

BHAI SAMUND SINGH JI, A SIKH RELIGIOUS MUSICIAN PAR EXCELLENCE

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“So kyon visre meri maaye” was a “Shabad of Gurubani” being broadcast on radio in a highly emotional tone and texture by an unheard of but extraordinary voice. This highly cultured voice completely mesmerized me when I tuned in to All India Radio Jalandhar-Amritsar some day way back in 1952. Later on after the singing of the Shabad was over, the announcer politely exclaimed in Punjabi “You have just heard the voice of Bhai Sumund Singh Ragi singing a Shabad”. My father (Late Sardar Sochet Singh), during the years of his college education, had heard this sweet, magical, flexible and emotive voice for the first time in mid nineteen twenties at “Gurdwara Janam Asthan Sri Nankana Sahib”, during the marathon celebrations of the Birth Anniversary of Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji. Sirdar Kapur Singh, who later on became an ICS Officer and a member of parliament was with him. Since that moment my father became a lifelong admirer of Bhai Samund Singh ji and with extreme reverence my father used to call Bhai Samund Singh ji as the Samunder of Gurmat Sangeet (the ocean of Sikh Religious Music). In my case too from that ominous morning of 1952, even I became a big fan of the sweet, melodious and enchanting voice of Bhai Samund Singh ji. Whenever the gifted singer Bhai Samund Singh ji happened to visit the studios of All India Radio Jalandhar, he was accorded the respect he amply deserved.

The authorities of All India Radio Jalandhar – Amritsar decided to fix every Friday of the week for predominance of “Shabad Kirtan” programmes at this regional radio station. His other contemporaries like Bhai Amrik Singh of Amritsar, Bhai Gurcharan Singh Avtar Singh of Sultanpur Lodhi, Bhai Munsha Singh of Kapurthala and Bhai Harchand Singh were invited to the radio station once a month, but Bhai Samund Singh ji was invited at least once in every fortnight to perform live at Punjab’s only radio station. During those days this radio station had a large number of its own musical instruments including several “Tanpuras” (a string instrument which accompanies every North Indian Classical musician during the rendition of pure classical numbers). Bhai Sumund Singh and Master Rattan of Phagwara were always requested to choose any one of the Tanpuras for accompaniment. Most other musicians had to bring their own Tanpuras. One of the staff artists, an accomplished clarinet player, had become a big fan of Bhai Samund Singh ji. He was always insistent of accompanying Bhai Sahib during rendition of “Shabad Kirtan”. Similarly a violinist also was always eager to play his instrument with Bhai Sahib. These facts and several other such incidents were told to me by Late Sardar Jodh Singh, retired Assistant Station Director of All India Radio Jalandhar. During his twice a month visits to the radio station, Sardar Jodh Singh almost invariably invited Bhai Samund Singh ji to have lunch at his residence. They remained very good lifelong friends. When Bhai Samund Singh died in January of 1972, Sardar Jodh Singh was in shock and disbelief.

Sardar Jodh Singh also told me that the ancestry and relatives of Bhai Samund Singh ji hailed mostly from the districts of Sheikhpura, Gujranwala, Lyallpur and Montgomery. Sardar Jodh Singh himself belonged to Gujranwala district but, before independence and division of the Indian Sub-continent, he served as a head master at Lyallpur (now Faisalabad) in Pakistani Punjab. According to S. Jodh Singh, strict religious discipline (Nitnem) and regular "Riyaz" of the Ragas was a hallmark of Bhai Samund Singh's lifestyle from childhood onwards.

Bhai Samund Singh was born in A.D. 1900 in a relatively unknown village called "Mulla Hamza" in Montgomery (now Sahiwal) district in Multan administrative Division of West Punjab. This district was famous for its wealthy Sikh farming community and was one of the favourite districts of the British rulers. Although the Sikhs constituted barely ten percent of the population of that district, yet financially they were very well off and were controlling the economy of the area. Sikhism had developed deep roots and was thriving in this area. Several Hindu families of the area also used to baptize their elder son as a practicing Sikh. One of the role-models for the Sikh community of the area was the devout Sikh family of Bhai Huzoor Singh ji, the illustrious father of Bhai Samund Singh ji, and their ancestors. At a very young age, approximately between the ages of six to ten, Bhai Hazoor Singh had set a vigorous training regime for his son. He was made to learn "Japuji Sahib" and "Rehraas" by heart before the age of ten. By the age of twelve, Bhai Samund Singh had learnt at least one thousand Shabads of Sri Guru Granth Sahib by heart. He had also undergone proper ab-initio training in several commonly sung "Gurmat Sangeet Raagas" and other common ragas by that age. For Bhai Samund Singh training in Ragas and mastering the technique and grammar of rendition was a lifelong obsession. Even while lying in the bed, he will have his Tanpura by his side. He experimented with singing each Shabad in several Ragas and Talls (beats). Some of the Ragas were prescribed in holy "Sri Guru Granth Sahib", others were similar in "Thath" (family) and some were purely based on the time of singing. Choice of the Raaga in accordance with the time of the day or night was very important for Bhai Samund Singh ji

The family lived and served in the historic shrines at Nankana Sahib (the birth place of Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji and the neighbourhood). At the young age of twelve, Bhai Samund Singh used to regularly perform at least one of the several "Chowkis" of Shabad Kirtan performed every day at Gurdwara Janam Asthan Sri Nankana Sahib (district Sheikhpura of Lahore division). The then hereditary managers of the shrines were called "Mahants". They had a number of failings, which have been highlighted in several written documents and weaknesses in their opulent and indulgent lifestyles, but they had something good also to their credit. They were quite knowledgeable about the requirements of Sikh religious music. They knew the correct structure of the Raagas and they could quickly distinguish between an accomplished Raagi (one who does rendition of Sikh religious music) and an ordinary Raagi. One such manager discovered the extraordinary talent in Kaka Samund Singh at the age of twelve and he offered him a permanent position of "Huzoori Kirtania" at the important Sikh shrine.

Before the partition of Punjab, two historic shrines were especially known for their fine traditions of "Gurmat Sangeet". One such shrine was the Golden Temple in Amritsar and the other one was "Gurdwara Janam Asthan Sri Nankana Sahib". Dhrupad style of "Gurmat Sangeet", prevalent during the time of the ten Gurus, attained its peak in the Golden Temple approximately four hundred years ago. The "Khayal Shelley" of "Shabad Kirtan" started taking shape during the time of the Tenth Master Guru Gobind Singh ji, but in Punjab it attained its peak during and immediately after the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Bhai Samund Singh was basically an exponent of "Khayal Shelley" of "Shabad Kirtan". Bhai Samund Singh did sing some "Dhrupads" too, which due to his great voice and versatile modulation were considered professional masterpieces.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, most of the "Rababi Kirtanias" had mastered the rendition of "Khayal Shelley", but somehow they had the tendency of extending the "Khayal" format too long and wide by starting with a long "Alaap" (before starting drum beat) and gradually going into "Jorh Alaap" (including drumbeat), before starting the rendition of Shabad in "Vilambhat Lai" (slow tempo) and then warming up to Madh Lai" (medium tempo) and finally going into the fast climax tempo called "Dhrutt Lai". While doing "Dhrutt Lai" many times the wording of the "Gurbani" became less clear or unintelligible.

Bhai Samund Singh, on the other hand, gave utmost importance to the clarity of words of "Gurbani". He mastered a new format. After a short "Alaap" he used to go directly into the "Madh Lai" and completed the entire "Shabad" in the same tempo. Most of the time, he completely omitted the "Dhrutt Lai". This resulted in marked clarity in words, which was also the aim of the ten "Guru Sahibaan". Bhai Samund Singh's style of rendition was named "Chhota Raaga Shelley". In spite of Bhai Samund Singh's innovation, the "Rababi Kirtanias" continued following the longer "Khayal Shelley" format. The Rababis often used to over-indulge in exhibition of their skills in classical music during their renditions. This practice in Punjabi was called "Taan Paltas". But this kind of excessive display of classical skills was alien to Bhai Samund Singh ji. For him his ultimate master (the Guru) was supreme and the Raaga was subservient to his "Guru's" message.

From 1912 onwards up to August of 1947, Bhai Samund Singh served as a "Hazoori Ragi" and later approximately after 1935 as the leading "Hazoori Raagi" of "Gurdwara Janam Asthan Sri Nankana Sahib". During his service at Nankana Sahib, he came in contact with a number of "Kirtanias" of name and fame. A lot of them were the "Rababis", who were considered masters of the art of North Indian Classical Music. His interaction with them was extremely useful to him as well as to them. Each one was learning something new from the vast reservoir of knowledge attained by the other maestros. Among some of his contemporary Rabani Kirtanias were Bhai Tana Singh, Bhai Gurmukh Singh Fakkar Bhai Sarmukh Singh Fakkar and Bhai Pall Singh Bhai Jaswant Singh to name a few. Some Rababis had retained their Islamic names and were not baptized

(practicing) Sikhs. They included Bhai Naseera, Bhai Sudarshan, Bhai Rashida. On special occasions, some Rababis used to come from Amritsar to perform at various Gurdwaras in Nankana Sahib. They included Bhai Chanan, Bhai Mehar, Bhai Faiz, Bhai Lal, Bhai Chand and Bhai Taba to name a few.

In 1925, after a prolonged struggle for the liberation of historic gurdwaras from the control of the “Mahants”, under a British Indian Act, the democratically elected Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) came into being. It was headquartered in the Golden Temple Complex in Amritsar and it exercised jurisdiction over most of the historic Sikh shrines located in the Provinces of Punjab and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) in undivided India. Among the gurdwaras taken over by the SGPC, the second most important was “Gurdwara Janam Asthan Sri Nankana Sahib”. The enthusiastic membership of this new committee quickly went into business and made several changes, including exchange and transfer of “Raagi Jathas” from one historic shrine to the other. During this time Bhai Samund Singh also started traveling a lot.

The rich and influential “Sikh Sangat” of Lyallpur, Sri Ganganagar, Montgomery and Gujranwala was always pleased to invite Bhai Samund Singh ji to perform “Shabad Kirtan” in the local Gurdwaras at Lyallpur, Montgomery, Gujranwala, Sri Ganganagar, Tobha Tek Singh, Samundri, Okarha, JArhanwala, Mandi Burewal and Gojra to name a few. There were some very staunch Sikhs living in far flung areas of North West Frontier Province, Balochistan and Sindh. They also used to invite Bhai Samund Singh ji to perform “Shabad Kirtan” in their Gurdwaras. This spread his name and fame in far away places. Members of the Sikh community, where ever he went showered at him a lot of love and respect.

At “Gurdwara Janam Asthan Sri Nankana Sahib”, the longest and the most demanding “Shabad Chowki” was that for “Asa Di Vaar”. Starting well before sunrise and ending at dawn, it lasted at least two hours. After 1935, Bhai Samund Singh was accorded more slots each month to perform this “Chawki”. Bhai Samund Singh discharged this duty with utmost devotion and reverence. He mastered the technique of rendition of “Asraje Tunde Di Dhuni” to perfection. I have heard “Asa Di Vaar” rendered by Bhai Santa Singh, Bhai Samund Singh and Bhai Budh Singh Taan. As far as the “Asraje Tunde Di Dhuni” is concerned, all three are quite identical. Bhai Santa Singh’s tempo was slightly faster. If we listen to the present day “Kirtanias” of the Golden Temple, we can find out that there is no standardization of rendition of “Asraje Tunde Di Dhuni” anymore. Bhai Samund Singh, as said earlier was very particular about the time of the Raaga. He rarely made a variation from the strict time regime of the Gurmat Raagas.

All India Radio Lahore, the then only radio station in Punjab, opened in a state of the art studio complex in 1937. This radio station needed a host of artists of all kinds and hues. In the religious category they needed “Muslim Naat and Qawali singers”, “Sikh Gurmat Sangeet singers” and “Hindu Bhajan singers”. Bhai Samund Singh ji of “Gurdwara Janam Asthan Sri Nankana Sahib” and Bhai

Santa Singh ji of the Golden Temple Amritsar were approved as the staff artists in the very first year. Soon they both attained the "A Class" in their category. These two stalwarts had contrasting styles. Bhai Santa Singh sang invariably in very high notes and he mastered this technique, but Bhai Samund Singh always sang in a completely relaxed style in all kinds of notes, and seldom went into the difficult to produce highest notes. Bhai Santa Singh mostly sang in "Kehrwaa Tall" and laid most stress on his highly cultured voice, but Bhai Samund Singh used most of the "Talls" used by the contemporary and ancient Sikh musicians. Bhai Samund Singh by prolonged "Riyaz" had developed such a fine "Murki" in his voice that he could render the most difficult modulations with perfection and ease. A lot of musicians tried to imitate him, but he was hard to imitate.

At All India Radio Lahore, Bhai Samund Singh came in contact with all time great maestros like Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Vinayak Rao Patwardhan, Dalip Singh Bedi (later Dilip Chander Vedi), Barqat Ali Khan, Din Mohammad, Kallan Khan, Harish Chander Bali and Master Rattan. Between performances and afterwards, they used to run into each other. Each one of them was not afraid of asking the other about the finer points of classical music. These discussions several times led to heated discussions too, but soon every difference of opinion used to be resolved amicably. Bhai Samund Singh used to commute, at least once every month to Lahore from Nankana Sahib. In the same way Bhai Santa Singh used to commute from Amritsar to Lahore. Bhai Sudh Singh and Pradhan Singh were also later on approved as radio singers. A local artist Bhai Budh Singh Taan was the only approved radio singer, who used to perform "Shabad Kirtan" as a solo artist. While in Lahore, Bhai Samund Singh used to stay overnight at "Gurdwara Dehra Sahib Lahore" and used to perform a "Chowki" over there too. Whenever Bhai Samund Singh's voice was heard over the airwaves, the evening crowds at Gurdwara Dehra Sahib Lahore used to swell several times. Among the listeners usually present were a lot of Muslims, Hindus and Christians. Music Director Vinod was one of the Christians, who used to listen to Bhai Samund Singh ji at "Gurdwara Dehra Sahib Lahore". In order to stay within their time constraints, All India Radio Lahore used to determine the time limit of the "Shabad" to be sung. Bhai Samund Singh, during rehearsal, used to sing each stanza at least once and if he could not complete the entire "Shabad" within the stipulated time slot, he used to refuse singing of that "Shabad" for the radio. It was not his principle to leave any part of the "Shabad" unsung. His strict "Gurmat" principles were always his strength and the authorities of All India Radio never defied his argument.

Bhai Samund Singh used to sing Shabads in the minimum possible time while singing for All India Radio, but at the time of performing "Kirtan" in the homes and Gurdwaras, he was more relaxed and he took more time to sing the same Shabad doing full justice to each "Elahi" (Godly) word. He did not like doing "Katha" while doing Kirtan. Bhai Vir Singh, the yesteryear's poet laureate of Punjabi, was very much opposed to performance of "Katha" also by the Kirtanias. He (Bhai Vir Singh) believed that "Katha" should be the domain and profession of the "Kathakars" (preachers and interpreters of the Guru's word) and "Kathakars"

should leave the art of singing of the Shabad” to the professional “Kirtanias”, who always could do a better job of “Kirtan” and Bhai Samund Singh always agreed with Bhai Vir Singh’s advice.

“Thumri” is a semi-classical form of North Indian classical music. It took concrete shape during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. “Thumri” in a most effective manner conveys the subtle emotions of love, devotion and the pangs of separation from the lover. In “Gurbani” also there are numerous Shabads conveying similar emotions. The only difference being that in “Gurbani” love and devotion are directed towards “The Guru” and the God almighty. “Thumri” had not been a form of music in Punjab until the second decade of the twentieth century. In fact Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, a contemporary and a good personal friend of Bhai Samund Singh, perfected the Punjabi version of singing of “Thumri” (Patiala Gharana Style of Thumri) during nineteen thirties and forties. He went on to record his best rendition of “Thumris” during the decade of nineteen forties.

Bhai Samund Singh, who had heard the greatest exponents of “Thumri” right from Amritsar born Indu Bala to the most recorded Kamla Jharia of Bihar, Barqat Ali Khan, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan and others, had evolved his own “Shabad Gayan in Thumri Ang” by selectively adopting the “Thumri” style in his renditions of “Shabads”. This innovation found its acceptance by the Sikhs in overwhelming numbers. Some of such Shabads were originally sung at All India Radio Lahore. During those days tape recordings and transcripts of radio programmes were not made by All India Radio. Because of such reasons his renditions of the thirties and forties are not available for the listeners. Bhai Gurmeet Singh Shant of Jalandhar has in recent years adopted the “Thumri” style of music for some of his tunes and the Sikh community has welcomed it as a pleasant innovation. ..

It was the communal frenzy and bloodshed of horrific proportions at the time of creation of Pakistan that led the family of Bhai Samund Singh ji to leave their ancestral homes and hearths for good and migrate to the holy city of Amritsar in the Indian Punjab. Such decisions are rather tough to make, especially when you have spent your entire life at the birth place of the founder of your faith.

Soon after independence and the division of Punjab into Indian (East Punjab) and Pakistan’s (West Punjab), Bhai Samund Singh camped in Amritsar, where he took a position as a “Hazoori Raagi” at the Golden Temple. Another brilliant contemporary of his, Bhai Chand (a Rababi Muslim Kirtania) was still serving as a “Kirtania” at the Golden Temple but was on his way out and ready to leave for Pakistan. After going to Pakistan, Bhai Chand became a lonely and disgraced person, who eventually could not compromise with the circumstances. And one day he committed suicide as a frustrated and a financial wrecked man. Within a couple of years Bhai Samund Singh decided to become a freelance “Kirtania” and shifted his residence to Ludhiana, where he lived for the rest of his life.

Bhai Samund Singh became an “A Class” artist of All India Radio Jalandhar – Amritsar, when this newly established radio station was commissioned in 1948. Most of the staff at this radio station had migrated from Pakistan and some had already served at All India Radio Lahore. For a short-while Sardar Kartar Singh Duggal, a veteran from All India Radio Lahore and Peshawar, served as a top official at this new radio station. Sardar Jodh Singh, a refugee from Lyallpur and Gujranwala also joined as a producer of programmes in Punjabi at this new radio station. Bhai Samund Singh was the most revered religious and classical musician at this station. Occasionally he performed at the Delhi and Lucknow stations of All India Radio too. While performing at the Delhi station, his talent caught the attention of the experts of classical music at the national capital station. On their recommendation, Bhai Samund Singh got the unique distinction of becoming the first Sikh religious classical musician to perform a one and a half hour long live programme in the prestigious “Weekly Akhil Bharatiya Programme of Classical Music on a Saturday evening. This special programme had a record listenership. He performed so well and with such a remarkable ease that at the end of the programme he was given a big ovation by all. After that he started performing more frequently at All India Radio Delhi and other regional stations.

The Chief “Khalsa Diwan Amritsar”, the premier institution that established the Khalsa College Amritsar and several other Sikh educational institutions used to hold annual “Sikh Educational Conferences” not only in Amritsar, but other large Indian cities too. Bhai Samund Singh was always a respected invitee in those conferences and he invariably was the official “Kirtania”.

During the “1969 Quin Centennial Celebration of the Birth of Guru Nanak Dev ji”, a set of five long playing records was published and Bhai Samund Singh was the most prominent singer featured on this one of a kind set of records. While serving in Nankana Sahib and singing for radio in Lahore, Bhai Samund Singh somehow did not allow cutting of gramophone discs of Shabad Kirtan rendered by him, but during the nineteen sixties, his voice was featured prominently on several 33rpm long playing records. Some of his Kirtan performances at All India Radio were also recorded on professional fast speed tapes.

During the nineteen sixties, Professor Taaran Singh MA PhD, one of the heads of departments at the Punjabi University in Patiala wanted to record “Shabad Kirtan” in original vintage tunes by the great masters of the Sikh religious music. He got especially worried after the untimely death of Bhai Santa Singh ji at age sixty two in 1966. After obtaining due permission from the then vice chancellor of the university, he got the project going. Among the first Raagis whom he requested to record in their original “Reets” was Bhai Samund Singh ji. Others included Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi. Bhai Samund Singh recorded several Shabads in his inimitable style. Later on Bhai Samund Singh suggested that Bhai Avtar Singh and Gurcharan Singh, the illustrious sons of Late Bhai Jawala Singh ji of Sultanpur Lodhi had a vast reservoir of original “Gurmat Sangeet” in ancient “Dhrupad” and “Dhamar” style, which deserves preservation. On this suggestion

Professor Taaran Singh requested Bhai Avtar Singh and Bhai Gurcharan Singh, who were at that time serving in various historic Gurdwaras of Delhi to record unique "Reets" of "Shabad Kirtan" in their original tunes for the Library of Punjabi University at Patiala. Both Bhai Avtar Singh and Bhai Gurcharan Singh told me that they also recorded five hundred vintage tunes of "Shabad Kirtan" in their voices accompanied by Tanpura. By now, according to the best of my knowledge, neither the recordings of Bhai Samund Singh ji nor the recordings of Bhai Avtar Singh and Gurcharan Singh are now available with the university. Such is the pathetic state of storage and preservation in our top universities too.

Sohan Singh Misha, a brilliant poet of Punjabi and an academician, served All India Radio Jalandhar in various capacities. Due to his brilliance, he rose to become the second senior-most official at this capital station. He was very jovial and lively person and a blunt talker too. Once he told me that he treats religion in any form with utter disregard, but when Bhai Samund Singh sings, he (Misha) is transported into a new world of ecstasy and romanticism rarely experienced when the others sing. He further told me that it would have been better if Bhai Samund Singh would have been a "Ghazal" singer too and he (Misha) would have composed some very soulful "Ghazals" for him. I told him not to share these thoughts with Bhai Samund Singh ji. Bhai Sahib is a deeply religious man, he will be hurt on hearing your thoughts. At this Misha gave his mischievous smile and agreed with me. Those Pakistani Muslims, who had heard Bhai Samund Singh over the airwaves before partition of Punjab used to tune in to All India Radio Jalandhar to especially listen to "Shabad Gayan" in his seasoned voice. According to Sardar Jodh Singh, All India Radio Jalandhar used to receive hundreds of letters every year from his admirers in Pakistan.

Among Bhai Samund Singh's millions of admirers were some high profile musicians of his time. Bade Ghulam Ali Khan was his friend and colleague at All India Radio Lahore. There is one tune, in which both were singing. Bhai Samund Singh used to sing some Shabads in a centuries old tune used to sing "Multani Qafis". This tune was typical of the folk tunes of Multan Division of Punjab. It may be as old as Guru Nanak Dev ji himself was. Since it was a local folk tune, there is likelihood of its use even for Gurbani even during the life time of Guru Nanak Dev ji. Bade Ghulam Ali Khan heard it from Bhai Samund Singh and improvised it for his own rendition of "Qafis". Later on Bade Ghulam ALI Khan also sang the same tune at All India Radio Jalandhar. According to Sardar Jodh Singh, Rehmat Qawwal, the best known Qawwali singer in India was a great admirer of Bhai Samund Singh ji. Kapurthala born Tufail Niazi, a well known Punjabi folk singer of Pakistan. Another Kapurthala born maestro Ghulam Hassan Shagan, the former head of the music department at Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation's Lahore Station, himself a Kirtania at one time, was another great admirer of Bhai Samund Singh ji.

When I was posted at Patiala, several times I met Professor Sohan Singh of Agra Gharana. Among all the Sikh religious musicians, he liked Bhai Samund Singh ji

the most. Professor Sohan Singh especially liked Bhai Samund Singh's no compromise with classicalization of rendition of "Shabad Gurbani". Professor Sohan Singh also sang some "Shabads", which are masterpieces of Sikh music.

A famous Music Director of yesteryears S. Mohinder (full name Mohinder Singh Sarna) told me that he owes his career as a music director to Bhai Samund Singh ji. When he (S. Mohinder) was a child, his father was posted as a prosecuting inspector in Lyallpur, where he was initiated into classical music by the Late Sant Sujan Singh, a descendant of Baba Nand Singh. Later on his father was posted at Sheikhpura and he came into contact with Bhai Samund Singh ji at nearby town of Nankana Sahib. Here S. Mohinder became a pupil of Bhai Samund Singh ji. Bhai Samund Singh taught him the basics of several commonly used classical Raagas. What as a young student S. Mohinder learnt from Bhai Samund Singh became a stepping stone for him (S. Mohinder) in becoming a full fledged Bollywood music director later on in life. On his visits to Ludhiana, he (S. Mohinder) always made it a point to pay his respects to Bhai Samund Singh ji.

Bhai Samund Singh never left "Riaz" of music in his life. Later on he became so busy that his daily Kirtan assignments became the substitute for his "Riaz". Some of the musicians lose the quality of their voice as they start growing old. This deterioration never happened with Bhai Samund Singh ji. In fact his voice kept maturing and getting more and more cultured with each passing year. In fact I heard him performing Kirtan at a Bhog ceremony barely a few months before his sad demise, his voice was as magical as ever, rather it became richer.

Punjabi film "Nanak Naam Jahaz Hai" was made in 1969 and was accorded the President of India's All India Gold Medal for excellence in film music. Although Mohammad Rafi and Asha Bhonsale also sang for this film, but the most revered singer in this film was undoubtedly Bhai Samund Singh ji. Bhai Samund Singh's voice, in the Raagas of his choice was most prominently featured in two Shabads sung for this film. One Shabad was in his favourite "Raaga Bahar". The music director of the block buster film (S. Mohinder) did not fiddle with the original tunes of Bhai Samund Singh. Bhai Samund Singh never compromised with his musical practices. He never tolerated any adulteration or imperfection in "Sur" and "Taal" and he rendered the Shabad in its entirety.

Towards the end of 1971, Bhai Samund Singh was a very sad grand old man of Sikh religious music. During the nineteen sixties the public taste of the Sikh community had started deteriorating significantly. The mediocre Kirtanias were getting a lot of respect and admiration and those who had struggled hard to hone their skills in the Raagas were being short changed. Even the authorities running the historic Sikh shrines were quite indifferent to the professional merit of the Hazoori Ragis. This frustration he had experienced towards the end of his life. In January of 1972, after a bout with ill health, he left for his heavenly abode. A few years before his death, even Bhai Santa Singh ji had expressed a sense of deep dissatisfaction at the degradation of the Sikh religious music. Bhai Samund Singh

has left us physically, but his voice shall never die. As long as the technology keeps improving, more and more modes for the preservation of his voice shall be available to the humanity. The quality of his old recordings may not be very good, but his voice is so dear to us that it will survive in what ever quality it is available.

When Bhai Avtar Singh, Gurcharan Singh and Swaran Singh went to see him during his ill health, in frustration Bhai Samund Singh told them that the golden days of good Sikh musicians are over. The SGPC is recruiting mediocres and even the "Sangat" is giving more importance to the ordinary Kirtanias at the cost of the meritorious ones. On hearing this, the visitors also nodded in affirmative.

All India Radio has been quite irresponsible in preserving Bhai Samund Singh's voice. Hundreds of hours of his tape recordings were lying unprotected in the storage of All India Radio Jalandhar. Some of these tapes were later on erased to be used for recording music of other much junior and much less accomplished artists. After his sad demise, the need for preservation of his voice was realized. The then authorities of the Punjab and Sind Bank approached All India Radio Jalandhar to make available all old recordings of Bhai Samund Singh ji for preserving his voice on long playing records. But they were given recordings for one and a half hour only. Rest of his music had already been destroyed due to callous negligence and lack of professionalism. If all his recordings would have been preserved, we could have been able to listen to hundreds of hours of his finest renditions. His famous recording of "Asa Di Vaar" by All India Radio Jalandhar, has also been lost for ever.

On one hand the "Hindustan Recording Company of Calcutta" has preserved entire recording of the music of K.L. Saigal and on the other hand the Sikhs have lost almost entire treasure of the voice of Bhai Samund Singh ji also for ever.

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