

The Different Styles and Types of Kīrtan in Rāṅh

Bengali literature of the nineteenth century is rich with examples of the *kīrtan* poems of many renown Vaishṇav *kīrtaniyas* (also called *pādakar*), such as Govinda Das, Narrotama Das (who also wrote *jhumur* songs), Krishna Goswami and others. All three forms of *kīrtan*, that is, *pāda kīrtan* (verse), *kathā kīrtan* (story) and *nāma kīrtan* are very popular in Rāṅh. As stated above, *Nāma kīrtan* is the form of *kīrtan* where only the name of the particular deity is sung, whereas in *pāda kīrtan* songs in praise of god are expressed in verse form. In Sanskrit, *kathā* means 'story.' It is a recital of a story in prose as well as verse, which is based upon the *līlā* (divine play or sport) of god in many different forms. The *Krishnalīlā* or love play of Krishna and Rādhā is an example of *kathā kīrtan*. Edward Henry refers to *kathā kīrtan* in a north Indian village as "the reciting of moral parables by a Brahman, as well as a *pūjā* (worship) in which story telling is contained" (1988:140). He states that *kathā kīrtan* can also be performed when a householder wants to express gratitude for some personal achievement or if someone wishes to obtain blessings from god, in which case it will be held as a family rite of transition (Henry 1988:140).

According to Sarkar (1984b:16), *nāma kīrtan* was popular in Rāṅh even before the birth of Caitanya Mahāprabhu. Sarkar states that people in certain areas of Bengal were performing *kīrtan* in their distinct local style and these different schools of *kīrtan* or *ghāranā* included the *Manoharshani ghāranā*, which some say comes from Orissa and others from Birbhum in Rāṅh. There are two different types of *nāma kīrtan* in this area, states Mihir Mahato, and these are *ākhandā* and *baitaki*. The most prevalent type of *kīrtan* is called *ākhandā kīrtan*, which is performed for an extended period of time, using many different *tālas* and melodies. *Ākhandā kīrtan* consists of continuous chanting over stipulated periods of time, called *prāharās*, and each *prāharā* is equal

to three hours. The *kīrtaniyas* dance in a circular anticlockwise direction around the village temple while performing *kīrtan*. The most common length of time to hold an *ākhanda kīrtan* is twenty-four hours (called *astam prahar*) or three days and nights (called twenty-four *prāharās*). Other forms of *ākhanda kīrtan* are called *madol kīrtan*, which means fourteen days and fourteen nights and *unmadol* which is nineteen days and nights. During the *ākhanda kīrtan* performance, the mantric sound must not be broken, that is, it must continue for the whole period.

In *Baitaki kīrtan*, however, the mantric sound can be broken after a short time. The purpose of *Baitaki kīrtan* is to imbibe the occasion with auspiciousness, whether it is an important public ceremonial occasion or a family rite of transition. The *Baitaki kīrtan* performance is usually no longer than one hour in length and often occurs in one of the homes of the higher caste people, with all of the participants seated rather than dancing.

In *pādabali kirtan*, the devotional stories of Rādhā/Krishṇa are sung in verse form and sometimes rendered through prose. Many of the *pādabali kīrtan* songs are 'through-composed', in that they do not have a refrain, and are structured in the same linear fashion as a story line. According to Mihir Mahato there are three main parts to be rendered in the performance of a *pādabali kīrtan* song. These are as follows: The first part is the story of Krishṇa, who leaves Brindavan and goes to Mathura to kill Kangsa, leaving Rādhā alone and crying; in the second, Rādhā feels that her life has become meaningless without Sri Krishṇa and she can think only of him and the third stage is the closing part of the *pādabali* song, during which Rādhā's desires are fulfilled and her love for Krishṇa consummated (M. Mahato 1996: pers. comm.).

The Traditional Instruments in the Kirtan Parties

The traditional instruments used in the *kīrtan* parties of Manbhum region are the *khol*, a double-headed clay drum with two different size heads. The small end makes a high-pitched sound and the other, larger side emits a deeper sound. The *khol* is an instrument favoured among the Vaishṇavs as it is particularly suited for *kīrtan* performance, being light and of variable pitch. The deeper sounds that are played on the *khol* provide a grounding and strengthening effect on the dancers whereas the high-

pitched sounds of the *khol* make them jump and want to soar above the mundane world. The *kartal* or small cymbals are also used in every *kīrtan* party in Rāṅh and together with the *khol* make up the rhythm section of the ensemble. The melodic part that accompanies the vocalist is the *bāṅshī* or bamboo flute and occasionally the harmonium as well. During a performance, the *kīrtan* players dress very simply in the traditional white *dhoti* (cloth worn around the waist) and a white vest and a garland of flowers around their necks.

The Music of Kirtan

The music of *nāma kīrtan* is antiphonal and strophic with only a few basic melody lines of narrow range, which gradually get higher and higher. The drummer provides the basic propulsion with his *khol* or *ḍhol* and the singers usually keep time with the *kartal* or handclapping. In *ākhandā kīrtan*, the tunes proceed in cycles beginning at a moderate tempo and vigour and becoming faster and louder with time until a feverish pitch is reached. After each climax, the cycle begins anew with its initial moderate pace and continues until the end of the allotted time. Hence the *kīrtaniyas* require a great deal of stamina as well as musical skill to perform for extended periods of time. At particular points in the *kīrtan* performance when the devotional expression is at its peak the head musician will change to a new *sur* (tune) and *tāl* (rhythm) so that the *kīrtan* cycle will begin again with renewed vigour. Hence the *kīrtaniyas* create a generative effect which is said to help purify and vitalize the surrounding atmosphere by infusing it with a highly charged spiritual vibration. Though the performance of *kīrtan* appears to be very simple, there is in fact a large degree of intuitional science behind it. When, for example, an excellent musical performance by the *kīrtaniyas* takes place, the participants can be moved to ecstatic heights of devotional expression, which may continue to enliven them for a very long time.

The first *tāla* most commonly used in *ākhandā kīrtan* is *Ektāla* with seven or twelve *matra*. After that *Tintāla* ('*tin*' means three claps) may be used, depending on the *kīrtan* party who will choose which *tāla* and *sura* they will play at the beginning of the performance. Each *tāla* change is timed appropriately so that the ebb and rise

of the devotional flow can be maintained throughout the whole performance and gradually brought to one musical/devotional peak after another.

In *kīrtan* we use *ektāl* (*ek* means one) and then after that we use *tintāl* (*tin* means three claps) with five *matra* or divisions, but most of the time we use seven *matra tāl*. An example of *ektal* with twelve *matra* or divisions is spoken as: *kar / tak / dha / dhagay / dhagay / dhi / ta / taty / ta / kar / tak / dha /* (N. Mahato 1996: pers. comm.).

Three popular *kīrtans* sung in the Purulia District are as follows:

Krishṇa Krishṇa bole, Gora kande ghare ghare

which means Sri Caitanya is crying Krishṇa Krishṇa again and again. It is performed in a seven beat *tāla* of two/two/one/two/ divisions, The second one is,

Jai Jai Bhaber Bhaber Balai, jaire aha amare Krishṇa Krishṇa Bole

which means "Victory to love and to devotion. At the time of death we will be victorious because we call Krishṇa's name and so go to heaven" (M. Mahato 1996: pers. comm.), and the third one is,

Bābā Nām Kevalām

which means, "everything is an expression of the Beloved, Supreme Father" (Kirtyananda 1996: pers. comm.)

The Influence of Kirtan

Local Sanskrit scholar Kirtyananda, states that "the Bāul cult is much older than *kīrtan* and has greatly influenced *kīrtan* in Rāṅh" (1996:pers. comm.). However, because of its mass appeal, *kīrtan* has traditionally lead the way towards a greater musical literacy in Rāṅh and a deep sinking in of musical ideas. *Nāma Kīrtan* has absorbed a great deal of other music genres' *tāla* and *sura*, such as the Bāul and *jhumur* melodies, different classical *rāgas*, as well as modern Hindi film and theatre songs, and has in turn, influenced these and other musical styles of Rāṅh. This can be heard for example in the Chau musical performances, where certain *kīrtan tālas* and *suras* are played, at the time when the gods and goddesses, such as Shiva and Durgā, enter the Chau *ākara*. The *kīrtan tāla* is also said to have influenced the *dārbari jhumur* songs of Rāṅh, particularly those of Vaishṇav themes. The opinion of Guru

Mihir Mahato is that the influence of the modern commercial cinema has had a detrimental effect on the *kīrtan* tradition. He says, "*Kīrtan's* popularity is decreasing in a slow way. Slowly, slowly, *kīrtan* is disappearing from our village, for now the younger generation are taking more of an interest in the cinema, TV and video and not devoting the time to *kīrtan*" (M. Mahato 1996: pers. comm.).

The opinions of other *kīrtaniyas*, such as Nalini Mahato, is that the adaption of modern Hindi cinema tunes to the modern day *kīrtan* performances is just a passing phase in the *kīrtan* tradition. He states that "Because of public demand only, are we using modern cinema tunes in *Hāri Nām kīrtan*, but I think people will forget these new modern tunes in future and the original Rāṅhi tune of *kīrtan* will live, it will not be lost" (N. Mahato 1996: pers. comm.).

The Benefits of *Kīrtan*

According to the *kīrtaniyas* of this region, *kīrtan* is a devotional musical expression that has infinite power to help a person to reach god. As one prominent *kīrtan guru* of Purulia District says, "We think *kīrtan* is a holy thing and it is a worship of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. We believe that man is alive with the help of this *Hāri Nām* mantra as it is the power in a man's life. *Hāri Nām* is the name of god and it will save you from all danger" (N. Mahato 1996: pers. comm.).

The inclusion of *kīrtan* in any significant social ceremony in a Rāṅhi village is seen as vital for a successful outcome. The village people believe that *kīrtan* will protect them from danger and will ward off any evil spirits. During the wedding ceremonies the *Hāri bol* party will sing *kīrtan* to ensure that the future of the newly wedded couple will be bright.

Hāri Nām is the holy name and it will destroy the future dangers of the new couple from evil powers, which is why we use *Hārinām* in the marriage ceremony. When a person dies, we also use *Hāri Nām*, because this holy name will help him go to heaven (N. Mahato 1996: pers. comm.)

Kīrtan may also be organized by the parents of a sick child to promote the child's cure and good health (Slawek 1988:82). It may be performed in order to remove ghosts and ward off the evil effects of Mars and Saturn. *Kīrtan* may be prescribed for people

suffering from mental problems, or to help a person or group of people to find the solution to difficulties that seem insurmountable.

If people sit together at any place and do *kīrtan* wholeheartedly for a while they will easily find a solution for their problems...*Kīrtan* will remove worldly difficulties and physical affliction, whether manmade or natural, i.e. floods, famine, epidemics or drought. If *kīrtan* is chanted with intensity of sincerity, emotion and concentration, it will bring relief in no time (Sarkar 1982:8)

Avadhuta Cidananda, a Tantric monk, states that *kīrtan* can change negative forces into positive ones, so that all are benefitted, that is, those who are singing, those who are not singing and those who do not even like the sound. The following Sanskrit *shloka* says: *Shraddhaya helaya va*, which means, "either with veneration or without, *kīrtan* can remove collective psychic afflictions, those already existing and those about which we only have premonitions of their impending arrival" (Cidananda 1990:MS).

Hence *kīrtan* is a musical tradition which can satisfy both individual and social needs. It provides a direct avenue of expression and link with the divine as well as a sense of community spirit and cohesiveness. It is also the only music genre which can take the participant to ecstatic heights of devotion for the greatest length of time. As the *kīrtanīyas* say, the *kīrtan mantra* 'is' the power of god and not just a song. An example of a *kīrtan* performed using the Sanskrit *mantra Bābā Nām Kevalām* is as follows: (Track no.15 on the CD)

NĀMA KĪRTAN

