

Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji gave a lot of invaluable gifts to the world and one of them was very pleasant, very soothing and very educative Sikh religious music. This form of music came with Guru Nanak more than five hundred years ago. The author takes us on a tour through the Gurmeet Sangeet's development but rues how those administering the religion have paid scant attention to nurturing talent in this aspect.

Harjap Singh Aujla

W e the members of the Sikh community are passing through a very difficult phase of our existence. Our moral and spiritual values are going down the drain.

Our leaders, who are supposed to give us a lead, are falling prey to the policies of appeasement and populism. They are incapable of giving us a lead. One of the most precious of our traditions is our distinct spiritual music, which flourished during the time of our great "Gurus" (1485 A.D. to 1710 A.D.) and after lying low during the dark period from 1710 A.D. to 1800 A.D. had experienced a second phase of renaissance during the period of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's

Empire and subsequently up to the end of 1950s. But since the nineteen sixties, our sacred religious music also has suffered a steady decline due to the lack of vision on the part of our so called elected leaders and their utter neglect of Sikh traditions.

Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji gave a lot of invaluable gifts to the world and one of them was very pleasant, very soothing and very educative Sikh religious music. This form of music came with Guru Nanak more than five hundred years ago. During the time of Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji, the North Indian classical music (Hindustani form of classical music) was quite well developed and Dhrupad and Dhamar form of music

was in vogue in all the known musical Gharanas. Guru Nanak's music of course was not untouched by this great tradition. Those were the days when a host of string instruments were prevalent as accompaniments to the vocalists in Northern India. Rabab was one such very versatile instrument, which was not played with a bow but was plucked to produce melody and a semblance of beat. Bhai Mardana, an accomplished string instrumentalist (Rabab player) became a lifelong musician companion of the great Guru. Guru Nanak Dev ji undoubtedly was the lead singer, who sang his own spiritual and musical compositions to the accompaniment of Bhai Mardana's melodious Rabab. This in a nutshell is how the Sikh



Between 1966 and 1972 four legendry Kirtanias died. They included Bhai Santa Singh, Bhai Surjan Singh, Sant Sujan Singh and Bhai Samund Singh. This dealt a severe blow to the lovers of Gurmat Sangeet. Others who filled their slots were not as competent.

Religious Music is conceived to have originated. During the four famous "Udasis" (tours) and during his shorter visits, even those who did not understand Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji's language and the message contained in his "Baani" (spiritual poetry) used to get mesmerized by his music and after the music and discourses were over, they used to go home after

imbibing his message. Guru Nanak's successor four Gurus, were also great poets and musicians in their own rights. While compiling the holy Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the fifth Sikh Guru Arjan Dev ji divided his own Baani (spiritual poetry) and the compositions of his predecessors as well as some compatible spiritual poetry of a few Hindu and Muslim saints into bunches of hymns to be rendered in certain specific Raagas. Roughly from 1485 to 1710, the transformation or evolution of the Sikh religious music took place during a cumulative period of 225 years. The life time of the Gurus was the first golden period of the Sikh religious music or in Punjabi the "Gurmat Sangeet". During this period a number of additional string instruments were added to

"Rabab" as accompaniment. During the period of the gurus, percussion instruments were also added, which gave "Taal" beat. Pakhawaj (with animal leather on both sides), as known as Mardang was added to give "Taal" (beat). Later on "Tabla" with two drums (one for bass notes and the other for treble notes) was adopted, because it was more convenient to play. In the village gurdwaras "Dholki" (similar to Pakhawaj or Mardang, but smaller) came to be used. "Saranda" (another string instrument similar to modern day Sarangi) was introduced during the times of the fifth and the sixth Gurus. Later on some folks from Iran also became the followers of the great Gurus and they presented "Taus" (another string instrument) to the Guru Darbars. Similarly more such instruments were added from time to time. Later on "Tanpura" became an accompaniment of every accomplished classical musician, may he be a Hindu, Sikh or Muslim. Its sweet vibratory sound was very soothing to the ears of the singers and the listeners alike. Even now "Tanpura" is a must for all classical performances.

Most of the musicians, who used to sing the Baani of the Gurus in their Darbars, during the lifetimes of the great

Gurus, other than the Gurus themselves, were Rababis (members of Bhai Mardana's community (caste) of musicians). The most prominent names amongst them were those of the duo of Bhai Satta and Bhai Balwand. Then came a period of turmoil from 1710 to 1800 A.D. The Sikh community was embroiled in a bitter struggle for survival and eventual sovereignty. Many times for months the Sikh places of worship remained closed or under occupation of the foreign invaders. During this period "Shabad Chowkis" in specific day and night "Raagas" became irregular even in the holiest Sikh shrine the "Sri Darbar Sahib Amritsar". During this difficult period some serious attempts were made to



THE GOLDEN PERIODS OF THE SIKH RELIGIOUS MUSIC



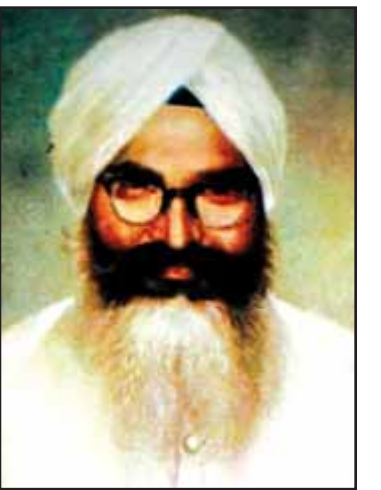
The life time of the Gurus was the first golden period of the Sikh religious music or in Punjabi the "Gurmat Sangeet". During this period a number of additional string instruments were added to "Rabab" as accompaniment. Then came percussion instruments like Pakhawaj, Mardang, Tabla and Dholki. Soon were added Saranda, Taus and later even Tanpura that became an accompaniment of every accomplished classical musician

destroy and demolish the "Sri Darbar Sahib" (now the Golden Temple). The Sikh religious music even during these trying times miraculously remained alive, but in the privacy of the homes of the religious musicians and the homes of perpetually at war Sikh soldiers. In spite of facing very difficult times and under constant fear of massacres, the hereditary exponents of the Sikh religious music (mostly from the Rababi community) kept the age old traditions alive from generation to generation by imparting this valuable educational treasure to their sons and grandsons. Our heads bow before their grit and determination. Several Sikh religious musicians did not see even one open performance of "Gurmat Sangeet" during their life times. Some were lucky to perform "Shabad Kirtan" at "Sri Darbar Sahib" during auspicious occasions of the festivals of "Diwali" (the festival of lights) and "Baisakhi" (the spring harvest festival). The periods of the repeated invasions of India by the invaders from North Western Asia i.e. Ahmed Shah Abdali and Nadir Shah were the worst for the followers of the Sikh faith and the exponents of its hereditary musical traditions. Many musicians and their families could not afford even two square meals in twenty four hours.

Bhai Chanan Rababi of Kapurthala was a remnant of the ancient Dhrupad and Dhamar style of classical music. He was an acclaimed drummer (Tabla player) too. He was conversant with several "Taal", which had become extinct during the preceding two centuries. He used to perform "Shabad Gayan" as a free-lancer in the Golden Temple and in "State Gurdwara Kapurthala". My father (late Sardar Sochet Singh of Kapurthala) had several exploratory interactions with Bhai Chanan. It was Bhai Chanan, who told my father about the stories of the abject poverty of the Rababi Kirtanias during dark years which followed the demise of Guru Gobind Singh and which ended with the coronation of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. According to Bhai Chanan, the Golden Temple has always been the fountain-head of "Gurmat Sangeet" since 1600 A.D. As explained above by late Bhai Chanan, the second golden period of Sikh religious music started during the reign of the Sikh Emperor Maharaja Ranjit Singh roughly from year 1800 onwards. This renaissance of Sikh religious music kept going strong up to the beginning of 1960s. Maharaja Ranjit Singh inherited the fiefdom of "Shukarchakya Misl" from his brave soldier father Maha Singh. This "Misl" was based in Gujranwala and Guru Nanak's birth place "Nankana Sahib" was a part of it. In fact the traditional "Chowkis" of "Shabad Kirtan" were held regularly in Guru Nanak's birth place "Nankana Sahib" since the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's grand-father roughly around 1760 A.D. During Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign, the daily attendance at the Golden Temple took a quantum jump and the offerings multiplied manifold. Those musicians who lived in abject poverty, for up to four generations became well off within years, because the Sikh community had attained affluence and had become very generous. By the turn of the century (round about 1800 A.D.), Maharaja Ranjit Singh annexed Amritsar to his territory of control, which event proved very important from



Bhai Samund Singh Raagi



Bhai Santa Singh

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the point of view of propagation of "Gurmat Sangeet". In fact this ominous annexation proved to be the golden news for all kinds of Sikh fine arts. During this period, all the known and unknown "Rababi Kirtanias" came out of their four generation long hibernation and started converging at the Golden Temple Amritsar. "Gurdwara Janam Asthan Sri Nankana Sahib", "Gurdwara Dehra Sahib Lahore" and "Gurdwara Sri Darbar Sahib Tarntaran". In the neighbouring "Ahluwalia Misl" administered State of Kapurthala also, the "Rababi Kirtanias" resumed uninterrupted performance of "Shabad Kirtan" among other places at "Gurdwara Sri Ber Sahib" at Sultanpur Lodhi. It can be concluded that from 1800 A.D. the second golden period of Sikh religious music started with a bang. The Rababi Kirtanias started working harder and harder on the Raagas and on training and culturing of their voices. They meticulously started "Riyaz of Raagas and Reets" for several hours everyday and performed every time from their heart and to the limits of their tonal and volumetric capabilities.

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lungs. The brilliant and emotionally charged up musicians used to be very well compensated monetarily and through other religious recognitions and rewards. By year 1850 A.D., the ancient Dhrupad and Dhamar format of classical music was still very much alive in "Gurmat Sangeet". "Partial" variation (several specific beats for different stanzas within the same Shabad) was also still in vogue. Lahore and Amritsar used to be the harbinger of any change in North Western India's culture. The presently popular "Khayal" format of North Indian classical music was still in its evolutionary stage in the Sikh shrines of Punjab. The leading centres where this new format of classical music (Khayal) was primarily evolving were Patiala, Malerkotla, Sham Chaurasi (in Hoshiarpur district), Amritsar, Kapurthala, Jalandhar and Kasur (in Lahore district). According to some accounts "Khayal" and "Tarana" styles of classical music had taken birth during or before the life time of the Tenth Sikh Guru Gobind Singh ji and "Gurmat Sangeet" in these new formats was performed in his "Durbars". But during his time also most Sikh musicians based in Sultanpur L o d h i , Kapurthala, Amritsar and Tarntaran were still

