

# Gurbani Sangeet into the 21st Century: Contribution of Bhai Dya Singh of Australia

**GURMUKH SINGH (UK)\***

\* Principal, UK Civil Service (Retd.). Address: 298 Norwood Road, Norwood Green. Southall. Middlesex UB2 4JH (UK).

For cassettes and CDs recorded by Dya Singh's group contact: Dya Singh, GPS Box 2130, Adelaide SA 5001, South Australia. Telefax: 618 8278 3088

SOME FIVE YEARS AGO, AFTER attending a marriage in Australia, Dr Jagir Singh of Chandigarh, who himself is a prominent Sikh scholar and classical *raagi*, reported in his monthly *Amrit Kirtan* (December 1997 issue) that during his *kirtan* he was accompanied by "Dya Singh of international fame". I also attended this function and was reminded of an eight-year old Dya Singh doing kirtan with his saintly father, Giani Harchand Singh Bassaian, a well-known *pracharak* of Malaysia in the 1950s. The boy is now a man, Bhai Dya Singh of Australia.

In the south-eastern corner of the world, away from the stern and restraining eye of the traditional Sikh establishment, no less than a revolution in *Gurbani sangeet* has been taking place over the last ten years. With the production of Dya Singh's cassette "*Gurbani Yatra*", that revolution is now nearly complete. Dya Singh is a household name in the multi-society music world of south-east Asia. Formed in 1992, Dya Singh's "World Music Group" has emerged as one of the most sought after music groups in Australia and other south-eastern countries like Malaysia and Singapore. The group has performed concerts in countries as far away as Canada and Japan. The reader will get some idea of the group's popularity from the following comment:

"In the space of two hours, Dya Singh's material ranged from incantations to Sikh hymns, *ragas* and Asian classical music. The talent of the performers, the range of the music they played, the deep spirituality which infused their performance, all made this a memorable evening."

- The Sydney Morning Herald

Dya Singh's unique experiment with the globalisation of *Gurbani sangeet* could only have happened in Australia, that remote island continent. Expert press comments and the growing universal popularity of Dya Singh confirms that he is regarded as one of Australia's best examples of the dynamics of multiculturalism at its best. Dya Singh's choice of musical instrument's and talent is equally adventurous. In addition to his three highly gifted daughters, Dheeraj Shresta, a classical *tablchi* provides the beat on various "drum" instruments as required (*tabla*, *mardang*, *dhols*, drums, etc), Keith Preston, another highly talented artist, plays Greek bouzouki, electric guitar, santoor and bohdran, and Cicilia Kemezys plays the flutes. That is the core group, but other well-known Australian artists join in as required. The group is popular on the local and national television and radio in Australia.

*Gurbani shabads* (including English translations), provide the entrancing meaningfulness to the popular and semi-classical tunes (*bandash*) played by the musicians. When I was in Punjab last year, a retired Airforce Wing Commander confessed that he was not a very religious man and did not have an ear for *Gurbani* kirtan. That is, not until he heard Dya Singh's family group (Dya Singh and

daughters). Now, without fail, when driving, he turned on his car cassette player to listen to the group and was immediately enchanted by the introductory *Mool Mantar* sung to eastern/western musical instruments.

Initially, the music appealed more to the new generation Sikhs and Western ears. Observers commented that the group created an entirely original *genre* of World music. Western observation is that while the music made one get up and dance, the message made one sit down and listen!

*Gurbani* is the central theme and it has the power to harness the impact of *raag*, rhythm and beat, (even western beats) and promote an atmosphere of joy and peaceful contentment.

Says Barbara Roberts of *InFOLKus Magazine*: "Dya Singh's incredible voice amazed me, at times quietly sensitive, at others overwhelmingly powerful, and always with the purest melody." Indeed, Dya Singh's voice range appears to have no limit, yet it always remains well controlled and melodious. Another commentator has described the experience of listening to Dya Singh simply as "A *voyage into the heart*".

What about Dya Singh's impact on the eastern ear more used to traditional *Gurbani kirtan*? A well-known classical *ustaad*, Giani Darshan Singh Sohal of UK (successor of the famous Bhai Gian Singh Almast), used to say "Dya Singh Ji, you have great talent, but you are sometimes careless about the rules of *raag*. Stay with me for one or two years and you will be amongst the best in the Sikh world."

Dya Singh's typical jovial response used to be: "But Giani Ji, that is precisely the reason why I am avoiding *raagis* lest they put me in the straight-jacket of *raags*!" But Dya Singh has heeded the advice of great Sikh *raagis* and based his popular music on classical *raagis* even for mixed eastern-Western performances. His latest cassette "*Gurbani Yatra*" of "straight kirtan" has been widely acclaimed by lovers of traditional *Gurbani kirtan*.

Yet, his style is unique and has great appeal for the new generation. So much so that during a recent tour of Malaysia (at the request of the Sangat of Malacca), young Sikhs travelled long distances to listen to him. Outside the south-east Asia, Dya Singh is reaching out to the parts not reached before: his introductory cassettes are gaining popularity in the UK and amongst the East African Sikh community. He already has a wide audience base in the USA and Canada.

Outside the Gurdwaras, this talented and pioneering Sikh *sangeetkar* is successful, taking the message of Guru Nanak to the young Sikhs and the multi-cultural audiences world-wide.

While some orthodox traditionalists may frown at his novel but popular approach, the Sikh community world-wide will be hearing more from - and feel proud - of Bhai Dya Singh of Australia.

Others are likely to follow in his footsteps, as part of the process of taking the universal message of Guru Nanak to the world and well into the 21st Century.

