



## Gurmat *Sangeet*: Raga and Bhava based musical compositions

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### Abstract

Gurmat *Sangeet* is a unique musical tradition which is five centuries old. Guru Nanak Dev ji, the founder of the Sikh religion, and its first Guru began the tradition. The tradition was continued and refined by every Sikh Guru through to Guru Gobind Singh ji. It continues to this day. With Gurmat *Sangeet*, the divine message is communicated through Shabad and Kirtan prescribed in different Ragas. In Gurmat *Sangeet*, ragas play an extremely important role. It's a channel through which the emotions and feelings contained within the shabad can be effectively conveyed. The shabads contain examples and lessons for the mind and soul to talk to and understand each other. In understanding and reconciling these two sides one recognises oneself and attains unity with the Creator. In addition to ragas from classical traditions (Hindustani and Karnatak), shabads in the Guru Granth Sahib have also been rendered in ragas derived from rural folk traditions such as Ghoreean, Suhag and Alohnian. Punjab, the birthplace of Sikhism, is especially rich in folk music.

**Keywords:** Gurmat *Sangeet*, ragadari, bhavas, compositions, Sikh Guru's contribution

### 1. Introduction to Indian Music

The Indian subcontinent possesses an immensely rich and varied musical culture, whose origins can be traced back to ancient Hindu Vedas of the 2nd century. The most fundamental component of Indian music is raga. Raga is derived from the Sanskrit word "rang" meaning "to color". Conceptually, raga may be thought of as an acoustic method of "coloring" the mind of the listener with emotion. Practically, raga can be (grossly) simplified to mean "a pattern of notes used as a basis for improvisation". When we speak of Indian music, we are primarily referring to "Pure music" or "ragdaari music". Commonly known as Indian classical music, the term 'classical' is a misnomer as Indian ragdaari music dates back to 2000 B.C. - 1000 B.C. proving that it existed far before the renaissance or classic era.

- Indian music based on the raga form encompasses both,
  - a. North Indian raga music - which is prevalent in almost all but the southern Indian states and
  - b. The music of southern origin - which is still restricted to and appreciated mainly by southern India. They are known as Hindustani shastriya *Sangeet* (northern) and Karnatic *Sangeet* (southern) respectively.

Due to India's cultural and ethnic diversity there are also various forms of regional folk music which serve not only as entertainment but also as a channel through which emotions such as joy and sadness can be conveyed on poignant occasions like weddings, births, deaths etc.

Guru Nanak has described music as a means of attaining spiritual joy and transcendental bliss. He adopted music as a means for moulding the spiritual, mystical and temporal life of the devotees.

### 2. Gurmat *Sangeet*

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 Guru Gobind Singh ji. 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 Gurudwaras 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.

The Bani of the Granth Sahib, written and indexed according to the prescribed Raagas, singing forms, music signs/ headings and the other guidelines issued in the Bani, creates an original and specific musicology. A scientific approach to music can help in recognising more explicitly the musical tradition according to the Guru Granth Sahib.

In his compositions, Guru Nanak used 19 ragas out of which ten are morning ragas, four mid-day ragas and three evening ragas. The other two ragas are seasonal. The successors of Guru Nanak used traditional ragas. However, they introduced some changes to provide different melodies and to reflect intensity of divine aspiration. In the ragmala are mentioned 6 major ragas and 30 raginis (wives) and 48 sons, making a total of 84. In the Adi Granth, 31 ragas are used.

### 3. Ragas used in Guru Granth Sahib

Ragas have a direct relationship to human moods and the following are the connections between Ragas and feeling.

1. Soohi – joy and separation

2. Bilaaval – happiness
3. Gaund – strangeness, surprise, beauty
4. Sri – satisfaction and balance
5. Maajh – loss, beautification
6. Gauri – seriousness
7. Aasa – making effort
8. Gujri – satisfaction, softness of heart, sadness
9. Devgandhari – no specific feeling but the Raag has a softness
10. Bihaagra – beautification
11. Sorath – motivation
12. Dhanasari – inspiration, motivation
13. Jaitsree – softness, satisfaction, sadness
14. Todi – this being a flexible Raag it is apt for communicating many feelings
15. Bhairaagi – sadness, (The Gurus have, however, used it for the message of Bhakti)
16. Tilang – this is a favourite Raag of Muslims. It denotes feeling of beautification and yearning.
17. Raamkali – calmness
18. Nat Narayan – happiness
19. Maali Gaura – happiness
20. Maaru – giving up of cowardice
21. Tukhari – beautification
22. Kedara – love and beautification
23. Bhairav – seriousness, brings stability of mind
24. Basant – happiness
25. Sarang – sadness
26. Malaar – separation
27. Jaijawanti – viraag
28. Kalyaan – Bhakti Ras
29. Vadhas – vairaag, loss (that is why Alahniya is sung in this Raag when someone passes away)
30. Parbhathi – Bhakti and seriousness
31. Kaanra – Bhakti and seriousness

The singing of the hymns of the Gurus is called Shabad Kirtan, which literally means singing the praises of God; therefore kirtan is divine music. Kirtan music is like a precious diamond; it is full of bliss and has many qualities. A person taking part in the kirtan is saved of all troubles and all his problems are solved. Music is of great value as it not only refines the feelings of the person taking part in the kirtan but also moulds his character. It has also the effect of preserving and restoring health and purifies the soul. It is a significant mode of devotion and brings comfort and bliss to the devotee.

#### 4. Raag and Bhava based musical compositions

Guru Nanak attached great importance to the singing of divine music. Kirtan is not mere mechanical singing of hymns; its meaning and true significance must be understood. The devotee must enter into the spirit of the music and sing kirtan in a technically correct manner. Its language, grammar, poetry and art should be perfect in all respects. The kirtan should bring out clearly the purpose, scope and philosophical content of the hymns set to instrumental music. Guru Nanak has attached great importance to this aspect of the kirtan. He said:

"It is not the raga nad  
If the thought of one God is not in one's mind,

With mind attuned, dance, keeping the  
Steps in tune with the Infinite  
With the fear of the Lord in mind, is the  
Real tuing of the dance;  
And such a fear should always be in one's mind  
Everyday sitting and rising."

- Rag Asa

Thus a devotee who listens to the kirtan with a pure heart and mind casts off jealousy, ill-will and enmity. The kirtan removes all the dirt and filth in one's thinking and shakes off the ego. Sri Guru Arjan Dev Ji said :

"O brother, if you want permanent bliss,  
You should remain in the company of the  
Saints as ordained by the Guru.  
Where you remember only the Name of the God.  
In their company you cross the ocean of life,  
Knowledge is of great significance of all the elements.  
Of meditation; the most important is His meditation.  
Of all sounds, the most important is the kirtan.  
When a devotee meets the Guru, he sings the  
Praises of the Lord, sayeth Nanak."

- Basant

Kirtan should be sung day and night. Only the time spent in kirtan is fruitful. A discipline should pray to God for strength and courage and sing His praises.

Kirtan implies "words, shabad set to music and rhythm, utilising the experience communicating quality of singing, objectified emotional character of raga, the multiple concept of tal and the purposeful, meaningful and inspirational character of bani." Kirtan is the invaluable jewel, which is full of bliss and manifold virtues.

Music is, therefore, regarded as the easiest way to achieve the true objective of human life. Guru Arjan Dev Ji said:

"Whosoever listens kirtan of Hari;  
Whosoever sings kirtan of Hari  
Misery cannot overtake that person."

- Rag Gauri

The Guru had become the minstrel of the Lord to sing His praises and carry His message to the mankind to cure humanity of all its ills, the only way to spread His Name. Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji said.

"I do not know what to sing  
I sing what he commandeth me."

The Kirtan, the confluence of inner experience, emotion, rhythm and music, is a spontaneous outburst of sublimity and spiritual inspiration.

#### 5. Development of Gurmat Sangeet by all Sikh Gurus

In all Guru Nanak composed 974 hymns in nineteen ragas. Gurmat *Sangeet* continued to be steadily developed and promoted by Guru Angad, Guru Amar Das and Guru Ram Das.

Guru Arjan's greatest contribution to the Sikh religion was his

compilation of the Scriptures into the Aad Granth. It contains the hymns not only of the Gurus but also of saints and minstrels belonging to different religions and castes. Guru Arjan installed the Scripture – Aad Granth – in Harmandir Sahib at Amritsar in 1604. It contains his 2218 hymns in thirty ragas. Guru Arjan maintained a number of musicians who performed Kirtan at his court. Up until the time of Guru Arjan all the musicians performing Kirtan had been paid professionals, but Guru Arjan ordered that every Sikh should learn Kirtan, and not depend solely on the services of professional musicians. Such non-professional singers came to be known as ragis. He personally trained the ragis in hymn-singing in the appropriate ragas. Guru Arjan was not only a great singer, but also an eminent musicologist. He devised a stringed musical instrument called the Saranda which he played.

Guru Hargobind was a great patron of musicians. He established a new class of singers called dhadhis and introduced the new instruments like Dhadh and Sarangi. The dhadis sang heroic deeds of old warriors and inspired the Guru's soldiers. Guru Tegh Bahadur composed 116 hymns in fifteen raags. He introduced a new raag called Jaijawanti. Guru Gobind Singh was a great patron of poets and musicians. Guru Gobind Singh himself created and played the Taus, and introduced another stringed instrument, the Dilruba, to Gurmat *Sangeet*.

## 6. Conclusion

- The Gurus democratised sacred music and brought it from the exclusive temple halls to the homes of the ordinary men and women.
- The Gurus brought awareness of regional music to the masses by singing and composing shabads in folk tunes in addition to classical ragas.
- The Gurus used music to break down religious and cultural barriers during a period of extreme intolerance and religious persecution. They used both north and south Indian musical styles. They blended Hindu and Muslim music practices and popularised ragas such as Asa and Suhi, which have strong Muslim influences.
- Though the appeal of Kirtan is generally directed to one's feelings and instinct, the element of intellect is not ignored.
- The Gurus maintain that ultimately, music is secondary to the shabad. Music is the medium through which the spirit of the shabad is propagated.
- The main aim of Kirtan is to hymn the glory of God and to get spiritually closer to Him. This can only be achieved by acting upon the lessons/instructions within the shabad, not merely by listening to it.

Thus, whilst performing Kirtan, the words and meaning attached to the shabad must have pre-eminence over all else. Although musical and vocal competence is requisite, showcasing musical skills or demonstrations of singing prowess, at the expense of the words of the shabad, are undesirable. Sikhism divides the human character into two equally important halves: the mun (mind) – representing the selfish/impatient side – and aatma (soul or conscience) – representing the honest and sincere side. Thus man's natural

instinct for music is utilised and channelled, through Gurmat *Sangeet*, towards achieving higher spiritual goals.

## 7. References

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