



## ***Chaar Yaar: A Band Echoing Human Consciousness across the Globe*<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the rich and wide-ranging musical repertoire of the band *Chaar Yaar* (four friends) comprising of Dr. Madan Gopal Singh (the vocalist and the composer), Deepak Castelino (the Guitar and Banjo player), Pritam Ghosal (the Sarod player) and Amjad Khan (the Percussionist). It presents a brief biosketch of Dr. Madan Gopal Singh and his reflections on the musical and extra-musical expedition of his band within the larger musical and socio-political scenario of South Asia. The paper attempts to put across how a musical group emanating from and rooted in Indian local traditions, has been able to synthesize global values like universality of human consciousness, gender justice, peace and communal harmony.

**Keywords:** Band, Music, Poetry, Human Consciousness, Communal Harmony

### **Introduction**

Music also stays in resistance. Who could be a better musician than a rebellious? The protest which has no music in it also lacks the tune of emancipation. Music of emancipation can be somewhat better than the *Sufi* music! The struggle is not only with the power but is also with the walls we build inside us, which get raised as a result of the same power. If you want 'formless', then leave ego; the inside has to be broken before the outside. This is the first prerequisite of the education.

The best vision of the liberation from bondages is to become a beloved in the devotion. This vision or dream has the emancipation from the identities made of caste and

religion; it also has the emancipatory vision of the workers. It is only when one gets truly immersed, that music starts coming out automatically and starts becoming the real knowledge. It creates a world where there are no pretences. Whether it is *Sufi* or *Bhakti*, the aim is not just to erase yourself in search of a larger ego but, more about moving in search of your own self. Only then one can truly understand the fervour of *Sufi* music. Here, there is a conflict between believing and not believing; a tension between knowing and not knowing.

Rumi or Bulleh Shah; John Lennon or Baba Farid; Tagore, Nanak, or Kabir or Ghadar– Why should the music born out of struggle be an ornament of great musical gatherings? One might think like this, nevertheless a crowd of thousands assembles to listen to Sufi music. For, ecstasy is Allah and ecstasy is God. It is certainly not possible to touch the sky and shores of Sufi music; however, I made an earnest attempt to understand a few pieces lying on the ground through Madan Gopal Singh.

The most vocal and radical TV journalist, Ravish Kumar, introduced Madan Gopal Singh (the founder and the lead singer of the band *Chaar Yaar*) and his music most aptly. “I don’t have the capacity to say anything about Madan Gopal Singh but there is a couplet of Rumi, ‘stay with the one who is better; let that be lost who is worse’. You will find all good things of music in this ascetic of Delhi,” (Kumar 1:47-2:07). This paper is appreciative of Dr. Madan Gopal Singh and the rich and wide-ranging musical repertoire of his band *ChaarYaar* (four friends). The band comprises of Dr. Madan Gopal Singh (the vocalist and the composer), Deepak Castelino (the guitar and banjo player), Pritam Ghosal (the sarod player) and Amjad Khan (the percussionist)<sup>2</sup>. Since 2004, it has not only been performing all over the World in various

residencies and music festivals but has also collaborated with globally renowned artistes. The most interesting thing about the band is that its repertoire consists of not only Sufi and other mystic poetry of Punjab and North India. It also includes the Punjabi and Hindi translations of modern poets like Brecht, Tagore, Faiz, Lorca and Neruda.

The juxtapositions of traditional and modern poets as well as performing intertextuality through music are the unparalleled characteristics of the repertoire, giving it a niche of its own. For example, singing Rumi, John Lennon, Kabir and Bulleh Shah in one song, and presenting a melody of amalgamation. The name *Chaar Yaar* is also a very carefully thought out choice since it has had different connotations at different times and different spaces. Initially the term referred to the first four Rashidun Caliphs succeeding the Prophet Muhammad. In 13<sup>th</sup> century Indian context, it referred to four Sufi saints<sup>3</sup>. *Chaar Yaar* in this case connotes different religious affiliations of the band members and a bond transcending their socio-religious identities.

In this paper, I will first explain briefly about Dr. Madan Gopal Singh<sup>4</sup>. It is not an attempt to put across his biography, rather the focus is upon what made him a singer and what motivated him to evolve a different musical repertoire. In order to underscore how he sings differently, I will try to identify some musical and extra musical features that are unique to his singing and this band. Then I will try to situate the music of the band in larger musical and socio-political scenario of South Asia. Finally, I intend to look at how a musical group, emanating from and deriving its roots from the local traditions, synthesizes human values like universality of human consciousness, gender justice, peace and communal harmony having global appeal. It can be asserted that the music and poetry

of the band cannot be simply qualified either of ‘resistance’ or ‘devotion’. In fact, it is the music of human consciousness with all its manifestations.

The paper derives its stance from the three interviews of Dr. Singh, including the one taken by myself on 12<sup>th</sup> of June, 2019<sup>5</sup>. In addition to these, the recordings available on Digital Media Platform, YouTube, have been referred to, for musical examples. The expressions and interpretations also stem from my understanding developed through attending the performances of the band personally.

### **Tracing the Life Story of the Singer**

In Madan’s own words, ‘I was born in Amritsar and the house of my maternal grandparents was situated where on one side was the Golden Temple and on the other side was Jalian Wala Bagh. Therefore I grew up amidst both religion and radical thought.’ There were three sonic and scenic factors that had a great influence on Madan in his formative years. The first was the sound of the Gurbani coming from the Golden Temple every morning and evening<sup>6</sup>. The second was the radio Pakistan (Lahore) that used to broadcast Indian film songs till 1964. We shouldn’t forget that AIR during 1950s was serving a heavy dose of both Hindustani and Carnatic music in order to promote India’s national music and elevate the listeners’ taste. Madan along with his siblings used to send request letters for the programme that catered to the listeners’ choice. It is on Radio Pakistan that he heard *Hamd* and *qawwalis* for the first time<sup>7</sup>. The third factor was the ‘romance’ of Bhagat Singh. Madan’s father used to live in a village called *Ichhra* that was very close to the Central Jail of Lahore, where Bhagat Singh along with his friends was hanged till death in 1931. He grew up with the memories

of the whole village remaining awake that whole night and shouting slogans 'long lives the revolution' in response to the same coming from the revolutionaries inside the prison.

Although born in Amritsar, Madan grew up in a refugee colony at Karol Bagh in Delhi. Dr. Singh remarks, 'Nai Walan and Bidanpura in Karol Bagh were the colonies wherein refugees coming from diverse linguistic regions of partitioned Punjab had settled. Therefore there was not total harmony always; rather, there were gaps between the people which were not easy to mend. Actually there was a great pressure on the space that the uprooted people had to occupy, and the politics begins from there.' Thus coming together of different communities and the everyday politics of space in the post-Partition Delhi was another major thing that Madan as a child witnessed closely. It not only made him aware of different dialects and languages spoken in Punjab but also the tensions and stresses that the refugees were passing through. He was sent to a local school run by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. There he came across peers from all parts of the country, as this was the time when Nehru was conceiving Delhi as the microcosm of the modern India. In his interviews, he talks of how Delhi of that time has a syncretic culture where the children used to enjoy Durga Puja, Ram Leela or Sikh religious processions, irrespective of their caste or religious background. He also talks of great devotional singers performing at Gurdwaras for the whole night and the festivity that a shared community used to have on such occasions. In school, he had some friends, in whose company; he started listening to Carnatic music also. Thus, Amritsar and Delhi had a huge influence in exposing him to a variety of musical genres.

Madan also received literature and literary wisdom in legacy. His father, Dr. Harbhajan Singh was a noted

Punjabi poet, critic, cultural commentator and translator. Gurbani and Sufi poetry were part of everyday conversation at their home. In addition to this, the World literature was also available as his father used to translate literary classics into Punjabi. Madan revealed that there was a lot to read at home, and he would try and get his hands on everything.

When Dr. Singh reached to pursue B.A. Honours in English at Delhi University in mid 1960s, it was a period of tumult not just in India but throughout the World. In India, the Congress party was disintegrating and for the first time after independence, there were coalition governments in some states<sup>8</sup>. Jaiprakash Narayan's movement, Naxalite movement, abolition of privy purses, nationalization of banks and the Bangladesh issue were the events, occurring one-after-the-other which not only made the whole nation politically charged but also created a cultural euphoria amongst boys and girls studying in the universities all over the country. The students were also touched by anti-Vietnam War movement and the students' protests of 1968 taking place in Europe and North America. Therefore, the Western singers like Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger and Beatles were very popular amongst students in India too. In addition to this, there were certain groups of students who were singing the likes of non-English radical poets such as Nazim Hikmet, Faiz Ahmad Faiz etc.

Dr. Singh found him more comfortable with those who were singing radical South Asian songs because of two reasons. First, although being a student of English literature he was not very comfortable with the language as he came from a non-English academic background. Secondly, he had been exposed to abundant Punjabi literature at home. Thus, he found himself more equipped

as compared to Anglicized students, when it came to dealing with origins of the issues related to India. He summarizes his student days like this, 'There was great poetry, great music and great theatre all over India. So there was hardly any escape route.'

The political turmoil continued during 1970s and the Congress government at the centre imposed emergency in 1975. This was a huge blow to democracy, freedom of press and cultural expressions. Late 1970s and 1980s was the period when separatist movements started emerging in various parts of the country. Punjab witnessed Khalistan movement which polarized the Sikhs against the Hindus. Madan comments, 'I nurtured a Nehruvian vision of people being diverse yet plurally involved in each other's culture. But I saw India being torn asunder.' All these disturbances thus led him to sing and become active in street theatre with Safdar Hashmi, who was also killed on the first of January, 1989. The rise of right wing politics and demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 were the other developments which further threatened a plural and multi-cultural India. Thus, when Madan saw the religious and caste identities being entrenched very deeply, it disturbed him a lot. He found the text and music available to the people insufficient to pose a counter-politics.

Before moving on to the repertoire of Dr. Singh and his band, it is very interesting to note that he doesn't have any formal training in music. He sings and composes only through inspiration. He was sent to learn music from Surender Singh, a well-known classical musician but he did not go after the second class. The guru was teaching him musical notes but strikingly, Madan was more interested in the cricket outside. He started chasing classical music when he heard great maestros like Pt. Bhimsen Joshi, Kumar Gandharva and Mallikarjun Mansur

in his college days (Khurana). Later he got fascinated by a number of bauls too. He was greatly influenced by the singers from the other side of the border like Tufail Niazi, Abida Parveen and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan since he found them challenging the established cannons of poetry as well as music. When asked about his musical training, he acknowledges the contribution of Delhi's concerts culture in his musical preparation.

In 1979, Madan Gopal Singh befriended a famous painter Manjit Bawa, who had some training in playing tabla and Madan started singing with him. Later he came in contact with the film makers like Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani who used his voice in their films. Madan's response to why these great film makers used his voice is, 'They used me not because I could sing well but because I could sing unusually something which the classical or folk musicians could not. I was a kind of a break with a midway space between the classical and the folk, born in an urban space.'

### **The Band and the Repertoire**

This brings me to the repertoire of his poetry and music. About the choice of lyrics, Madan comments, "I wanted to make some sense of the morass we were getting sucked into. So, I intentionally went back to Kabir and Bulleh Shah." Being a student of history and literature, he was fascinated by the Punjabi Sufi poetry of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He describes the 18<sup>th</sup> century in India as a period marked ironically by both, liberation and an extreme fear. After the death of Aurangzeb, the Mughal Empire started disintegrating. The absence of the powerful state meant the fear of invasions from outside and at the same time, it was also the end of the state repression. Therefore the era sees emergence of paradoxically impassioned texts which are



taking on the state and its repression but are also expressing liberation. This understanding made him appreciate and sing Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah, Shah Husain and other Sufi poets.

Secondly, he believes that the Sufi music emerged as community music during the time of Lodhi Sultanate at Dargahs. It emerged in opposition to the enclosed court music. Thus, Sufi music was trying to build a larger community through people singing together and clapping. He adds, "I encourage people to sing with me as I want to form a community through music." "The *Guru Granth Sahib* was also doing the same thing," he remarks. The unparalleled feature of our holy book is that it is not the book of Punjab; it becomes a pan-subcontinental book<sup>9</sup>. In his lectures, he talks about the syncretic and inclusive character of *Guru Granth Sahib* at length but he hardly sings the hymns from that<sup>10</sup>. He gives three reasons for this. First, the present Sikh politics is dominated by Jat Sikhs and he does not want to get into that. Secondly, there is a canonical mandate about the Gurbani in terms of its pronunciation, phonetics and morphology with which he somewhat does not agree with, having his training in Sanskrit as well as in linguistics. Third and most significantly, he believes that there is a spiritualism which happens only when one leaves the religious space altogether. That spiritual resonance has to transcend all forms of religiosity. Moreover, it gives him the freedom to deal with different texts.

Before shifting our focus to the performance, it is necessary to talk about how the band came into existence. Madan met Deepak Castelino when he had just returned from Ayodhya after some concerts in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition. Madan having his background in Sufi music and Deepak having been trained in Western

music started performing together since 1993. They thought of forming a band in 2002 and sarod player Pritam Ghosal, the disciple of Ustad Amjad Ali Khan also joined in. After trying with a few percussionists, Gurmit Singh stayed in the quartet for a long time. For last three-four years, Amjad Khan has been accompanying on the drums. The idea was to explore various cultures and musical styles, and to combine them in a manner that is very much their own. The initial focus was on the Sufi poetry, but very soon the quartet began to look for creating cross-cultural bridges which aimed at connecting South Asian as well as continental boundaries. This becomes obvious when one attends any performance of the quartet.

Madan along with his band begins his concert with *siharfis* of the 17<sup>th</sup> century poet Hazrat Sultan Bahu<sup>11</sup>. He then generally sings poems of Bulleh Shah after that in the form of Dhamal. It starts with *Nagma*, the sarod and guitar being played together; then comes a *Rubai* which is without rhythmic accompaniment. After that the song begins with rhythm. Here the singer shows two very unique features of Sufi performance. The first is *Takrar*, meaning obsessive repetition of one word or a phrase. This is a way of expressing mock anger, complaint or love with the larger ego. Here, he involves the audience to accompany him. The second thing is *Girah*, which means tying a knot. This gives the singer freedom to go outside the text. The element of intertextuality comes in here. Madan sings translations of Neruda, Lorca or any other poet which he likes. This is a unique way of connecting the local and the global.

The band also performs Rumi, John Lennon, Kabir and Bulleh Shah in one song, wherein all the poems talk about rising above all the manmade identities. He also sings Guru Nanak's *aarti* and brings in Tagore with that.

Juxtaposing Punjabi folk with Brecht, translations of Simon and Garfunkel, Bob Dylan etc., singing different passages of the *Hir* of Waris Shah in unconventional tunes, and the song of transgression are other items which make the performance a distinct experience. A notable singer and scholar, Sumangala Damodaran, noted in a lecture delivered at Ambedkar University, Delhi, that Dr. Singh sang four different versions of *Hir* including one from Afghani border lands, one from Punjab and the other from Rajasthan<sup>12</sup>. The band also sings the poems of radical Hindi poets like Nagarjun and Urdu poets like Faiz. Most of the tunes are composed by Dr. Singh himself and Deepak Castelino also writes some of the melodies. Pritam Ghosal adds the flavor of melody with his sarod. It is a very organic group (Kusnur).

It is also pertinent to mention about Madan's travels and collaborations with other artistes. On the request of his mentor Tufail Niazi, he recorded a folk song for the Lok Virsa museum of Pakistan. He has also travelled with Allan fakir of Sindh and Bungar Khan, a quintessentially Manganiyar singer. Madan also went to Iran and sang along with Shahram Nazeri. He remembers how they travelled in a bus from town to town and how they were singing underground over a period of 15 days. He also worked with the, German musician Theo Bleckmann and David Hykes' harmonic choir. In addition, he has also given music for some international art exhibitions and installations. This is how the 'local' and the 'Global' have coalesced in his music experiments.

## **Conclusion**

While summing up, it is important to note what Dr. Singh thinks of his music. He says that he sings the poetry of protest. Before explicating the tradition of protest music in

India, I will hint at what makes the band different from other musicians. Dario Martinelli's recent book shows us a new direction to look at protest songs in a Global context (Martinelli 1-17). He makes two very significant points about the protest songs. First, the 'protest songs' is a very inadequate term to circumscribe the variety of songs of resistance and we should move on to a bigger category of 'songs of social protest'. Secondly, these songs qualify as an independent genre in popular music because of their context, content and music. It is not just the venue or lyrics of these songs that qualify them; but musically too, they stand different to other forms of popular music.

In sync, Dr. Singh claims that he, along with his band, sings the poetry of resistance and is of the opinion that the poetry of resistance is missing today (Kapoor). He firmly believes that the contemporary music does not reflect the anxiety of the people. Therefore, it does not connect with the people. He finds the poetry of Kabir, Guru Granth Sahib and Sufi saints political as these evoke 'listening to the other and not questioning his sanctity'. He finds Sufi poets more radical than Bhakti poets because they question the existing socio-political as well as religious order and they also engage politically. I have talked of Sultan Bahu writing about Baghdad in 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>13</sup>. Madan believes that Almighty is something which is at the lowest rung in Sufism. Love or *ishk* is above that; and the highest thing is the possibility of becoming friends, of bonding, of touching the other. I have already talked about his views on the emergence of Sufi music. *Takrar* (refrain) and *girah* (strophes from different texts) are politically motivated.

India has a rich and wide-ranging tradition of resistance poetry and music. In the present times, T.M. Krishna, a well-known Carnatic musician, who is also a

Ramon Magsaysay awardee, takes well-articulated positions on caste, class, society, the environment and beyond. Because of questioning the traditions and politicising his art, Krishna is disliked by the conservative Carnatic musicians<sup>14</sup>. On the other hand, in Punjab, Dalit singers produce songs valorising their history and heroes in response to the Jat pop music. These songs not only reflect the caste conundrum in its wake but also emerge as powerful expressions of rebellion against entrenched caste hierarchies. The singers of these ‘mission songs’ valorise lower caste heroes and purposely address the terms often used as the expressions of insult and disgrace for them by the upper castes. This is demonstrative of the Dalits’ rising confidence in their own “selves” and the will to resolutely exhibit it publicly (Singh 33-37). An economist by training but a singer by passion has not only released a CD of the protest songs of Indian People’s Theatre Association but has also written a well-researched book on its rich and varied tradition of protest songs ranging from 1930s to the present (Damodaran). It took her more than a decade to search old IPTA musicians and singers, record interviews, retrieve songs and research histories<sup>15</sup>. Singers like Shubha Mudgal and Vidya Shah also include radical songs in their repertoire. Young Sufi and film singer Rabbi Shergill has also sung on ecology. Even ghazal singer Jagjit Singh also recorded some *ghazals* having radical lyrics. He also donated the royalty of one of his albums to an NGO working for street children.

The music of *ChaarYaar* can be seen as an effort of cultural conversation or a social dialogue across cultures and musical styles. The quartet intends to utilize the transformative potentials of creative encounters of poetry and music (Wood, Harris). With the right wing government in power and the people being polarized along

the religious identities along with religious majoritarianism in the air everywhere, this band is one of the very few voices in India that not only relates to our shared and syncretic past but also beacons towards an inclusive society. The band tries to form a community through music. The song of transgression, which I have mentioned, is a 17<sup>th</sup> century song in which a woman questions the whole ascetic order and intends to enjoy all the intoxicants they relish. This and other songs also indicate quest for a gender just and egalitarian society.

In his concerts, Madan speaks vociferously about political issues because he believes that art and politics are connected. He is also one of the founder members of *Sahmat*. After the Gujarat riots of 2002, he performed 27 concerts. In the days of heightened tensions between India and Pakistan, it was not easy to score the music of Sabiha Sumar's *Khamosh Pani*. He also performed in a festival organized by Pirzadas at Lahore. Thus, the mystic singer along with his band sings to promote communal harmony and brotherhood and carries the message that we are plurally singular and singularly plural.

Through his band he wants to involve with the community. Hence Neruda, Lorca, Faiz and Beatles are juxtaposed with Bulleh Shah, Kabir and Tagore. The chords of guitar along with the deep and sonorous sounds of sarod create a different acoustic atmosphere with multiple percussions. "The world is going through its worst possible phase. This bothers me, the way, we have come to hate each other, the way we demonise communities. I am not going to stay quiet about these situations at this point. As an artist I will raise my voice. It is necessary," (Khurana).

## End Notes

1. This paper was presented at the 45<sup>th</sup> session of the World Conference of International Council for Traditional Music held at Bangkok in July, 2019. I am grateful to ICTM for providing me the travel support. I am also thankful to the audience present there for their valuable comments.
2. Although at present, the percussion accompaniment is being given by Amjad Khan yet Gurmit Singh was the most versatile percussionist of the band. He used to handle multiple percussions on the stage very skillfully.
3. There is a very famous song of Us. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, “Allah Muhammad chaar yaar; Haji, Khwaja, Qutub, Farid.” Haji Dataganj Baksh Uzberi (Lahore, Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti (ajmer), Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki (Delhi) and Sheikh Farid (Pak Pattan) are called four friends in Punjabi Sufi thought. Later this notion kept changing and Nizamuddin Aulia along with other Sufi saints was also included.
4. Born in December 1950 at Amritsar, Dr. Madan Gopal Singh studied at Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University. He did his Ph.D. on Indian cinema. Madan taught English literature for 42 years in Delhi University. He is a prolific writer and translator. His film on classical singer Mallikarjun Mansur ‘Rasa Yatra’ received the best short film award in 1995. He also gave music in *Khamosh Pani* which won three awards in the Locarno Film Festival. He has also written dialogues and lyrics of Anup Singh’s award-winning film *Kissaa* and recently he has done the music of ‘Song of the Scorpion’ by Singh.
5. The other two interviews are available on Youtube. Sunil Kataria interviewed him for BBC Punjabi and the title of Madan’s other talk is “Dwarka Baat Cheet: Madan Gopal Singh-Spiritual Journeys as a Celebration of the Plural and Diverse”.
6. *Gurbani* means the poetry of Sikh gurus and other saints included in the Holy book of Sikhs. These poems are set to music and are sung at Sikh religious shrines by the singers known as *kirtanias* or *ragis*.
7. In an interview, he recollects what mesmerizing impact of the qawwali sung by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan’s father and uncle had

- on him when he heard that for the first time from Radio Pakistan.
8. In 1967, Samvid government was formed with Govind Narayan in the state of Madhya Pradesh.
  9. The fifth Sikh guru sent scholars across the length and breadth of Indian subcontinent in order to collect poetry before he sat to compile the book. The Holy Book includes the poems of Gurus, Muslim fakirs, and even Dalit saints.
  10. So far I have only heard two verses from him which are from the Sikh Holy book. He sings aarti by Guru Nanak and the first stanza of Anand Sahib written by the third Sikh Guru.
  11. *Siharfi* is a poem in which the poet begins with an alphabet and then creates a word from that. Then the whole poem follows. I am citing here a preliminary translation of a very uncommon poem by Sultan Bahu which fits well into the context of the present condition of the Middle East. “What are the identification markers of the city of Baghdad? It is a city with tall palm trees. My body and heart has torn into pieces as the small pieces of cloth at a tailor’s shop. I will stitch these and wear a shroud made of these and come on the roads along with ascetics. I will beg for the pieces of the Baghdad city which you have destroyed.” (translation, mine).
  12. In 2017, he along with his musicians was called at SOAS to commemorate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Waris Shah’s *Hir* wherein he also presented different renditions of this famous love-legend of Punjab.
  13. Refer to footnote 14.
  14. In order to understand how Krishna’s music led to his concert being cancelled and how Delhi government stepped in to organize his performance on the very same day (Sharan). Sharan also describes how the concert was something beyond tradition and how the singer performed different musical genres and that too, in different Indian languages.
  15. She began her research as a CSDS fellow in 2005.



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