

# **BHAI SANTA SINGH**

## **AN UNMATCHED EXPONENT OF THE GURU'S HYMN**

**Harjap Singh Aujla**

As a child in India I was used to waking up between 6 and 7am. But on one cold early winter morning of 1948 my mother woke me up at about 4:30am, gave me a bath and made my "Joorā" (a bun of combed and knotted hair worn by the Sikhs). After I put on new clothes, she took me to the family radio and asked me to operate (switch on) it. I pushed the on-button and the light came on. Soon the sound appeared. To hear the sign-on tune of All India Radio looked like a great achievement. Then a sweet voice announced the time 5:00am and the start of a special one hour morning service on the airwaves of All India Radio Jalandhar-Amritsar in honour of the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak. The announcer told that we are taking you to the Golden Temple Amritsar for a direct transmission of the recitation of "Asa Di Vaar". In a split second the beat of the drums (Tabla), the sound of harmonium and high pitched voices of a group of musicians could be heard. It seemed that the musicians were emotionally begging Guru Nanak to once again bless this earth with his physical presence in human form. The one hour long special relay of the recitation of the hymns of "Guru Nanak Dev ji" and the "Baani of Bhai Gurdas" sounded genuinely emotional and appeared uniquely impressive. At that young age I did not understand as to what was being sung, nevertheless, I felt highly impressed and touched by the melody, tone and texture of the music. I had no knowledge as to who was singing, nor did anybody announce it especially. For a number of years the voices heard on that day were shrouded in mystery, but my curiosity was always there to un-revel this mystery.

Several years later, I had a chance meeting in America (in New Jersey) with a perfect gentleman and saintly looking Sardar Jodh Singh, the retired Assistant Station Director of All India Radio Jalandhar. Sardar Jodh Singh happened to be the announcer of the programme in the sanctum sancrorum of the Golden Temple on that auspicious day in 1948. He revealed for the first time that the group of musicians performing "Shabad Kirtan of Asa Di Vaar" at the Golden Temple during the first ever live transmission on the Birth Anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev ji was indeed led by Late Bhai Santa Singh, the then senior most musician of the Golden Temple. I knew it all along that it was somebody special, somebody highly accomplished. A number of "Shabads" recorded on 78 RPM gramophone records in the voices of Bhai Santa Singh Ragi and party were available in the market for decades and different stations of All India Radio including Delhi, Jalandhar, Jammu and Lucknow used to play these records.

Bhai Santa Singh had the God given unique capability to sing in the highest and lowest possible scale of musical notes, which most of his other contemporary competitor musicians could not replicate. This was more true about the highest notes. His exact date of birth is not known, but according to recorded information he was born in the walled city of Amritsar in 1904. he was four year's younger than another great Sikh musician Bhai Samund Singh ji of Sri Nankana Sahib.

During those days, when Mahants were in possession of the most important Sikh shrines, very few Gursikhs were considered accomplished enough to perform “Shabad Kirtan” even in the other historic gurdwaras. Those who did perform “Gurmat Sangeet” had to hone their skills at classical music for years at a stretch under the strict guidance of Muslim or Pandit professional classical teachers. Bhai Santa Singh was no exception. He enrolled at a very young age, much below the age of ten as a learner of Sikh classical music in the music department of the famous “Yateem Khana” in Amritsar. The head teacher was a renowned trainer in classical music Bhai Sain Ditta. Several of Sain Ditta’s students served as the “Huzoori Ragis” at the Golden Temple. Other famous students of Sain Ditta included several accomplished Rababis including Bhai Taba, Bhai Naseera and Sain Ditta’s own son Bhai Desa. Among practicing Sikhs one of his most accomplished students was Bhai Darshan Singh Komal of Hoshiarpur. But Bhai Santa Singh was simply exceptional among all of Bhai Sain Ditta’s students.

Soon after completing his education at the “Yateem Khana” Bhai Santa Singh was employed as a “Hazoori Ragi” by the management of the Golden Temple during early twenties. His group included among others another famous “Gurmat Kirtania” Late Bhai Surjan Singh also. Both were bestowed with very sharp and melodious voices and could sing in ideal unison unmatched in recent history. For the first several years, due to his very shrill voice, Bhai Santa Singh was not permitted to perform “Gurmat Sangeet” at the sanctum sanctorum of the Golden Temple. He was ordered to perform Kirtan at the Baba Atal Rai Sahib and other shrines within the complex. Some of the established “Kirtanias” of those days opposed his employment even. His competitors knew it quite well that Bhai Santa Singh has a unique melody in his voice and at the highest possible notes he does not lose his balance and technically he was far more superior to them. This jealousy kept him away from the sanctum sanctorum of Sri Darbar Sahib for several years. But later on his shrill voice found the unanimous acceptance of the Sangat and the management and he rose to become the de-facto Head Ragi under the newly created management of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. Later in when he was selected as a radio singer by All India Radio Lahore in 1937, his voice became extremely popular throughout the Punjab and North West Frontier Province and his detractors had to finally relent.

The democratically elected governing body for the Sikh shrines, the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), replacing the old institution of “Mahanthood” took control of all the historic Sikh shrines in Punjab and North West Frontier Province in 1925, but for the first three decades a consistently high standard of “Gurmat Sangeet” (traditional Sikh religious music) was maintained at most of its Gurdwaras under its control. The real downfall in the standard of the musicians performing “Gurmat Sangeet” in the Sikh historic shrines started during the decade of the sixties and, with a few exceptions, it is still continuing.

During pre-independence days the Golden Temple Amritsar was known for employing highly accomplished musicians for performing “Chawnkis of Shabad Kirtan” in its sanctum sanctorum. Recommendations by the influential and the powerful were never considered for recruitment of staff. Other great musicians in the service of the Golden Temple included legendry Bhai Lal, Bhai Chand, Bhai Chanan, Bhai Hira Singh, Bhai Sham Singh etc. Soon Bhai Santa Singh carved a nitch for himself. He was very hard-working and wanted his services to find true acceptance by the “Guru”. As a first step he used to grasp the meaning of the “Shabad” to be sung. He modulated his voice to convey the true meaning of the “Shabad” without the need of explaining it through a speech or a discourse. At times he used to slow down the beat so much that the meaning of each word of the “Guru” was understood clearly even by the layman. While reciting the “Bir Rus Bani” (martial music) of the tenth master Guru Gobind Singh, he used to convey the message of war by increasing the tempo of the musical composition.

On special occasions, the Golden Temple and Gurdwara Janam Asthan Sri Nankana Sahib, the two most sacred Gurdwaras, used to exchange their leading musicians. Bhai Santa Singh used to be the price choice to be sent to Nankana Sahib on those occasions. Similarly Bhai Samund Singh used to be the choice for being invited to the Golden Temple from Nankana Sahib.

All India Radio Lahore came into being in 1936, but the full fledged production facilities were added in 1937. That was the year when Bhai Santa Singh was also approved as a casual radio artist. During those days the line up of the classical vocal radio artists of All India Lahore included among others Dalip Chander Vedi, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Master Rattan of Phagwara, Master Madan, Dina Qawwal of Jullundur, Mubarik Ali Fateh Ali of Jullundur and Harish Chander Bali. The leading Sikh religious musicians included Bhai Santa Singh of the Golden Temple and Bhai Samund Singh of Gurdwara Janam Asthan Nankana Sahib. Malika Pukhraj, Bhai Chhaila of Patiala, Mohammad Rafi, Noorjehan, Zeenat Begum, Shamshad Begum, Dilshad Begum, Mukhtar Begum, Parkash Kaur and Surinder Kaur were considered much junior Punjabi song and “Ghazal” singers.

Casual singing at All India Radio Lahore made Bhai Santa Singh very famous. During those days Genophone Recording Company opened its modern recording studio in Lahore. Master Ghulam Haider was hired as its music director. Master Ghulam Haider developed a special liking for the voice of Bhai Santa Singh. He persuaded Bhai Santa Singh to record some “Shabads”. The tunes were either traditional Sikh religious “Reets” handed down from generation to generation or Bhai Santa Singh’s own highly melodious creations. The orchestra with special preludes and interludes was of course Ghulam Haider’s. Eight “Shabads” were recorded on four discs of three minutes each and each became very popular. These recordings were made in 1941-42, but their 45RPM extended play discs were available till 1970s. Other Sikh musician whose recordings of Sikh religious music are among the earliest available on records include Bhai Budh Singh Taan, whose rendering of “As Di Vaar” was available on 12 discs in 78RPM.

My friend and a prominent Sikh scholar Professor Harbans Lal has recently added that round about in 1936, when he (Professor Harbans Lal) was only six year's old, Bhai Santa Singh used to visit his hometown Haripur Hazara in a remote area of North West Frontier Province. At that time devotees used to take out a "Prabhat Pheri" (early morning community walk for religious purposes), during which they used to announce the arrival of Bhai Santa Singh ji and his party of musicians in the town. The people of the town and the neighbouring areas, including the Hindus, Sikhs and some Muslims used to wake up and after taking a bath used to throng to the local Gurdwara. Bhai Santa Singh used to start rendition of "Asa Di Vaar" around 4 or 4:30am. He will invariably sing the Shabad "Bhinni rainarye chamkan tare" in his soul inspiring voice and the entire audience used to get completely mesmerized.

Late Giani Gurdip Singh ji, former Head Priest Gurdwara Richmond Hill New York, told me that Bhai Santa Singh ji and other top "Kirtanias" of the times often used to visit the main Gurdwara in the town of Lyallpur. Bhai Santa Singh's rendition of "Kirtan" was attended by large congregations of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, who will make it a point to reach the Gurdwara well before dawn. Bhai Santa Singh's unique voice quality and his soulful rendition of the "Guru's Hymns" always left a lasting impression on the knowledgeable congregation in the richest agricultural town of undivided Punjab. According to Bhai Gurdip Singh ji, Bhai Santa Singh did several hours of "Riyaz" everyday in the "Ragaas" to be rendered for most of the years of his early life. He had rendered "Asa Di Vaar" at least 12000 times throughout his life. With so many repetitions, he became very fluent in rendering the "Asa Di Vaar" that he could effortlessly utter 10 syllables instead of the normal practice of rendering 5 syllables per second. Just as an expert painter can play with the colours and lines for his masterpiece creation, Bhai Santa Singh could indeed play with the rendition of "Asa Di Vaar".

"Asa Di Vaar" rendered by the group of Bhai Sudh Singh Pardhan Singh, from Multan Division of Western Punjab, was also recorded during the forties. One or two records of "Shabad Gayan" in the voices of Bhai Gurmukh Singh Sarmukh Singh Fakkar of Gurdwara Janam Asthan Sri Nankana Sahib were also available for a limited period in the market. In addition one disc of "Shabad Gayan" in the voice of child prodigy Master Madan was also recorded during the nineteen forties. Master Madan's recording after disappearing from the market for several decades is once again available. Some "Shabads" sung by Bhai Budh Singh Taan and Surinder Kaur were also available in the market during the forties. Bhai Samund Singh, although sang regularly for several stations of All India radio, but did not record his "Shabad Gayan" on gramophone discs until the nineteen sixties, when during the Quin Centennial celebrations of the birth of Guru Nanak, a set of five long playing records was published. Bhai Samund Singh never compromised with purity of the Raga. He seldom simplified the Ragas into Reets.

After the creation of Pakistan, Bhai Samund Singh also joined Bhai Santa Singh in the service of the Golden Temple. They had very different styles of performing "Shabad Kirtan". Bhai Samund Singh used to perform in a modified version of "Khayal Gayaki". He used to leave the "Alaap", "Jorh Alaap" and the "Vilambhat Lai" as well as the climax "Dhrut Lai" and sing the entire "Shabad" in "Madh Lai". On the other hand Bhai Santa Singh either sang in the traditional "Reets" handed down from generation to generation or he created his own "Reets" by improvising new tunes from the source "Ragas" and "Raaginis". Bhai Santa Singh used to rehearse the tunes for hours at a stretch to the accompaniment of "Taan Pura".

While in Delhi Bhai Santa Singh was allotted a modest dwelling on the campus of "Gurdwara Mata Sundri ji" and he used to perform "Kirtan" mostly at Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib or at Gurdwara Sri Bangla Sahib. True to his humble beginning Bhai Santa Singh always believed in very simple living. He used to ride a by-cycle on his way to perform "Shabad Kirtan". One day an admirer presented a car to him, which he retained for a few days before returning it back to him. The reason given for spurning the offer was that he used to recite a "Nitname" path while riding a cycle and while riding he used to complete the path. But when he started being driven in the car the same distance was traveled in 5 minutes, a time too short to complete the path. Such was the simplicity and lack of greed in Bhai Santa Singh. There are several other stories about his utter lack of greed.

Once the famous Rababi Kirtania Bhai Lal was supposed to perform last of all in a special "Kirtan Diwan" in pre-partition Lahore and Bhai Santa Singh was the penultimate singer. But while listening Bhai Lal got so much impressed with the "Shabad Gayan" by Bhai Santa Singh, that he made a request to skip his own turn and requested Bhai Santa Singh to finish the "Diwan" by singing "Raga Darbari Kanra". Bhai Santa Singh completely mesmerized the audience with his soulful rendition of "Raga Darbari Kanra". This story was narrated to me by Bhai Gurdip Singh ji, the head priest of New York's famous Richmond Hill Gurdwara.

Round about in 1949, Bhai Santa Singh abruptly left the service of the SGPC and temporarily moved to New Delhi. Soon he tried his hand at becoming a building contractor in Assam, but contractor-ship did not suit his temperament and he took employment in Gurdwara Sis Ganj Old Delhi. Delhi was fast becoming a city of refugees from West Pakistan. Some of his most ardent admirers had moved from Lahore, Gujranwala, Lyallpur, Montgomery, Sialkot and Sheikhpura to Delhi. For them it was a pleasure to listen to the "Shabad Gayan" by Bhai Santa Singh. On hearing about Bhai Santa Singh's joining the service of Gurdwara Sis Ganj Delhi, the crowds at that historic gurdwara started swelling each morning.

The refugee "Sangat" from Pakistan at Delhi got so much hooked to listening to Bhai Santa Singh's "Shabad Kirtan" at Gurdwara Sis Ganj Chandni Chowk that they insisted that the early morning "Chawnki of Asa Di Vaar" must always be performed by the group led by Bhai Santa Singh ji. The only other group allowed to perform "Asa Di Vaar" in the absence of Bhai Santa Singh was Bhai Avtar

Singh Gurcharan Singh and Swaran Singh, formerly of Sultanpur Lodhi in Kapurthala District, who had also moved to New Delhi.

While in Delhi Bhai Santa Singh became the staff artist of All India Radio Delhi and his live performance of "Shabad Kirtan" became a regular feature of its Punjabi Program. Some years after 1947, one of the most important members of his group Bhai Surjan Singh parted company and formed his own group. This incident affected him emotionally, but he trained his brother Bhai Shamsheer Singh to sing alongside him. This change did not diminish the popularity of his group. In the meanwhile Bhai Surjan Singh's newly created group also became very popular. To this day the best selling records of "Asa Di Vaar" are Bhai Surjan Singh's.

On the death of India's First Prime Minister Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru in 1964, Bhai Santa Singh was the only Sikh religious musician, who was especially invited to perform "Shabad Kirtan" during the period of mourning at All India Radio Delhi. Some of these recordings are still preserved in the archives of the Delhi Station of All India Radio. At one time or the other every great maestro, be it a vocalist or an instrumentalist of India, had the honour of singing at one or the other stations of All India Radio. Some of those artists were recorded and many others were not. Even those whose performances were recorded, their recordings were destroyed later on due to the callousness of the authorities. If all the recordings of Bhai Santa Singh and Bhai Samund Singh would have been preserved, we would have had at least 300 hours of recordings of each. Such musicians are not born every day. We are sorry to lose their historic moments.

Late Yogi Harbhajan Singh was a great admirer of the "Kirtan Shelley" of Bhai Santa Singh ji. In order to train his followers, the American Sikhs, in the art of performing "Shabad Gayan" he wanted to bring one of the students of Bhai Santa Singh's school of music to America. Bibi Amarjit Kaur, who had honed her skills under the guidance of Bhai Santa Singh, was brought from India to America for the purpose. She now works in the World Bank and lives in Northern Virginia, in one of the suburbs of the American Capital Washington D.C. By listening to her renditions you can get a glimpse of her great mentor. The way she modulates her voice, it appears that she is coming true on the teachings of her great teacher.

In 1965, Bhai Santa Singh's former companion Bhai Surjan Singh suddenly left for his heavenly abode. Although they had parted company years ago, but still Bhai Santa Singh took this loss to heart. For several days he felt very much dejected. But according to the "Gurus" message the life must go on and Bhai Santa Singh did not miss his "Kirtan" schedules at Gurdwara Sis Ganj.

Bhai Santa Singh was in great demand for his unique style of "Shabad Kirtan" all over India, but due to demand of the local "Sangat" he seldom stepped out of Delhi. Once in 1966, on the persistent request of the knowledgeable "Sangat" of Bombay he was allowed to go to Bombay for a couple of weeks. On hearing this welcome news, the critically appreciative "Sadh Sangat" of Bombay and its

suburbs was electrified. The Sikhs of Bombay had the once in a lifetime experience of listening to Bhai Santa Singh live. They requested for more of his time, but the management of Gurdwara Sis Ganj in Delhi refused to extend his stay, because the "Sangat" in Delhi also was yearning to listen to his "Shabad Kirtan". Important dignitaries like the legendary playback singer Mohammad Rafi used to come to the gurdwaras to listen to Bhai Santa Singh ji. On the day of his departure for Delhi huge crowds gave him a tearful sendoff in Bombay.

On his way back to Delhi, while still in train somewhere between Bhusaval and Jalgaon, he suffered a massive heart attack. Before any medical care could be administered, he had already left for his heavenly abode, in the feet of his divine master the "Guru". When All India Radio broke the sad news, his listeners and admirers in Delhi and all over India were plunged into unprecedented grief. Bhai Santa Singh's funeral back in Delhi saw the community in deep mourning. This story was narrated to me by his pupil Bibi Amarjit Kaur.

After Bhai Santa Singh's death, his brother Bhai Shamsher Singh made another "Kirtan Jatha". Bhai Shamsher Singh could sing most of the popular tunes of Bhai Santa Singh, but he lacked the range and modulation. After the death of Bhai Shamsher Singh about two decades ago, Bhai Santa Singh's brilliant nephews Bhai Harjit Singh and Bhai Gurdip Singh are keeping his glorious tradition of "Shabad Kirtan" alive. They may not be able to match the dexterity of Bhai Santa Singh, but they have kept all his "Reets" alive to this date. Today they are the leading musicians of Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee and are held in a high esteem all over India. Bhai Harjit Singh and Gurdip Singh humbly admit that they are no match for the genius of their ancestor Bhai Santa Singh ji.

The life may go on, but for a true lover of "Gurmat Sangeet", who has heard Bhai Santa Singh ji's renditions live or recorded, it may not be the same after his demise. But according to the word of the "Guru" life must go on.

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