

VI. KĪRTAN

"*Kīrtan* provides a means to approach union with the divine" (Henry 1988:139). The sacredness of sound and its metaphysical power to create transcendental states are well-known concepts in the Vedic religion, in which the Brahman priests would recite Sanskrit chants during various social and religious ceremonies. Hence sound, or *nada*, was often equated with *Brahma* (God) and the saying *nada Brahman hai* (sound is God) is a core concept of the Sanskrit tradition.

You see there is the saying that sound is absolute (*nada Brahman hai*). Thus, there is no good or bad kirtan. It used to bother me when people sang out of tune. But when I thought about it, just like *laddus* (Indian sweet), some are round, some are out of shape, but all are equally sweet. Emotion and love in *bhakti* is one aspect, style of music is another. A kirtan is like a laboratory through which we spread the verbal form of Brahma. (Slawek 1988:84).

Though it is usually the *purohit* rather than the Brahman priest that presides over any ceremonial function in Rarh, the use of particular Sanskrit *mantras* (incantations) or chants as the lyric content in *kīrtan*, is common. Hari, is the name of god used in *Hari Bol kīrtan* and refers to lord Vishnu or to either of his incarnations, Rama and Krishna. "While *kīrtan* refers to any group devotional song or recitation accompanied by music, *harikīrtan* refers to antiphonal Vaishnavite songs with short simple stanzas continuously repeated, e.g., *Hari Krishṇa Hari Krishṇa, Krishṇa Krishṇa Hari Hari, Jai Sia Ram Jai Jai Sia Ram* (Henry 1988:140). These short Sanskrit stanzas are sung to particular melodies and *tāla*, which are specific to *kīrtan*. These have been composed by various *kīrtaniyas* (*kīrtan* singers) over the past seven hundred years.

Kīrtan is considered to be the most sacred of the music genres in Rārḥ because it is "the best way of worshipping god" (N. Mahato 1996: pers. comm.). *Kīrtan* can be performed at any time purely for spiritual pleasure or for ceremonial reasons (N. Mahato 1996: pers. comm.). As a music performance genre, *kīrtan* is extremely

popular in Rāgh, particularly during *Baishak*, or the summer season, when the *Shiva Gājan* festival occurs. At this time of the year one can find at least one *kīrtan* group, also called *Hari Bol* party, performing in every small village. During the summer season it is too hot and dry to do any agricultural work in the fields and so the people have time to relax and pursue creative and spiritual interests. The location of *kīrtan* singing is often at the village temple, but can also be a verandah, a roof of someone's home, or any other suitable place.

This is the rest month for Manbhum people and so the people pass their leisure time in singing *Hari Nam*. For this reason people organize different *melas* in the hot season and they choose this *mantrā* for worshipping god. *Kīrtan* gives mental peace, you know the people of this world are not happy, their minds are full of tension so if you sing *kīrtan*, it will relieve you from sorrow and mental anguish (N. Mahato 1996: pers. comm.).

Definition and Origins

In Sanskrit, the root word *kīrt* means 'to utter something loudly enough to be audible to others', and the founder of *Nama Kīrtan* (*Nama* means name), Caitanya Mahaprabhu (1485-1533), is reputed to have said: *Trnadapi sunicena taroriva sahisnuna, amaninam manadeyam kirtaniya sada Hārih*, which means "one should be as humble as the grass and as tolerant as the trees and one should give respect to those whom no one respects and always do kirtan to the Lord" (Sen 1960:88). An explanation of *kīrtaniya sada Hārih*, is "When someone's qualities are sung aloud, when they are highly praised, it is called *kīrtan*" (Sarkar 1982:2). In this case, it is the qualities of *Hāri* that are being praised. *Hāri* is *Krishṇa* in the role of the 'Cosmic Thief', one who takes away the sins of the devotees without their permission or knowledge. Hence *kīrtan* is an integral part of *Bhakti Mārg* or the path of devotion, the purpose of which is to channelise one's emotion towards *Hāri* as God through the continuous repetition of the *mantrā*. The philosophy behind this performance practice is as follows, "At the time of *kīrtan*, the vocal cord sings, the ears hear and the hands and feet dance and thus all the organs are preoccupied with the divine" (Sarkar 1982:16).

From a purely social perspective, the performance of *kīrtan* includes people of all castes and classes united under the same banner. A typical session of *kīrtan* singing may include singers from the community of wealthy businessmen, middle-class educators, or agricultural workers from the nearby villagers, all participating side by side, states Slawek (1988:84). "Chant-like and extremely repetitious, [*kīrtan*] transforms the consciousness of its singers, as well as satisfying social needs (Henry 1988:139).

Historical Aspects

Kīrtan was first advocated by a native Rāghī poet, Dvija Candidas from Nanur of Birbhum District, around seven hundred years ago. The *Krishṇa kīrtans* (songs in praise of Krishṇa) formulated by Candidas were composed in the same form as the *Gītā Govindā* by Jayadeva and used to be sung in certain classical *rāgas* and *tāla*, although these are unintelligible today. Just as in the *Krishṇa kīrtans*, the Sanskrit love poem called the *Gītā Govindā*, written around A.D. 1150 is saturated with the *madhur bhava* or the tender emotion of erotic love. The structure of the *Gītā Govindā* is that of a sequential series of twenty-four songs, with each song comprising a *dhruvā* (refrain) and eight stanzas called *pāda*, hence the common term *astapādi* (having eight stanzas).

The inner spirit of mysticism that characterized the Bāul songs of Rāgh was similarly expressed in the *pādavali* (narrating the descriptions of god) *kīrtans* of Candidas. For example, in one of Candidas' *pādavali kīrtans* he wrote,

*Sai keva se shonaila Shyama nam
Kaner bhitar dia marame pashila go
Akul karila paran*

which means, "Just listening to the name of Krishṇa, Rādhā merges into the ocean of Viraha. Painstricken was Rādhā for not seeing Krishṇa for so long" (Kirtyananda 1996: pers. comm.). The *kīrtan* songs of Krishṇa/Rādhā paved the way for the formulation of *nāma kīrtan* (singing the name of god), introduced by Caitanya around two hundred years later. *Nāma kīrtan* is said to embody certain elements of the

ancient *cāryapādas* (Tantric practice songs), *Gītā Govindā Pādāgana* (songs of the *Gītā Govindā*), *Krishṇa Kīrtans* of Candidas, Bāul and other socio-devotional songs that were current before, and in, its time.

Caitanya Mahaprabhu was born in Navadvīp, and is said to have been influenced by the music-culture of Rāṅgh. He is reputed to have said: *Rāṅghī Sure Rāṅghī bole, Rāṅghī akhare kīrtana kariva* (Kīrtyananda 1996c:16), which means, 'Sing Rāṅghī tunes, and follow Rāṅghī kīrtan.' As Caitanya's time was one of turbulence, with religious conversion a common practice in the society, he felt that people would not be able to understand the depths of spiritual philosophy, and so he endeavoured to unite the people with the spiritual-cum-emotional sentiment of *nāma kīrtan*. Shunning social convention, Caitanya advocated *Bala Hāri Bol, Puti macher jhol*, which means 'take proper food and sing *kīrtan* day and night.' This became the basic premise of his philosophy (Kīrtyananda 1996: pers. comm.). On his many pilgrimages to Puri, he passed through Rāṅgh on foot and thus established Vaishṇavism in the region.

The connecting links between the kīrtan and the Bāul songs and traditions is an emphasis on the expression of ecstatic devotion, the common use of Rādhā/Krishṇa themes and principle of social egalitarianism among the singer/members. Originally the Shiva Tantra, Bāul and Vaishṇav cults were accepted by the Rāṅghī people because certain innate characteristics, like their introversal and sentimental nature, were in harmony with the underlying spirit of the above cults. Hence they were adopted as part of their musical and spiritual heritage. Vaishṇavism in particular gained wide popularity in Rāṅgh through the propagation of the *kīrtan* songs and chants by Caitanya Mahaprabhu and his followers. In many places in Rāṅgh today, the words Bāul and Vaishṇav are used synonymously, and consequently there is less semblance of casteism than in other areas of India, states Kīrtyananda (1996: pers. comm.).

The Kirtanias

The expression '*kīrtan* is in my blood' is often heard in Rāṅgh. Kīrtan is a musical tradition that is part of everyday village life and deemed essential to the well-being of the people. The *Hāri Bol kīrtan* parties of the Vaishṇavs perform each morning through the streets of the village, passing from door to door and singing *nāma kīrtan*.

In return they collect rice and coins from the householders for their daily survival. Hence *kīrtan* is considered to be a community-oriented form of worship, as fundamental to the life of the village as the blood that runs through everyone's veins. Recounting his childhood experiences, *kīrtan guru* Mihir Kumar Mahato states, "I loved *kīrtan* with all my heart and soul, so at study time I also played *kīrtan*. You know later in my life my office transferred me to another place, but I did not go because of *kīrtan*. As I told you before *kīrtan* is in my blood" (M. Mahato 1996: pers. comm.).

Mihir Kumar Mahato, the senior most respected *kīrtan guru* in the area, is from Dabar village near to Puruliā. Now aged seventy-five, he began his formal music training at the age of thirteen when he met Kailash Goswami, who is a Vaishṇav from Navadvip. Kailash Goswami is said to have descended from the original *Hāri Bol* party of Caitanya Mahaprabhu and is the lead singer and *ḍhol* player of his own *kīrtan* group. He taught Mihir Mahato the *kīrtan tālas* on the *ḍhol* and in return Mihir Mahato's father gave Kailash Goswami thirty rupees a month and food twice a day. He states,

You know my *guru* taught me in the evening and morning. He would give me one task to perform over a seven day period and if within seven days I was able to accomplish it, then he would give me another task to practice for the next seven days. With the help of my *guru* I have made a copy of all the *tāls* and songs that he taught me (M. Mahato 1996: pers. comm.).

Mihir Mahato states that there is no difference today between the teaching process and style used by his *guru* and the one he uses today with his students. He has taught Nalini Kanta Mahato and other *kīrtanīyas* in the district, who are now *gurus* in their own right. Mihir Mahato continues to teach his students with the same notes (which he calls 'copy') that were written by his *guru* when he was a student. Mihir Mahato's musical notation looks like a graphic illustration of the *tāla*, with the words *Hari Bol* written above, to the side and on top of certain shapes. One of his students from the same village, Nalini Kanta Mahato, says, "Yes, we have musical notation, but it is written in terms of *Hāri Nam* because we use only these two words, *Hāri* and

Bol and we express these two words with the help of different tunes, or *suras*" (N. Mahato 1996: pers. comm.).



Figure 6.1: Kirtan *guru* Mihir Mahato with musical notation.

One is expected to take many years in musical training to become a *kīrtan* expert in Rāṅh. Guru Mihir Mahato's period of training for example, continued for at least twenty years and even today at the age of seventy-five, he still considers himself to be a student of *kīrtan*. He says "I first learnt *khol* playing from thirteen years of age to twenty five years. Then from twenty-five years to twenty-seven years of age I learnt the harmonium and after that I learnt to sing" (M. Mahato 1996: pers. comm.).

It is the custom in this area to invite the traditional hereditary caste members of the *kīrtan* songs and chants, called the Vaishṅavs, from another village to come and be the first to perform at any important *kīrtan* function. The main difference between the Vaishṅav and non-Vaishṅav *kīrtan* singers and players today is that *kīrtan* is a

hereditary profession for the Vaishṇavs, which implies that they follow certain rules and regulations. These include no meat, fish, eggs or spicy foods of any kind in their diet. For the non-Vaishṇav *kīrtan* singers and players there are no such restrictions. Though there may be less recognition for the non-Vaishṇav *kīrtanīyas*, there appears to be little difference between either group, in terms of musical skill or dedication.

The Different Styles and Types of Kīrtan in Rāṅgh

Bengali literature of the nineteenth century is rich with examples of the *kīrtan* poems of many renown Vaishṇav *kīrtanīyas* (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 Rāṅgh. 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 Rāṅgh 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 Rāṅgh. There are two different types of *nāma kīrtan* in this area, states Mihir Mahato, and these are *ākhandā* and *baitakī*. 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 *kīrtaniyas* 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

