

Sikh Shabad Kīrtan and Gurmat Sangīt: What's in the Name?

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This article presents an overview of *shabad kīrtan*, the devotional singing of sacred songs from Sikh scriptures. The discussion addresses both its historical development and a description of it as it is practiced today. Special attention is given to features of Sikh musicology. These are described beginning with the musical information in the Guru Granth, including the musical designations in the *shabad* titles and the musical information in the text. After critiquing the meaning of the term *gurmat sangīt*, which has relatively recently come to describe *kīrtan* that uses *rāg* music, the article proposes “*rāg-ādhārit shabad kīrtan*” as the more fitting term to refer to that genre, and “*gurmat sangit shāstar/vigyān*” to refer to Sikh musicology.

Sikh *shabad kīrtan* is the devotional singing of sacred songs from Sikh scriptures. It is central to the spiritual lives of Sikhs, and forms an integral and prominent part of worship at the *gurdwārā* (place of worship), of life ceremonies, and of their daily listening to recorded music. For many Sikhs, *shabad kīrtan* is indeed their favorite part of the gurdwara service.

Shabad kīrtan is a five hundred year-old tradition, having started with the songs of the founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak. Its journey over these five centuries has included many new developments—new melodic modes, musical forms, styles, musicians and performance contexts—but also loss and recovery of tradition.

However, relative to its significance in Sikh lives, and its fascinating journey, *shabad kīrtan* has been an understudied subject. Writings in English have been few and far between.¹ In Punjabi, too, most prominent books have been collections of musical notations of the musician's repertoire.² Of course, these are important sources of compositions used by Sikh musicians, and their critical review as Sikh musicological material would be an excellent area of research. In the last decade or so, several works in Punjabi on Sikh musicology have been published in Punjab.³

Sikh shabad kirtan has received scant scholarly attention in the Western academe,⁴ and papers on the subject are rare in Western peer-reviewed academic journals. On the musicological aspect, in particular, I have not been able to find any article, and the present article, together with two companion pieces (Inderjit N. Kaur 2011a; 2011b) represent initial attempts in this line of research. As such many topics touched upon in this paper remain significant unexplored areas for in-depth research.

This article presents an overview of shabad kirtan, with an emphasis on its musicological dimensions. It begins with a summary of its historical development, going on to a brief description of shabad kirtan as it is practiced today, with its many genres and performance contexts. This is followed by a more detailed discussion of Sikh musicology, beginning with the musical information in the Guru Granth. This is essential to an understanding of Sikh sacred music, since the Guru Granth is the foundation of this music and also a scholar-authenticated source of information. This section includes a discussion of: the musical designations in the *shabad* titles—*rāg*, *ghar*, musical forms (*pade*, *chhant*, *partāl*, *birahaṛe*, etc.), and *dhunī* names; the musical information in the *shabad* text—verse meter, chorus marking, verse sequencing, and very importantly, *ras* (aesthetics); and its implications for use of musical material such as *pad* (text), *rāg*, *tāl*, and *lai*, as well as for structuring shabad kirtan sessions. The article then turns to a discussion of the meaning of *gurmāt sangīt*, and, underscoring the importance of terminology, proposes “*rāg-ādhārit shabad kīrtan*” as the more fitting term to refer to *kīrtan* that uses *rāg* music, and “*gūrmāt sangīt shāstar*” or “*vigyān*” to refer to Sikh musicology. The article concludes by addressing the question posed in its title, and with emphasis on the essence and core aesthetic of *shabad kīrtan*.

Historical Development of *Shabad Kīrtan*

Sikh *shabad kīrtan* began with the songs of Guru Nanak (1469-1539), as the sonic expression of his Divine inspirations. He sang the revealed Word—the *shabad*—to the accompaniment of the minstrel Bhai Mardana’s *rabāb* (a plucked lute) in his journeys, and when he settled a community in Kartarpur. And he recorded the *shabad* texts in *pothīs* (manuscripts), of which the *Har Sahāi Pothī* is believed to be extant.⁵

Evidence of Guru Nanak as a musician, and of his *pothīs*, is found in the *janam sākhīs* (life stories), in the *vārs* (verses) of Bhai Gurdas (ca.1558-1633), and in 18th and 19th century paintings. The *janam sākhīs* tell of Guru Nanak’s moments of revelation—“Mardana, play the *rabāb*, *bāṇī* has come,” he would say. In Bhai Gurdas’s *vār* 1:32 he is described with *kitāb* (book) tucked under his arm, and in *vār* 1:33 the *mullahs*

(Muslim priests) ask him to refer to his *kitāb*. Older paintings typically depict him singing, with Mardana on the rabab, and often there is a pothi by his side. Bhai Gurdas mentions the use of rabab in var 14:15. The musical influence of Guru Nanak is noted in Bhai Gurdas' var 1:27 (*ghar ghar hove dharamsāl, hove kīrtan sadā visoā*—"Every house was a place of worship with constant *kīrtan* as on Baisakhi"). The prevalence of shabad kirtan in Kartarpur is recorded in var 1:38 (*sodaru ārtī gāvīai amrit vele jāpu uchārā*—"Sodar and *Ārtī* were sung, and in the early morning *Jāp* was recited).

The tradition of shabad kirtan started by Guru Nanak was continued by the following gurus. Guru Angad, Guru Amardas, Guru Ramdas, and Guru Arjan vastly expanded the *gurbānī* (guru's word) for shabad kirtan, singing in new musical forms and modes. Guru Angad institutionalized the singing of *Āsā kī Vār* (Ballad of Hope) in early morning (Macauliffe 1996[1909], vol. 6:15). Guru Amardas' composition, *Ānand* (Bliss), has become the standard concluding piece of kirtan sittings. Guru Ramdas' *Lāvānī* verses form the core part of the Sikh wedding ceremony. Tradition has it that Guru Arjan played the *sarandā* (waisted bowed lute), and developed the upright *ḷorī* (drum pair) from the double-headed drum, *mridang*.

Guru Arjan had the works of the first five Sikh gurus scribed in *Ādi Granth* (1604), which became the first authoritative compilation of gurbani. He also included in it songs of fifteen *bhagats* (saints) from different faiths. The second and final compilation, with the addition of the *shabads* of the ninth guru, Teg Bahadar, was the *Guru Granth*, which, since 1708, has been the primary Sikh scripture and the primary source of Sikh shabad kirtan.

Shabad kirtan may use sacred songs only, defined as songs from the *Guru Granth* (the primary Sikh scripture), the *Dasam Granth* (works associated with the tenth Sikh guru, Gobind Singh, compiled in the early 18th century), and the works of Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal (1633-1715). Other texts may not be used for shabad kirtan.⁶

Institutionalizing of liturgical kirtan sessions began with Guru Nanak and continued with the following Sikh gurus, as mentioned above. Guru Arjan is said to have initiated the daily tradition of five kirtan *chaukīs* (sittings) at the Harmandir Sahib Gurdwara (The Golden Temple) in Amritsar: the early morning *chauki* of *Asa ki Var*, the mid-morning *chauki* of *Anand*, the midday *chauki* of *Charan Kanwal*, the evening *chauki* of *Sodar*, and the nighttime *chauki* of *Kalyan*. The Sikh gurus encouraged the development of professional kirtan performers.

Tradition has it that the descendants of Bhai Mardana became professional musicians in the gurus' courts—Sajada in Guru Angad's center at Khadur Sahib, Sadu and Badu in Guru Amardas' center at Goindval and Guru Ramdas' center at Chak Ram Das Pura, Balvand and

Satta in Guru Ramdas' and Guru Arjan's court, Babak during Guru Hargobind's time, and Chatra later. Thus ensued the *rabābī* tradition of Muslim hereditary professional musicians who sang kirtan to the accompaniment of the rabab. It is said that the rabab-players in the house of the gurus were recognized as *Bābe ke* (i.e. those of Baba Nanak) as compared to those in the royal courts *Bābur ke* (of Babur). The *rabābī kīrtan* style and tradition continued through the Sikh guru period becoming an important part of the kirtan tradition at the holiest Sikh gurdwara, Harmandir Sahib. Bhai Sain Ditta is said to be a well-known rababi who performed at Harmandir Sahib during the early 19th century. At this time the rababi tradition also received patronage from the Sikh states of Nabha, Patiala, and Kapurthala. Bhai Chand, Bhai Taba, and Bhai Lal performed at Harmandir Sahib during the early 20th century.

Parallel to the rababi tradition there developed a tradition of professional Sikh *kīrtan* singers, *kīrtankārs*, starting with amateur singers from the Sikh guru period. Tradition speaks of several famous *kīrtankārs* of that time: Bhai Dipa and Bula during Guru Angad's time; Narain Das, Padha, and Ugrsain in Guru Amardas' time; Bhai Ramu, Jhaju, and Mukand during Guru Arjan's time; Banvali and Parsram during Guru Hargobind's time; and Gulab Rai, Bhel, Mansud, and Gurbaksh during Guru Teg Bahadar's time. This tradition of Sikh musicians developed into the professional *rāgī* tradition. Bhai Mansa Singh is reputed as a fine kirtankar at Harmandir Sahib during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. During the 19th century the *rāgī* tradition received the patronage of Sikh maharajas and leaders. The states of Patiala, Nabha, and Kapurthala are particularly notable, supporting *rāgīs* such as Baba Pushkara Singh. Bhai Sham Singh is said to have performed kirtan for some seventy years at Harmandir Sahib during the latter half of the 19th century. Some stalwarts of the early 20th century include Hira Singh, Santa Singh, Sunder Singh, Sammund Singh, Surjan Singh, and Gopal Singh. Bhai Jwala Singh was a tenth generation kirtankar who was followed by his illustrious sons Avtar Singh and Gurcharan Singh. Other eminent ragis of *rāg*-based kirtan during the latter part of the last century include Balbir Singh and Dyal Singh.

The *dhāḍī* singers (see Thuhi, this volume) are said to have developed under Guru Hargobind, who encouraged the singing of songs of valor. Bhai Abdallah and Nath are reputed to have been zealous dhadis during his time, the former playing the stringed instrument, *sārangī*, and the latter playing the small handheld drum, *dhadd*. The dhadi tradition gained quick and continuing popularity. The performance, typically by an ensemble of three, consists of the singing of heroic ballads interspersed with chanted narratives. The tone is highly charged with emotions of heroism. Since the songs are typically not sacred Sikh songs from the sets of works mentioned above, dhadi singing is not classified

as Sikh shabad kirtan. Another distinction is that the ensemble stands while performing, while shabad kirtan is performed sitting on the floor.

Thus three categories of professional Sikh musicians emerged in the Sikh guru period: *rabābī*, *rāgī* and *dhāḍī*. However following the tumultuous history of the Sikhs, these traditions suffered a rocky road, too. After the passing of the tenth and last Sikh guru, Gobind Singh, in 1708, and a brave but unsuccessful effort by Banda Bahadar to resist oppression, the attempted genocide of Sikhs in the early 18th century led to their hiding. Sikh institutions, music included, suffered great setbacks. During the 18th century there were repeated interruptions to the singing of kirtan at Harmandir Sahib. In the late 18th century, Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, a prominent *sardar* (leader), also known to be a good kirtankar, contributed significantly to the re-establishment of Sikh institutions. Patronage of Sikh kirtan resumed in the 19th century in the princely states of Patiala, Nabha, and Kapurthala. A wave of renewal and revival occurred at the turn of the 20th century with eminent Sikh scholars such as Dr. Charan Singh, Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, and Bhai Vir Singh taking up the cause of heritage kirtan traditions in the larger context of Sikh identity, culture, and society. Yet another blow was dealt by the partition of Punjab in 1947, leading to mass cross border migration of Sikhs out of West Punjab (which was allotted to Pakistan) and Muslims out of East Punjab (which was allotted to India). The rababi tradition suffered in particular since the Muslim musicians migrated to Pakistan where there was scant patronage for Sikh kirtan. Efforts of revival are now underway in Punjab (India), giving recognition to the surviving rababis. However, by the 20th century rababis were singing with the more modern harmonium (see below) rather than the traditional *rabāb*.

The recurrent upheavals for Sikhs led to significant loss of musical heritage in a number of ways. The practice of the musical modes, melodies and forms that are designated in the Guru Granth declined sharply. The use of traditional instruments also declined. These included stringed instruments such as the rabab, saranda and *tāūs* (bowed fretted lute), and drums such as the mridang and jori. By the early-mid-20th century the relatively modern harmonium (reed organ with a Western-style keyboard) had replaced the stringed melodic instruments, and the relatively modern *tablā* had replaced the traditional mridang and jori. The size of the professional kirtan ensemble also reduced from a quartet (*chaukī*, literally, “four”) to a trio. The quartet included the main vocalist, a support vocalist, a stringed melodic instrument player, and a drummer. In the modern trio, the stringed instrumentalist was eliminated, and the two vocalists doubled up on the relatively easy-to-play harmonium.

Shabad Kīrtan Today

Sikh shabad kirtan today is practiced in many genres, by a diverse set of musicians and in a variety of contexts. All these aspects require further research. In this section I provide a brief overview of performance contexts, types of musicians, and performing styles.

Professional kīrtan sittings, musicians and genres

The predominant performance context is the Sikh gurdwara, which is open to all people irrespective of faith, social status, and gender. In a gurdwara the center stage is always occupied by the primary sacred scripture, the Guru Granth, which is kept on an elevated *palkī* (platform), surrounded by ornate *rumālās* (scarves). The *rāgī jathā* (ensemble) typically sits on an elevated stage to a side of the Guru Granth, facing the congregation, which is seated on the floor. There is no special seating for anyone, but in some gurdwaras men and women sit on opposite sides of the aisle. This enables tighter seating during rush times, such as special celebrations.

Visitors to a gurdwara during regular service hours and during celebrations can expect to hear kirtan as an essential part of the service. Major gurdwaras and those with substantial attendees have a number of sittings on Sunday, and evening sittings on other days.

The first early morning *chaukī* (sitting) comprises of the singing of the composition *Āsā kī Vār*. This sitting has one of the most well-defined and distinct formats of Sikh kirtan *chaukis*. The verses of this composition are chanted and sung to standardized melodies believed to be historical from the Sikh guru period. This is the only *chauki* where the drum-player is required to chant certain verses solo. The verses of *Asa ki Var* are sung interspersed with other *shabads* chosen by the performers. However no discourse may be used within this *chauki*. It usually lasts for two to three hours, but can be longer depending on the number of other *shabads* sung. The ability to perform this *chauki* well is the hallmark of accomplished professional kirtan performers. Due to the combination of the early morning time, the uninterrupted singing and substantial length, this is the favorite *chauki* for those looking for a deeper meditative experience. Other *chaukis* in most gurdwaras have a looser format with respect to the presentation. Typically though, it consists of the singing of a few *shabads*, ending with singing of six stanzas from the composition, *Ānand*. Another distinctive composition is the *Āratī*, sung during the evening *chaukis*. *Rain sabāī* (all night) sessions are usually annual events with a number of musicians participating, and often ending with the early morning *Asa ki Var* session. At Harmandir Sahib, kirtan *chaukis* run

continuously from dawn past midnight, systemized around the time of day and seasons.

Kirtan programs that take place for life ceremonies, milestones, and achievements include shabads with appropriate themes: birth and death, celebration and purpose of life, gratitude, and supplication. This is also the case for the choice of interspersed shabads within the sitting of Asa ki Var. Family members often request a shabad or two that would be specially meaningful to them for the occasion.

The Sikh wedding ceremony, *Ānand Kāraj* (Work of Bliss) has a distinctive kirtan section with a defined format. The bride and groom sit at the head of the center aisle of the gurdwara, facing the Guru Granth. After a set of shabads with appropriate themes, the shabad, *palai taiḍai lāgī* (“connected to You”) is sung during which the bride’s father hands each end of a *chunnī* (long scarf) to the bride and groom. The core part of the wedding consists of the chanting and singing of the four *Lāvānī* verses, which describe successive stages of the soul’s journey to Divine Union. As each verse is sung, the couple-to-be processes around the Guru Granth. The completion of the fourth round is the declaration that they are married, and is immediately followed by the joyous singing of the shabad, *viāh hoā mere bāblā* (“the wedding has occurred, O Father”).

A typical kirtan sitting at the gurdwara is performed by a professional ensemble known as a *rāgī jathā*. The contemporary standard *jathā* is composed of three musicians: lead and support vocalists, who also double up on harmoniums, and a tabla-player. The jatha members are professional, and in addition to singing shabad kirtan, they are required to be able to perform all liturgical services.⁷ Thus they have the title of a priest—*Bhāī* (literally, “brother”). As with all gurdwara priests, all are male. This is an indication, not of gender discrimination, but of practical dictates of traditional societies. In recent years a few female jathas have emerged. Female ragis have the title of *Bibī* (literally, “lady”). Mixed gender jathas are rarely seen. Apart from the traditional mold, the monophonic feature of music makes it difficult for the male and female voices to cover the same scale range in a sweet and soothing manner.⁸

In keeping with Sikh theology that prohibits casteism, it is not acceptable for ragis to use a last name that indicates a caste. Almost all names are the generic Sikh last names—“Singh” for males and “Kaur” for females, and some add “Khalsa” at the end. Identity is given by locational associations, such as “Dilli Vale” (from Delhi), or employment associations with a gurdwara, such as “Hazuri Rāgī Harmandir Sahib” (i.e. rāgī in service at the Harmandir Sahib gurdwara). The jatha attire is geared to simplicity and sobriety, consisting of uniform clothing of white or off-white long shirts and pants, with white, navy, saffron or black turbans for males, and scarves for females. More recently a wider array

of colors is being seen. Professional jathas are paid standard fees at the gurdwaras. They may also perform kirtan at private events for an honorarium. However, performing at ticketed venues has not been considered appropriate.⁹

The most prevalent genre sung in the gurdwara by far, now described as “traditional,” uses fairly simple melodies set to simpler varieties of *tāl*—mostly the 8-beat *kahirvā* and also the 6-beat *dādrā*. The simpler melodies and *tāls* enable the congregation to sing along, and also keep the focus on the shabad rather than on the music. Singing is interspersed with complementary melodic material played on the harmonium. The tabla accompanies with variations in tempo and rhythmic variety. The overall affect sought is calm and spiritual. The orientation of the performance is a combination of presentation and participation. Most lines are repeated to enable the congregation to join in. This “traditional” genre encompasses many styles including *gīt*, *ghazal*, and *bhajan*. The most popular rāgi by far of this “traditional” genre has been Bhai Harjinder Singh Srinagar Vale.

The historically traditional genre used more *rāg* music and included traditional stringed melodic instruments along with, or instead of, the relatively modern harmonium, which was introduced to Indian music in the early 19th century. The relative ease of playing and transporting led to the quick adoption of the harmonium in shabad kirtan, however its rigidly fixed and modern, equal temperament-based tuning makes it inadequate for fully realizing the microtonal inflections and ornaments of traditional rag music. There is now an increasing wave of effort to revive the playing of historical stringed instruments such as the rabab, saranda and taus. This is particularly evident in the *rāg*-based shabad kirtan genre called *gurmat sangīt*, which largely uses the contemporary *khyāl* style of Hindustani classical music.

Shabad kirtan is also distinguished as Parmāṇ-style kirtan where the rāgi intersperses lines from related shabads to elaborate on the main theme, and Viākhīā-style kirtan where the rāgi pauses the singing to explain the shabad being sung and present a short discourse.

There are now many Sikh music educational institutions. Traditionally kirtan education occurred within the larger learning centers, *ṭaksāl*, such as Jawaddi Kalan (in Ludhiana) and Dandami Taksal (near Amritsar). These centers have religious codes of conduct that students must adopt, but they seem to be open to all. Students of kirtan often start young and are trained in music, scripture and pronunciation. It would be pertinent to say here that fine kirtan requires much more than musical ability and training. Fine expression of the aesthetic of shabad kirtan requires deep understanding of the shabad text (a point elaborated upon in a later section below), as well as Sikh culture and history. It is noteworthy that in an interview, the eminent rāgi, late Bhai Avtar Singh,

in his answer to my question of the requirements to become a good Sikh kirtankar, listed first a spiritual life that follows the path of the Guru Granth, and then listed training in *rāg* music. It was clear in his mind that a good kirtankar had a different lifestyle compared to a musician in general.

Amateur kīrtan sittings, musicians and genres

In addition to the genres used by professional kirtan ensembles, there are several genres used by amateur singers¹⁰ as well. These have a greater participatory orientation, include a number of handheld idiophonic percussion instruments (e.g. *chhaiṇā*, *chīmṭā*, and *khartāl*), and display contrasting aesthetics to professional kirtan. A particularly distinctive style, with *qawwālī*-like features, is the *Akhand Kīrtanī* style, started in the early 20th century by a devout Sikh, Bhai Randhir Singh. In keeping with its name, *akhand* (literally, “unbroken”), there is no pause between the shabads in a performance, even though performers (men and women) may take turns leading.¹¹ This kirtan aims to generate ecstatic fervor. The music is simple but generates fervor through changes in rhythm, tempo and volume, especially during repetitions of the chant *Vāhegurū* (Praise to The Guru). The kirtan proceeds in cycles of increasing intensity.

Istrī satsang refers to women’s kirtan groups that meet in gurdwaras when the regular sessions are not on, typically in the afternoon. Various members take turns leading in a call and response manner. The drum accompaniment here is the *ḍholkī* (small, double-headed barrel), which is also played with folksongs.

Outside the *darbār* (court) setting (i.e. in the presence of the Guru Granth either in gurdwaras or private homes), shabad kirtan is also sung in what is called *nagar kīrtan*, by large groups processing around the gurdwara complex or neighborhood streets on foot. This kirtan is very participatory, with a leader leading in the call and response style, and many handheld percussion instruments. The drum used is the *dholki* hung over the shoulder. Melodic instruments are not used, as they would be heavy and cumbersome to carry on foot. Modern versions of *nagar kīrtan* have floats carrying the Guru Granth, and shabad kirtan that is recorded or performed live by a jatha seated with instruments on the float.

Kīrtan recordings

Apart from live shabad kirtan, Sikhs listen to recorded shabad kirtan for a substantial part of the day. It is often the main music that plays in a traditional Sikh household, to provide a calm and spiritual atmosphere in the home. For the same reason it is often the choice of music while

commuting to and from work. Recorded shabad kirtan is a very large industry. Its economic force has had a strong influence on performers and listeners alike, mutually reinforcing a style more and more distant from the historical style of shabad kirtan. This has included the adoption of popular tunes and styles, and elaborate instrumental accompaniment, the latter not seen even in contemporary gurdwara performances. Interestingly, video recordings show only the ragi jatha trio with two harmoniums and tabla, as performers, while many (invisible) instruments and musicians play along.

Sikh Musicology

While shabad kirtan is vibrant in its diverse practice, it is currently not based on a detailed musicological foundation. The natural source for such a foundation is the Guru Granth, which provides considerably more musical detail than is commonly recognized. In fact, the operative meaning of significant aspects of the musical terminology from the Guru Granth has been forgotten. This section introduces an analytical approach to recovering this information, and drawing out implications for the practice of shabad kirtan.

Musical information in the Guru Granth

The Guru Granth consists of about 6000 shabads, with the vast majority arranged by musical designations (in addition to authorship), specified in shabad titles, *sirlekh*. In addition to the *sirlekh*, the shabads themselves contain significant musical information—on the structure of chorus and verse (given by *rahāu* and *ank*), the structure of meter (given by the text), and very importantly, on the Sikh musical aesthetic (given by the *rāg-dhyān* shabad in particular). This section proceeds to discuss this musical information in the Guru Granth, shabads from which constitute the core of Sikh kirtan practice.

A. Musical designations in *sirlekh* (shabad titles)

The first and major musical designation is *rāg*, the Indian melodic system.¹² The second is musical form, such as *pade*, *chhant*, *vār*, *ghōṛīān*, etc. With the exception of a few, the musical features of these forms are forgotten. The third musical designation in the *sirlekh* is *ghar* (literally, “house”), specified with numbers, the meaning of which has also been considered forgotten by musicians and scholars alike.

I. *Rāg*

Rāg is the major organizing principle in the Guru Granth. Apart from short initial and final sections, shabads are presented in thirty-one *rāg* sections that include a large number of *rāg* variants. Many of these variants have names, but most are designated with sequential *ghar* numbers (see discussion of *ghar*, below). *Gaurī* is the key exception here, with names for all variants and no *ghar* number designations. These *rāg* sections and versions are, in order,

1. *Srīrāg*, in seven versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-7;
2. *Mājh*, in four versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-4;
3. *Gaurī Guārerī*, in eleven versions, designated with names (without any *ghar* number designations): *Gaurī Guārerī*, *Gaurī Dakhaṇī*, *Gaurī Chetī*, *Gaurī Bairāgaṇ*, *Gaurī Pūrbī-Dīpkī*, *Gaurī Pūrbī*, *Gaurī Mājh*, *Gaurī Mālvā*, *Gaurī Mālā*, and *Gaurī Sorath*;
4. *Āsā*, in seventeen versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-17, three of which have names: *Āsā Kāfī* (*ghar* 8), *Āsāvārī Sudhang* (*ghar* 16), and *Āsā Āsāvārī* (*ghar* 17);
5. *Gūjri*, in four versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-4;
6. *Devghandhārī*, in seven versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-7;
7. *Bihāgrā*, in two versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-2;
8. *Vadhans*, in five versions: *Vadhans Dakhaṇī*, and others designated with *ghar* numbers 1, 2, 4,¹³ and 5;
9. *Sorath*, in four versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-4;
10. *Dhanāsrī*, in ten versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-9 and 12¹⁴;
11. *Jaitsrī*, in four versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-4;
12. *Ṭōḍī*, in five versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-5;
13. *Bairārī*, in one version, designated with *ghar* number 1;
14. *Tilang*, in four versions: *Tilang Kāfī*, and others designated with *ghar* numbers 1-3;
15. *Sūhī*, in ten versions: *Sūhī Lalit*, and others designated with *ghar* numbers 1-7 and 9¹⁵, and 10 named as *Sūhī Kāfī*;
16. *Bilāval*, in fifteen versions: *Bilāval Dakhaṇī*, *Bilāval Mangal*, and others designated with *ghar* numbers 1-13;
17. *Gonḍ*, in three versions: *Bilāval Gonḍ*, and others designated with *ghar* numbers 1-2;
18. *Rāmkalī*, in four versions: *Rāmkalī Dakhaṇī*, and others designated with *ghar* numbers 1-3;
19. *Naṭ Nārāin*, in one version without a *ghar* number designation;
20. *Mālī Gaurā*, in one version without a *ghar* number designation;
21. *Mārū*, in nine versions: *Mārū Dakhaṇī*, and others designated

- with *ghar* numbers 1-8 with *ghar* 2 named as Māru Kāfī;
22. Tukhārī, in one version without a *ghar* number designation;
 23. Kedārā, in five versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-5;
 24. Bhairau, in three versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-3;
 25. Basant, in two versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-2, with *ghar* 2 named as Basant Hindol;
 26. Sārang, in six versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-6;
 27. Malār, in three versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-3;
 28. Kānaṛā, in eleven versions, designated with *ghar* numbers 1-11;
 29. Kaliān, in three versions: Kaliān Bhopālī, and others designated with *ghar* numbers 1-2;
 30. Prabhātī Bibhās, in four versions: two versions of Prabhātī Bibhās, designated with *ghar* numbers 1 -2, and Prabhātī Dakhaṇī and Bibhās Prabhātī;
 31. Jaijāvantī, in one version without a *ghar* number designation.

The Sikh Gurus thus sang in rags that were from both the Hindu liturgical (e.g. Bhairav and Srirag) and Sufi traditions (e.g. Suhi and the Kāfī styles), as well as from folk-based traditions (e.g. Asa and Majh). The rag-variants indicate diverse regional forms, illustrated well, for example, by the Gauri names.

One musicological aspect that has received some attention from Sikh musicians and musicologists is the identification of particular rag version(s) as the authentic one(s) from the original Sikh tradition. In 1979, Punjabi University, Patiala undertook a project to archive heritage music compositions of the eleventh generation rāgi brothers, Gurcharan Singh-Avtar Singh. About 500 of their shabad renditions were recorded¹⁶ and their notations published in a two-volume book, *Gūrbāni Sangīt: Prāchīn Rīt Ramāvalī*. In 1991, the Ludhiana Jawaddi Kalan (Sikh school of music) undertook a similar audio-recording project under the guidance of Sant Succha Singh. The rag forms were chosen by a committee (the Rag Nirnayak Committee) with a view to the distinct Sikh tradition. Gurnam Singh (2000) gives brief outlines of various rag versions in use by Sikh musicians, identifying the committee's choice. In an expanded version (yet to be published) of *Gūrbāni Sangīt: Prāchīn Rīt Ramāvalī*, late Bhai Avtar Singh Ragi has expressed his views on heritage rag versions.¹⁷ Further research is needed to review the diverse rag-form and notation material in depth, and perhaps identify different rag versions with different *taksāls* (schools of music). My research on *ghar* (summarized below; see also I. N. Kaur 2008), with the interpretation of *ghar* numbers as rag-variants, suggests that many rag versions were used by the Sikh gurus and could, therefore, be accepted now.

The rag organization of the Guru Granth is another topic that has received some attention, by textual scholars, in the context of textual analysis of the scripture. Mann (2001) explores the possibility that the choice and sequencing of *rāg* in the Guru Granth are determined by an attempt to achieve a balance with respect to gender and time association. However, he concludes,

[T]he *rāg* arrangement in the Adi Granth, unlike that in the Goindval Pothis,¹⁸ defies an entirely satisfactory explanation... My suggestions toward interpreting the structure of the Adi Granth may yet yield no perfect answers, but I hope they are sufficient to challenge any argument that the rag combinations of the Adi Granth are insignificant. (Mann 2001:94)

For Pashaura Singh,

[T]he *raga* organization of the Adi Granth presents an excellent combination of lyrical and rational elements. It is far more complex than any simple explanation would describe it. It may be added here that understanding the *ragas* of the Adi Granth and their organization solely in terms of the modern Indian musical tradition is inadequate. (Pashaura Singh 2000:149)

The common thread, however, between both these analyses is that rag is seen as an *ex post* “choice” rather than as an organic part of the sonic expression of Divine inspiration. As argued above, given the tradition of singing saints of that period, and their usage of rag music, it would follow that the rag designations in the Guru Granth correspond to those in which the shabad was sung by the gurus. Rag designations remain mostly invariant over time in the different *pothis* (manuscripts). One must bear in mind that the period during which the first five gurus lived was one of many changes in the prevalent musical system, with the constant development of new rags and rag forms. The few changes in designation that did occur across pothis could be attributed to such changes. Why certain rags were in the gurus’ repertoire (apart from being prevalent in the devotional singing tradition), and, in particular, why they were placed in the given sequence in the Guru Granth, remain areas for further research.

But one point is clear: as with other devotional singing in India, rag music was the medium of expression for the Sikh gurus as well. For rag music had been discovered as Divine inspiration, too, and was based on

combinations of notes that were consonant—pleasing and harmonious—generating peace and tranquility, and resonance with the inner essential self, creating *ras* and bliss of the Infinite.

ਧੰਨੁ ਸੁ ਰਾਗ ਸੁਰੰਗਏ ਆਲਾਪਤ ਸਭ ਤਿਖ ਜਾਇ ॥
dhan su rāg surangare ālāpat sabh tikh jāi (Guru
 Granth, 958)

Blessed are those beautiful *rāgs* which, when chanted,
 eliminate all desire.

The same, as will be discussed below, was the intent of shabad itself, making the content and medium of the Guru Granth congruent.

II. Musical forms

The Sikh gurus sang in a variety of musical forms. Shabad titles in the Guru Granth specify these musical forms, which include:

1. *Pade* (songs with chorus and verse)
2. *Vār* (ballad)
3. *Chhand* (metered verse)
4. *Partāl* (verse with metrical variation)
5. *Bārahmāh* (song of the twelve months)
6. *Thitī* (song of lunar dates)
7. *Pahre* (songs of the times of the day)
8. *Birahare* (songs of separation)
9. *Paṭī* and *Bāvaṇ Akharī* (acrostic song using letters of the Gurmukhi alphabet)
10. *Ghoṛīān* (wedding songs)
11. *Alāhṇīān* (songs of death)
12. *Āratī* (song honoring Divinity)
13. *Rutī* (song of seasons)
14. *Salok* (couplets)
15. *Sadu* (invocation)
16. *Sohilā* (song of praise)

The study of musical features of the forms specified in the Guru Granth remains a significant area of study. The poetic aspects, and some musical aspects, of these forms are discussed in Jagir Singh (2004).

The majority of shabads in the Guru Granth are designated as *pade*, a form in use for devotional music in India during the 16th-17th centuries. For liturgical music the prevalent forms were *dhrupad* in North Indian

temples and *kriṭī* in the South. Interestingly, neither of these terms appears in the Guru Granth shabad titles or text.¹⁹

III. *Ghar*

Within each *rāg* and musical form section, shabads are organized by *ghar* number designations. These vary by rag, and for most range up to seven. The meaning of *ghar* designations has been considered lost by musicians and scholars.²⁰ Contemporary musicians do not make any use of this designation in their performance.

In previous work (Inderjit N. Kaur 2008) I have proposed that *ghar* numbers designate rag versions, giving a number of supporting arguments. This thesis is based on the significant new observation that the shabad titles in the Gauri rag section in the Guru Granth do not contain any *ghar* number designations. Instead, rag variant names are specified, which occur in sequence, just as *ghar* numbers do in other rag sections.²¹

While there is no other published scholarly research on the meaning of *ghar*, other interpretations that have been put forth are *tāl* (meter) and *shrutī* (microtone). I have previously argued why these are unlikely. Here it may suffice to add that the term *tāl* was very much prevalent when the Adi Granth was scribed, and the word occurs in shabad text. Yet, it was not used in any shabad title, except in the form of *partāl*. As for *shrutī*, sequential shrutis cannot exist in rags that are not heptatonic.

IV. *Dhunī* specification

There are several instances where a particular *dhunī* (melody) is prescribed for a shabad. Typically these are for the *vārs* (ballads) and as such the *dhunis* prescribed are then-prevalent, well-known melodies. This is an indication that melodic details were important to the Sikh gurus. It further lends support to my thesis that *ghar* numbers refer to melodic variants of rag, that *ghar* is an intermediate level of melodic classification, between rag and *dhuni*. In my view, *ghar* designations, together with rag and *dhuni*, serve to systemize the diversity of melodic material used by the Sikh gurus as they addressed diverse communities.

B. Musical information in *shabad* text

In addition to the musical designations in the shabad titles, the shabad text itself contains significant musical information. These are summarized below.

I. Verse meter

This is an important indicator of the appropriate *tāl* for a particular shabad. Both the length of its meter and the lyrical subdivisions would indicate the tal which would best suit a particular shabad so that words are not overly elongated or crowded. Indeed, since the optimal tal for a shabad would be defined by the meter itself, the need for tal designation in the shabad title could be considered redundant. And as stated above, the Guru Granth shabad titles do not specify the tal. Whereas most of the shabad are in regular meter, the *partāl* shabads are a distinct genre with variation in meter and internal rhythmic patterns.

II. Chorus and verse marking and sequencing

The choruses in the shabads are marked as *rahāu*—literally, “pause”—similar to the *tek* (literally, “support”) used in other traditions. These lines contain the central theme of the shabad. Most shabads are *rahāu*-subsequent, i.e., the *rahāu* lines are written after the first verse. There are instance of shabads that are *rahāō*-antecedent and also *rahāō*-absent. Some shabads have two *rahāu* lines, typically the first in the form of a question, and the second in the form of its answer.

The verses in a shabad are also clearly marked. Numbers indicate the sequence in which they are to be sung.

III. *Ras* (aesthetic experience)

An important piece of musical information contained in the shabad text is its associated *ras*—the mental state that the shabad text evokes in the listener. Within an overall feeling of *bhaktī ras* (devotion), shabad texts speak of love, longing, union, wonder, and virtue. These are guides for the music chosen to sing a particular shabad.

Overarching these emotions is the dominant aesthetic of the Guru Granth encapsulated in the concepts of *shabad surat*, *sahaj dhyān*, and *Har ras*.

1. *Shabad surat* (*shabad*-attuned consciousness)

Contemplation of the Divine through the shabad is the central enterprise of kirtan. The music is a vehicle for tuning the consciousness to the shabad. Emphasized in many shabads in the Guru Granth, the focus on shabad by using music is repeated in the verses of Bhai Gurdas, too.

ਪਵਣ ਗੁਰੂ ਗੁਰੂ ਸਬਦੁ ਹੈ ਰਾਗ ਨਾਦ ਵੀਚਾਰਾ ॥
pavan gurū, gur sabad hai rāg nād vīchārā. (Gurdas, Var 2:19)

The breath-Guru is the Gur-*Shabad* (Word through the gurus),
 contemplated on through musical sound.

2. *Sahaj dhyān* (serene contemplation)

This *shabad surat* is marked by *sahaj* (intuitive ease, peace, calmness, and equipoise)—the ultimate aesthetic prescribed for shabad kirtan. It is emphasized in many shabads, such as,

ਰਾਗ ਨਾਦ ਸਬਦਿ ਸੋਹਣੇ ਜਾ ਲਾਗੈ ਸਹਜਿ ਧਿਆਨੁ ॥
rāg nād sabad sohṇe jā lāgai sahaj dhiān. (Guru Granth, 849)

Melodies, sound, and *shabad* are beautiful, when they bring serene contemplation.

3. *Har ras*

The *ras*-s (aesthetic experiences) mentioned are those of *ānand* (bliss) *ras*, *amrit* (nectar) *ras*, *Har* (Divine) *ras*, and *Nām* (Name) *ras*.

ਸੂਖ ਸਹਜ ਆਨੰਦ ਰਸ ਜਨ ਨਾਨਕ ਹਰਿ ਗੁਣ ਗਾਉ ॥
sūkh sahaj ānand ras jan nānak har gūṇ gāu. (Guru Granth, 48)

Bliss and peace are obtained, O servant Nanak, by singing the
 Glories of the Divine.

The mind submersed in *Har ras* is beyond other *ras*, beyond other aesthetic delights.

ਅਨ ਰਸੁ ਚੁਕੈ ਹਰਿ ਰਸੁ ਮੰਨਿ ਵਸਾਏ ॥
Un ras chūkai har ras mann vasāe. (Guru Granth, 115)

Other aesthetic experiences are forgotten, when the Divine aesthetic experience comes to dwell in the mind.

There are a number of shabads that explicitly describe the aesthetic that should be generated by particular rags.

ਗਉੜੀ ਰਾਗਿ ਸੁਲਖਣੀ ਜੇ ਖਸਮੈ ਚਿਤਿ ਕਰੇਇ ॥
 ਭਾਣੈ ਚਲੈ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੂ ਕੈ ਐਸਾ ਸੀਗਾਰੁ ਕਰੇਇ ॥
gauṛī rāg sūlakhaṇī je khasamai chit kare.
bhāṇai chalai satgurū kai aisā sīgār kare. (Guru Granth, 311)

Gauri rag is auspicious, if, through it, one comes to think of the Beloved.

Walking in harmony with Divine Will, this should be its beautification.

These rag-descriptive shabad texts may be termed *rāg dhyān shabad*, after the rag-descriptive poems found in many period Indian music texts and referred to as *rāg dhyān*. These describe the thought that the rag is to create.

ਬਿਲਾਵਲੁ ਤਬ ਹੀ ਕੀਜੀਐ ਜਬ ਮੁਖਿ ਹੋਵੈ ਨਾਮੁ ॥
 ਰਾਗ ਨਾਦ ਸਬਦਿ ਸੋਹਣੇ ਜਾ ਲਾਗੈ ਸਹਜਿ ਧਿਆਨੁ ॥
bilāval tab hī kījīai jab mukh hovai nām.
rāg nād shabad sohṇe jā lāgai sahaj dhiān. (Guru Granth, 849)

Sing Bilaval, when the Divine Name is on your tongue.
 The melody, sound, and shabad are beautiful when they bring peaceful contemplation.

The importance of *Nām* (Name) is central to Sikh philosophy and musical practice. The purpose of shabad kirtan is to experience *Nām*, the Divine presence that resides in each person. *Shabad* (revealed Word) itself is the manifestation of *anhad shabad* (unuttered Word) that exists within each person. The purpose of shabad kirtan is to connect with the *anhad shabad*, to enable it to resonate in and permeate the being.

ਖਟੁ ਮਟੁ ਦੇਹੀ ਮਨੁ ਬੈਰਾਗੀ ॥
 ਸੁਰਤਿ ਸਬਦੁ ਧੁਨਿ ਅੰਤਰਿ ਜਾਗੀ ॥
khṭ muṭ dehī man bairāgī.
surat shabad dhun antar jāgī. (Guru Granth, 903)

Above the six energy centers of the body dwells the detached mind.
 Awareness of the vibration of the Word has been awakened deep within.

ਵਾਜੈ ਅਨਹਦੁ ਮੇਰਾ ਮਨੁ ਲੀਣਾ ॥
 ਗੁਰ ਬਚਨੀ ਸਚਿ ਨਾਮਿ ਪਤੀਣਾ ॥
vājai anhad merā man līṇā.
gur bachnī sach nām patīṇā. (Guru Granth, 903)

The cosmic vibration resonates within; my mind is attuned to it.
 Through the Guru's Teachings, my faith is confirmed in the True
 Name.

It is in this state that the transcendental experience of *Nām ras* and *Har ras*, and of *sahaj* and *ānand*, are obtained.

C. Implications of the Guru Granth's musical aesthetic for detailed musical material and structuring of *shabad kīrtan* sessions

I. Usage of musical material such as *svar* and *tāl*

The aesthetics of *shabad surat*, *sahaj dhyān*, and *Har ras* prescribed in the Guru Granth requires, in my view, that musical material be used in a manner that portrays this aesthetic. *Svar* expression—its volume, tone, and microtonal treatment—would need to be suitable for this aesthetic. Many types of musical expression are in use in various genres of Indian music. Their consistency with the prescribed Sikh aesthetic requires careful analysis. For example, the *mīṇḍ* (slow glide), *kaṇ* (grace note) and *āndolan* (slow oscillation) are more suitable for *sahaj dhyān*, whereas *khaṭkā* (quick, forceful repetition of a note) and *murkī* (rapidly executed cluster of notes) would need to be used with care. The *alāp* (improvised, slow musical phrases) would be particularly conducive to the development of a meditative aesthetic, and *shabad-alāp* (rather than *ākār* [“ah” vowel] or *sargam* [solfege] *alāp*) would deepen *shabad surat*. In contrast, *tān* (rapid sequence of notes) would create a more exciting affect, with the ability to completely break serene contemplation, especially when it is in *sargam*. Thus even *shabad-tān* would need to be used with extreme care. *Shabad-banāv* (shabad phrases rendered with rhythmic variation, in medium speed), on the other hand, could be discerningly used to advantage. But *shabad-bānt* (using text to achieve rhythmic variation) is more music-focused and playful in nature.

Similarly, the choice of *tāl* and *lai* (tempo), are also significant. As discussed above, the shabad verse-meter is an important determinant of the best fit for a tal that neither crowds nor stretches the text. The choice of tempo is crucial too, for the proper enunciation of the text, and its affect. The *vilambit* (very slow) *lai* could make the overly stretched words incomprehensible, while the *drut* (fast) *lai* could destroy *sahaj*. Thus the *madhyā lai* (medium tempo), in my view, would be most

suitable for the *shabad surat* and *sahaj dhyān* aesthetic of the Guru Granth.

Detailed attention to the usage of such musical material is as important as the designations in the shabad titles of *rāg*, *ghar*, *dhunī* and musical form, and the chorus and verse markings in the shabad text.

II. Structure of a *shabad kīrtan* session

In addition to the use of musical material in a shabad rendition, equally important, in my view, is the structure of presentation of a complete session of shabad kīrtan. There is currently no standardized format with the notable exception of the Asa ki Var session, and in other sessions, the conclusion with six verses from the composition Anand.

There is a trend though of the use of some form of *manglācharan*—an invocational prelude to the shabads to be sung. Some performers use a *tāl*-free *shabad-alāp*, while others use a *tāl*-bound format. Some use the *mul-mantar* (core verse) or a *salok* (couplet) from the Guru Granth. The *manglācharan* is usually in slow *lai*. Some shabad kīrtan performers preface the *manglācharan* with *shān*—an instrumental prelude that creates the mood for the coming session and is the instrumentalists' salutation to the Divine. The history of *shān* and *manglācharan* in shabad kīrtan performance needs to be researched in depth.

The place of *shān* in shabad kīrtan brings us also to the very important question of the size and composition of the ensemble. In contrast to the contemporary trio described earlier, the tradition of *kīrtan chaukī* (literally, “foursome”) indicates that the typical ensemble consisted of four musicians: two vocalists, a drummer, and a stringed melodic instrumentalist. However, whereas the use of *rabāb* by Bhai Mardana as he accompanied Guru Nanak is well documented, more in-depth research needs to be done on the history and usage of stringed melodic instruments such as the *saranda*, *taus*, *dilrubā* (a bowed fretted lute), and of drums such as the *mridang* and *jori* (i.e. as distinct from the more familiar *tabla*).

Yet another significant question is the time association of *rāgs*. Should shabad in a particular rag be sung at particular times? Here, too, the practitioners of *gurmat sangīt* have followed Hindustani music traditions. Rag time association has its roots in Hindu liturgical practice. Melodies sung in the morning, for example, became formalized as rags such as Bhairav. Traditional song texts provide supportive illustration. For instance, *jāgo mohan pyāre* (“Wake up, Charming, Beloved”) is an old song sung in rag Bhairav. Gender association for rags is similarly related to the expression of personification of Hindu deities in music and visual art. These associations provided a context for associating

particular moods and feelings with particular rags. All this practice was prevalent in the Sikh gurus' time.

What indication do we have of its adoption by Sikh gurus? Their philosophical stance of *nirgūṇ* (Divinity without physical attributes) and of freedom from ritual would point to the adoption of music that is free of time and gender associations. As pointed out above, Mann's (2001) attempt to explain the choice and sequencing of rag in the Guru Granth through these attributes was inconclusive. Furthermore, the Guru Granth uses many Dakhani (South Indian) forms of rags, and Karnatak music does not use time-association of rag.

While Bhai Gurdas, in Var 6:3, speaks of the singing of Sodar in the evening and S ohila and Arti at night, which would indicate time-associated liturgical musical practice in Kartarpur at the time of Guru Nanak himself, rags themselves were not necessarily bound to time associations. For example, Rag Asa is common to both Asa ki Var and Sodar, one sung in the morning and the other in the evening. Another example is that of Ramkali, sung at any time of the day in the Anand. Arti, sung at night, is in the "night" rag Dhanasri, as are most shabads which refer to *ārī*, but there is a notable exception in the "morning" rag Prabhati:

ਕਬੀਰ ਦਾਸ ਤੇਰੀ ਆਰਤੀ ਕੀਨੀ ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰ ਨਿਰਬਾਨੀ ॥
kabīr dās teri āratī kīnī nīrankār nīrbānī. (Guru Granth, 1350)

Kabir, Your servant, performs this Āratī, this lamp-lit worship service for You, O Formless Lord of Nirvana.

Another question relating to the structure of a kirtan session pertains to the practice of Viākhīā-style kirtan, in which the ragi pauses the singing to explain the shabad being sung and to present a short discourse. In an article in 1908, Bhai Vir Singh criticizes this practice, lamenting the loss of *akhand* (unbroken) *kīrtan*, which has the power to take the consciousness beyond the thinking mode. In other words, in his view, discourse breaks *shabad surat* and *sahaj dhyān*.

All these aspects pertaining to the structuring of shabad kirtan sessions need further research.

Gurmat Sangit: What Does It Mean?

In my discussion above, I mentioned *gurmat sangit* as a contemporary rag-based genre of shabad kirtan. Since this is a fast growing genre that honors the basic rag arrangement of the Guru Granth it deserves special attention from musicological and historical perspectives, as well as, it will be argued, from the viewpoint of creating meaningful terminology

for Sikh music and musicology. The term literally means, “music as per the guru’s viewpoint.” In this section I question the use of this term for a genre of shabad kirtan, and propose that it is more appropriate to reserve it to refer to Sikh musicology. There, too, a more complete term such as *gurmat sangīt shāstar* or *vīgyān* (music theory) would be more informative.

The Guru Granth does not use the phrase *gurmat sangīt*. The word *sangīt* itself occurs only twice, where it is used to imply music in general and not specifically singing. More notably, there is no prescriptive indication, as there is in the case of the word *kīrtan*, which occurs 109 times. Many shabads speak of the benefits of kīrtan—it cleanses the mind, brings peace and contentment, truth and liberation, and illuminates the soul, enabling one to realize the Divine. No such virtues of *sangīt* are extolled.

The concept of *gurmat* (guru’s wisdom), however, is central in the Guru Granth. It is with the aid of *gurmat* that *anhad shabad* is perceived, that Nām is realized.

ਗੁਰਮਤਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਮੇਰਾ ਪ੍ਰਾਨ ਸਖਾਈ

gurmat nām merā prān sakhāī (Guru Granth, 10)

Through the Guru's Teachings, Nām becomes my breath of life.

It goes without saying then, that, as with all Sikh enterprise, shabad kirtan must be guided by gurmat. Indeed, shabad itself embodies gurmat, and was expressed by the Sikh gurus in song.

The Guru Granth clearly specifies the *gurmat* (guru’s views) regarding *sangīt* (music) in the text of many shabads, particularly the *rāg-dhyān shabad*, as discussed above. These shabads state that the thought, which the rag is to create, is that of Nām. This indication was especially important, since, during the period of the first five Sikh gurus—late 15th through the end of the 16th century—*sangīt* in India was undergoing significant changes. It was a period of the development of art music in the Mughal courts. Music that had hitherto largely been associated with prayer, devotion and spirituality—whether in liturgical, paraliturgical or secular (and even royal court) contexts—was moving to a context where it was appreciated for its own sake and for the artistic finesse achieved by the artist. Text was losing its centrality and serving as mere lyrics for musical material. Melodic and rhythmic articulation was taking center stage. Hence it was important for the Sikh gurus to lay down their views about music and its use.

It is interesting to trace the usage of the term *gurmat sangīt*, which, as noted above, does not appear in the Guru Granth. It is notable that there is no entry for the term in the *Mahān K osh*, the authoritative

encyclopedia of Sikh literature, authored in 1930 by the learned Sikh, Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha. Based on my research so far, the first significant published mention of the term *gurmat sangit* appears to be in Dr. Charan Singh's booklet, *Srī Gurū Granth Bāṇī Biurā*, published in 1902. The term is mentioned in reference to his essay "Gurmat Sangit Nirne." This essay was later published in Bhai Vir Singh's important booklet, *Gurmat sangit par hūṇ tak milī khōj* ("Research up until now on *gurmat sangit*") (1958). It is important to note that the usage of the term by Dr. Charan Singh and his son, Bhai Vir Singh, was in the context of musicology and education. The article emphasized the need for starting, at universities, departments of Sikh music study that would follow the musical guidelines in the Guru Granth, and to use melodies consonant with the import of the shabad text. Even though shabad kirtan originated as rag-based music, over time the use of rag had diminished, and many other musical designations in the Guru Granth had fallen into disuse. The original music of the Sikh gurus was gradually forgotten as emerging prevalent genres such as *khyāl*, *ghazal*, and *filmī* came into practice. Sikh scholars also felt the need to distinguish Sikh music from Hindustani music. They argued that *Gur-mat* sangit was different from other *mat* (schools) of music, such as Shiv Mat and Hanūmān Mat. Sikh intellectual leaders realized the importance of Sikh musicology education for the survival of the original tradition. The same motivation inspired the book, *Navin Gurmat Sangit*, by Sant Charan Singh (1962).

The early significant books on notations (e.g. Gian Singh Aibtabad 1961; Avtar Singh and Gurcharan Singh 1979) do not use the term *gurmat sangit*, either. Typically, *gurbāṇī sangit* is used, i.e. "music for the guru's word." Of the later significant works on notations, the term is used by Dyal Singh (1984, 1988), who studied at, and later headed, the Gurmat Vidyalay (school) in the Rakab Ganj Gurdwara, and by Gurnam Singh (2000) at Punjabi University, Patiala.

Thus, the term *gurmat sangit* was traditionally used in the context of musicology and education of Sikh music. The educational context of *gurmat sangit* is further supported by the establishment of Sikh music educational institutions such as Gurmat Sangit Vidyalai. With time, however, "gurmat sangit" emerged as a phrase to connote a particular *genre* of shabad kirtan—one that is rag-based. In recent decades there has been a revival of interest in, and support for, rag-based shabad kirtan and the use of heritage stringed instruments. There is now a substantial and expanding repertoire of "gurmat sangit."

Whereas the appellation of *gurmat* for *sangit* makes sense, particularly in the educational sense of Sikh musicology, one must be careful about the assertion that a particular musical genre of shabad kirtan has the distinctive quality of *gurmat*. Is the *sangit* (music) of shabad kirtan in other genres lacking in *gurmat*?

The core defining feature of the contemporary “gurmat sangit” label is that it is rag-based. Beyond that, it does not necessarily follow any other musical designation in shabad titles. And not all of it necessarily uses the designated rag, but just *some* rag. In many instances the shabad text is maneuvered or extraneous vocatives (such as *jī, hā, piāre*) added to fit the selected *tāl*. Indeed, a review of prominent performances, discography, and notations of “gurmat sangit” reveals that it does not represent a standardized genre in terms of the usage and presentation of musical material—rag-version, melodic forms, melodic and rhythmic articulation, number and type of instruments, ensemble composition, or performance structure. Most of it follows the contemporary *khyāl* style of Hindustani music that emerged well after the Adi Granth was compiled. Given our discussion above of the path that Hindustani music took under the patronage of Mughal courts, gurmat sangit then would be a departure from those emerging genres. The Sikh guru’s rejection of the emerging musical path was parallel to their rejection of the path to divinity that had lost touch with the internal *shabad* and *nād*. It is ironical then that the vast majority of shabad kirtan that is labeled “gurmat sangit” adopts the genre developed in that period.

Most importantly, much of current “gurmat sangit” practice is particularly lacking in the most significant *gurmat* attribute, that of shabad-attuned consciousness or *shabad surat*. Often, the text is not discernable. Instead the singing is music-focused. It tends to become *sangīt-pradhān* (music-dominant) instead of *shabad-pradhān* (shabad-dominant). Much of this results from the use of unsuitable musical material, as was discussed above. Hence, it is not surprising that the Sikh community at large has not embraced gurmat sangit, for they do not find in it the aesthetic quality of shabad kirtan defined in the Guru Granth, of which the Sikh congregation has a keen intuitive sense.

If only one feature of being rag-based is sufficient to endow the stature of “gurmat sangit,” then other musical genres, with any subset of *gurmat* features, are equally qualified for this appellation. The nomenclature could well be adopted by all genres, claiming one *gurmat* attribute or another. It is possible to have *gurmat lok* (folk) *sangīt*, *gurmat ghazal sangīt* and even *gurmat* soft-rock *sangīt*! And rag-based genres could well be further detailed as *gurmat dhrupad sangīt*, *gurmat khyāl sangīt*, and *gurmat thumrī sangīt*.

Conclusion: What’s In the Name?

Sikh *shabad kīrtan* is the music of the Sikh gurus—Divine manifestation in the united form of shabad and music, revealed to them. Many musical features of their shabad kirtan practice are provided in the Guru Granth. These are *rāg, ghar*, musical forms (*pade, vār, alāhñānī*, etc.) given in

sirlekh (shabad titles), and the structure of chorus and verse (*rahāu* and *ank*), the structure of meter, and most importantly, the Sikh musical aesthetics of *shabad surat*, *sahaj dhyān* and *Har ras*, given in the shabad text. Many shabads in the Guru Granth speak of the importance of kirtan, of singing Divine praise. Today, Sikhs enjoy shabad kirtan in many genres.

Gurmat sangīt is a term that was traditionally used in the context of Sikh musicology and education, but has in recent years come to be used to denote a rag-based genre of shabad kirtan. As far as shabad kirtan is concerned, the *gurmat* appellation is meaningless, since shabad itself is *gurmat*. There is no un-*gurmat* shabad kirtan. Furthermore, the very basis of the term, *sangīt*, draws attention away from the essential enterprise, which is shabad kirtan—devotional singing of the Revealed Word, and its accompanying aesthetic, the transcendence to *shabad surat* (Word attunement). The Guru Granth does not prescribe *sangīt*; it prescribes *kīrtan*.

A recent trend to replace “shabad kīrtan darbār” with “gurmat sangīt darbār” runs the risk of losing connection with the essential aesthetic, with the essence. It is no surprise then that the main shortcoming of much of “gurmat sangit” as it practiced today is the lack of *sahaj* and *shabad surat*, and why the intuitively and aesthetically sophisticated *sangat* (congregation) at large has not embraced it whole-heartedly.

In this paper, I have suggested that the phrase *gurmat sangīt shāstar* would be suitable to denote Sikh musicology, as given and implied by the shabad titles and text of the Guru Granth. It would be instructive to keep in mind that *gurmat sangīt shāstar* is important input into shabad kirtan. Shabad kirtan requires mastery over *gurmat sangīt shāstar*. It would be appropriate to hold *gurmat sangīt shāstar* workshops and conferences that present and discuss the musical material for use in shabad kirtan. But these would be distinct from a *shabad kīrtan darbār*. The performance context and the focus would be distinct. A *gurmat sangīt shāstar* session would focus on the musical aspects. A *shabad kīrtan darbār* would focus on *shabad surat* and *sahaj dhyān*. One would hope that, over time, a successively larger proportion of shabad kirtan would use Sikh musicology—*gurmat sangīt shāstar*. But it would be unfortunate if the term *shabad kīrtan* were replaced by the term *gurmat sangīt*. It is interesting to note that other genres of shabad kirtan that have used genre-specific terminology have retained the word *kīrtan* or *shabad*: *akhand kīrtan*, *nagar kīrtan*, *joīān de shabad*, etc. From this perspective, *rāg-adhārit shabad kīrtan* would be a more appropriate term for rag-based genres of shabad kirtan.

Shabad is the key, the core, the purpose, and therefore it is important that it remain in the terminology. *Kīrtan* is also critical. It is not any *sangīt*, but *devotional singing*. The term *shabad kīrtan* reinforces the

musical aesthetic defined in the Guru Granth. *Shabad* is the sonic expression of *anhad shabad*, of Nām. *Kīrtan* is singing that imbues the body with the color of Divine love. Together the phrase expresses the essential purpose: using *shabad* to become immersed in Divine love. *Gurmat* is expressed through *shabad*; *gurmat* itself adds no further information than *shabad*. *Sangīt* misses the key aspects of *kīrtan*—the journey to *sahaj* (intuitive ease and equipoise), to *anhad shabad* (unuttered Word) and to Nām (Divine Name/Presence).

Thus, what is in the name is the Name—*Nām*. *Shabad* is the manifestation of Nām. Because the Name (Nām) is important, the name is important. It is not *sangīt*—it is *shabad kīrtan*.

Notes

¹ Sikh Sacred Music Society (1967) and Mansukhani (1982) stand out in the writings in English that provide detailed overviews.

² Prominent writings of this type include Aibtabad (1961), Avtar Singh and Gurcharan Singh (1979), and Dyal Singh (1988).

³ Most prominent among these is Gurnam Singh (2001), which provides an overview and notational material.

⁴ Baldeep Singh's lecture (2001) presents an overview of the Sikh kīrtan tradition. Pashaura Singh (in Beck, ed. 2006) discusses Sikhism and music.

⁵ For details on *pothīs* see Mann (2001) and Pashaura Singh (2000).

⁶ Sikh Rehat Maryada (Sikh Code of Conduct) [www.sgpc.net].

⁷ In a standard liturgical session this consists of chanting the *hukam vāk* (reading) from the Guru Granth and the *Ardās* (Supplication). Other liturgical tasks include recitation from memory of the *nimem* (five key compositions for daily practice), *prakāsh* (opening the Guru Granth for the day) and *sukhāsan* (closing the Guru Granth for the night).

⁸ This is true of most other Indian music, with Bollywood music being the main exception where the female soprano sings at twice the scale of the male singer in duets.

⁹ Recently, in the West, some professional kīrtan performers have broken this traditional mold, as also of musical genres, using global music genres encompassing soft rock and rap in ticketed concerts. While appealing to non-denominational and younger Sikh audiences, these singers have not been patronized by gurdwaras and the Sikh community at large.

¹⁰ Amateur singers perform without payment, typically in private settings, but sometimes in the gurdwara, too.

¹¹ Interestingly, since the *Akhand Kīrtanī* style is relatively new, men and women performers sit together in a large ensemble of 10 to 15 members. In perhaps another assertion of gender equality through participation in

the Sikh visible identity, women also wear the *dastār* (turban) that is generally worn by Sikh males.

¹² For an excellent explanation of *rāg*, see Wade (1979).

¹³ The designation “*ghar 3*” does not occur. My interpretation is that the third version of Vaḍhans occurs named as Vaḍhans Dakhaṇī.

¹⁴ My interpretation is that the number 12 was likely scribed in error in place of the number 10. It occurs in only one place in the Dhanāsri section.

¹⁵ The designation “*ghar 8*” does not occur. My interpretation is that the “8” version of Sūhī occurs named as Sūhī Lalit.

¹⁶ Unfortunately, these recordings were not preserved well.

¹⁷ Upon his request in 2005, I translated the text of this four-volume book, *Heritage of Sikh Sacred Music* (forthcoming, Shriromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee).

¹⁸ However, Pashaura Singh (2000:131) disagrees with Mann’s hypothesis that the rag arrangement in the Goindval Pothis exhibits a clear pattern of gender and time association of rag.

¹⁹ My paper in progress, “*Dhrupad and Sikh Shabad Kīrtan*,” addresses the likelihood that shabad kirtan began in the *dhrupad* genre.

²⁰ In an interview in 2005 with the author, eleventh generation ragi Bhai Avtar Singh acknowledged this loss and expressed regret that it never occurred to him to ask his father, the renowned ragi Bhai Jwala Singh.

²¹ A future project I hope to work on is the determination of variant names and forms for all rag sections.

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