

BHAJANS AND KIIRTAN IN INDIAN MUSIC

The doctrine of *bhakti* or devotion, expressed as the love for God, has been of continuing importance in India. Specific musical styles inspired by this devotion became prominent over the last 500 years or so. Two forms stand out: these are generally called *bhajans* and *kirtan*.

A brief summary of the nature of *bhajans* is first called for, followed by a more detailed explanation of *kirtans*. There is some overlap in terminology. However, *bhajans* can be considered as a devotional song genre, while *kirtan* can be considered as a religious genre. *Kirtan* can also be considered as an activity because it can involve dance or drama, while *bhajans* is only a song type.

Bhajans

Bhajans, as the generic term for devotional songs, express this *bhakti*. The root word *bhaj* means to share or partake in (as in a ritual). Accordingly, *bhajans* have importance in *puja* or worship, and are sung at such gatherings as an act of devotion. Poet saints of various regions in India, such as Mira Bai, Surdas, and Kabir, have composed thousands of these songs in their regional languages and passed them on orally. They are particularly popular throughout North India using the light, nasal head tones typical of Indian popular music and classical singing.

Informal, loosely organised, musical performances of *bhajans* are common where they are sung by people from all sectors of society. *Bhajans* can be sung in a call and response form. They also became popular early in the 20th century on the concert stage. As a result, *bhajans* are also sung by professional vocalists with standard light classical instrumental accompaniment, primarily the *tabla* (set of 2 membrane drums) and harmonium.

Rhythmic cycles of 3, 4 or 8 beats are common. For the *tabla* player, *dadra* as a medium tempo *tal* (rhythmic cycle), because it is symmetrical and easy to perform, is used a lot in *bhajans*. *Dadra* has 6 *matras* (beats), with two *vibhags* (groupings) of equal length (each *vibhag* having 3 *matras*). The *tali* (clap) being on *matra* 1 and the *khali* (wave/empty) being on *matra* 4. The *bols* (syllables) of *dadra* are:



Bhairav is a common *raga* (scale/motif of notes) for *bhajans*. Sung in the morning, it has the *vadi* (most prominent note) as *Dha* and *samvadi* (next most prominent note) as *Re*, both of these are flattened (*komal*), with the remaining *svaras* (notes) being *shudh* (natural). It proceeds as follows: *aroha* (ascending) - *Sa Re*(flat) *Ga Ma Pa Dha*(flat) *Ni Sa*; *avaroh* (descending) – in reverse. *Bhairavi raga* is also used which is the same, but with *Ga* and *Ni* also flattened and sung at dawn. Both are of the *that* (parent scale) of *bhairav*.

Bhajans are sung both by men and women, including in public concert performances. There do exist devotional *bhakti* cults (as an aspect of culture) especially catering for women. Both women and men have adopted the practice of *bhajan* singing in neighbourhood gatherings in village and urban settings. The same applies to *kirtan*.

The performance of devotional music in India encompasses not only *bhajan* singing, but also other forms of singing (solo and choral), and recitations and chanting. In these, the performers employ instrumental resources judiciously and in varied combinations. Besides the *tabla* or *mridanga* (double headed barrel drum) and harmonium, string instruments can provide melodic support and

drone instruments provide constant background sound. Cymbals and clappers also provide rhythm. This also applies to *kirtan*.

Kirtan

Kirtan is a heterogenous practice that involves communal singing of devotional songs, recitations or chants. It is done by both men and women. It centres around singing about God or singing the name of God, as the Supreme Entity. The word *kirt* means to celebrate, praise or glorify. So *kirtan* is a form of praise song. It often involves a leader or *kirtankar* with devotees singing songs collectively. This includes at festivals or while on pilgrimages or even as mendicants.

There are a wide variety of musical forms of *kirtan*. The styles and instrumentation vary and may borrow from folk, light classical and even popular tunes. It is fair to say that only the common *ragas* are used in *kirtan*.

An exploration of the historical time frame concerning *kirtan* gives a good indication of its development. Apparently, the form of *kirtan* first developed towards the end of the 12th century through Jayadeva's composition of the *Gita Govinda* in around 1178 AD. These are Sanskrit love poems saturated with *madhur bhava*, which are the tender emotions of divine love. That is, they portray devotion or the love of God. This work comprises 24 songs with each song consisting of a refrain (*dhruva*) and 8 stanzas (*pada*).

Pada kirtan

Pada kirtan consists of verses. Commencing in the late 14th century *dhrupad* was the common type of temple music for court musicians and singers, and was also cultivated in songs associated with beggar minstrels or ascetics. *Dhrupad* is the oldest genre of North Indian classical vocal music. Occasionally, it is still performed today. *Dhrupad* is not only a type of song, a style of singing and playing; but also a philosophy of musical performance.

In its simplest form, *dhrupad* is a short poem of 2 or 4 rhyming lines which are sung as a verse (*pada*) of which the first line incorporates a refrain (*dhruva*). *Dhrupad* songs with only *sthayi* (1st) and *antara* (2nd) *taks* (segments) are also common. The longer form consists of 4 *taks*, such as *sthayi*, *antara*, *sanchari* and *abhog*. *Dhrupad* poetry has a serious tone and can cover a wide variety of subjects. This includes hymns in praise of Hindu and Islamic deities or saints, celebration of seasons, and philosophical reflections on music.

Dhrupad is set to music using traditional *ragas*. However, the *tals* used in *dhrupad* are not common because they are *pakhawaj* (double barrel drum) *tals* (instead of *tabla*). The *tals* used may be the *chautal*, *surfank*, *brahmatal*, *teoda*, *rudratal* and *jhanptal*. The *pakhawaj* or *mridanga* are the only drums used in *dhrupad*. The *pakhawaj* has a long association with religious music and its deep tone is considered more suitable for *dhrupad* than the lighter-toned *tabla*. Another *tal* is the *chartal* (meaning 4 claps) with 12 *matras* divided into 6 equal *vibhags*. It has 4 *tali* or claps falling on the 1st, 5th, 9th and 11th *matras*.

The bols of *chartal* are:

¹ धा धा दिं ता | ² किट धा दिं ता |
Dhaa Dhaa Din Taa | KITa Dhaa Din Ta |

³ ति ट | ⁴ ग दी |
TiTa KaTa | GaDee GeNa |

As part of temple music, the *Vaishnavite* poets (those who place God at the centre of their philosophy) also wrote *kirtans* to accompany dance in the temples. This *kirtan* stressed emotional elements. Ancient *tals* used include *todi*, *kamod*, *shrirag*, *pahadi* and *patamanjuri*.

Importantly, during the 15th century Dwija Chandidas (1390-1450), from Nanur in Birbhum District, advocated *kirtan*. These were Krishna *kirtans* or songs in praise of Lord Krishna, as an incarnation of the Supreme Entity, and were composed in the same form as the *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva. They used to be sung in certain classical ragas and *talas* and are the *padavali kirtans* (lyrical literature) of Chandidas well known throughout Bengal and beyond.

One such example from Chandidas (Sai, Keva Sunailo Syama-nama, verse 1) is:

Sai, keva sunailo Syama-nama
kanera bhitora diya, marame pasilo go
akula korilo mora prana

The 'inner meaning' is:

O my dear Sakhi, who is that person who first made me hear this name "Syama" (Krishna)?
When it enters my heart through my ears, I become overwhelmed with impatience.

See: Tridandisvami Sri Srimad Bhaktivedanta Narayana Maharaja (19 June 2003), *Prayers And Pastimes At The Time Of Taste*, Birmingham, UK, <http://www.purebhakti.com/lectures/lecture20030619.shtml>

This type of *padavali kirtan* is like poetry. It simply involves singing about the Lord and telling about the qualities of the Lord, which are expressed through Krishna's attributes and pastimes.

Padavali kirtan, as a refined Bengali devotional music, in its poetic and lyrical nature is very aesthetic. This aspect was again emphasised in Bengal (present day Bangladesh) at around 1583 by Narottam Das at Kheturi. In his songs about Krishna and Radha (Krishna's consort), Narottam Das used the slower *dhrupad* styles of Vrndavan and Mathura. These songs are known for their expressions of tenderness and purity and suit the sober *dhrupad* style, rendered in an easy and slow measure.

Pala kirtan

Another style of refined *kirtan* is *pala kirtan* in which many persons take different roles in longer programmes with various dialogues. For example, a 3 hour exposition and elaboration of a given theme. It mainly consists of extended narrative song texts describing the pastimes of Krishna and his Braj (Vrndavan) associates. The musical portions are set to melodies associated with classical ragas and *tals* related to Hindustani rhythms. This can involve large *kirtan* ensembles.

Today, in Manipur, a north-east state of India, it combines with music and dance in a male group performance using cymbals (*kartal*) and drum (*dhak*) called the *Kartal Cholom*. This dance is led by an *ishalpa* (main singer) and a *duhar* (dance leader). The performers wear large white ball-

shaped turbans. Using a cymbal they sing and dance to the rhythm of the drum. The initial movements are slow but gather pace towards the end of the dance. In Manipur, *pala kirtan* or *nata sangkirtan* is always an item in various life cycle celebrations from birth to death and religious festivals. King Jaysingha is said to have initiated the present form of *pala kirtan*.

Katha kirtan

Where only actual stories or narratives are involved this is called *katha kirtan*. Their purpose is to arouse intense devotion for God. *Hari katha* are stories about Hari, literally stories of the Lord, which have as their exposition some religious theme, usually concerning the life of a saint, or are stories from India's scriptural texts being mainly the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The story telling can be done in composite with poetry, drama, dance, music and philosophy. In this regard, *Hari kirtan* is the more repetitious sing of hymns that feature repeated climaxes and is the form used by the Haridas singers of Karnataka.

Nama kirtan

Nama means name. The *kirtan* songs about Krishna and Radha paved the way for the formulation of *nama kirtan*, which is singing the name of the Lord. This can be done over and over again (such as *Sita Rama, Hare Krishna, Hare Rama, Radhe Shyam, Jai Mata Di*, etc). The beginning of this vibrant devotional music began during the time of the Bengali saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1484-1533) who spread the *Gaudiya Vaishnav* practice of Hinduism, a personalist-bhakti movement devoid of caste discrimination, throughout Bengal in the early 16th century. Chaitanya immortalised *kirtan* and gave it status in the spiritual field. *Nama kirtan* is popular everywhere in India.

The text of *nama kirtan* as a devotional song form repeats the various names and epithets of a deity.

An example is:

Its meaning is:

Rama Krishna Hare Mukunda Murare Sita
Vallabha Sita Rama Vrindravana Govinda
Nanda Nandana

Hail Rama Krishna, enemy of Mura, lover of
Sita, Sita Rama, cowherd of Vrindavan, son
of Nanda

Along with characteristic elements from the *Gita Govinda* and the Krishna *kirtans* of Chandidas, *nama kirtan* embodies elements of the ancient *Caryapadas* (*tantric* practice songs) and Baul and other socio-devotional songs.

The *Caryapadas* are *tantric* verses of the 12th century that are the earliest surviving literary works in Bengali. This part of *tantra* comprises a body of esoteric Hindu and Buddhist religious texts and rituals composed by *siddhas* (mystics) of the *Shahajia* sect (a difficult mystic branch) believed to be an off-shoot of Tantrika Mahayana Buddhism. The subject matter of *Caryapada* is highly mystical, which centres round the esoteric doctrines of *yoga* (union with the God) and *sadhana* (spiritual meditation). The *Caryapada* is likely to have influenced the *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva.

The Baul songs (equivalent to *bhajans*) of Bengal also contain much mystical content. They draw their spiritual inspiration from Islam, mystic Sufism, the devotional/*bhakti* path of Vaishnavism, and Hindu-Buddhist *tantric* philosophy. The wandering Baul minstrels make their living strumming one-string plucked lutes (*ektara* or *gopi yantra*) or playing a simple drum (*dugi*) while singing and dancing ecstatically. Small ensembles include men and women. Before the founding of Kolkata in Bengal, *kirtan* was confined to the rural culture of Bengal – the home of the Bauls.

Generally *kirtan* is rendered in a standing position or combined with a dance, but it can be done while sitting. *Akhanda* (meaning endless) *kirtan* is another form of *nama kirtan*. It can be danced around a *puja* altar or table in an anti-clockwise direction. This is done for at least 3 hours and can last for several days (with no limit of time). Generally, the length of time is in multiples of 3 (eg 6, 9, 12, 24 hours, etc). The Sikh *shabd kirtan*, which is a form of devotional singing by a group or an individual while sitting and playing harmonium and the *dholak* (drum), is maintained on a 24 hour non-stop basis at the Golden Temple in Amristar, Punjab.

Nagar kirtan

Singing *kirtan* while walking and/or dancing is called *nagar kirtan*. It involves a collective public performance through the streets of a city or town. In Bengal, *Vaishnava* devotees chant and dance *nagar kirtan* in praise of Krishna through the streets playing the *mridanga* and cymbals. The *Hare Krishna* movement and other spiritual groups, such as *Ananda Marga*, do this also.

The collective performance of *bhajan* singing can go by the name of *sankiirtan*. While *nam sankiirtan* is singing in a responsorial style in which the audience participates collectively while singing the name of the Lord. The form of *nagar sankiirtan* is singing *bhajans* while walking.

Conclusion

Though *kirtan* originates from the classical stream of *dhrupad*, it does not strictly follow the classical mode. There is great diversity in *kirtan* shown by its use of entire scales and various tempos: *drut* (fast), *madya* (medium) and *vilambit* (slow). There is also diversity in the style and place of performance: from simple chants to longer song texts; from sitting to dancing; from temples to streets. The social setting involves both men and women, and all sectors of society. Instruments used range from drums such as *mridanga*, *pakhawaj* and *dholak*, cymbals and jingling clappers such as *cipla* and *cimta*, as well as the harmonium.

Kirtan and also *bhajans* have found a place in both the rural and urban human environments. For example, with the rise of Kolkata, *kirtan* became popular among the city elite. It also has a wide religious or spiritual base. For example, before the partition of 1947, both Hindus and Muslims listened to *kirtan* along with other genres. Though afterwards looked upon with disfavour as a Hindu genre *kirtan* continued to be sung in the villages of East Pakistan now Bangladesh, even if the performance of *kirtan* has lessened there. It is also sung by Sikhs, as well as many of the numerous spiritual groups that emerged from India making their mark in the West in the 1960s and 1970s which adopted *kirtan* forms for their gathering (*satsang*). This testifies to its widespread appeal. The same applies to *bhajans* which are popular with adherents in the West as well as in India.

Overall, *bhajans* and *kirtans* provide uplifting spiritual, religious, musical and social experiences for members who participate collectively in functions and places where they are performed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barba, Eugenio. 1994. "The Steps on the River Bank", *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol.38, no.4, pp107-120.
- Beck, Guy. 2000. "Religious and Devotional Music: Northern Area", in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 5, South Asia: The Indian Subcontinent*, ed. Alison Arnold, Garland Publishing, New York.
- Capwell, Charles. 1986. *The Music of the Bauls of Bengal*, Kent State University Press, Kent, Ohio.
- Capwell, Charles. 1988. "The Popular Expression of Religious Syncretism: The Bauls of Bengal as Apostles of Brotherhood", *Popular Music*, vol.7, no.2, pp.123-132.
- Goswami, Karunamaya. 2000. "West Bengal and Bangladesh", in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 5, South Asia: The Indian Subcontinent*, ed. Alison Arnold, Garland Publishing, New York.
- Henry, Edward O. 1988. *Chant the Names of God: Musical Culture in Bhojpuri-Speaking India*, San Diego University Press, San Diego.
- Kassebaum, Gayathri R. and Claus, Peter J. 2000. "Karnataka", in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 5, South Asia: The Indian Subcontinent*, ed. Alison Arnold, Garland Publishing, New York.
- La Trobe-Burton, Jyosna. 1997. "Kirtan" in chapter 6 *Red Earth: The Music Culture of Rarh, India*, MA thesis, University of Auckland, Auckland.
- Middlebrook, Joyce. 2000. "Punjab", in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 5, South Asia: The Indian Subcontinent*, ed. Alison Arnold, Garland Publishing, New York.
- Natavar, Mekhala D. 2000. "Music and Dance: Northern Area", in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 5, South Asia: The Indian Subcontinent*, ed. Alison Arnold, Garland Publishing, New York.
- Novetzke, Christian L. 2003. "Divining the Author: The Idea of Authorship in an Indian Religious Tradition", *History of Religions*, vol.42, no.3, pp.213-242.
- Roche, David. 2000. "Music and Trance", in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 5, South Asia: The Indian Subcontinent*, ed. Alison Arnold, Garland Publishing, New York.
- Slawek, Stephen M. 1988. "Popular Kirtan in Benares: Some 'Great' Aspects of a Little Tradition", *Ethnomusicology*, vol.32, no.2, pp.77-92.
- Wade, Bonnie C. 1987. *Music in India: The Classical Traditions*, Manohar Publications, New Delhi.