



Photo: Ekta Saran

# KIRTANS FROM THE heart

**Manika Kaur:** Healing the world with her voice

Australian singer Manika Kaur learned from a young age that there is no greater love than to help your fellow neighbour. Having grown up in a home where she was taught lessons of peace, love, equality and humanity, she has been involved in seva, or the principle of selfless service, her whole life. “Wars make money. Feeding and educating the homeless and impoverished don’t,” Kaur reflects from her current residence in Dubai. “A part of me is angry at the injustice in the world but what good is anger? It will only bring darkness.”

The now 31-year-old Melbourne-born and raised activist was told at an early age that she had a unique singing voice. But it wasn’t until three years ago – when she almost died after giving birth – that she became attuned to her inner voice. “There was a darkness in me that I didn’t know how to deal with,” she says as she recalls those difficult

weeks and months following the birth of her son. “I was cut very deep and long during an episiotomy, and then stitched wrong. I lost a lot of blood and had to have a blood transfusion.”

The new mother was finally discharged from hospital. But her pain continued to worsen, and a week later it was discovered she was septic with a deadly strain of e-coli. After more time in hospital, and further surgery to repair the damage she had suffered, Kaur was at last allowed home to heal.

It was a painful journey that saw her on and off antibiotics for a whole year as her body slowly built up its immunity again. “I was trying to understand life’s plan as I went through a range of emotions including anger, doubt, blame and bitterness,” Kaur says. “My mum said to me, ‘you have to be strong for yourself, you have to feed your baby; you cannot lie in bed all day and feel sorry for yourself.’ And I came

to realise that to come through the experience without emotional baggage and scarring, to have my smile back, a smile from the heart, a real one, not one that is put on as a show for others, I had to be true to myself.”

## **Finding her calling**

This insight allowed the award-winning singer/songwriter of devotional chants and hymns to experience what she calls ‘a shift’ inside herself. The sympathy she previously felt for people suffering ill health, poverty or emotional and physical abuse transformed into an empathy so deep that she now spends time each day in her prayer room praying for all the souls in the world who are suffering.

“My prayer room is a place where I feel safe and fearless,” Kaur says, “where I can cry and let go of pain, where I can seek guidance, where trouble leaves and stillness comes to reside.”

She incorporates yogic breathing, asana (which she calls the mastery of sitting still!) and meditation techniques to help her focus as she prays. “Things come to you when you are ready to evolve. Taking time to connect to the light within is like having my batteries charged. Afterwards I feel balanced and equipped to face anything.” Kaur says she feels blessed to have finally let go of her negative birthing experience with a sense of acceptance, forgiveness and peace. Her mission now is “to heal with my music” and the kirtan tracks that she spends time in her studio composing, recording and producing relay this passion with lyricism and love.

The idea for Kirtan for Causes, the logo under which she sells her music to raise money for charity, came to Kaur as an answer to prayer. Her debut album *Bandhana*, released in 2009, raised more than a million dhiraams (over AUD\$290,000) towards building the first official gurdwara – or Sikh temple – in Dubai, a place she now calls home after moving there following her marriage in 2007. The gurdwara is modelled on the Golden Temple in Punjab, India, which is the holiest place of worship for Sikhs. It is a sacred destination that Kaur has journeyed to each year since she was young.



Everyone is welcome at the Golden Temple

“It’s truly an uplifting experience and impossible to describe,” she says. “Everything at the Golden Temple has a significant meaning. The Guru symbolically placed the temple on the lower level as an expression of humility, so that even the mightiest had to step down to enter it. And the four entrances, one on each side, signify that it is open to all worshippers of all castes and creeds.”

### Feeding the world

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Golden Temple is the practice of langar – the serving of free and sanctified vegetarian meals prepared on site. It is offered to not only the tens of thousands of pilgrims who visit the temple daily but also to visitors of other faiths, the poor, the homeless, tourists and locals alike. It is the largest free kitchen in the world, feeding up to 100,000 people a day. The food never stops, and no one is turned away. “This is what brotherhood and sisterhood means,” Kaur says. “We are all the same. I’m not here to judge you or change you. I respect that you are on your journey and you are welcome here to eat, rest and meditate.”

Langar at the Golden Temple is operated largely by volunteers and



Feeding the needy

financed by donations from around the world, says Gurmel Singh, a research scholar and former member of the Sikh History Board in Amritsar, India. Now managing the Khalsa Diwan Sikh Temple in Hong Kong, Gurmel said that langar is an important institution that helps the poor and needy. By inviting people from any community and any faith to volunteer in food preparation and cleaning, it condemns the caste system and creates equality. Seva, in the form of langar, gives people “peace of mind, self-satisfaction and makes one humble,” Mr Gurmel said. The Golden Temple’s kitchen manager, Harpeet Singh, reveals the enormous scale of the undertaking in an article published on the news site *Al Jazeera*. The daily list of groceries required includes: 7,000 kilos of wheat flour, one and a half tonnes of lentils, 1,200 kilos of rice, and 5,000 kilos of ghee (clarified butter). There are also 300,000 plates, spoons and bowls to be washed; and 100 LPG cylinders and 5,000 kilos of firewood are consumed every day in the running of the massive operation.

“Sikhs feed the world. This is the legacy of the Sikh gurus,” Kaur says. “They have created a selfless service that will live forever, and it is the same at every gurdwara. When I was in Melbourne I would see a lot of non-Sikhs come to the gurdwara to eat, and seeing that warmed my heart.”

SBS journalist and Walkley Award finalist Manpreet Singh says the average Australian may not be aware



Meal time

everyone is welcome. “The doors are open to all,” she says. “I have seen many thousands of people partake in langar at the Blackburn Gurdwara and other Melbourne Gurdwaras including Keysborough and Craigieburn, with Sikhs and non-Sikhs helping to prepare the langar, as well as consuming it. Anyone non-Sikh who attends the gurdwara for the first time is always awe-struck that a simple meal has such a potent power to bring people together.”

It was being raised in this culture of giving to others, Kaur says, and the example of her father, whom she calls a “true humanitarian”, that helped forge her own path towards raising money for those less fortunate. Her latest track, *Guru Ram Das Rakho Sarnee*, is a moving tribute to Guru Ram Das Ji (1534—1581) who was instrumental in designing the Golden Temple. Orphaned as a young boy and brought up by his grandmother, he would sell lentils on the street and share what he had with those less fortunate, Kaur says.

The music video accompanying the kirtan, which has had over four and a half million views on YouTube, reveals in magical hand shadowgraphy the story of how pilgrims flocked to help Guru Ram Das Ji build the Golden Temple and feed the hungry. “Guruji believed in the equality of all human beings,” Kaur says in the video. “Birth and caste are of no avail before God. It is one’s deeds which make or unmake a man.”

### Educating children

Sponsoring rural children in India who would otherwise miss out on the opportunity to have an education is another cause close to Kaur’s heart. She was inspired by her parents, who, in 2004, started a humanitarian project called S.O.S Initiative which provides financial aid to poor families in Punjab, India.

“Every year when I visit the Golden Temple I also meet the children we are sponsoring and their families,” Kaur explains. “There is so much desperation and hopelessness that at times parents feel like they can’t move on because of debt.”

The suicide rate amongst farmers in Punjab is one of the highest in India, Kaur says, and many children are left to fend for themselves. “I visit my kids every year but when you spend time there you realise the problem is so much bigger. The aim is to get as many children in school as possible and help reduce the burden on the family. It gives them hope so that they hold on for the sake of their children. These families and these children are standing at a cliff and education can make the difference.”

Today S.O.S. Initiative – the profits of which Kaur’s latest album, *Satnam Waheguru* (released in January 2014) is supporting – educates more than 2000 children from rural villages in Punjab by providing the financial assistance needed to send them to school as well

as sponsoring teachers. “Some of my kids are in university now which is a higher expense but when you think about how a university degree can open up these children’s futures then the cost is worth it,” Kaur says.

One of these ‘kids’ whose future has opened up wider than she ever dreamed possible is Gurpreet Kaur, a young woman whose labourer father struggled to provide for her and her four siblings. Gurpreet vividly remembers the day a notice was put up on the board at her local school. “It was written that a person want to give best education to 200 students who belong to poor families who are brilliant but cannot able to have,” Gurpreet writes in a letter Kaur shares on her website. “A hope of light was arises at my mind.” Gurpreet eagerly applied for the opportunity and was accepted into the sponsorship program. With the financial assistance Kaur and her family provided, Gurpreet went on to complete her schooling and is now studying engineering at Guru Nanak Dev University in Punjab. “If I talk about my life before education, I was like a desert,” Gurpreet said in an email from India. “But now, a beautiful castle is being made at that desert, the castle of my dreams, my wishes, my talent, my hopes.”

Immersed in her fifth semester exams, Gurpreet corresponded passionately from an internet café, talking about how vital it was for every child in the world to be educated. “Education has



so many benefits,” she said. “It reduces illiteracy and child labour. It increases the standard of living for people and helps develop countries. And it raises awareness among people.” Hoping to one day work for the Indian civil service, Gurpreet said education had not only given her the tools to reach her goals but had also made her more confident. “It is often said that education is the weapon by which we can change the world. So if you want to change the world you have to educate the people first.”

Gurpreet is now twenty-one and said she was looking forward to the day when she could help someone else fulfil their dreams. “I think that helping each other can lead to universal brotherhood,” she said. “By helping the needy we not only ensure their work is done but it is a sign of a good relationship among people. When we help each other, there is a peace in our mind and we feel happiness in our heart and soul.”

**Moving forward with strength and courage**

During a recent interview with BBC Asian Radio Manika Kaur reflected

on her video, Guru Ram Das Rakho Sarnee, which she has dedicated to her father. The gurus, she said, “... talked about harmony, equality, balance, worship, humility, tolerance. They spread a divine message of peace, and it’s something that the world still struggles to accept. At the end of the day it is very much your own journey ... I’m just me, being me, singing kirtan and sharing it and hopefully raising money and raising awareness for good causes.”

This commitment to seva has helped Kaur on her own journey as she learned to let go of the darkness and listen to her inner voice. With a true smile in her heart, Kaur says she is happy being a mother and feels blessed to have a family. “People often say that ‘good things happen to good people’ but my experience has taught me that sometimes the worst things that happen to you turn out to be the best thing for you – for your journey to the light,” she says. “I believe our good deeds help us survive the hard times. They help us come out of it without emotional damage but with strength and courage.”

Suvi gives daily yoga, ocean swimming and walks with the pram as the secret to staying sane as she juggles freelance writing with the joys and demands of being a new mum. She can be contacted at [suvmahonen@bigpond.com](mailto:suvmahonen@bigpond.com)

Manika Kaur was born in Melbourne, Australia in 1982. She moved to Dubai in 2006 after getting married. Apart from being a busy mother to her 3 year-old son Manika spends her time recording kirtan to raise money for good causes. To learn more about Manika like her fb page: Manika Kaur



The children. Education can change the world