

# Give the Man a break

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DYA SINGH IS A TRADITIONAL SIKH of Indian origin, who was born and raised in Malaysia. He was educated in England but now makes his home in Australia. Being a stranger to India he looks at it as tourist would, but he is excellently trained in the ragaas of Gurbani and in music. God gave him a mellifluous voice and talent galore. So he performs keertan and gurbani sangeet as a mission. He walked away from his life as a successful accountant to satisfy this inner compulsion.

But here comes the rub. He sings Sikh liturgy, but his music doesn't always hew to tradition all that much. He has become an expert at fusion of eastern and western rhythms, medleys and instruments. The result is a product that is unique and electrifying, very different from the keertan we are used to in gurdwaras. His tunes are catchy and hummable. Young Sikhs who usually slink away from gurdwaras follow him around from gurdwara to gurdwara as if he were the pied piper.

So one would ask where is the problem? The last time I attended one of his performances - perhaps I should call it a concert - young Sikhs came out of the wood work to attend and enjoy but many of the older Sikhs of a different generation including the local granthi very visibly upset.

These keepers of our faith were not pleased. The only Sikhs in his ensemble were Dya Singh himself and his daughter. There was a Nepalese Hindu on the tabla, and a couple of White Australians obviously of Christian background - one playing a native Australian instrument, the other strumming a guitar. To many, this was mind-boggling. What to make of the ruling that only Sikhs should perform keertan in a gurdwara? (There is considerably irony in such a rule. We forget that Bhai Mardana was a Muslim, as was the first *dhadi* Abdul Natha in the time of the sixth Guru. A celebrated raagi Bhai Chand was Muslim as is Bhai Lal, the present raagi at Nankana Sahib.)

Mind you, I come from a bias that likes to hear every *shabd* sung in the *raag* specified for it in the Guru Granth. But that is so rarely heard even from the best known traditional ragis. I also enjoy keertan in folk tunes and catchy rhythms, which is what most raagis perform. But such performances hardly ever upset the guardians of our tradition.

Look at it another way. I enjoy a violin concerto but am not averse to country music or jazz. I love Hariprasad Chaurasia and Ravi Shankar but a ghazal rendering by Jagjit Singh can be an equally satisfying in a different context. So why not let Dya Singh do his thing? It is different and may not be everyone's cup of tea, but where is the harm? Just as many of us graduated from nursery rhymes to love classical music, some of his listeners might fall in love with gurbani by listening to the pop hits of Dya Singh.

Sometimes though, I think Dya Singh goes overboard. At least one of his tunes, someone pointed to me, appears heavily based on a very popular party song; that can be distracting. He needs to watch his step in such matters. If a rendering of a

hymn connects the listener to the infinite that is fine, if it does not then we need to recast the hymn in a different melody. The ideas to bring the listener to a closer awareness of the celestial music within - what gurbani calls the music that springs forth without the striking of a note.

Some people point out that at times Dya Singh performs in less than ideal settings - away from gurdwaras - where some of the audience may be drinking or smoking and without the reassuring presence of Guru Granth. I am not entirely sure how to react to this and as a Sikh I am troubled with this. But then I think - when Guru Nanak traveled from place to place and performed his heavenly keertan did he require that his audience sit in a particular manner, in a clean setting, in a spiritual ambience, with their heads covered and shoes removed or did he expect that the magic of his keertan which brought people to him will also transform and make them behave differently, in time if not immediately.

I remember that in the 1960's in the heyday of the Beatles and the drug culture, Ravi Shankar, at the start of his outdoor concerts, would request his audience rather emphatically to refrain from consuming alcohol and from smoking tobacco or pot. I don't know if Dya Singh follows such a practice but, if he doesn't he should.

I am also baffled at how upset some people become just because his music is different from traditional keertan. Some very serious minded Sikhs wanted to report him to the Akal Takht. Running to the Akal Takht for every little thing is like running to father for every transgression of your siblings, friends or rivals and, I think, distressingly unnecessary and childish. When a guitar-strumming convert to Sikhism sings a ballad to the glory of the Khalsa or a shabd in his heavy accented Punjabi, we are full of admiration. When a traditional looking Sikh like Dya Singh gives us a richer fusion of musical traditions we tend to go ballistic. Do we have a double standard here? Do we have a clear sense of what we want?

It seems to me that there are sensible recommendations that we could make to Dya Singh as I have pointed out so that the dignity of gurbani is not lessened. In the meantime, why not give him some slack and appreciate that he brings the music of our Gurus and their teachings to those who will never hear from otherwise.

Let us celebrate and welcome Dya Singh and his *keertan*. □