

## BHAI DHARAM SINGH ZAKHMI, A GREAT PREACHER KIRTANIA Harjap Singh Aujla

Since the days of Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji and his lifelong musician assistant Bhai Mardana (a Muslim Rababi maestro), there has been a long association of the Rababi Muslim musicians with the Sikh community. By tradition since ages (roughly a thousand years from now) the Rababi families consisted primarily of hereditary musicians and one of them Bhai Mardana enjoyed the unique privilege of becoming a life long musical assistant of a great social and religious reformer Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji. He accompanied the great Guru during his four famous journeys of the then known World. Long after the death of the last Sikh Guru Sri Guru Gobind Singh in 1708, this community of professional musicians kept the traditions of original "Shabad Kirtan" tunes and formats alive by performing "Gurmat Sangeet" in the "Gurdwaras" and homes of the followers of the faith.

Most of the Rababi musicians kept on performing "Shabad Kirtan" till the beginning of the twentieth century in the original tunes of the "Guru Darbars". Even while serving the Sikh audiences most maintained their strong association with their Islamic faith. But some of them became genuinely attracted towards the Sikh faith and they eventually became practicing Sikhs. Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi was one of the few who embraced Sikhism in letter and spirit in 1947.

Most of the more accomplished Rababi musician families lived in the districts of Amritsar, Lahore, Nankana Sahib, Jullundur, Hoshiarpur and Kapurthala. During the twentieth century, some of the Rababi Kirtanias living in Amritsar, Jullundur, Hoshiarpur and Nankana Sahib had converted to Sikh faith. Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi's name was one of the most prominent among them. He became an "Amrit Dhari" Sikh by properly grasping the basics of the religion and after getting fully committed to his new faith. Since then he and his family never looked back.

Over the years and after reading the best Farsi and Urdu books on the religion, Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi had acquired a deep understanding for preaching the Sikh faith. While in school, he had studied Urdu and Persian languages and also learnt the history and philosophy as subjects through the old Persian and Urdu books on the subject. His pronunciation of Urdu words was perfect to the minute details. This was greatly appreciated by the educated and knowledgeable audiences in the Sikh congregations. After Bhai Samund Singh, Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi came to be recognized as the other most respected Sikh religious musician of All India Radio Jalandhar. Being a scholar of the Sikh religion and a leading orator, Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi became a very popular "Kathakar Pracharak" too and as such he earned a lot of name and fame.

Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi was born and brought up in a nondescript village Manko (near Adampur) in Jalandhar district. His younger brother, Bhai Shamsher Singh Zakhmi had worked even harder on classical music and his voice became very sweet and flexible. His range of produced notes was also very extensive. He could easily modulate between the highest and the lowest notes. As such during

the later years of the group, Bhai Shamsheer Singh Zakhmi used to virtually lead the party in singing. In earlier years both brothers used to complement each other. When most of the other Raagi Jathas performed "Shabad Kirtan" as groups of three, two on harmoniums and one on Tabla. Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi's group had a string instrument too and it consisted of four musicians.

Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi's initial training in classical music took place within the family. Later on for intensive training he became the student of Professor Darshan Singh Komal of Hoshiarpur. The blind maestro Darshan Singh Komal trained scores of Sikh religious musicians. Among his most promising "Shagirds" were Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi, Bhai Didar Singh (another great blind maestro), Bhai Beant Singh Bijli and Bhai Gian Singh Surjeet (also a blind artist).

One of Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi's sons Bhai Amrik Singh Zakhmi was trained to play a string instrument (Dilruba) and another brother of Bhai Dharam Singh Har Iqbal Singh accompanied the group as a drummer (tabla player). Even legendry Bhai Samund Singh ji loved to hear some of the "Shabads" in the choicest "Reets" rendered by Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi's group.

Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi's party was one of first among the Sikh musicians to travel abroad. Among other countries they visited Kenya, the United Kingdom, Malaysia and Singapore several times. During one of their trips to Great Britain, the audiences liked their "Kirtan" so much that they had to extend their two month trip to more than six months. Some of their music was recorded on professional spool type tape decks. However, on regular basis transcription of their renditions was done during their tours of Singapore. Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi died around 1978 and after a few months his group was taken over by his younger brother Bhai Shamsheer Singh Zakhmi.

Gurdwara Richmond Hill New York sponsored the visit of the "Raagi Jatha" of Bhai Shamsheer Singh Zakhmi in 1985. After serving in that famous Gurdwara for six weeks, the group visited Gurdwara Bridgewater New Jersey for a month. During this trip, the second singer was another Rababi maestro Bhai Mohan Pal Singh, formerly of Gurdwara Janam Asthan Sri Nankana Sahib and the drummer was Akal Singh, a nephew of Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi. During that trip Bhai Mohan Pal Singh's performance was simply outstanding.

A lot of Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi's music has been very well recorded and a substantial part is now available on internet under [Gurmarsangeetproject.com](http://Gurmarsangeetproject.com) and [Keertan.org](http://Keertan.org). Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi is not with us, but his voice lives on for the benefit of the future generations of listeners of good music.

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