

Ragas and Ragis

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INTELLIGENCE IS DIRECTLY RELATED to perception. The level of intelligence gradually changes and overhauls the complete gamut of introspection. Obviously, the far-sighted people cover the distance between observation and experience much faster than the normal person of ordinary psychological skills. The Sikh tradition has always encouraged commoners to strive to the maximum to develop their ingenuity and skills, but there was always a special niche for the above-average person who constantly endeavoured to reach out to perfection.

Song & the Singer: Bhai Mardana, for instance, has been relegated to an unsophisticated and comic role, though it is grudgingly admitted that he accompanied the great Guru for decades as his steadfast companion. It is based on a casteist view, or perhaps due to the limitation of the ordinary observer. Bhai Mardana had to be of an extraordinary calibre to be able to keep up with the strenuous routine of the Guru's regime. While Guru Nanak sang out sublime verses, Madana skilfully accompanied him on the rebeck with equal dexterity. He was adept in musical knowledge and the expanse of the classical musical values. He is credited with expounding the finer nuances to Pandit Hari Das, the mentor of the famous Tansen. Such was the level of skill and discernment of the Guru's constant companion and follower who could render music in the selected mode of Guru's mood in accordance with the prescribed *raga*. This training was also carried over to his descendents who skilfully sang in the daily congregations of the succeeding Gurus till they succumbed to the lure of riches, over the grandeur of art and devotion and divinity which had initially raised their status to such heights.

We have a galaxy of devoted musicians who not only practised the excellence of the art but were responsible in swaying multitudes of listeners to conversion to the sublime path of the Sikh religion. They filled the vacuum of the spiritual leadership after the Guru in human form was transferred to the congregation under the guidance and aegis of Guru Granth. The tribe of such inspired artists seems to have dwindled as an outcome of the materialistic trend of weighing every fine feeling and fervour on monetary basis. Not only the Sikhs moral tradition but all other institutions have suffered in quality and commitment.

During my college days, I had a strong attachment with a class-mate who was an accomplished musician, an adept instrumentalist who was frequently sought for airing programmes on the Radio Station as well as music conferences. He aspired to assemble a troupe of his own to give concerts internationally and I was chosen by him to accompany him as a trained music artist. I seriously studied music for some time and started to understand the finer points in rendition. I wanted to promote my friend morally and spiritually. With this view I requested a noted saintly person who cared about me to listen to and bless the young man who showed exceptional talent. After many trials, the saint agreed to spare some time and my friend outdid his best performance to convince him of his proficiency. All present were moved by the hypnotic atmosphere. The sage sat unmoved and unaffected. He softly spoke of the musicians who moved in the streets with a harmonium or a tri-string instrument and

people threw small coins to appreciate their *art*. They too were artists! The young artist felt outraged and offended. Not long after, he ran away with a small amount of loan he borrowed from me and miserably ended his short life as an obscure, mediocre instrumentalist in Bombay. What is needed is not only skill and expertise but unblemished high moral and spiritual character to achieve that pedestal of success and glory which every artist aspires to and dreams about in his life.

Divinity to Laity: A musician is nearest to the human emotional strings as musical notes penetrate and soften even the coarsest of characters. Man does not require any education or training to appreciate sound. Perfect sound moulds even the hardest soul. It is due to this quality of music that Guru Nanak chose to convey his message of divinity to the laity who felt attracted to his melody of ragas enshrining his sublime exposition of 'the truth and truthful behaviour'. In order to reach the crowd, it is not necessary to stoop to their levels. **The celestial song of Guru Nanak was rendered in the finest traditions of North Indian music system. The original compositions of our Gurus are preserved for eternity in the ragas selected by them for maximum effect of the texts on the congregations or when recited in chambers.**

A musician converting the sanctity of devotional music into commercialism is as guilty of swindling and defrauding as the self-appointed *babas* grabbing riches in the false garb of holy men. The ordinary Sikh feels inspiration of the Holy Scriptures and likes to honour the reciter with faith, and this faith gets a jolt when the purpose is exposed to collect money and wealth only. **In such cases the spiritual nuances fade away and the audience is left with bitterness and a sense of deception and mockery of religion.** It then becomes a profession like any other mundane calling and tends to damage the edifice of sanctity and purity of the spiritual. It is more damaging to the simple folk's faith in the efficacy of the prophetic system. Ask any musician and he would invariably hold music as an offering of devotion and prayer to God. It, indeed, becomes a tribute to the Deity, if it is a sincere and honest offering. In Music the same ethical and moral rules apply which are so essential for the man of God in his day to day life style. Haste and formalism take a musician far away from his objective to reach perfection. The endeavour begins with the sensitivity and understanding of the purity of sound and its different notes. It may seem simple as each person finds singing a part of his nature and within his reach, but to establish purity of sound it may take a whole life time. Without worrying about the style and the school of musicology, and wasting effort on developing special effects, one must remember that the great musicians found their own identity by excelling in purity and not by playing to the gallery. **As the musical mood grasps the singer, he is lost in the nuances of sound, out of reckoning of time and space, heat and cold, of life revolving around him and disturbances which simply do not exist at that alleviated stage.** It will be possible to, at the least, imagine the realm of Guru Nanak's God-intoxicated state in song and at all time and to see and react in elation and ecstasy of the presence in God.

Mystical Experience: When we sit to sing in the gurdwara, that feeling of losing oneself in the musical and mystical atmosphere of *gurbani* must envelop not only the singer but the whole congregation to reach that pitch of feelings which the Guru impacted with his verses composed in classical musical meters. Sant Attar Singh created such influence on the people present, which was repeated by Bhai Sahib

Randhir Singh and Sant Nand Singh Kaleran, to cite a few examples. People still remember the pitch of devotion of Bhai Hira Singh and Bhai Pradhan Singh who directed the energies of the *Panth* in the first half of the twentieth century. A notable contribution was made in *gurmat sangeet* by Bhai Gopal Singh and Bhai Santa Singh, as well as Bhai Samund Singh who presented *gurbani* in the pure classical strain. Notable contribution is made in this regard by Bhai Avtar Singh in preserving traditions coming down from the Guru period. However, music has changed as much as language and the style has to conform to the present trend while maintaining the norms of the Indian classical traditions. Space does not allow to enumerate a complete list of the devout *ragis*, but they have moulded the direction of the community and created waves.

These savants were full of selfless zeal to inspire congregations with *gurbani* and its widest effect on the Sikh collectively. At that level of their sincerity and commitment, the song they sang penetrated the souls of their listeners and it was immaterial if the strains were made up of popular folk tunes or consisted of the traditional rural simplicity. When Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee decrees that only classical mode of music will be allowed at Darbar Sahib, Amritsar, it remains a wish, but its implementation is left uncared for and unheeded. It may be noted that most of the ragas of classical Indian music were derived from pure folk singing, so that each and every tune intoned is based on some recognised composition of classical music.

Basic Honesty: A person engaged in exploration of any branch of truth and testing ground-rules may be acquiring proficiency scientifically in that subject. But it does not make music. The same aspect assumes poetical and mystical proportions when love for it is kindled in the person and adopted as a way of life with commitment. Then the scientific theorem turns into pure art form. Music, like all other art forms, is in the primary stage nothing but a revelation of its basic structures, its rules, restraints and finer points. **It becomes art when the practitioner experiences ecstasy of each and every note and pitch.** It is incorrect to confine it to formal basic training and consider it professional competence. What are required as essential traits include humility, affection and honesty as the pre-requisites of a *gurbani* exponent in musical form.

It is at this point that one has to stop and ponder if the Sikhs have maintained the traditions set by Guru Nanak in utilising music in elevating spiritual values. In the present scenario, it is indeed a dismal picture. Music has been vulgarised by the present generation of *ragis*, who have neither knowledge nor respect for the sublime art. The basic fact is that in order to be proficient in any field, one has to undergo rigours of imbibing the know-how of the structure of the subject, to make deep study and to master all the nuances of the matter before one may venture into its exposition. Merely using of a naturally good voice or dexterity of the fingers on an instrument are indications of one's capability to train. For training, one has to put in hard discipline and determination to conquer weaknesses and rough edges of the raw spirit and adopt a strict regimen of orderly behaviour. In the development of the character of the Sikhs, it was this very spirit adroitly employed by the Tenth Master, Guru Gobind Singh by *amrit* initiation. There is never an escape route in any subject or field of enquiry. **One has to undertake the baptism of fire, for which one has to resolve and be willing to undergo hardships, remaining**

steadfast in all adversities. Guru Nanak charted a steep course for the Sikhs to come prepared for undergoing suffering in the course of moulding and shaping their personality as a whole and not in parts. The modern Sikh who espouses relaxation of rules to make it simpler and easier to adopt the theory to the extent of his convenience is nothing but the evaders and shirkers, more and more falling back on the old traditions of letting others do penance on their behalf, like routine *akhand paths*. Fine arts are serious affair and a flair for it may thrill the novice, but to reach the top one has to strictly follow the rules. Being able to sing in a naturally gifted voice for making money can be an alternative to any other means of employment but commitment and material returns never go together. That is why there are so few proficient and so many profligate singers. Among the crude listeners, it has been argued, high competency may not be appreciated and therefore easy to dispense with. However, Guru Nanak's audience was seldom of high musical and philosophic background. But the great Guru adopted strictly high standards and drew the coarse masses to his own level of excellence.

Mass Appeal: Music as a stirring medium of mass appeal can be a soul raiser and mover of the inner conscience; from raucous to finer feelings. But it can only be achieved if the practitioner has the skill to awaken the sentiments and emotions of the brutes. Knowledge of music is not enough in itself. It requires sincerity, honesty of purpose and feelings of pure love. A passable musician without these traits is more like a body without soul. His motives become materialistic which not only hamper but totally eclipse his qualities and achievements. Very few rise to that level of excellence and exclusive class and remain in history and memory infinitely.

Once walking in the corridors of Connaught Place in New Delhi late in the evening, I had such a lofty experience. It was nearing mid-night and the area was practically dark and deserted when I heard sounds of exceptionally perfect rendering of music which stopped me in my tracks. It was behind closed doors of a music shop which I used to visit to purchase items of the string instrument I was learning from my class-mate. At that late hour, a saffron-clad *sadhu* was sitting with the shop owner and was singing divinely. The shop owner signalled to me to sit down quietly so as not to disturb the flow of heavenly music. Time ceased to tick while the *sadhu* rendered one composition after the other, highly emotive, and unconscious of the place, persons and environment. Such experiences are a rare treat. When he stopped singing, the spell was broken. The monk's moist eyes showed the high level of his intoxication with the sound. It was a spiritual enlightenment which I have not experienced ever again, although I wish our *ragis* to reach that pitch even once. The core issue is commitment. Those who laid down their lives willingly and readily for the Guru and his philosophy of life were of that calibre. It may be easy to excuse one's inability to reach those heights, but non-preparation and non-execution is inexcusable. Their effect on the laity is consequently negligible.

Guru Nanak was highly motivated by his mystical experience. His euphoria and rapture were a whole-time experience. He highly valued the *Sufi* discourses and his selection of the *kafis* and *shlokas* of Sheikh Baba Farid points to his deep appreciation of the *Sufi* state of *vajjad*. This mode has been lost to the Sikhs who have totally estranged themselves from their rich and motivating pangs of love of God which our Gurus valued and Guru Arjun sang many *sabds* in that orientation in the *multani* and *lehndi* dialect. **Our negligence of the style of music so dear to**

the Gurus is apparent from the bankruptcy of our singers to create that spell which was a part of Guru Nanak's skill. These *ragis* are mostly unable to differentiate between the various styles of north Indian *gharanas*, schools of musical expression. **The rendering of *sabds* is listless, repetitious and ineffective as one sits down daily to tune in to the radio broadcast and TV programmes telecast from Harmandir Sahib.** It should have been a boon to us to have internationally beamed live telecast of the sacred *kirtan* from the precincts of the Holy Darbar Sahib in the mornings and evenings. **We cannot forget our community's long time cherished wish to glimpse the holy Harmandir Sahib at Amritsar which has been always a part of our prayers. To accomplish this wish, generations of Sikhs courted martyrdom, keeping the wish alive to date.** There were snide remarks by our countrymen who scoffed at an infinitesimal less than 2% of the vast population of this land to harbour such lofty dreams to relay *gurbani* from Darbar Sahib. They argued that all other communities would demand similar provisions. But it became possible and practicable as no other community could match the devotion and plausibility of the service at Harmandir Sahib, although many TV channels have floated whole time programmes of seers and propagation of their respective ideologies.

Sabd is held in deep devotion and dedication by the Sikhs. It has the potency and eloquence to move and motivate listeners to come face to face with the Guru. It is sad that our protagonists of *gurbani* music are unable to create awareness of the lofty standards of the *sabd* which should be sufficient to effectively excite the susceptibilities of our youth towards the great wealth of Guru Granth Sahib, as the preacher-musicians remain unaccountable to any statutory authority, or without any set objectives towards the rejuvenation of the *Panth*.

Breach of Tradition: Ironically, mere framing of laws by the Gurdwara management to impose classical singing in the Darbar Sahib is not only flouted by the musicians who do not know better, but there is no enforcement of these norms. In order to make the rule effective, these *ragis* must undergo a whole time course of classical music and its discipline. They float from one raga to the other without knowing the difference. Their expression of the sacred verses is bored and time serving. There is no spirit in their exposition. The malady is not confined to the Harmandir Sahib but spread all over in our gurdwaras. Evidently, the *sangat* loses the mystical experience of Guru's word. Compared to this, the *qawaals*, who sing for their living on donations of the public, make special effort to soar to musical heights and sway the audience who demand more. The *bhajjan* singers are constantly rising to better effect on the listeners. May be, the permanence of service in gurdwaras, giving a protected stance to the *ragis*, displayed proudly by them as *hazuri*, is the main reason of eliciting undeserving respect and position without commitment to the task of leading the congregation or worry about the outcome of their poor performances. Reverently sung, even folk tunes may create their own spell. For example, Raga *Tilak Kamod* was evolved by the impact of singing of the village belles at their community well while drawing water. It inspired the composer, a trained singer of classical music to capture the tune into raga form. Effective rendering of folk tunes have turned simple musical notes into classical melodies.

Back to Future: Having said so, the whole fabric of Sikh management and its direction needs overhauling. Time is slipping from our hands. We have to consider

the entire gamut of Sikh worshipful music and the case in forming and framing a course of direction to attract the youth, not merely to the tunes employed by the *ragis*, but the message of *gurbani* itself. Guru Nanak used to sing his melodies and the public flocked to hear him expound his philosophy. Our *gurbani* is not song but an exposition of the Lord, even though music cannot be torn away from the *gur-sabd* which had its roots nurtured by Guru Nanak himself:

ਲੋਗੁ ਜਾਨੈ ਇਹੁ ਗੀਤੁ ਹੈ ਇਹੁ ਤਉ ਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਬੀਚਾਰ ॥

[SGGS: 335]

*People mistake it for a song,
But it is spiritual musing.*

Quality is lost when reduced to mere routine in every sphere. It is a law of nature. We have to endeavour to keep up the interest of the flock by presenting the highest standards of espousal of the splendid *gurbani*, whatever the methods and procedures. Let us create healthy competition and remove the dead wood from the august title of *hazuri ragis* and boost their spirits to work hard to receive honours. Although I received very little training in music from my fellow student who was a very good artiste, even that small amount of exposure gave me some appreciation of the basics of musicology and an idea of the gigantic task ahead. It is not mere knowing of the *swar* or *raga* which gives the musician proficiency but the inspiration of the *sabd*, which leads to the mystic experience which the singer pours out to the audience. **Without that state of ecstasy, the response will elude the singer.** It is to be wondered, when the Gurus could invite non-Sikh singers to perform high standard of *gurbani* music to effectively sway the congregations, why have we become so rigid to disallow the best among the singers in paying their homage at our gurdwaras and confine ourselves to a fare of insipid display without taking any steps to check the slide down which is indeed harming us? Our management has to sit up and take stock of the present pitiable situation and mend the fences. This 'holier than the Guru' attitude will only stifle our pristine cause.

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