

# Celebrating Gurubani Music A Dialogue with Bhai Avtar Singh Ji

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@ Bhai Avtar Singh and his family still live in Campus of Gurudwara Mata Sundari, New Delhi, play regularly in Delhi and travel internationally several times each year. His books can be found at [www.singhbrothers.com](http://www.singhbrothers.com). His recordings can be found at various Music shops in India or can be ordered through [kultar@india.com](mailto:kultar@india.com)

DHRUPAD IS ONE OF THE OLDEST known forms of Indian classical music. The nature of dhrupad music is deeply spiritual, inducing the experience of peace and contemplation in the listener. *Dhrupad* style in *Gurbani Kirtan* traces its origin back hundreds of years directly to the time of the Sikh Gurus. These older dhrupad compositions were likely performed in the presence of Guru Arjun Dev Ji himself. This brings great power to the experience of the shabad, evoking in the listener a sense of continuity and connection to the Light of the Guru. As we celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the installation of the Adi Granth, nothing brings us closer to that essence than listening to the Words of the Guru, sung in the raag that the Guru instructed and in a composition that the Guru approved. Following is an excerpt from an interview with Bhai Avtar Singh who has so faithfully preserved these *reets* for future generations.

One of the world's greatest treasure houses of Gurbani Kirtan is Bhai Avtar Singh from New Delhi. Honored with "Shiromani Ragi Award" in March 1984, Bhai Avtar Singh personally embodies the peace and joy that is the essence of *Gurbani Kirtan*. Together with his son Bhai Kultar Singh and his nephew Bhai Swaran Singh, they have toured the world bringing the sweet compositions and character of raag played in the ancient dhrupad style to longing hearts. In July 2004, Bhai Avtar Singh played in Spain at the Parliament of World Religions, captivating those who listened with haunting melodies that originated at the time of Guru Arjun Dev Ji. Recently, Bhai Avtar Singh and *jatha* toured the USA and delighted the *sangat* with their beautiful *dhrupad shabads*.

**Bhai Avtar Singh ji:** "Our family village was near Goindwal Sahib and the blessing of Sikhism came to our family at the time of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Guru, Guru Amar Das Ji. We have been singing Gurbani Kirtan in our family for twelve generations. We have made the family tree for the past three hundred years, but could not get the names before that. From father to son the knowledge has been passed down in the family, and when I became of age to learn, my father told me that I was the eleventh generation. If you take the life of one generation as 40 years, it goes back 440 years to the time of Guru Arjun Dev Ji. This *vidiya* - this precious knowledge - was preserved within the family, so that during difficult times the knowledge was not lost. Even during the time when the Sikhs lived only on horseback, kirtan remained the priority and the *vidiya* continued.

I was born on January 8, 1926, and I was nine years old when I started learning kirtan from my father. I started by playing small cymbals and singing with him. After about a year, I started playing the taus. When my father played kirtan, it was with

two taus, and two tablas. That was the jatha. For eleven years I played taus with my Father. You must appreciate there was no public address system at that time, no microphones, no speakers, nothing. When the taus is being played it has such a loud and deeply resonant sound that no other instrument can match it.

In 1923 the Akali movement for the reformation of Gurdwara management was fully underway. At the time of the Jaito Morcha, when Bhai Ripudaman Singh was arrested and the British put the sangat under heavy siege, the Sikhs launched a large, sustained non-violent protest. My father, Bhai Jawala Singh, was one of the Sikh leaders and he was jailed under difficult conditions. He spent 9 or 10 months in the jail and during this time, he developed some very painful joint problems. As a result, he could no longer play the taus. When he was older and his hands hurt, he used to do the opening melody with the taus, and then hand the taus off to me. He would then switch to harmonium and I'd continue playing the taus.

My grandfather, Baba Deva Singh Ji taught my father, Bhai Jawala Singh Ji, all of the old compositions and knowledge of raag. There was a friend of my grandfather, Baba Sardha Singh who used to visit him and play the "taus," an instrument that originates during the time of Guru Hargobind Sahib. So, when my grandfather died, my father learned kirtan vidiya from Bhai Sardha Singh also.

Bhai Sardha Singh brought my father, Bhai Jawala Singh, to Baba Rangji Ram, a great Hazoori Ragi from the Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar. He was known as Baba Rangji Ram, but his name was Baba Vasava Singh. He was from the most renowned and learned kirtania family of his time. My father studied with him for many years and brought this *vidiya* into our family. In this way, the compositions and the knowledge have come to me.

In the original compositions, they used to play *saranda*, *tabla*, and *taus*. Taus is the name for "peacock" in Persian. This instrument looks like a peacock and has the peacock stomach in the back and a beak in the front. The taus was conceived by and designed by the 6<sup>th</sup> Guru, Guru Hargobind Ji. It is very interesting to know how it was born. The Guru and his Sikhs were singing outdoors under a tree enjoying God and nature. As was the old tradition, they were playing some stringed instruments. After a while, the musicians took a rest, and they leaned their instruments up against the tree. A peacock waddled into the group and he cried in the wailing sound that belongs only to the peacock. All of the stringed instruments resonated with the sound of the peacock cry, and the strings actually started humming. The sound was so ethereal and Guru Sahib liked that sound so much that he said, "Let us design an instrument that sounds like this - a combination of the resonance of all the string instruments and the plaintive cry of the peacock". And that's how the *taus* was invented under the supervision of Guru Hargobind Ji.

*Taus* is seldom used in *kirtan jathas* now. One reason that the harmonium became popular was that carrying the taus was a big problem. There were no taxis; there were no public means of door-to-door transportation. We went everywhere by train and the railway station was 10 miles from our village. There were no vehicles, so we carried our instruments on our shoulders. Sometimes we would hire a horse or a donkey and put the instruments on the horse. When my father was old, he would sit on a horse and have the instruments loaded on another one. To carry a taus was difficult – it is large, and heavy and very delicate.

Stringed instruments, especially the taus, are very sensitive to the environment. These multi-stringed instruments are affected by hot weather, cold weather, and moisture. They are as delicate as children. You need 20 minutes to tune it when you arrive at the Darbar. It became very impractical, especially when your total duration of performance is from 45 minutes to an hour. And that is the reason that now you rarely see the taus in a *kirtan jatha*.

In these modern days, it is difficult to preserve the *vidiya* of Gurbani Kirtan. In years passed, there were no distractions as there are now like catchy tunes and the influence of other types of music on the kirtan. In my father's time everyone who played Gurbani Kirtan used to sing in dhrupad style, utilizing the difficult *taals* and the traditional form of *kirtan*. You would not be considered a *raagi* if you didn't sing in that style.

Fifty years ago, in January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1954, my brother, Bhai Gurcharan Singh, and I moved from Punjab to Delhi to join the employment of the Delhi Gurdwara Management Committee, and do kirtan at Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib.

When we were in Punjab, we were free to sing in the traditional style and there was no limitation as to how long we could sing. But when we came to Delhi and took our post with the DGMC, there was a particular time slot - from this exact time to that exact time - and so we had to change the way we played. We also faced a problem educating the *sangat*. They would say, "We don't understand what you are singing" because they didn't have exposure to the traditional dhrupad style of kirtan. As a result, we simplified some of the compositions so that the people could understand and sing along. But it was always of paramount importance to me that the old *reets*, the original compositions, should not be lost in the pressure of the times.

To this end my brother and I wrote a book, compiling and documenting all the shabads passed down through our family in the original compositions. In 1979 Punjabi University in Patiala published this book in two volumes, *Gurbani Sangeet Praacheen Reet Ratnaavalee*. There are about 500 compositions in those books, which include all of the shabads restored to the original dhrupad style. We sang all of those 500 shabads and there is about 72 hours of recordings that are archived. This brought a lot of publicity and public awareness to classical raag because these books were one of their kind. We received an award for books on music as the best books of 1980. People started taking these compositions more seriously and the old and beautiful style started to be revived. We again were able to include the dhrupad and difficult compositions in our singing.

Out of those 500 traditional compositions, in recent years there are about 380 compositions that we have professionally, digitally recorded in the studio. Some of these are already available to the *sangat*, but we still have about 40 hours of recording that have not been released yet. This is the best way to preserve it and to keep it alive. When the *sangat* listens with appreciation and devotion, then the *vidiya* is alive. Now, by the Grace of the Guru, it is preserved forever."

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