

“Bhai Mardana:-First Frontier of Gurmat Sangeet”

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ABSTRACT:

Gurmat Sangeet is a unique musical tradition which is five centuries old. It is part and parcel of the Sikh religion. Nanak, born a Hindu, the founder of the Sikh religion, and its first Guru began the tradition as he and his childhood Muslim friend Bhai Mardana traveled around Asia and the Middle East spreading

Nanak's divine message of one loving God. The tradition was continued and refined by every Sikh Guru through to Gobind Singh ji. It continues to this day. With Gurmat Sangeet, the divine message is communicated through Shabad (hymn/s, religious messages or poems) Kirtan(Sikh devotional music). Shabad Kirtan has become an inseparable part of the Sikh way of life. The Kirtan Chauki tradition has been in vogue in the gurdwaras for centuries and the Kirtan tradition as practised on special occasions is an extended form of this tradition. This practical Kirtan tradition is in accordance with the Shabad Guru of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

In the contemporary world of Sikh music, Gur Shabad Kirtan tradition, as founded by the Gurus and developed by the Sikh Panth, has established itself as an independent and original identity. This tradition of Gurmat Sangeet prescribed in the holy Guru Granth Sahib can be termed as Sikh Musicology. Rababi is a music tradition of the Sikh religion. They played the rabab instrument. Three types of Sikh musician - rababis, ragis, and dhadhis - flourished during the period of the Sikh gurus. The descendants remained rababis to all the 10 gurus, keeping alive the rabab tradition. Bhai Mardana, a Muslim minstrel, accompanied Guru Nanak (1469-1539) for some 30 years during his travels across South and Central Asia, providing the aural musical expression of Nanak's compositions. Mardana sang and played the rabab, a stringed instrument originating from Greater Persia/Afghanistan, to Nanak's poetry and prose during their travels.

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Mardana was the first disciple and lifelong companion of Guru Nanak and his rebeck player. With all the wit and humor of a Punjabi minstrel, Mardana became a poet and philosopher in the Guru's company. He was a Muslim by birth and a Mirasi or minstrel by caste and rebeck player by profession. Mardana was born at Talwandi Rae Bhoie Ki, the home-town. of Guru Nanak, in 1459, ten years before the birth of the Guru. Mardana's parents had lost all their children. When Mardana was born, his mother out of sheer despair and desperation called him Marjana, one who was about to die. But he survived and lived a fairly long life of sixty-one. Guru Nanak changed his name to Mardana meaning brave or manly.

His father was Badra and mother Lakho. Badra was the family bard of Mehta Kalu. Badra and Mardana called every morning at the houses of local residents and obtained alms generally in kind in the form of flour or some eatables. Both would sing to the accompaniment of music on rebeck and on receiving charity would move next door. Nanak as a child listened to their sweet music and felt fascinated. He had a natural attraction for boy Mardana.

In course of time, Nanak left Talwandi and went to Sultanpur Lodi where he was employed in the service of Daulat Khan Lodi, the Governor of the Jalandhar Doab. Mehta Kalu, Nanak's father, was not getting good reports about Nanak's work. It struck him that Mardana's company might do him good. Mardana was thirty

years old when he was sent to Sultanpur. Nanak was highly pleased at his arrival. It became usual with both of them to sing songs together in praise of God in the morning and evening before and after office hours, in a public place. Their melodious voice and soft strains on rebeck touched the hearts of listeners and transported them into a state of bliss. Both lived together and became inseparable. This drama was daily enacted in the streets of Sultanpur for seven long years.

Then Nanak became a missionary, and he decided to move from place to place. Mardana stuck fast to the Guru. Both left for Talwandi. While passing through Muslim villages they stayed in a faqir's takia generally situated near a graveyard. There they recited verses in praise of Allah. As Mardana attended prayers in a mosque, Nanak also accompanied him, and some times joined in prayers. The fanaticism of the Mulla or Maulvi was often softened by the presence of Mardana. The Mulla thought that under Mardana's influence Nanak might embrace Islam.

Visiting Sayyidpur and Sialkot on the way, they reached Talwandi. Nanak stayed outside the town, while Mardana called upon his family folk. He had a wife and two sons named Shahzada and Raezada and a daughter. Nanak's parents called on him and tried to persuade him in vain to lead the settled life of a householder. Mardana's wife and children also failed to detain him. In a couple of days both left together for Multan. In due course they returned to Sultanpur Lodi. This took place in 1496.

In 1497 Nanak and Mardana started on a journey to the east. They went as far as Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh and returned through Central India to Panjab in 1509 after twelve years. At Delhi Nanak and Mardana were both imprisoned by Sikandar Lodi for preaching in public in violation of his orders. In jail both sang songs while Mardana played upon rebeck also. This was a fascinating performance, and the prisoners thronged to listen to them. Such a scene was rare in gaol. As this disturbed the normal routine of the place, the Guru and his disciple were set free.

Guru Nanak undertook several journeys. His last journey was made to West Asia from 1517 to 1521. Mardana was with him. From Sultanpur Lodi they went in a boat down the river Beas and Satluj to Panjnad. From there they passed through the country of Sind. In this tedious journey Nanak once rode on horseback. They were halting in a jungle. The horse was let loose to graze and Mardana was looking after it. Nanak suddenly called Mardana to play a particular tune on his rebeck. Mardana would not leave the horse as it was trying to run away. Nanak shouted:

"Let go the horse and come back at once. The word is coming." Mardana quietly obeyed.

At the old harbor of Kot Lakhpat they sailed for Arabia. Having visited Mecca and Medina they went to Baghdad in Iraq, the capital of the Caliphs of Islam. As usual they stayed outside the town near a graveyard. Nanak's visit to Baghdad is recorded in the Vars of Bhai Gurdas who wrote:

Baba gaya Baghdad nun bahar jai kiya asthana,

1k Baba akal rup duja rabab Mardana.1

[Baba went to Baghdad, and put up outside. The immortal Baba was accompanied by the rebeck-player Mardana.]

On the roadside Nanak began to sing hymns in praise of God, and Mardana played a symphonic strain on his musical instrument. The language of the people being Arabic listeners could only catch the names of Allah and Khuda, but the combination of a melodious voice, sweet tune, and saintly appearances produced a soothing

effect on their minds. But as music was a taboo in Islam, somebody objected to their performance remarking that music turned mind from God towards sensuality. Nanak could understand and speak some broken Arabic. He replied that God created music, and that He was more easily accessible through pleasing poetry than pale prose.

The pilgrims stayed there for some time. Mardana's health and spirit had been failing, and he felt tired of travelling. To reach home they had to cover a distance of about 5,000 kilometres. If they could walk at the rate of 20 kilometres a day it would take them 9 or 10 months. At this prospect Mardana's heart began to sink. He had realised his life's ambition of making a pilgrimage to the greatest holy places and sacred shrines of Islam at Mecca, Medina and Baghdad. He had won the title of Haji. He did not want to go farther. He felt that he would die at this holy place. As luck would have it, he soon afterwards gave up the ghost in peace and tranquility.

Nanak grew sad. The separation was unbearable. But the Guru had a stout heart and an indomitable will. Besides he had a certain mission in life. With a heavy heart he performed the obsequies of Mardana with his own hands. A humble monument was erected in memory of Mardana. Within an enclosure on a wall an inscription in mixed Turkish and Arabic marks the site. Mardana was called Murad by the residents of Baghdad and being older than Nanak by ten years was considered Guru. Consequently the inscription which was put up after Guru Nanak's departure said:

"Guru Murad died. Baba Nanak faqir helped in constructing this building, which is an act of grace from a virtuous follower, 927 A.H."

Mardana seems to have died in December, 1520 A.D. at the age of 61. The monument lies near a graveyard, 2.5 kilometres away from the railway station.

Mardana was a master-rebeck-player. He improved the old form of instrument by fixing 4 to 6 strings to a hollow gourd so as to produce deep and mellow resonance. He sang devotional songs of Kabir, Ravidas, Trilochan, Beni, Dhanna and Nanak. He composed verses also, three of which are included in the *Adi Granth in Bihagre ki Var*. They are against the use of wine which brings about misery, lust, pride, self-conceit, falsehood, ill health and disease. He says:

The barmaid is misery, wine is lust; man is the drinker.

The cup filled with worldly love is wrath, and it is served by pride.

The company is false and covetous, and is ruined by excess of drink.

Instead of such wine make good conduct thy clarified butter, and modesty thy meat to eat.

Such things, O Nanak, are obtained by the Guru's favour; by par-taking of them sins depart.'

Bhai Mardana was Guru Nanak's long-time Muslim companion throughout his extensive journeys across the country and abroad, he was born the son of a mirasi (a caste of hereditary minstrels and genealogists) couple, Badra and Lakkho, of Talvandi Rai Bhoi, now Nankana Sahib, in Sheikhpura district of Pakistan. Guru Nanak and Mardana grew up in the same village. The *Meharban Janam Sakhi* describes the latter, who was ten years senior in age, as the Guru's companion since his childhood days and as one who sang to him songs from Kabir, Trilochan, Ravidas, Dhanna and Beni. According to Ratan Singh Bhangu, Prachin Panth Prakash, Guru Nanak as a small boy gave Mardana a String instrument improvised from reeds to play on while he sang the hymns .

As Guru Nanak was employed to take charge of the granaries and stores of the Nawab of Sultanpur Lodhi, the

stories of his generosity and hospitality spread far and wide. Mardana, already a married man and father of two sons and a daughter, wanted to visit Sultanpur and seek his bounty. Meanwhile, he was charged by Guru Nanak's father Mahita Kalu, to go to Sultanpur and bring news of the welfare of his son. Mardana went to Sultanpur, never to part company with Guru Nanak again. His occupation was playing the Ribab rebeck as Guru Nanak recited God's glory.

When Guru Nanak Prepared to go forth into the world to preach his message, he invited Mardana to accompany him. Mardana hesitated, for he did not wish to leave his family until his daughter had been married off and for this he did not have sufficient means. One of Guru Nanak's disciples, Bhai Bhagnath, bought the needed provisions and Mardana was able to give away his daughter in marriage. He was then ready to accompany Guru Nanak on his travels.

To relieve the rigour of the journeys, the biographies describe several humorous situations in which Mardana involved himself by his panicky behaviour when prospects of getting the next meal seemed less than certain. He was not easily convinced when Guru Nanak told him to be patient and have trust in something turning up, but Mardana wished always to be prepared before travelling with the rations. As the Puratan Janam Sakhi narrates, Guru Nanak and Mardana had not come out very far from Sultanpur when the latter complained that he felt hungry and needed something to eat immediately. The Guru pointed to the village they had passed and said that, if he went, he would be well entertained by Khattris of the Uppal caste who lived in that village. Mardana turned his footsteps in that direction and, arriving in the village, he found ever more than hospitable. He was fed sumptuously and given ample alms. As he saw him loaded with a bundle, Guru Nanak, says the Janam Sakhi, rolled on the ground laughing, since the bundle was very heavy. Mardana realized the oddity of what he had done and did not know how to get rid of what he had collected. He threw the bundle when Guru pointed out to him that those articles would be more of a burden to him.

The Janam Sakhis also contain many anecdotes picturing Mardana in despair out of agonizing hunger or petrifying fear and Guru Nanak or Nature coming to succour him some what miraculously. Once the two were passing through a remote wilderness when suddenly a violent storm overtook them. So severe was the tempest that the trees of the jungle began to fly about. Mardana, trembling with fear, thus spoke to the Guru, "True sovereign, thou hast brought me to my death in this forest. I shall not here get a shroud nor a grave." The Guru asked him to remain calm, but Mardana moaned, "I have not faced a calamity like this in my life. What is going to befall my poor soul today?" Then fire broke out. Smoke was all over and the blaze on all four sides. Mardana covered up his face and laid himself down on the ground saying, "Farewell, life" Then came water. Thick clouds gathered and poured water in torrents "Raise thy head, Mardana," spoke the Guru, "and take thy rebeck" Mardana pulled the strings and Guru Nanak sang: "If the fear of God is in the heart, all other fear is dispelled..."

According to Puratan Janam Sakhi, Mardana and his Master were taken prisoner by the Mughals at Saidpur. The Guru was given a load to carry on his head and Mardana to lead a horse holding its rein. Mir Khan, the Mughal commander, saw that the Guru's bundle was floating above his head and Mardana's horse was following him without the reins. He reported the miracle to Sultan Babar, who remarked, "Had there been such faqirs here, the town should not have been struck". Mir Khan asked him to see for himself.

In 1524, at Kartarpur, Mardana, fell ill. He grew weak and hope of recovery was lost. Born of a Muslim family, he had attached himself to Guru Nanak. The Guru asked him how he wished his body to be disposed of. Mardana replied that by the Guru's instruction he had overcome his pride of the body. What remained of him after death, he said, be disposed of as the Guru wished. Then the Guru said, "Shall I make thee a tomb to render thee famous in the world?" "When the Guru is releasing my soul from the body, why should he entomb me in stone?" answered Mardana. The Guru asked him to fix his mind on the Creator. The following morning, at a watch before day, Mardana passed away. The Guru consigned his body to the River Ravi, hymns sung and karahprasad, the

sacrament, distributed among the Sikhs. He consoled Mardana's son Shahzada, and other members of his family and asked them not to weep for him who had returned to his heavenly home.

Mardana was a poet of some merit. One of his slokas appears in Guru Granth Sahib in Bihagare ki Var along with two others of Guru Nanak's addressed to Mardana. He is convinced that an evil body may be cleansed of sin in sangat (GC, 553).

Bhai Mardana is the most significant character identified in Janam Sakhis after Guru Nanak. Naturally, such honor leaves a deep impression in the readers mind. Bhai Mardana enjoyed the unique honor of being a helper as well as a close confidant of Guru Nanak Dev. Bhai Gurdas places Guru Nanak on the prime pedestal while placing Bhai Mardana on second pedestal.

"Ek Baba Akal Rup Duja Rababi Mardana"

Meaning, one Baba (referring to Guru Nanak in Almighty's forms accompanied by the second Rababi (musician, player of Rabab) Mardana.

This great soul was immensely blessed with the closeness of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Undoubtedly, Bhai Mardana always accompanied Guru Nanak. Yet historians have hesitated to discuss Bhai Mardana. Whatever sketchy details available on his life are incomplete at best and misrepresentative. They are insufficient for a thorough and true assessment of his role, contributions, and stature.

Due to the lack of historical material, it is difficult to write much about Bhai Mardana. Nevertheless, we attempt this presentation with the following thoughts.

Bhai Mardana Ji is the very first entry in Sikh chronology. He was born approximately 10 years prior to Guru Nanak's birth, in 1459, at Rai-Bhoay-Di-Talwandi (district Shekhupura). His mother's name was Bibi Lakho and father's name was Bader of Marasi caste. He was the seventh child of his parents. The earlier six offsprings had died immediately upon birth. Accordingly, some think that he was named "Mur Jana" -- one to die and Guru Nanak Dev Ji changed his name to "Marda Na" -- meaning not to die. However, this isn't believable, since Guru Nanak Sahib was born 10 years after Bhai Mardana. According to Principal Satbir Singh, Bhai Mardana's childhood name was "Dana" and Guru Sah renamed him "Mardana" (emphasizing, in many ways) to influence him towards high moralistic life. This seems a more plausible and believable viewpoint.

Bhai Mardana Ji and Guru Nanak Dev Ji were childhood friends since they lived in the same village.

Being member of the Marasis Rababi fraternity, Bhai Mardana was an accomplished musician. He inherited this art from his family ancestors. Guru Nanak was deeply impressed by his art and that was probably an underlying reason for their strong bond.

While it is well established that Bhai Mardana was married, no information is available on when he got married and to whom. He had at least one child who wasn't lost by history. His was known as Bhai "Sagged," who performed kirtan in Guru Angad Dev's Darbar.

Guru Nanak Dev resigned from his job as storekeeper of a provision store at Sultanpur Lodhi (Kapurthala), and decided to answer his call to rescue this world and establish peace. Mehta Kalu sent Bhai Mardana to Sultanpur to ascertain Guru Nanak's well being. However, Bhai Mardana got entangled in the bonds of Guru's affection and did not return. Guru Nanak successfully sought Bhai Mardana's commitment (sewa) for his cause. It seemed Guru Nanak was waiting for this moment and did not want to make any moves without ascertaining Bhai Mardana's commitment.

Whenever Bani ascended, the strings of Bhai Mardana's Rabab initiated tantalizing vibrations. The holy shabad, right from its origins in Suchkhand, would ride the inaccessible and unapproachable musical tunes and descend into Guru Nanak's soul. Subsequently, Guru Nanak would expose it to the world. During this process, Bhai Mardana's Rabab served to transform the sacred inaccessible and unapproachable music into expressive tunes for this world.

Once Bhai Mardana inquired the reasons behind Guru's recluse. Guru responded, "Listen Mardania, I had blessed you with the string art and longed for this day. It is good that you asked this question." Guru Ji clarified; "Mardania all I have is hunger and poverty with me. If you desire comforts then return to Talwandi."

Guru Sahib had decided to settle at Kartarpur. So without reneging Talwandi, how could Mardana proceed to Kartarpur? Talwandi was representative of all worldly attachments, family worries, and material accomplishment while Kartarpur was Creator's place, representative of good deeds, sewa, simran and true happiness. Mardana reneged all his attachments to Talwandi, saying, "Returning has become difficult for me now. Where could I go? I dont see anyone else like you in this world."

Bhai Mardana Ji dedicated himself for the heavenly and sacred mission of Guru Nanak Dev. Undoubtedly he was the very first to sacrifice himself for the Sikh faith. Bhai Mardana's far sightedness and auspicious vision adopted the hunger and poverty filled, most difficult, path.

Bhai Mardana was extremely simple, pure, honest and friendly. He was a person of very high moral principles and qualities. Persistent like a child he couldn't hide his inner thoughts and feelings. However, his behavior never irritated Guru Sahib who always treated with him with love, affection, and softness.

Bhai Mardana had all the worldly qualities and characteristics. For this reason he could always seek answers to his doubts and questions from Guru Sahib.

Bhai Mardana was simple natured while Guru Nanak Dev Ji was a master of unique strengths who possessed knowledgeable of both worlds - this as well as the next. Despite his humbleness, Bhai Mardana was successful in exposing Guru's divine knowledge and insights to the world. Yet he never exhibited any signs of ego.

Bhai Mardana Ji was well aware that the person he accompanied wasn't any ordinary human being. He always lived in submission to Guru Baba's orders. He had a deep faith in Guru Baba. For such devotion and qualities, Guru Baba always kept him close by and never parted his company. Guru Nanak Dev Ji blessed Bhai Mardana, saying; "Mardania if you are exalted and delighted, so too is this world."

Bhai Mardana, as a result of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's blessing, had acquired the ultimate understanding. He understood the mysterious and incomprehensible secrets of the universe from Guru Baba.

Bhai Mardana received yet another unique honor that no subsequent Sikh could acquire. The middle saloks of Bihagada's vaar are dedicated to Bhai Mardana. This is evident of Guru Nanak Dev's deep love and affection for Bhai Mardana.

Bhai Mardana's role in Janam Sakhis is one of helper. As a helper, Bhai Mardana developed the plots to seek answers from Guru Nanak Sahib. His difficulties with resisting hunger, repeatedly wanting to return home, expressing greediness, being fearful, pretending to be devoid of understanding and knowledge, etc. are merely symbolic roles. All such characteristics can only belong to someone who doesnt shed such evils yet owns the ultimate truth. Evidently, the Mardana of Janam Sakhi is very different from true Mardana and the Sakhi's authors have used him symbolically. Dr. Gurcharan Singh clarifies by suggesting that:

"Such roles are written in contradiction with Guru Nanak Sahib's divine knowledge and insights. However, Mardana's involvement in such small worldly worries not only sharpens Guru Sahib's divine insights but enlighten them like the sun."

According to Bhai Khan Singh, Bhai Mardana died on 13th Mugar Sanmat 1591 in Afghanistan on the banks of Kuram. Guru Nanak himself cremated his body. This is implausible because Guru Nanak Dev Ji was in Kartarpur in Sanmat 1591. Further his return trip, if any, to Afghanistan for Bhai Mardana's cremation is not mentioned anywhere. On the other hand, some historians have stated that Bhai Mardana died in Kartarpur, 8 days after Guru Nanak Dev Ji's death. Yet Hari Ram examined the engraved writings of Baghdad and declared that Bhai Mardana died there during the Baghdad trip. As such it is difficult to determine when Bhai Mardana died and where?

Conclusion,

All we can say that Bhai Mardana was a person of utmost religious character. However, his roles mentioned in Janam Sakhis are difficult to reconcile. Yet they do not diminish any of his qualities. Bhai Mardana was the very first kirtania of Sikh history. His Rabab, even to this day, serves as the source of motivation for our kirtanias. Every Sikh, as well as kirtania, can learn a lot from his selfless dedication, sacrifice and humility filled life.

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