

Bhai Sahib Randheer Singh jee's Keertan Style  
By Pr. Gurmukh Singh jee  
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It's my guess that Bhai Sahib Bhai Randheer Singh jee started doing keertan at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was not related to any classical raag gharaanaa in any way. At that time in Punjab, there were only a few keertanees who sang in pure raag and then there were some Sants who did keertan in joTeeaa(n) with chimTay and dholkees.

Bhai Sahib jee would sit for five or six hours straight and do keertan non stop and he himself would become the embodiment of the keertan. At the same time, many in the sangat would also be enchanted with the keertan. Only that person can listen to keertan for hours upon hours who has a connection to the keertan internally.

Today's professional keertanees do their job to make a living. Neither they themselves are lost in the keertan nor do they have much of an effect on the sangat. There is now a custom of having keertan darbaars and there too professional raagees are prominent but there's no real spiritual upliftment at these places.

Mostly, when raagees do keertan, they spend most of the time playing the vaja and little time singing. But those who saw Bhai Sahib do keertan can testify that he never ever tried to save his voice or worried about his throat. Inside him, waves of keertan rose and he would do keertan at the highest of notes for hours on end. And then, he would sing each line so sweetly and repeatedly that many souls would be in the state of "rang haseh(n) rang roveh(n) chup bhee kar jaahi(n)". I myself saw so many people with teary eyes. In keertans like this, it was hard for the organisers to show their watches and draw the keertan to a close. There was such nectar from the keertan, that it seemed as if time did not exist. Keertan just kept going.

When I went to the Delhi Smaagam for the first time in 1953 and saw Bhai Sahib and his companions doing keertan in divine colours, this whole scene was a wonder to me. The keertan would start at 4AM at Tilak Nagar and Asa Dee Vaar would end at 5PM. Perhaps because the keertan went on for hours that people began to call Bhai Sahib's keertan style "Akhand Keertan", which is a term from baaNee: "Akhand keertan tin bhojan choora. Kaho Nanak jis satgur poora." (p. 236).

Bhai Sahib spent sixteen years in prison during the independence movement. In the dark cells of the prison, Bhai Sahib made his sarbloh kaRas instruments for keertan. He relied upon naam and baaNee and keertan to make his life sentence worthwhile. He remained steadfast in the will of the Satguru. Keertan was not his job, it was the food for his soul. When in the final two years, the doctors discouraged Bhai Sahib from doing keertan, he said the following words to me, "What's the matter with these doctors? They've tried to stop my keertan...."

Until Bhai Sahib's time, women were prohibited from doing keertan at big events and usually they just got together in different houses and after doing Sukhmani Sahib, they would sing shabads with a dholkee and chhaiNey. Bhai Sahib Randheer Singh jee used to encourage women to sit equally with others at big deevans and do keertan. The result of this is that in the keertans of the Akhand Keertanee Jatha, where Singhs do keertan, women also are given time.

Islam does not give women freedom to go to the mosque [i.e. unless special provisions are made] and Hindu women are considered unsuitable for worship due to sootak and they believe the gods may become upset. Under this Brahmanistic influence, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Sikh women used to also stay back. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bhai Sahib Randheer Singh jee encouraged women to come forward. Even to this day in Sree Darbaar Sahib Amritsar, because of the influence of Brahmanism, women are not allowed to do keertan. Why this discrimination in the Guru's darbaar between Singhs and Singhnees? How long will this continue?

Bhai Sahib also started another tradition: the refusal of money for keertan. Wherever the Akhand Keertanee Jatha is, they do not sell keertan. Considering keertan to be food for the soul, they themselves eat and also give it to the sangat.

It is not an exaggeration to say that in Bhai Sahib's and his companions' old shabad tunes, where the shabad is filled with vairaag, the tune too also reflects the vairaag and highlights it. Where the shabad was about happiness and meeting loved ones, the keertanee would use a tune to reflect this as well.

Gupurvasi Col. Piara Singh jee used to say to me that Bhai Sahib could hear divine keertan within himself. Hearing the keertan tunes within, he would then bring them out as well [and do keertan in sangat according to those tunes]. Bhai Sahib used to be very happy and eager to hear keertan from those who had the kirpaa of Satguru jee and were playing in dasam duaar.

The special feature of Bhai Sahib's keertan was that he would sing GurbaaNee very sweetly and enjoy the nectar. The new keertanees of today have not seen Bhai Sahib do keertan nor are there any tapes that they can listen to, and because of this, they remain away from this divine style of keertan. Both shabads of vairaag and happiness are sung to tunes from show-business/movie tunes. Keertan is a divine gift, not an art and not a mastery of the notes and scales.

Neither Bhai Sahib himself nor any of his companions used to do dhunee of gurmantar. Sometimes one could hear the sounds of "guroo guroo" coming from his lips but the keertan remained akhand or unbroken. Today, some 30-35 years after his leaving us, the keertan style he showed, has been totally changed. New keertanees think that the keertan can be akhand/unbroken or not but the abhyaas of Gurmantar in sangat should be akhand. If they are going to do 30 minutes of keertan, at least half that time is spent on "Vahiguru Vahiguru". Because of this, the keertan does not remain akhand keertan nor is it akhand abhyaas. It should be remembered that Bhai Sahib did keertan of gurbaaNee only. The custom of abhyaas in sangat like this only started after 1960. The custom of sangat abhyaas keertan is now even more in vogue today. I fear that in the coming time, the Jatha's name may be changed to the "Sangatee Akhand Abhyaasee Jatha". Abhyaas should be done secretly at amrit vela, in keertans, only pure keertan is suitable.

Leaving Bhai Sahib's style, Bh. Mohinder Singh SDO started a new style. This is the style of theme-keertan. If there was a keertan for someone's death, he would start a shabad and then leaving it, would sing examples out of baaNee on the same theme in different ear-pleasing tunes. And in between he would do dhunee of gurmantar and sometimes a little bit of explanation/katha as well. He would do keertan of Bhai Gurdaas jee's Vaars for hours. Sometimes I'd think whether singing keertan of the vaars was equal to that of singing gurbaaNee. The vaars are to clarify some hidden meanings in baaNee. But this practice continued for quite some time. Even now many brothers copy Bh. Mohinder Singh SDO's style and in such keertan, the intellect remains occupied but the consciousness does not attach itself. Going from theme to theme, without deep study of gurbaaNee there is a big chance of the keertan being without nectar.

If we want to grasp Bhai Sahib's keertan style properly, then we should sing baaNee with a lot of love and with enjoyment. First we should attach ourselves to the Guru's feet. In Sangat there are many that are thirsting for keertan-nectar. We should discourage ourselves from doing keertan for the intelligence and to show smartness. The foundation of this keertan gathering is loving-devotion/prema-bhagtee. Those who came to this gathering to show their knowledge left empty-handed. Only singing praises with love and enjoyment is of any use.