

# BHAI PRITHIPAL SINGH MOHAN PAL SINGH A LINK WITH THE MUSICAL HERITAGE OF NANKANA SAHIB

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We all know that since the days of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's empire "Gurdwara Janam Asthan Sri Nankana Sahib" and "Sri Darbar Sahib Amritsar" have been acknowledged to be the two shrines where the Sikh musical heritage was preserved at its pristine and sophisticated best. Other historic shrines used to look to these great places of worship for inspiration and guidance.

"Sri Darbar Sahib" is with us and we have extensively heard "Gurmat Sangeet" by the musicians in its service. We know this music since the days of Bhai Santa Singh and his contemporaries. We have also heard the music of Bhai Samund Singh ji of "Sri Nankana Sahib", but other than Bhai Samund Singh, we have not been really conversant with what his other contemporaries were singing.

At least I had the curiosity to know as to how the other, particularly the famous Rababi Kirtanias, used to sing "Gurbani" at "Gurdwara Janam Asthan Sri Nankana Sahib. To my good luck, by chance, I stumbled upon a musician, who represented the second generation of the refugee Raagis from Nankana Sahib.

It was the year 1976, I was posted as a sub-divisional engineer construction at Patiala. Police buildings in Fort Bahadurgarh were under my charge. I observed a huge sized Sikh wearing white clothes coming out of Gurdwara Bahadurgarh Sahib. This gurdwara is situated on the opposite side of Fort Bahadurgarh. A man, who knew this individual, told me that he is the finest classical musician in Patiala. He introduced the individual as Bhai Mohan Pal Singh.

True to my extrovert nature, I tried to open up with this so far mysterious musician. He quickly judged my curiosity and asked me if I have heard about Bhai Pal Singh Jaswant Singh and Bhai Gurmukh Singh Bhai Sarmukh Singh Fakkar of "Sri Nankana Sahib"? I answered in affirmative. He told me that he is one of the descendents of this great family of musicians. But he wanted me to hear him first and then decide if he is a worthy descendent of the famous Kirtanias of the yore. I asked him if he knew the Reets, in which Bhai Pal Singh Jaswant Singh used to sing at Nankana Sahib. He replied yes he can sing most of their "Reets". He gave me his home address, but he had no phone.

One fine holiday morning I decided to see him at his residence. He lived in a poor neighbourhood called "Tripuri" in Patiala city. The street leading to his home was only partly paved, the rest was potholed, muddy and dusty with milch cattle tied on both sides. On reaching his home I knocked at his door. The unpainted door was opened by Bhai Mohan Pal Singh himself. He was happy to receive me. He asked his lady to warm the milk for the guest, but I refused. He asked a young boy of twelve to bring the Tabla. He sang "Bilaskhani Todi". From his "Alaap" he appeared to be a pupil of Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, which he proudly admitted he was. He said during early sixties he and his cousin Prithipal Singh

were sent to Khan Sahib Bade Ghulam Ali Khan in Bombay to learn the finer points of the singing traditions of "Patiala Gharana" and this training helped them a lot professionally. Ever since that training, they have been doing "Riaz" of what they learnt. While in Bombay they met legendry playback singer Mohammad Rafi too, who offered them lucrative assignments as chorus singers in film industry, but they politely rejected the offer saying that they don't want to quit their ancestral profession of singing for their Guru. He said even these days we both keep visiting Malerkotla to learn more about music from Ustad Bakar Ali Khan, the most accomplished music teacher of Patiala Gharana.

I was impressed. My father (Late Sardar Sochet Singh) lived in Chandigarh. During his college education days in Lahore Government College, he used to occasionally visit Nankana Sahib and was impressed with the singing skills of the Rababi Kirtanias of "Gurdwara Janam Asthan". He was quite curious to hear the voices of their descendents. I promised him that I shall bring them to Chandigarh for a special "Kirtan Diwan" at my father's residence. But that moment eluded us. My father died on August 31, 1976. He could not hear them singing, but they were present and performing Kirtan on his "Antim Ardas" a few days later.

Bhai Mohan Pal Singh was always telling me that his cousin Bhai Prithipal Singh is even a better Kirtania. While in Patiala, I did not have the privilege of listening to Bhai Prithipal Singh and a desire to listen to him remained in my heart. But I often used to go to "Gurdwara Sri Dukh Niwaran Sahib at Patiala" and often heard Bhai Joginder Singh Mohinder Singh, the cousins of Bhai Mohan Pal Singh and Prithipal Singh perform "Gurmat Sangeet" and they were mesmerizing.

After coming to America, I had the privilege in 1985 of inviting Bhai Mohan Pal Singh, who was accompanying Bhai Shamsheer Singh Zakhmi, to perform Shabad Kirtan at Gurdwara Bridgewater New Jersey. I made some recordings too. Bhai Mohan Pal Singh's voice was power packed and highly cultured.

A few days ago a friend of mine guided me to listen to Sikh devotional music on [longislandkirtan.com](http://longislandkirtan.com). I did and to my surprise in the folder on old vintage Kirtan, I stumbled upon some recordings in the voice of Bhai Prithipal Singh. There is Asa Di Vaar in two parts and there are 2 more MP-3s in the voice of this musician. After listening to these four folders, I rediscovered some remnants of the great traditions of "Shabad Kirtan" once alive at "Gurdwara Janam Asathan Sri Nankana Sahib". I request all the genuine lovers of "Gurmat Sangeet" to listen to Bhai Prithipal Singh's "Shabad Kirtan". In some very small pieces he has given glimpses of his mastery over this dying art. Both Bhai Prithipal Singh and Bhai Mohan Pal Singh are not alive anymore. Both died a few years ago before attaining the age of sixty. Both lived and died in poverty. Our community never recognized their talents. They have been tormented financially but they never abandoned their traditions and never compromised with their music.

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