

The Creative Tradition of Spiritual Music in Sikhism

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Guru Nanak says in Japji : “*Aape beej, aape hee khao...*”

Translated it means: “You yourself have to sow and you yourself have to eat.”

In other words, whatever you plant or sow or do today, by way of actions, thoughts or speech, you shall be getting the results accordingly or shall have to bear the consequences in due course of time. Whatever input is fed into the mind or *budhi* or *mutt*, the outputs shall emerge accordingly.

Whatever is planted today, whether good or evil, so shall we be reaping the benefits, or pitfalls, in due course of time. When? it is difficult to say. Just as when we plant a seed, we do not know when the seed shall sprout into a stem, when the stem shall sprout into a stalk, and when the stalk shall sprout into a bud and when the bud shall sprout into a flower... one fine morning when we open our eyes....lo and behold... unexpectedly the flower is there in all its beauty!

This is the Natural Law of Activism or what one calls Karma. An action done today will lead to some effect and this effect can further become the cause for another action to take place. So when one does good deeds or good actions, the results may not be visible now, but ultimately something good or beneficial will accrue to the doer in due course of time. Guru Nanak, in his travels accompanied by Bhai Mardana - travelled across the length and breadth of undivided India and also across to foreign lands in Central Asia as well as to Sikkim and Tibet in the north. Guru Nanak, during the four *udasis*- or trips - he undertook, met and had dialogues with countless people, some hostile and others friendly amicable. Via the medium of his music played to Bhai Mardana's *rabab*, he spoke **Divine Thoughts** and shared the universal message with one and all. Whenever revelations of the Divine Word welled up from Guru Nanak's heart, he would say: “Mardania, *utha rabab! Dhuro banee aayee!*”

One marvels how 500 years ago, when there was no modern means of transport, Guru Nanak's love for his fellow beings, living under inhumane tyrannical rulers of the prompted him to undertake this ordeal of travelling for long months - on foot or by boat or on horse. It was a Herculean task, but there was a mission in the heart of Guru Nanak whose undeviating faith and confidence in divine Creator, spurred Bhai Mardana to accompany him, without whom such odyssey would not have been possible.

It was the team work of Guru Nanak, *Ragas*, that has brought us the Sikh philosophy in which has brought us today the philosophy in the shape of divine hymns sung by Guru Nanak, passed on to Guru Angad and succeeding Gurus, which ultimately took the shape of Guru Granth Sahib. The tradition was set by Guru Nanak and so music thus plays an important role in the life of a Sikh since it is music which has the capacity of uplifting a person's spirits and of taking it to unparalleled heights of ecstasy in which the whole being is awash in love of the divine. One's thinking stops and one is transported - into the depths of one's soul or *atma*. As Guru Nanak Dev Ji says, “*Antar gat teerath mal nao..*”, [Japji Sahib] It is this inward journey which one has to undertake not to places of pilgrimage, as was the prevalent

custom of Hindu society during the period. While undertaking this journey into the depths of one's heart, where the soul or *Divine Light* resides as is recorded, "*Sab kichh ghar mein bahar nahee, bahar toley so bharam bhulaee....*". Enlightenment is within us.

It is the *shabad's* essence which flows into the heart and soul and resonates in part of it to strike an ecstatic chord paving the way for feelings of compassion and love to erupt from one's heart. Music is but a medium utilized by Guru Nanak for the easy passage of the message (*shabad*) to sink in and quench the thirst of the soul, resulting in bliss, as recorded in the Holy Granth, "*Gobind Milan ki eh teri bariya...*" Our *surat* or consciousness has to be struck like - an arrow to reach the- core of the soul or *atma* residing in each and every one of us..... "*Ghat ghat vasey.....*"

For this passage to be unobstructed, Guru Nanak says, "*Bhanda dhoe bas dhoop devo to doodhay ko jao..*".....we have to cleanse our insides of the dirt of the five vices or which trouble our *atma* or soul and due to which this *Gobind Milan* is not possible. These five vices are: dirt of *Kaam* {lust}, *Krodh* {anger}, *Lobh* {greed}, *Moh* {obsessive attachment} and dirt of *Ahankaar*{ego}.

Can music be possible without the instruments? No! The ones popular during the times of the Sikh Gurus, the *rabab* and the *saranda*, have become almost extinct today, while Sikhs have fallen for an instrument that is lowest in the rung of musical hierarchy of instruments. Where art thouviolin, sitar, synthesizer, piano, etc.....together placed and we get an orchestra and music so created in tune with the *hymnal raags* will echo in every heart of the *sangat* in the Gurdwara. This can move the person so deeply that transformation is bound to happen.

We understand that Bhai Dya Singh of Australia is doing innovative kirtan by reaching out to the innumerable youngsters and elders alike, through musical concerts and Youth Gurmat Camps quite popular in Malaysia and Australia, which makes them say, "I am grateful to be a Sikh" rather than the age-old coinage of "I am proud to be a Sikh" since pride and *Sikhi* are polarities while thanksgiving and *Sikhi* are synonymous, with humility.

The controversy which arises, now and then, during or after a recent concert in St. Louise's Gandhi Bhavan in his ongoing US tour Bhai Dya Singh jolts one out of our traditional mould and makes us ask ourselves: "Has the day- arrived that *shabads* should be sung in public, on stage, both by Sikhs and non-Sikhs, - outside the Gurdwara – so that the message of our great Sikh Gurus and other contributors to Guru *Granth* be made popular amongst the masses?"

What Bhai Dya Singh is doing is in fact revolutionary, but the greatest advantage which he has in his defense is, as he says, "I am just using the medium of music to spread the message of our Sikh Gurus. Didn't Guru Nanak also use this medium, and the more important point to note is that, I do not, under any circumstances , distort the *shabad* or its contents!"

Perhaps Bhai Dya Singh has, by performing various concerts all over the Western world, planted a new seed and how shall this seed germinate is now upto the Sikhs and the Dharam Prachar Committee. Bhai Dya Singh is sure to create a niche for himself in Sikh History. But if the religious authorities at the helm of Sikh affairs succumb to the hardliners and issue a directive or command asking Bhai Dya Singh to stop – then a creative musical genius with his undaunting faith in *Sikhi*

would be nipped in the bud, like Bhai Harbans Singh, the popular *raagi* who underwent tough pressures and had to comply with the Akal Takht's decision a few years back. His fault: he started singing his own compositions and people mistook it to be *Baanī*!

The probable questions cropping up in reader's minds would be: Firstly, should creativity of Sikhs, which had been the forte of the Sikh Gurus, be stifled? Or, should the issue be coolly considered by the Sikh intellectuals and intelligentsia as to how best to encourage creative genius of Sikhs while, at the same time, ensuring that the importance and sanctity of the Sikh's Holy Scripture is retained?

What about the *Kavi Darbars* held during *Gurpurabs* in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib where the *dadhi jathas* sing the praises of the Sikh Gurus and of the Creator in poetic form which is often their own compositions.

Let us also recall the 52 poets of the *darbar* of Guru Gobind Singh Ji wrote out of sheer inspiration and recited their compositions to devotees of the Guru, for the pleasure of expressing their love and devotion and admiration for their Guru. Is it not an indication from the Tenth Master that Sikhs today should encourage creative divine music for the masses, for *kirtan* is one of the pillars of Sikh lore and moral tradition?

