the weekly Friday and Sunday congregations at Gurdwara Bridgewater thoroughly appreciated his “Kirtan Kala” and he was not compelled to use his “Sarangi” as a “Dhadi” during any of the “Diwans”.

Bhai Pargat Singh, a long time resident of New York, is himself a very well trained classical musician. Bhai Pargat Singh learnt proper classical music from a highly accomplished classical maestro Master Rattan of Phagwara. He is also a great connoisseur of all kinds of classical music. Bhai Didar Singh was one of his most favourite “Kirtanias”. I invited Bhai Pargat Singh to an evening “Kirtan Darbar” at Gurdwara Bridgewater. He was asked to bring his string instrument “Taanpura” too. He came with his musician family. Together they performed very melodious “Kirtan”. After that he accompanied Bhai Didar Singh also as a side

musician and he was accompanied by his "Taanpura". This performance came out to be a historic event. I am glad I have been able to preserve its transcript.

During a month long stay at Gurdwara Bridgewater, Bhai Didar Singh invariably performed the first "Shabad" in pure "Khayali" classical format and the subsequent "Shabads" were rendered in "Reets" based on classical "Raagas". I personally made a number of recordings of his renditions. But before we could schedule his repeat visit in 1989, he was already no more. He was diabetic and no one in India got his heart checked up like we do in America. He died before attaining the age of sixty. He is not physically with us but his voice has been preserved for the unborn Sikh posterity. Bhai Didar Singh was a masterly Sikh religious musician, who never got his due.

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