

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Previously Published Works

Title

The Reverberation of the Sacred Gurbani's Vibrations at the Darbar Sahib: The Issue of Its Television Broadcasting

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6299151d>

Journal

Religions, 15(4)

ISSN

2077-1444

Author

Singh, Pashaura

Publication Date

2024-03-25


DOI

10.3390/rel15040395

Peer reviewed

Article

The Reverberation of the Sacred Gurbani's Vibrations at the Darbar Sahib: The Issue of Its Television Broadcasting

Pashaura Singh 

Department for the Study of Religion, University of California, Riverside, CA 92521, USA; psingh@ucr.edu

Abstract: This essay will examine the contemporary issue of the television broadcasting of the sacred Gurbani from the Darbar Sahib to set the stage for understanding the historical context of the musical sessions (*chauṅkīs*) of devotional singing, followed by the process of decolonizing the musical performances in modern times, including religious aesthetics and sacred time and the processional *chauṅkīs* in the Darbar Sahib Complex. The continuous singing of the Guru's hymns (Gurbani kirtan) resounds inside the Darbar Sahib ("the Divine Court"), popularly known as the Golden Temple of Amritsar. This special mode of worship consists of singing and listening to the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred scripture of the Sikhs. The heart of Sikh devotional experience lies in the performance of scriptural hymns in a congregational setting. Notably, different sessions of devotional singing go on day and night from 2.45 a.m. to 10.45 p.m. at the Golden Temple, following a celebrated tradition established more than four centuries ago by the Fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan. Even during the four-hour period of cleaning the *sanctum sanctorum* at midnight, the devotees recite hymns from memory, thereby making the Darbar Sahib a unique place where vibrations of sacred sound reverberate continuously for twenty-four hours a day.

Keywords: *aṣṭ-yām*; *chauṅkī*; Darbar Sahib; *darśanas*; Gurbani; Guru Granth Sahib; kirtan; *naubat*; raga; seva



Citation: Singh, Pashaura. 2024. The Reverberation of the Sacred Gurbani's Vibrations at the Darbar Sahib: The Issue of Its Television Broadcasting. *Religions* 15: 395. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15040395>

Academic Editor: Guy Beck

Received: 9 January 2024

Revised: 17 March 2024

Accepted: 22 March 2024

Published: 25 March 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The purpose of this essay is sixfold. First, it will begin with the recent controversy over the exclusive rights for the television broadcasting of the Gurbani kirtan from the Darbar Sahib. It reflects the politics of power play between the state and a religious institution, and it has far-reaching ramifications in the political climate of Punjab as well as the global Sikh community (Panth). Secondly, this study will explore the historical context in which the daily routine of devotional singing came into being at the Darbar Sahib, focusing on both religious and secular traditions of musical performances in Mughal India. Thirdly, it will illuminate the nature and performance of the eight musical sessions (*chauṅkīs*) as part of the daily liturgical routine of the Darbar Sahib. Fourthly, it will look at the decolonizing process at work in the last three decades in reviving the usage of ancient musical instruments. Fifthly, this essay will then turn to the significance of religious aesthetics and sacred time to lay the spiritual background of Sikh music relevant to the daily routine of the Darbar Sahib. Finally, we will try to understand the nature and significance of processional *chauṅkīs* that have become the inspiration for modern-day Nagar Kirtans ("Devotional singing in the public arena of towns and cities") throughout the Sikh world. In sum, this study covers many topics, including Punjab politics and comparative liturgical approaches to the "eight watches" (*aṣṭ-yāms*), Mughal and colonial interactions, and decolonization, proceeding from contemporary politics to comparative *chauṅkīs*, from Pushtimarg to Akbar, and ending with religious aesthetics and public performances of Nagar Kirtans, including some relevant issues.

The central place of Sikh worship is the Darbar Sahib or "the Divine Court", popularly known as the Golden Temple of Amritsar. It serves as multiple-purpose center of devotional

activities for the Sikh Panth. After completing its building inside the sacred pool, the Fifth Guru, Guru Arjan (1563–1606), established the daily liturgical routine of devotional singing in the form of eight “sittings” (*chaunkīs*), marking the first time when he installed the authoritative text of the *Adi Granth* (“Original Scripture”) in the Darbar Sahib in 1604. Since then, the sacred sounds of the devotional singing of the Guru’s hymns (*Gurbani kirtan*) reverberate inside the Darbar Sahib every day. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new era started with the televised broadcasting of *kirtan* throughout the world with the help of Zee TV’s global platform, the ETC Channel Punjabi network (Shankar and Bhatnagar 2004, pp. 172–73). For the last eleven years, however, the PTC (Punjabi Television Channel) network has had exclusive rights to the airing of live *Gurbani* from the Darbar Sahib for about eight hours a day, a channel which is available in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe. Millions of Sikh devotees view the live tele-broadcast of *kirtan* from the Golden Temple across the world from 4.30 a.m. to 8.30 a.m. in the morning and from 4.30 p.m. to 6.30 p.m. in the evening. As discussed in my earlier study, this service is unprecedented in the world of tele-broadcasting, as the Golden Temple is the only sacred space where a permanent earth station is in place with a satellite dish, up-linking equipment, and editing controls. It is no wonder that the daily routine of *kirtan* at the Golden Temple has become a significant factor in the evolution of the Sikh tradition in a global context (P. Singh 2011, p. 102).

On 20 June 2023, the Punjab government run by APP (Aam Aadami Party) unilaterally amended the Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925, as Kusum Arora reports, stipulating that the SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, “Chief Administrative Body of Sikh Shrines”) should propagate the “teachings of the Gurus uninterrupted (without any onscreen advertisements, commercials or distortion) live feed of *Gurbani* from the Golden Temple, Amritsar, every day available free of cost to all media houses, platforms, channels or whoever wishes to broadcast it” (Arora 2023). The SGPC saw the move as government interference in religious matters, while Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann had pitched it as a move to make the broadcast of *Gurbani* freely accessible. As noted earlier, the exclusive broadcast rights are with the PTC network, a private television channel in which Sukhbir Singh Badal, President of the SAD (Shiromani Akali Dal, the main political party of the Sikhs), reportedly has a stake. In a political move, Mann presented the Bill as a way to break the Badal family’s monopoly on the broadcast of *Gurbani*. The PTC won the 11-year contract in 2012, and its term expired on 24 July 2023. Currently, advertisements are not run during the *Gurbani* broadcast—a condition the channel managers say was a deterrence to other broadcasters. However, the *Gurbani* telecast has brought the channel a high viewership, which in turn allows it to command good advertising rates for its other programs. Responding strongly to the passage of the Bill, the SGPC held a special general house meeting at Teja Singh Samundri Hall, Amritsar, on 26 June 2023, to reject it. Condemning the Punjab government’s “interference” in the Sikh Gurdwaras Act, 1925, the SGPC house members called for strong opposition to this unconstitutional move. The SGPC also passed a resolution, in which it warned the Mann government that if it did not stop this “anti-Sikh decision”, they would be forced to launch a *morchā* (“agitation”). The SGPC members made it explicit that “CM Bhagwant Mann should withdraw the Bill or get ready to face an intensified struggle” (Arora 2023).

This controversy illuminates how the broadcasting of sacred music from the Golden Temple has become a contest between the Punjab government and the SGPC, the main statutory body of the Sikhs. It has far-reaching consequences for the global Sikh community. Responding to this new situation, as IP Singh reports, the SGPC has already started preparations to launch its own YouTube and Facebook channels after its agreement with PTC expires on 23 July 2023: “At political level and from other Sikh quarters, who strongly opposed the method of amendment to the Sikh Gurdwaras Act, there has been common refrain that SGPC should start its own channel and in place of giving one channel monopoly”, and consequently, “a go-ahead has also been given to the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee staff for making technical preparations for starting the channel on social media

platforms” (IP Singh 2023a). Historically, sixty-five years ago, the Congress government led by Partap Singh Kairon had hurriedly passed an amendment in January 1959, which evoked a strong protest from the Sikhs at large. A silent protest march was organized by the Sikhs in Delhi on 15 March 1959. The impact of this Sikh protest culminated in the ‘Nehru-Tara Singh Pact’, a pact which was signed by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Akali leader Master Tara Singh in April 1959. The main point in this pact explicitly articulates that any amendment to the Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925 requires the consent of the two-thirds majority of the general house of the SGPC and that the government cannot interfere in the gurdwaras affairs (IP Singh 2023b). Many legal experts have raised the following question in the current situation: why did the Punjab government rush through with the amendment without taking the SGPC on board? The answer to this question obviously lies in the political agenda of the AAP government to interfere in the gurdwaras affairs in order to increase their vote bank in view of the defeat of the Shiromani Akali Dal in 2022 Punjab Legislative Assembly elections.

Notwithstanding the political nature of the present controversy, our main purpose here is to examine the celebrated eight “sittings” (*chauñkīs*) to sing kirtan in praise of Akal Purakh (“Eternal One”, God) as part of the daily liturgical routine at the Darbar Sahib in its original historical context by focusing on contemporary religious and secular musical traditions. The rationale of why this controversy about the tele-broadcasting of Gurbani from the Darbar Sahib is related to the *chauñkī* system becomes clear from its discussion in which the divine Power offers a challenge to worldly powers. The discourse of ‘power’ is, therefore, at the center of our analysis. Literally, the Punjabi term *chauñkī* originally meant a ‘quarter’, a four-footed wooden platform upon which the holy choir used to sit to recite the sacred hymns in a Sikh congregation in ancient times. It also referred to a session of devotional singing, the number of Sikh musicians (*rāgīs*) at such sessions being four, and playing different musical instruments, namely the *rabāb* (the plucked lute, with six main strings and twenty-two metallic strings for resonance) or the *sirandā* (an instrument with three main strings), the *dilrubā* (bowed lute) or the *taūs* (peacock-shaped instrument with stretched wires and frets), the harmonium, and the *joṛī-pakhāvāj* (a pair of small kettle drums). It should be emphasized that singing the praises of Akal Purakh in the congregational setting is the heart of Sikh devotional experience.

2. Historical Context

The Sikh tradition, including other religious traditions of India, follows the theoretical division of a day into eight watches (*pahar/yām*, an Indian unit of time equal to three hours), though the concrete definition of the *aṣṭ-yām* (‘eight watches’) is normally modified with the ritual requirements. It is feasible to establish the religious context of the eight musical *chauñkīs* at the Darbar Sahib by looking through the lens of the ‘eight orders of *darśanas*’ (‘the acts of seeing a particular *līlā* or play of Krishna, an anecdote in his life’), ritually played by the Pushtimarg sect of Vaishnavas at each watch of each day and night at the Govardhan Temple. In the Krishnaite Vaishnava temples, for instance, the *aṣṭ-yām* divisions are determined by the daily activities of Lord Krishna, the divine cowherd, lasting around 15 min each. Beginning with *mañgala* (the auspicious first hour in the morning when the deity is awakened, between 4.30 and 5.30 a.m.), the liturgical cycle continues with *bala* (the morning meal, around 9 a.m.), *śriñgāra* (when the deity appears fully dressed and ready to depart for the forests with the cattle, between 10 and 11 a.m.), *rājbhoga* (the midday meal, between 12 and 1 p.m.), *utthāpana* (when the deity awakes from an afternoon siesta, around 5 p.m.), *sandhyā ārtī* (when the deity returns with the cattle at evening twilight time, between 6.30 and 7.30 p.m.), *vyālū bhoga* (the evening meal, around 8.30 p.m.), and concludes finally with *sayāna* (when the deity retires for the night, around 9 p.m.). Each watch corresponds to a *darśana* (‘vision’); that is, the shrine of the deity opens, and the image can be seen and glorified at all watches except for *vyālū bhoga*, when the ceremonial light offering (*ārtī*) is performed. The whole liturgical cycle is referred to as the *aṣṭ-yām sevā* (‘service throughout the eight watches’). Devotional songs accompany the ritual acts

throughout the day, and their proper rendition calls for suitable temporal ragas or ‘melodies’ (Thielmann 2000, p. 52).

In the contemporary secular world, the presence and sovereignty of Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) was announced, enunciated, reiterated, and symbolized by the periodic musical ensemble (*naubat*), reflecting the visible and audible presence of power. The *naubat*, described by Bonnie Wade as “orchestra of world dominion”, was housed at a prominent point of approach and entrance to the imperial fort-palaces that were an integral part of the quarters of imperial residence (Wade 1998, p. 5). The fivefold *naubat* coincided with the five times of prayer in the daily life of Muslims. According to his memoirs, Emperor Babur (r. 1526–1530), the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India, conflated this periodic musical performance with the system he found in place in Hindustan for marking off the eight watches of the day:

In our country a day and night is conventionally divided into twenty-four parts, each of which is called an hour, and every hour is divided into sixty parts, each of which is called a minute, so there are 1440 min in a day and night. . . The people of India divide the day and night into sixty parts, each of which is called a *ghari*. Moreover, the night and day are each divided into four parts, each of which is called a *pahar*, or what in Persian is called a *pas*. . . For keeping time, in all the important towns of Hindustan a group of men called *gharialis* is appointed and assigned. They cast a disc of brass as large as a tray and two fingers thick. This brass object, called *gharial* is hung in a high place. Another vessel has a whole in the bottom, like an hourglass that fills up once every *ghari*. The *gharialis* take turns putting the vessel in water and waiting for it to fill up. For example, when the vessel that they put water at daybreak fills up once, they strike the *gharial* with a mallet. . . When the first watch of the day is finished, after repeated striking, the *gharialis* pause and strike once. When the second watch is finished, they strike many times and then strike twice. For the third, thrice; for the fourth, four times. (Thackston 1996, pp. 348–49)

Babur adopted the Indian system, amending it slightly by including the reference to the different times of Muslim prayers. Under Akbar, however, the ensemble became much elaborated and played a more explicitly musical function as well. The fivefold *naubat* was not only a reminder of the presence, the power, and the authority of the Mughal ruler, but also produced “a symphony far from disagreeable” and possessed “a charm peculiarly its own” (Wade 1998, p. 9). Even a select group of instrumentalists traveled with the emperor almost everywhere he went, in order to inform all who were along the route of the presence of the sovereign (Wade 1998, p. 10). The discourse of power was intimately linked with the music of the imperial *naubat*. Guru Arjan saw firsthand the display of musical *naubat* when Emperor Akbar visited the Sikh center at Goindwal on 4 November 1598, at the request of the Fifth Guru (Moosvi 2001).

Remarkably, any kind of display of power through the beating of drums became the target of sharpest criticism by Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of the Sikh tradition: “Many have proclaimed their sovereignty over millions of fortresses on the earth, but they have now departed. And those, whom even the sky could not contain [because of their pride], had ropes put through their noses [to make them slaves]” (GGS 595). In contrast to the display of the visible and audible presence of imperial power through the fivefold *naubat*, therefore, Guru Arjan introduced eight *chauṅkīs* of kirtan at the Darbar Sahib, five of which had special significance in Sikh worship. These *chauṅkīs* were not periodical musical performances like the fivefold *naubat* or the eightfold *darśanas* of the Vaishnavas, but rather stood for the continuous singing of the praises of Akal Purakh day and night to symbolize the ever-present divine Power. Ever since their introduction in Sikh liturgy at the Darbar Sahib four centuries ago, these *chauṅkīs* have continued to inspire devotees with the mystery of the divine presence to the present day. They have indeed played a leading role in buttressing the centrality of the Darbar Sahib within the Sikh Panth (P. Singh 2011, pp. 104–5).

3. Daily Routine at the Darbar Sahib

The earliest source which describes the introduction of the *chauṅkī* system is the *Srī Gurbilās Pātishāhī* 6 (1718 CE), referring to a splendid biography of the Sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind (1590–1644) and his heroic character. The term hagiography cannot be applied to this text because the life stories narrated in it have spatial and temporal boundaries. As Ann Murphy argues, the past in the *Gurbilās* text “is chronologically and geographically ordered and located and concerned with specific chronologically narrated events” (Murphy 2012, p. 84). According to the *Gurbilās* text, Guru Arjan prescribed the daily routine at the Darbar Sahib (*mirjād darbār kī*) by saying: “When one watch [i.e., three hours] of the night remains, the musicians should start performing *Vār Āsā*” (*ek jāṁ nisi jab rahi jāe// rāgī āe vār ihāñī lāe//*). The Guru continued: “When two *gharīs* [i.e., 46 min] of the night remain, then the sacred volume of the Adi Granth should be brought inside the Darbar Sahib.” Baba Buddha (1506–1631), the first head Granthi at the Darbar Sahib, used to carry the sacred volume on his head while Guru Arjan waived the whisk over it to give it royal honor and dignity. The Fifth Guru then proclaimed that “devotional singing should continue throughout the day” (*sāro divas su kīrtan hovai//*). For this purpose, different musical sessions were established. Guru Arjan then mentioned the name of final session as follows: “When the night has passed one watch, devotional singing continued at the highest pitch. At the performance of *Kānaṛe Kī Chauṅkī* the Guru himself listened with utmost concentration” (*jām ek jab nisi gae kīrtan hot beant// kānaṛe kī chauṅkī bhaee srī gur sunmai anant//; Srī Gurbilās Pātishāhī* 6, Gill [1968] 1977, p. 96). The same *Gurbilās* text mentions how Guru Hargobind used to attend the five special *chauṅkīs* of devotional singing at the Darbar Sahib (Ibid., pp. 153–54; P. Singh Forthcoming).

It is instructive to note that religious communities create memory through the practice of rituals and symbols. The performative practices and recitals always bridge the gap between the past and the present, where recitals of the past events are not just matters of intellectual exercise, but an invocation and an evocation in which historical remembrances produce subjectivities and create mentalities. The growing turn within the academic study of religion toward ‘lived religion’, as Charles Townsend argues, calls scholars to be aware that ‘religions’ are at least as much about things that people “do” as about the ideas, ideals, and central narratives within their texts and scriptures (Townsend 2015, pp. 19–28). There is an urgent need to draw attention to the intersection between Sikh sacred texts and the actual practices of the Sikh community. The heart of Sikh devotional experience lies in the performance of scriptural hymns in a congregational setting. It is a special mode of worship, consisting of singing and listening to the hymns of the Adi Granth, commonly referred to as the Guru Granth Sahib (‘Honorable Scripture as Teacher’) to reflect its authoritative status within the global Sikh community (Panth). It is noteworthy that the text of the Guru Granth Sahib is indexed according to specified ragas. To understand the daily routine at the Darbar Sahib, we need to closely look at the following eight musical ‘sittings’ (*chauṅkīs*) in their actual liturgical context: (1) *Āsā dī Vār* (early morning); (2) *Bilāval* (after sunrise); (3) *Anand* (before noon); (4) *Sāraṅg* (noon); (5) *Charan Kamal* (afternoon); (6) *So Dar* (sunset); (7) *Ārtī* (night); and (8) *Kīrtan Sohilā* (late night).

It is instructive to note that five of the musical ‘sittings’ (1, 3, 5, 6, and 8) at the Darbar Sahib are regarded as special sessions of kīrtan, because they conclude with the recitation of the Sikh Prayer (*Ardās*, ‘Petition’) and the distribution of ‘sanctified food’ (*kaṛah prasād*, ‘sweet porridge’ made of flour, sugar, butter, and water, and prepared in a large iron dish) to the congregation. Specifically, both Guru Arjan and Guru Hargobind used to attend these five sessions, and that is why these ‘sittings’ (*chauṅkīs*) acquired special significance. The devotees would be thrilled to see the Guru in person during those sessions. The daily repertoires sung in the context of eight musical sessions at the Golden Temple are dominated by the ragas with temporal implications. In particular, the choice of the raga is determined by the liturgical function of the hymn (*śabad*) of the Guru Granth Sahib at any given time. The Tenth Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708), terminated the line of personal Gurus before he passed away in 1708, and installed the Adi Granth as

‘Guru Eternal’ for the Sikh Panth, making it the source of spiritual benefits and central focus in Sikh worship. Therefore, all the musical sessions (*chaunkīs*) are organized around it since it is regarded as the powerful symbol of the divine (P. Singh 2011, p. 105). Consequently, the Golden Temple of Amritsar has emerged historically as a new “power center” in its own right.

3.1. *Āsā dī Vār*

The singing of Guru Nanak’s ballad (*vār*) in the melody of *Āsā* early in the morning at the Darbar Sahib and other gurdwaras (‘Doors of the Guru’, Sikh places of worship and multipurpose centers) around the world is a major Sikh tradition. It is the most cherished of all the twenty-two *vārs* included in the Sikh scripture. It is instructive to note that the *Āsā Rāga* was employed by Guru Nanak for the maximum number of his compositions. It was his favorite raga, and that is why it has always been a part of early morning Sikh kirtan. Apart from the Sikh tradition, the *Āsā Rāga* is now found only in the musical tradition of Afghanistan, not in the musical tradition of north India except in the folk traditions of Sindh (being one of the *surs* in the *Shāh Jo Rāga*), Punjab, and Rajasthan. It is from the group of “twilight melody-types” (*sandhī-prakās rāgas*) that are earmarked for singing in the pre-dawn or post-dusk period for maximum effect on the listeners (SSMS 1967, p. 59).

The kirtan session of *Āsā dī Vār* begins at the Darbar Sahib at 4.30 a.m. in winter. Its text has twenty-four stanzas (*paurīs*, also meaning ‘steps or stairs’) with a total of fifty-nine *shaloks* (‘verses’), forty-four by Guru Nanak and fifteen by Guru Angad. At the time of its actual performance, the Sikh musicians will prefix each of the stanzas by a lyrical quatrain (*chhant*) from the series by Guru Ram Das entered separately under the *Āsā Rāga*, collectively known as *chhakkās* or the clusters of ‘six quatrains’, each counting as a unit. They will also accompany the performance with explanatory hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib, the Dasam Granth, and other approved texts such as the works of Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal in appropriate early-morning ragas. The Sikh musicians (*rāgīs*) frequently render hymns of their own choice in early-morning melodies such as *Āsā*, *Bhairau*, *Rāmakālī*, *Prabhātī*, and *Bhairavī*. According to the musical direction recorded by Guru Arjan at the beginning of *Āsā dī Vār*, its stanzas were meant to be performed to the tune of a popular ballad of the amputated (*tunḍā*) Asrāj, the son of a local chieftain named Sarang, who fought a battle against his stepbrothers to win the throne of his father. Thus, it was meant to infuse valorous spirit in the audience.

At the middle of the performance of *Āsā dī Vār*, the Sikh musicians start singing a hymn on the theme of an ‘auspicious sight’ (*darśan*) of the divine—“O Guru! May I live by beholding your beautiful face! (*darśan dekh jīvān gur terā*, GGS 741–742)” or “Fortunate is the time that provides the opportunity of beholding the beautiful face of the Guru” (*dhann so velā jitu darśan karnā*, GGS 562)—in anticipation of the arrival of the majestic volume of the Guru Granth Sahib in the Golden Temple. The singing of such hymns must be understood in the context of the power relationship with the Guru in the Sikh tradition and the exploration of the meaning of the concept of *darśan*. It helps to penetrate more deeply into the phenomenon of “seeing the Guru and being seen by the Guru” (P. Singh 2011, p. 106). It is primarily a mental, spiritual, and mystical contact with the Guru by being in the sheer presence of the Sikh scripture. In contrast to the Vaishnava stress on seeing the divine in iconic representation, the Sikh experience lays emphasis on revitalizing the vibrations of the sacred sound in reciting scriptural hymns from memory. As noted in my previous study, this is the time when the sacred volume of the Guru Granth Sahib is carried in a golden palanquin (*pālki*) in a procession from the Akal Takhat (‘Throne of the Timeless One’) to the Darbar Sahib, beginning with the beat of a large drum, *naḡārā*, and occasionally the blowing of a *narsingā* (a huge horn-like brass instrument) to invoke the sacred symbols of power. Thousands of chanting Sikhs participate in this early-morning service, some greeting the scriptural Guru with affectionate reverence by showering flower petals on it, while others jostle for opportunities to carry the heavy palanquin, but are

often eager to encourage the visitors to take a turn in what is called *pālkī-sevā* or ‘palanquin service’ (P. Singh 2008, p. 661).

The high point of this devotional activity comes when the sacred scripture is majestically installed on a lectern (*mañjī sāhib*) under a canopy inside the sanctum sanctorum of the Golden Temple to the accompaniment of the recitation of ‘Panegyrics of the Bards’ (*bhaṭṭān de savayye*) by a group of Sikhs, and it is then opened at random by the head *granthī* (‘reader’) to proclaim the Guru’s Word (*Vāk*, ‘saying’) which is received by the audience as the divine command for the day (P. Singh 2008, p. 661). In his seminal work on the comparative understanding of the phenomenon of ‘scripture’, Wilfred Cantwell Smith proposed a radical thesis that no text is a scripture in itself. People—a given community—make a text into scripture by treating it in a certain way. Accordingly, *scripture is a human activity* (Smith 1993, p. 18). In other words, scripture becomes scripture only when it is filtered through the collective consciousness and experience of a religious community. In this sense, scripture is a relational concept: it points to a relationship of power between a text and a community (P. Singh 2008, p. 661). From this theoretical framework, the daily installation of the Guru Granth Sahib early in the morning at the Golden Temple is a unique phenomenon.

After listening to the divine command (*Vāk*), the *rāgīs* resume their devotional singing and recite the first five and the last stanzas of Guru Amar Das’s celebrated composition, *Anand* (‘Divine Bliss’) in the *Rāmakālī Rāga*, followed by the congregational prayer on behalf of the Sikh volunteers (*ṭahalūān dī ardās*) who had been waiting for the Guru’s blessings after their mid-night service (*sevā*). At this time, *karāh praśad* is distributed to the congregation sitting in the inner sanctum of the Golden Temple. As previously discussed in *Sri Gurbilās Pātishāhi 6*, this is an exceptional custom that originated with Guru Arjan four centuries ago, as he used to come to the Darbar Sahib at the midpoint of the musical session of *Āsā dī Vār* and to offer his blessings to the volunteers. He would have recited his morning prayers, including Guru Nanak’s *Japjī* and *Shabad Hazāre*, from memory before participating in the early-morning service at the Darbar Sahib (*lai avāz japjī kā pāṭh// hazāre shabad guru so gāṇṭh//*; Gill [1968] 1977, p. 96). The *rāgīs* would then complete the second half of the musical ‘sitting’ of *Āsā dī Vār*. This session would conclude with a congregational prayer and a ‘rereading’ of the same *Vāk* from the Guru Granth Sahib, as was proclaimed earlier (P. Singh 2011, pp. 105–7).

3.2. *Bilāval*

According to well-established tradition based upon the collective memory of the Sikh community, the morning ‘sitting’ of the *Bilāval Rāga* owes its origin to the Fourth Guru, Guru Ram Das (1534–1581), who used to sing *kīrtan* in specified ragas. He was an accomplished musician in contemporary traditions of North Indian music. He was responsible for supplementing another musical dimension to the Adi Granth by adding eleven new ragas to the set of nineteen ragas that he inherited from his predecessors. He employed technical terms to provide direction in the musical performance of his hymns.¹ It is quite evident from his compositions that his “sense of melody and rhythm place him high according to the exalted standards of the Adi Granth, a feature of considerable importance” (McLeod 1997, p. 27). A careful reading of his compositions reveals that they “are saturated with devotional ardor and are set to limpid melody” and that “the bracing throb of rhythm evokes a ready response in the hearts of the listeners” (SSMS 1967, p. 22). Overflowing with emotion, Guru Ram Das actually “sings of his eyes becoming dewy with the love of God” (SSMS 1967). In the present context, consider the following reference in which he expresses the joy of having performed in the melody of *Bilāval*:

I have lauded the exalted Lord, the Supreme Master, in the tune of *Bilāval*. I have faithfully followed the teachings of the Guru after listening to them; this is the pre-ordained destiny written upon my forehead. All day and night, I chant the glorious praises of the Divine Being; I am lovingly attuned to him within my heart. My body and mind are totally rejuvenated, and the garden of my mind has blossomed forth in lush abundance. The darkness of ignorance has

been dispelled, with the light of the lamp of the Guru's wisdom. Servant Nanak lives by beholding the Lord. Let me behold your face, for a moment, even an instant. (1)

(M4, *Vār Bilāval*, 1 (1), GGS, p. 849; trans. adapted from Sant Singh Khalsa)

Clearly, this *shalok* highlights the fact that *Bilāval* is the raga expressive of joy. Through his personal experience, Guru Ram Das explicitly states that true joy comes not from the melody but from constancy of loving devotion. Accordingly, *Bilāval Rāga* is the melody of bliss only when it leads to contemplation of the divine Name (*nām simaran*). Even in his praise of the ecstatic performance of *Bilāval Rāga*, it is loving devotion (*bhakti*) to the Guru that takes precedence over music.

Temporally, the session of *Bilāval* welcomes the rays of the sun inside the Darbar Sahib, creating the mood of hope and optimism in the hearts and minds of the audience. Additionally, the performance of morning ragas such as *Devagandhārī* and *Gūjarī* remains relevant throughout the second and the third watches, with ragas *Bilāval* and *Asāvarī* enjoying special prominence. This musical 'sitting' ends with the recitation of Guru Arjan's stanza in *Vār Rāmakalī*, stressing the glory of Akal Purakh, whose writ runs eternally in the affairs of all creation:

The greatest of the great and infinite is Your dignity. Your colors and hues are so numerous; no one can know Your actions. You are the Soul within all souls; You alone know everything. Everything is under Your control; Your home is beautiful. Your home is filled with bliss, which resonates and resounds throughout Your home. Your honor, majesty and glory are Yours alone. You are overflowing with all powers; wherever we look, there You are. Nanak, the servant of Your servants, prays to You alone. (18)

(M5, *Rāmkalī Kī Vār*, 18, GGS, p. 965; trans. adapted from Sant Singh Khalsa)

The daily recitation of this stanza in the Darbar Sahib makes it the mouthpiece of eternal majesty of the divine rule, offering a challenge to all the evil rulers of the world. In actual practice, there are four consecutive sessions of *Bilāval* performed by four groups of *rāgīs*.

3.3. Anand

The kirtan session of the hymn *Anand* ('divine Bliss') concludes the singing of morning ragas in the Darbar Sahib. Mostly, the *rāgīs* begin their performance with such melodies as *Devagandhārī*, *Gūjarī*, *Sūhī*, *Bilāval*, and *Asāvarī* before they employ popular folk tunes to appeal to the larger audience. In fact, Guru Amar Das's *Anand* in the *Rāmakalī Rāga* enjoys a particular prominence in Sikh ceremonies. Though the complete hymn has forty stanzas, its short version (the first five and last stanzas) has become an integral part of this musical session. Every Sikh service or ceremony in the gurdwaras concludes with its recitation. In its text, we find a reference to the five types of 'mystic sounds' (*pañch śabad*) that resound in the heart of the individual who feels the divine presence within and all around (GGS 917). This is the mystical stage where one listens to the music of the divine Word within oneself. As noted in my previous study, Guru Nanak describes this experience as a kind of musical mysticism:

"The True Guru is the All-knowing Primal Being; He shows us our true home within the home of the self. There, the Five Primal Sounds (*pañch śabad*) resonate and resound within, with the accompaniment of the melody of five musical instruments; the insignia of the divine Word is revealed there, vibrating gloriously. In that spiritual state, worlds and realms, nether regions, solar systems, and galaxies are wondrously revealed. The Divine Sovereign sits on the true Throne there, where the strings and the harp vibrate and resound to the accompaniment of stringed instruments. . ."

(M1, *Malār Kī Vār*, 1 (27), GGS, p. 1291; trans. adapted from Sant Singh Khalsa. For details, see P. Singh 2006a, p. 148)

Although the Sikh Gurus' personal experience was not the inevitable result of any *Haṭha* yoga ('physical yoga') technique, the *Nāda* Yoga ('sound yoga') texts offer descriptions of five "mystic sounds." In this context, Guy L. Beck's research on the five mystic sounds is revealing. These are the sounds of "a kettledrum [*bherī*], a conch [*saṅkha*], a *mridaṅg* ['drum'], a *vīṇā* ['stringed instrument'], or a flute [*vaṁṣa*]" (Beck 1993, p. 99). Elsewhere, they are described as the sounds of the hum of the honey-intoxicated bee, a flute, a harp, ringing bells, and the roar of thunder (Beck 1993, p. 103). Accordingly, the musical sounds heard in meditation correspond to the musical instruments used to accompany devotional singing. As Beck aptly puts it: "The divine sounds of the drum, cymbal, vina, and flute. . .exhibit marked correspondences with the instruments employed in devotional music" (Ibid., p. 110).

Most instructively, the last stanza of *Anand*, translated partly by Christopher Shackle, describes the transforming power of the divine Word (*bāṇī*): "I suffer no more since I heard the true Word. On hearing the Word from the Guru, the saints are delighted. Those who hear and who sing are made pure by the Guru. For those at his feet, Nanak says, let the trumpets play music unheard" (GGS 922; Shackle 2008, p. 256). This stanza captures the essential character of devotional singing. Both activities of listening and singing the inspired utterances of the Gurus (*gurbāṇī*), containing the divine message of truth, offer the possibility of blissful liberation from self-centeredness (*haumai*) and the cycle of birth and suffering. Through such *kirtan*, the devotees attune themselves to vibrate in harmony with the divine Word and immerse themselves in the deeper levels of its meaning. The musical 'sitting' of *Anand* concludes with the recitation of a congregational prayer (*Ardās*) and the distribution of *karah prasād* (P. Singh 2011, pp. 108–9).

3.4. *Sāraṅg*

During the noon 'sitting', the morning melodies give way to midday ragas such as *Sāraṅg* and *Todī* sung around the midday meal offered in the Sikh community kitchen (*laṅgar*) to one and all. The performance of the *Sāraṅg Rāga* during this session creates the mood of peaceful reflection in the audience. In fact, this raga was used extensively by Guru Arjan for his hymns. When *Sāraṅg* is mentioned in the musical tradition of North India, it usually means *Vrindābanī Sāraṅg* of Vraja, "the land of Krishna, which is not only one of India's foremost pilgrimage centers but at the same time the hub of life, of pulsating action, of sensual experience of the phenomenal world in all its manifold forms and nuances" (Thielmann 2000, p. 31). After its performance at midday, most of the Vaishnava temples close for the siesta and reopen only around 5 p.m., when the ragas for dusk are rendered (Ibid., p. 53). This is, however, not the case with respect to the liturgical cycle at the Darbar Sahib, where devotional singing (*kirtan*) continues to welcome the devotees throughout the day (P. Singh 2011, pp. 109–10).

3.5. *Charan Kamal*

The afternoon musical session begins with Guru Arjan's hymn: "May I always meditate on the Lotus Feet of the Divine!" (*charan kamal prabh ke nit dhiāvahu//*, GGS 806). This hymn has contributed to the name of this 'sitting'. The most appropriate ragas for this session are *Dhanāsarī*, *Vaḍahaṅs*, *Mājh*, *Gaurī*, and *Tilaṅg*. The *rāgīs* frequently employ folk tunes and other musical styles (*rītīs*) in their performance of selected hymns on the theme of the "Lotus Feet" of the divine, cultivating the spirit of humility in the audience. These hymns have the sonic power to transform and unify the consciousness of both performers and listeners who become ecstatic with the spirit of humble devotion to the Guru. In his *Dhanāsarī* hymn, Guru Arjan explicitly says: "Nanak has lodged the divine Feet in the heart through sustained nurturing of the Word of the True Guru" (*hirdai charan śabad satguru ko nānak bāndhio pāli*, GGS 680). Thus, understanding the essence of the Word (*śabad*) of the true Guru amounts to the worship of the 'divine feet'. This session concludes with the singing of the first five and the last stanzas of the celebrated *Anand Sāhib*, followed by a congregational prayer offered by the *Ardāsīā* ('one who performs *Ardās*' in the Darbar

Sahib) and the distribution of *kaṛah praśād* (P. Singh 2011, p. 110). Notably, three groups of *rāgīs* perform this *chauṁkī* in three consecutive sessions.

3.6. *So Dar*

The first word of the first hymn of the evening order provides the name of the evening ‘sitting’ of *So Dar* (‘That Door’), whose actual performance takes place at sunset. Traditionally, the singing of the *So Dar* hymn according to the melodic framework of *Āsā* is preceded by evening melodies such as *Srī*, *Gaurī*, *Pūrbī*, *Madhūvantī*, and so on. Historically, the singing of the *So Dar* hymn in the evening had originated during the last two decades of Guru Nanak’s life at Kartarpur, a period in which the first testimony comes from the works of Bhai Gurdas (1558–1636), who refers to the “chanting of *Jāpa* (‘Honored Recitation’) in the ambrosial hours of early morning and the singing of *So Dar* and *Ārtī* (‘Adoration’) in the evening” (VBG 1977, *Vārān Bhāi Gurdās*, 1:38). The complete *So Dar* hymn reads as follows:

Where is ‘That Door’ of yours, and where is ‘That Home’ in
 which you sit, keeping watch over all?
 There where the music resounds to your glory,
 the heavenly strains of a host without number?
 Boundless the range of your glorious harmony,
 Infinite they who unite in your praises.
 The wind, the waters and the fire, the whole world of nature,
 Unite in your praises and join in the song.
 With them your scribe and his tireless attendants,
 Praising your greatness while listing people’s deeds.
 Blest by your grace all the gods and their consorts,
 A mighty array singing hymns to your praise.
 So too the Siddhs in their deep contemplation,
 And others of wisdom, austerities, and strength.
 They who are learned sing hymns to your glory,
 With Rishis who study the scriptures of old.
 Ravishing beauties add joy to the harmony,
 Music in heaven, on earth and below.
 Spirits most precious give voice to their gladness,
 Their music resounding where piety dwells.
 Heroes and warriors, famed for their victories,
 Sing with creation one vast song of praise.
 They who enraptured lend voice to this harmony,
 All win your love for the praises they sing.
 Boundless, unnumbered, an infinite chorus,
 Mighty assemblies which none may conceive.
 Assuredly you are the one True Creator,
 With Truth as your Name and unfailingly true.
 All that exists in its forms and its colorings,
 All is your handiwork, all you sustain.
 None may command you, none challenge your purpose,
 Whatever you choose comes to pass.
 You are the Sovereign, the Emperor above us,
 Before you, O Nanak, all creatures must bow.

(M1, *So Dar Rāga Āsā*, GGS, pp. 8–9; trans. adapted from McLeod 1997, p. 286)

A brief exegesis of Guru Nanak’s *So Dar* hymn reveals his personal experience of heavenly joys in the company of all liberated ones, who sing in eternity the praises of Akal Purakh at the door of his ineffable court. It illuminates the point that there is divine music everywhere and in everything in the world of nature (P. Singh 2011, p. 111).

The repetition of the *So Dar* hymn three times in the Guru Granth Sahib is a unique instance, one in the morning prayer (*Japjī*), the other in the evening prayer (*So Dar Rahrās*,

‘Supplication at That Door’) and the third in the beginning of the *Āsā Rāga* (GGS 6, 8–9, 347–48). It is instructive to note the presence of additional vocatives (*terā*, “Yours, O Lord!” and *tudhano*, “To You, O Lord!”) in the *So Dar* hymn and the opening hymn of *Āsā*’s melody, the vocatives of which are absent from the morning prayer (*Japjī*). It should be emphasized that the vocatives are considered musical devices that form part of a singing tradition. Since *Japjī* is a contemplative composition and is meant for recitation during the hours before dawn, vocatives are unnecessary. The evening prayer, on the other hand, is meant for congregational worship (P. Singh 2006a, p. 155). The *So Dar* hymn, therefore, is sung at the evening ‘sitting’ at the Darbar Sahib in *Āsā*’s melody, a raga which is already described as the “twilight melody” (*sandhī-prakāś rāga*) earmarked for singing in the pre-dawn or post-dusk period for maximum effect on the listeners. Thereafter, the recitation of the remaining portion of the evening prayer is performed by the head *granthī* (“reader”). It is followed by a congregational prayer (*Ardās*) and the reading of a *Vāk* from the Guru Granth Sahib and the distribution of *kaṛāh prasād* (P. Singh 2011, pp. 110–11).

3.7. Ārtī/Kalyān

This night session is suitable for such melodies as *Kalyān*, *Yaman*, *Hamīr*, *Bagesharī*², and so on. Specifically, the performance of the *Kalyān Rāga* is a blessing bringing all good fortunes into one’s life (Curtiss 1996, p. 177). In contrast to the performance of *Ārtī* (‘Adoration’) in the Vaishnava temples, consisting of waving around the head of an icon a platter containing five burning wicks at twilight time (*sandhyā ārtī*), the devotional singing of Guru Nanak’s *Dhanāsarī* hymn, and the compositions of medieval poet-saints takes place in the Darbar Sahib. In his revolutionary message, Guru Nanak reinterpreted the Vaishnava mode of worship, declaring that the whole universe was the scene for the proper performance of *Ārtī*:

The sky shall be our salver with its lamps the sun and moon,
 its pearls the host of stars which shine above.
 Sweet sandalwood our incense, gently wafted by the breeze,
 and the plants which clothe the earth shall be our flowers. (1)
 Thus, we offer our worship to the One who stills our longings:
 thus, we raise our lamps to offer praise.
 The mystic Word within us the drum we beat in praising you,
 that soundless Word which faith alone can hear. (1) *Refrain*.
 Your mystery must baffle us, a thousand eyes yet none:
 a thousand forms, yet you can have no form.
 A thousand feet of purest form though you must footless be;
 no fragrance yet a host of sweet perfumes. (2)
 A splendor shines in every place, its light the light of you;
 a light which lightens every living soul.
 Yet only by the Guru’s grace that light can stand revealed,
 and godly lives alone can give you joy. (3)
 The dust your lotus feet let fall is sweetness to our souls:
 each day I seek the joy my spirit craves.
 As cuckoo’s thirst for drops of rain I long to sip your grace
 and find joy your Name alone can bring. (4)
 (M1, *Dhanāsarī* 3, GGS, pp. 13 and 663; trans. McLeod 1997, p. 297)

Here, the metaphor of *Ārtī* serves to highlight the ineffable divine radiance pervading the entire universe. The performance of this hymn in a popular tune inspires the whole congregation in the Darbar Sahib to join in singing, creating a choral effect on the listeners. It is followed by the singing of hymns on the same theme of *Ārtī* by the poet-saints such as Ravidas, Sain, Kabir, and Dhanna. After their completion a brief prayer is offered by the leader of the processional *chauṅkī* entering the Darbar Sahib at that time. Thereafter, regular kirtan is resumed in appropriate melodies (P. Singh 2011, pp. 111–12).

3.8. *Kīrtan Sohila/Kānaṛā*

The final musical ‘sitting’ is either known by the late-night order of *Kīrtan Sohilā* (‘Song of Praise’) or by the melody of *Kānaṛā*. The devout Sikhs recite *Kīrtan Sohilā* at night immediately before retiring to bed, and for this reason it is much shorter in length, containing five hymns only. Scriptural hymns in late-night ragas such as *Kānaṛā*, *Kedārā*, and *Bihāgaṛā* are sung in this musical session. The performance of *Kānaṛā Rāga* creates the mood of quiet reflection and a majestic feeling in the audience. To conclude this session, the *rāgīs* sing a stanza from Guru Ram Das’s ballad in *Kānaṛā Rāga* (*tūn āpe hi siddh sādihiko tūn āpe hī jug jogīā*) as follows:

You yourself are the perfect Siddh and seeker. You yourself are the Yoga and the master Yogi. You yourself are the Taster of tastes; You yourself are the Enjoyer of pleasures. You yourself are All-pervading; whatever You do comes to pass. Blessed, blessed, blessed, blessed, blessed is the True Congregation (*sat saṅgat*) of the True Guru. Join them—speak and chant the Lord’s Name. Let everyone chant together the divine Name, *Har, Har, Haray, Har, Har, Haray*. Chanting *Har*, all sins are washed away. (1)

(M4, *Kānaṛe Kī Vār*, (1), GGS, p. 1313; trans. adapted from Sant Singh Khalsa)

The exegesis of this stanza highlights the point when the audience experiences the divine presence, manifesting itself in the “true congregation” (*sat saṅgat*) in the form of multiple blessings that create feelings of ecstasy in each and every heart during the chanting of the divine Name. In this particular performance of *Kānaṛā Rāga*, Guru Ram Das prescribed the changing of rhythmic cycles (*paṛtāl*) after each verse in the singing of this stanza. The bracing throb of changing rhythms in this style evokes a ready response in the hearts of the listeners sitting in the Darbar Sahib (P. Singh 2006a, p. 157).

The devotional singing ends with the choral recitation of the final epilogue of Guru Nanak’s *Japjī* (*pavaṅ gurū pānī pītā mātā dharatu mahat*, ‘Air is the Guru, water the father, and the earth the mighty mother of all’). The complete *shalok* is given below:

Air is the Guru, water the father, and the earth the mighty mother of all. Day and night are the caring guardians, fondly nurturing all creation. In the Court of the Righteous One all stand revealed, their deeds declared, both good and ill. As we have acted so we are recompensed, some brought near, others driven away. They who have meditated on the divine Name, have run their course faithfully, by working hard to do their labors. Radiantly, O Nanak, they go to glory by freeing themselves and others with them.

(M1, *Japu*, Salok, GGS, p. 8; trans. adapted from McLeod 1997, p. 281)

The choral recitation of this *shalok* by the congregation is followed by the congregational prayer (*Ardās*) and the reading of the final *Vāk* from the Guru Granth Sahib. Then, the scripture is reverently closed and wrapped in white clothes while the head *granthī* recites the late-night order of *Kīrtan Sohilā* from memory. After a brief prayer, the sacred volume is taken back in the golden palanquin (*pālki*) in a procession to its resting place in the Akal Takhat, with the beat of a *naḡārā* and occasionally the blowing of a *narsīngā* to invoke the sacred symbols of power (P. Singh 2011, pp. 112–13).

4. Decolonizing³ the Musical Performances

In this section, we will address the modern issue of the decolonization of musical performances in the Sikh tradition. Nirinjan Kaur Khalsa-Baker has skillfully identified the urgent need to set in motion the process of decolonizing Sikh institutions, pedagogy, and praxis (Khalsa-Baker 2019, pp. 264–77). For instance, the harmonium has become the common instrument played by professional Sikh *rāgīs* today at the Darbar Sahib. In premodern times, however, only stringed instruments (*tantī sāj*) were employed in devotional singing. During the Sikh rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780–1839) in Punjab, the liturgical routine at the Darbar Sahib followed the standard pattern in which eight

groups of Sikh *rāgīs* and seven groups of Muslim *rabābīs* (“minstrels”) used to perform *kirtan* with stringed instruments in different sessions. The Maharaja gave land grants (*jagīrs*) to Sikh institutions who supported *rāgīs* and *rabābīs* for performing *kirtan* at the Darbar Sahib and other historical gurdwaras. These grants were confiscated later by the British during the colonial period. After the Maharaja’s death in 1839, his successors could not withstand the pressure exerted by the advancing British forces; after two Anglo-Sikh wars in 1846 and 1849, the Sikh kingdom was annexed to the British Empire. With the loss of the Punjab’s independence, the Sikhs were no longer the masters of their own kingdom (P. Singh 2021, p. 26). The introduction of the British administration into Punjab after annexation in 1849, as J.S. Grewal argues, brought profound changes to Punjabi society. The colonial rulers introduced a large measure of bureaucracy and the rule of law, which established a new kind of relationship with the individual and the state. Unsurprisingly, the ‘paternal rule’ of the early decades was eventually replaced by the ‘machine rule’ of laws, codes, and procedures (Grewal 1990, p. 128). The British introduced a worldview grounded in the secular, modernizing ideology of European Enlightenment. The most significant change, as Ian Kerr argues, was seen when the British sought to cosset and to control the Sikhs through the management of the Golden Temple and its functionaries (Kerr 1999, p. 128). Specifically, the British even sidestepped the dictates of statutory law which required them to maintain “the separation of secular and religious matters, neutrality in the treatment of religious communities and the withdrawal from involvement in religious institutions” (Kerr 1999, p. 164). For the alien British, therefore, the need to control the Golden Temple was greater in order to control the Sikh community.

Exploring the origins of the harmonium, Marie Joy Curtiss maintains that it was invented in 1840 by Alexandre Debain in Europe, and that it was introduced to India in the nineteenth century (Curtiss 1996, p. 165). Particularly, British officers and Christian missionaries disseminated it widely, and it soon came to be used as a crucial accompanying instrument in all North Indian traditions. The musicians produced tones by depressing the keys on a piano-type keyboard of about two and a half octaves. Although the earlier models were not well adapted to the Indian classical idiom, later on improvements were made through which tuning adjustments in the better models were so arranged that a fairly accurate raga scale could be played. Similarly, the dynamic level of tones could also be controlled from loud to soft. In 1875, as Lhendup G. Bhutia argues, a musical instrument maker in Calcutta known as Dwarkanath Ghosh introduced some structural modifications in the harmonium by replacing the foot-operated bellows beneath the keyboard in the European harmonium by the hand-operated bellows at the rear and by adding drone knobs to the instrument to produce harmonies in Indian classical music (Bhutia 2022). Ghosh also added a scale-changing technique to the Indian version of the instrument. By 1915, India had become the leading manufacturer of the harmonium (FP Explainers 2022). Moreover, the learning of the harmonium was much easier than the classical stringed instruments of Indian music. That is why it became popular among a large number of Indian musicians. In his arguments on ‘Sikh Music and Empire’ Bob van der Linden aptly maintains that Rabindranath Tagore and certain Western ethnomusicologists like A.H. Fox Strangways and Arnold Bake strongly criticized the use of the harmonium in Indian music. These musicologists forcefully argued that “as a fixed-pitched instrument, the harmonium did not conform to the traditional flexible intonation in Indian music, that is, glissandos and others” (Van der Linden 2008, p. 8).

The premodern tradition of eight sessions of Sikh musicians (*rāgīs*) and seven sessions of Muslim minstrels (*rabābīs*) was still alive at the Darbar Sahib at the beginning of the twentieth century. The use of stringed instruments in *kirtan* sessions was also in vogue, even though the harmonium had already been introduced because of its growing popularity. As a matter of fact, the harmonium had become the prime accompanying instrument in devotional singing (*kirtan*) in the gurdwaras, “despite early resistance from the *rāgīs* of the Golden Temple, who were used to playing stringed instruments and probably did not look forward to having to learn new techniques on a foreign instru-

ment” (Van der Linden 2008, p. 8). In the early decades of twentieth century, therefore, the stringed instruments were gradually replaced by a pair of harmoniums and the *tabla* (a pair of small kettledrums) in devotional singing at the Darbar Sahib. One can easily understand the contrast between the stringed instruments (*tantī sāj*) used at the Darbar Sahib in devotional singing in earlier precolonial times and the usage of the harmonium and *tabla* in modern times from the following Figure 1.

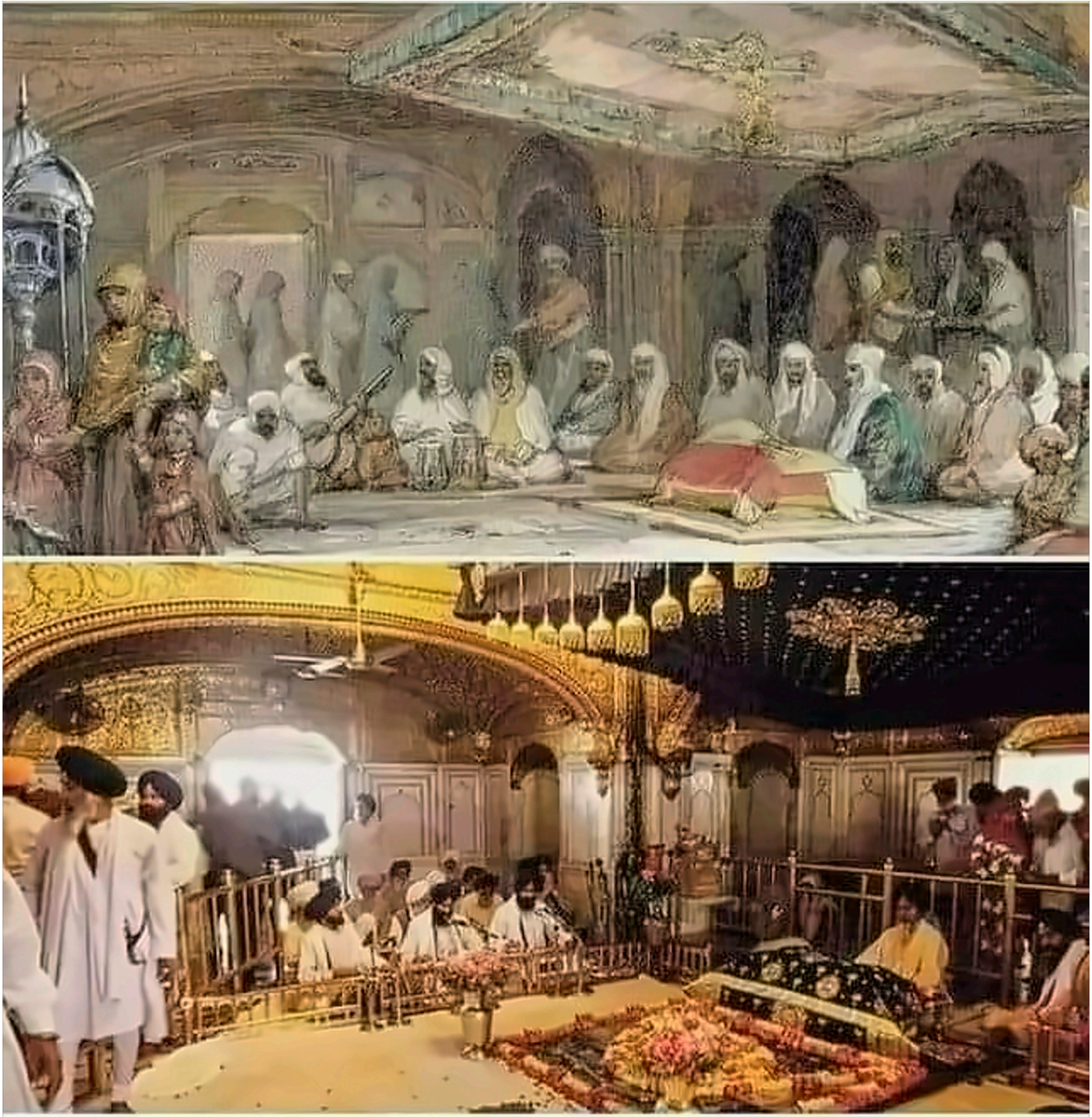


Figure 1. The two images of the inner sanctum of the Darbar Sahib, Amritsar, are approximately 170 years apart—since the painting by William Carpenter in 1854. The biggest change is the clothing and turban styles, and then the musical instruments. In the pre-colonial era, *kirtan* was performed using stringed instruments (*tantī sāj*)—predominantly the *rabāb*, but also the *taus*, *dilrubā*, *sirandā*, and so on. The harmonium (colloquially known as *vājjā*) is of French origin. It became dominant during the colonial era. Photo courtesy Noble Media Network (18 May 2023 Facebook). It is available in the public domain.

In a decolonizing process, the SGPC reintroduced stringed instruments partially in 2006 along with the harmonium at the inspiration of Bibi Jasbir Kaur Khalsa, who promoted “the ancient Sikh musical traditions, particularly the revival of the Kirtan *chauṅkī* system at the Darbar Sahib” (Sikhnet 2011). On 5 May 2022, however, a *gurmatā* (“Resolution expressing the Guru’s intention”) was passed by *Pañj Singh Sāhibān* (“Exalted Cherished Five”) headed by the Jathedar of Akal Takhat, stating that Gurbani singing should be started with string instruments in the inner sanctum of the Darbar Sahib. The Jathedar of Akal Takhat gave directive to the SGPC to phase out the ‘European’ harmonium from hymn-singing at the Darbar Sahib in three years and replace it with stringed instruments. Bhai Balwant Singh Namdhari, who is a maestro in Gurmat Sangeet, a centuries-old musical tradition within the Sikh Panth, justified the Akal Takhat directive by saying, “The harmonium was an invasion by the British. But then it made inroads. . .” Similarly, Bhai Baldeep Singh, a renowned Gurmat Sangeet exponent, told *The Indian Express*, “The harmonium was introduced as part of the British interference in Sikh affairs. They had no idea about our heritage” (FP Explainers 2022). Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, however, makes the following observation on this move to replace the harmonium with string instruments: “Attempts to replace the harmonium with string instruments are not straightforward since this act involves many moving parts: instrument manufacturers and traders, practitioners, pedagogues, scholars, students, and the *sangat* all need to be on board and synchronized in their efforts for this initiative to take root” (Bhogal 2022, p. 27).

Nevertheless, a decolonizing process is at work at present in reviving the ancient tradition of using stringed instruments in devotional singing at the Darbar Sahib. In this regard, the Anad Foundation at Sultanpur Lodhi, Gurmat Sangeet Chair at Punjabi University, Patiala and Gurmat Sangeet Academy at Anandpur Sahib are at the forefront of preparing a new generation of Sikh musicians who are well versed in stringed instruments. In addition to an endowed Sikh Musicology Chair at Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY (USA), and Raj Academy Conservatoire, London (UK), there are certain gurdwaras in the diaspora that have made special arrangements to teach Sikh children ancient musical instruments such as the *rabāb*, *sirandā*, *dilrubā*, *taus*, *pakhāvaj*, and *joṛī*. In his PhD thesis, *Music in the Gurus’ View: Sikh Religious Music, Memory, and the Performance of Sikhism in America*, Charles M. Townsend has described the current generation of Sikh Americans as a ‘kirtan generation’—“a generation of Sikhs who are learning to perform *Gurbani kirtan* at a rate that may be unprecedented since the time of the Gurus of the Sikh tradition” (Townsend 2015, p. 344).

5. Religious Aesthetics and Sacred Time

Let us now turn to explore an important theme of religious aesthetics and sacred time in this section, a theme which lays the spiritual background about the deeper aspects of Sikh music. The fundamental focus in the Sikh tradition is the spiritual meaning of the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib in its “intellectual and aesthetic experience, evoked by means of meditating on, singing of, and listening to the sacred hymns” (Nijhawan 2006, p. 53). The organization of these hymns is based on the ragas, predetermined “melodic, tonal, rhythmic themes associated with moods, times of the days, months and years” (Schwartz 2004, p. 83). In an actual musical performance, any given raga specifies combinations of grace notes and microtonal ornaments. In accordance with the theory of North Indian music, however, the ragas are composed to suit various moods, intervals of time, and specific seasons. Each raga has acquired a particular spiritual significance of its own based on tradition and usage (P. Singh 2019, p. 290). That is why great care is taken in the preservation of the exact pitch relationships between the tones of any established raga. Thus, in any musical performance, one must maintain the exact number of vibrations to produce the mood ascribed to a given raga (Curtiss 1996, p. 160).

According to the metaphysical theory of ancient Indian music, as William P. Malm argues, the physical vibrations of musical sound (*nāda*) were inextricably connected with the spiritual world, so that the validity of a ritual and the stability of the universe were

believed to be adversely affected by a faulty intonation of sacred texts (Malm [1967] 1996, pp. 115–27). In the framework of this musical theory and the Indic notions of sacred sound, as I have discussed in my early study, Sikh doctrine maintains that the inspired “utterance of the Guru” (*gurbāṇī*) embodies the divine Word (*śabad* or *nāda*; P. Singh 2006a, p. 144). In his *Rāmakalī* hymn, for instance, Guru Nanak proclaims: “Gurbani embodies all the scriptural knowledge (Veda) and the eternally sounding melodious vibration (*nāda*) that permeates all space” (GGS p. 879). This “unstruck melody” (*anahat nāda*) cannot be directly perceived or “heard”, although it is the basis of the entire perceptible universe. The physical vibrations of musical sound are inextricably connected with the spiritual world of “unstruck melody” (P. Singh 2006a, p. 144). Likewise, all the ragas exist eternally and some of them are merely discovered from time to time by inspired musicians. In this context, Guru Nanak remarks: “The jewel-like ragas, along with their fairy families, are the source of the essence of the ‘nectar of immortality’ (*amrit*). This wealth belongs to the Creator, O Nanak, and a very few people realize this” (GGS p. 351). This reference clearly indicates Guru Nanak’s familiarity with the gender-based “*rāga-rāginī* system” which was prevalent at that time in North India (P. Singh 2006a, p. 144). Similarly, Guru Ram Das says the following: “The raga and the melody (*nāda*) embody the divine Truth (*sach*), and their value cannot be described. Those who are deprived of divine music cannot truly understand the divine Order (*hukam*)” (GGS p. 1423).

A close reading of Guru Nanak’s works reveals that he emphasized the mode of devotional singing as the only effective means of realization of the divine Truth: “It is through singing of divine praises that we find a place in the divine Court” (GGS 143). For him, the ethical aspects of devotional music must always take precedence over its technical performance: “If one’s mind is caught by the love of duality and is full of deception within, mere singing of devotional songs in melodic modes leads one to suffer in terrible pain” (GGS 1342). The main purpose of Sikh kirtan is spiritual discipline, and that is why it should be kept free of the secular characteristics that may be in vogue at any given time. Any kind of music that might contribute to the arousal of sensuality has no place in the Sikh tradition (P. Singh 2006a, p. 161). In fact, devotional music “gradually washes the inner consciousness” and one becomes “holy and spotless through the power of kirtan” (Mansukhani 1982, p. 78). In this context, Guru Arjan proclaims: “Blessed are the notes of those ragas which put the mind in a tranquil mood” (GGS 958). Thus, religious music is regarded as a divine gift which finds an echo in the hearts and minds of the devotees. In actual Sikh practice, it is used with the divine Word as an aid to ethical and spiritual development (P. Singh 2006a, p. 161). According to Guru Ram Das, the transforming power of kirtan purifies the mind of all evil inclinations and leads to a life of spirituality: “Truly blessed is the destiny of those saintly people who become virtuous by performing kirtan” (GGS p. 649).

The framework of religious aesthetics and sacred sound may be better understood if we closely look at the Indian notion of *rasa* (‘taste’, ‘essence’, ‘flavor’). In this context, Susan L. Schwartz skillfully elucidates this technical dimension that *darśan* describes the “visual culture of India, and *mantra* the oral/aural; *rasa* combines these aspects of the body’s experience and adds, among other factors, the experience of emotional states and their potential to induce religious response” (Schwartz 2004, p. 6). In personal religious experience, as Gobind Singh Mansukhani argues, kirtan plays a threefold role. First, it satisfies one’s aesthetic sensibilities. Second, its dominant ‘sentiment’ (*rasa*) delights one’s inner consciousness and offers spiritual nourishment. Third, it transports one’s heart, mind, and soul (*man*) into a realm of ecstasy (Mansukhani 1982, pp. 80–81). On the paramount importance of devotional music, Guru Arjan proclaims: “The purpose of my life is deeply connected with absorption in religious discourse, kirtan, and vibration of the divine Word through singing and music” (GGS 818). Unsurprisingly, Sikh pilgrims and other devotees who visit the Golden Temple at Amritsar “purify themselves with a dip in the sacred pool, present themselves at the court with the Guru Granth Sahib in the seat of authority, and listen to the recitation and singing of its contents around the clock”

(Mann 2004, p. 89). They experience the religious aesthetics of *shānt rasa*, normally defined as peace/tranquility/enlightened repose, and their time spent inside the Golden Temple Complex becomes sacred (P. Singh 2011, p. 115).

There are four seasonal ragas in the Guru Granth Sahib, such as *Bhairau*, *Basant*, *Sārang*, and *Malār* that are appropriate to autumn, spring, summer, and the rains, respectively (Pincott 1886, p. 442). These ragas are normally sung and played any time of the day and night during the season assigned to them. The strict requirement of the time of performance in the case of seasonal ragas is relaxed. Most instructively, seasonal ragas significantly affect the daily musical routine at the Darbar Sahib twice a year at springtime and during the rainy season. The singing of the *Basant Rāga* at the Golden Temple, for instance, begins on the first day (*saṅgrānd*) of the month of *māgh* at the time of the Māghī festival in the middle of January and continues for the next two months until its last performance takes place on the festival of Holā Mahallā, which usually falls in March. During this season, ragas connected with the spring festival such as *Kāfi*, *Basant*, *Basant-Hiṇḍol*, and *Bahār* remain prevalent during all the musical *chaunkīs* at the Darbar Sahib. The second major seasonal melody type is *Malār*, the characteristic raga for the rainy season, which is first sung on the first day of *Sāvan* (July–August) that corresponds to the beginning of the season of monsoon. It is instructive to note that scriptural hymns in *Malār Rāga* form an independent poetic repertoire for the rainy season, and like raga *Basant*, no temporal restrictions apply to *Rāga Malār* (Thielmann 2000, p. 54).

6. Processional *Chaunkīs* in the Darbar Sahib Complex

In this section, we turn to explore the performance of devotional singing in the public arena, a remarkable practice which has now become an inseparable part of the global Sikh community. In addition to the daily routine of eight musical ‘sittings’ (*chaunkīs*) of kirtan inside the Golden Temple, there are some processional *chaunkīs* in the precincts of the Darbar Sahib led by groups of Sikh devotees, chanting hymns as they walk, circumambulating the holy complex, including the sacred pool (*sarovar*) and the Golden Temple. The column marching and reciting of the hymns divides itself into two, one section leading and the other repeating the hymn verse by verse in a melodious folk tune (P. Singh 2011, p. 116). This tradition originated when a distinctive resistance movement in the form of a processional devotional-singing march (*chaunkī chārḥnī*) came into being after Emperor Jahangir (r. 1605–1627) had put the Sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind, into jail in the fort of Gwalior. During the Guru’s absence from Amritsar at the time of his internment, the elderly Sikh, Baba Buddha, started the first processional *chaunkī* from the Akal Takhat (“Throne of Eternal One”) to protest the Mughal authorities. The contemporary author of the Persian *Dabistān-i-Mazāhib* (1640s) testifies: “During that period the *masands* [“deputies”] and the Sikhs went and knelt down in *sijda* [i.e., with foreheads touching the ground] before the wall of the fort” (Grewal and Habib 2001; Habib 2001, p. 68). One Sikh would hold a torch (*mishāl*) of protest, leading the chanting Sikhs to Gwalior. It was the impact of such public musical processions from Amritsar to Gwalior that Emperor Jahangir released Guru Hargobind after six months, much before the completion of the actual imprisonment of twelve years. As a matter of fact, the emperor was forced to release the Guru because of the fear of an uprising in the Punjab plains (P. Singh Forthcoming, chap. 4).

The processional *chaunkīs* mounted daily in the precincts of the Darbar Sahib make sense only when we look at them through the interpretive grid of the *mīrī-pīrī* tradition, representing the indivisibility of political sovereignty (*mīrī*) and religious sovereignty (*pīrī*). The same unity is present in the twin doctrine of Guru-Panth (“Sikh Community as Guru”) and Guru-Granth (“Sikh Scripture as Guru”). Similarly, the concept of *sant/sipāhī* (saint/warrior) in Sikh thought stresses that “the ideal is for a man [/woman] to be devotional in spirit yet armed to combat and remove the evils of social degradation and misuse of power whenever necessary” (Pettigrew 1991–1992, p. 112, n. 1). The early Sikh community in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries used folk music as a sonic power against the oppression of Mughal authorities, much like the Black South Africans who used

music to both protest the oppression of apartheid and organize a revolution for freedom in the twentieth century (P. Singh 2011, pp. 118–19). Another example relates to the Vaishnava saint Srikrishna Chaitanya (1486–1534), who had introduced the singing procession in the public arena. His contemporaries knew him as a leader of singing, with roaring crowds that were set afire by his love of Krishna and by his sense of Krishna’s presence. The religious fervor that Chaitanya stirred up in Navadvip in Bengal did not sit well with the Brahmin scholars of the day. They complained to the Muslim governor about the noise in the streets. The governor pronounced the singing procession to be a public nuisance and issued an ordinance to ban it. To protest this ban, Chaitanya sent out 12 of these processions at once, all leading to the governor’s palace, where the Mughal authorities eventually ceded and legalized the practice (P. Singh 2011, p. 119).

The impact of the original tradition of processional *chaurīkīs* held in the precincts of the Darbar Sahib complex may be seen on the modern-day Nagar Kirtan, a living practice which has been followed for the last four centuries as an integral part of the Sikh tradition. The Punjabi word *nagar* stands for “town” and *kirtan* implies “devotional singing”, thereby making the phrase ‘Nagar Kirtan’, referring to the public performance of kirtan in a parade fashion through a neighborhood, village, town, or city (G. Singh 2023, p. 103). The sacred volume of the Guru Granth Sahib is placed in a decorated vehicle while thousands of devotees participate in singing the scriptural hymns. This parade is led by the ‘Cherished Five’ (*pañj piāre*, “Five Khalsa Sikhs” representing the collectivity of the Guru-Panth), following the five flag-bearers. A young contingent of Khalsa Sikhs in their blue garments display the martial arts of *gatkā* (“Stick-fighting”) in front of the parade. The food from the Sikh community kitchen (*laṅgar*) is served to one and all at different stalls set up at various points on the route. Looking at this public performance, Kristina Myrvold (2008) has skillfully equated the Nagar Kirtan to a *processional cortège*, which is when a king or other royal person is taken through a city with their advisors and assistants to legitimize their authority and power over the people and to create a dialogue between royalty and the common person of the area. The Guru Granth Sahib as the Guru-King passing through the neighborhood or city accompanied by their Sikhs is the perfect representation of the Guru’s reign over that area. The float for the Guru Granth Sahib is usually very high and creates a symbolic meaning that the Guru is higher than all and watches from above. Those sweeping and cleaning in front of the float as the Guru-King’s servants make sure that the area the king is treading is clean and fit for royalty. For the Sikhs, the Guru Granth Sahib is the source of ultimate authority. That is why it is seated on a throne, moved in a palanquin, and has a whisk waved over it to give it royal honor and dignity (G. Singh 2023, pp. 108–9). The Nagar Kirtan parades take place on Sikh festival days. In particular, the festival of Vaisakhi, marking the creation of the Khalsa and celebrated as the birthday of the Sikh Panth in the middle of April, is the special occasion for the Nagar Kirtan parades in cosmopolitan cities around the world. The Sikhs normally invite political leaders, local religious leaders, and other dignitaries to interact with them while attending the Nagar Kirtan parades. These occasions provide them with an opportunity to better understand the vibrant community of the Sikhs in their neighborhood and to learn about their traditions. It is no wonder that these parades have become the center of Sikh activism and politics. Figure 2 shows the processional *chaurīkī* in front of the Akal Takhat.



Figure 2. A processional *Chaunkī Sāhib* in front of the Akal Takhat in Amritsar early in the morning of 24 November 2019. The author personally attended this performance event. Photo courtesy the author.

7. Conclusions

The tradition of the performance of eight musical *chaunkīs* in the Darbar Sahib is Indic in character. The original frame of reference behind it may be traced to the popular *aṣṭ-yām sevā* or ‘service performed throughout the eight watches’ in the Vaishnava temples in the sixteenth century. The emphasis on the ‘five’ special sessions of kirtan in the Darbar

Sahib may have been inspired by the contemporary fivefold imperial *naubat* ('periodic musical performance') at the court of Emperor Akbar, whose official visit to Goindwal on 4 November 1598 was indeed the high point of the cordial relationship between Mughals and Sikhs (Moosvi 2001, p. 55). It provided Guru Arjan with a first-hand opportunity to look closely at the accompanying imperial ensemble (*naubat*) and illustrated manuscripts that were displayed as part of the Mughal policy of disseminating information among the people. It is an established fact that a group of artists, scribes, painters, and a band of musicians always accompanied Akbar. This display of imperial paraphernalia served as a visible sign of authority (P. Singh 2011, pp. 124–25).

Despite the formative influences received from the contemporary musical traditions of North India, the kirtan *chauṅkīs* at the Darbar Sahib acquired their own distinctive character. They did not remain as periodical musical performances like the fivefold *naubat* or the eightfold *darśanas* of the Vaishnavas, but rather stood for continuous singing sessions of the praises of Akal Purakh day and night to symbolize the ever-present divine power. The structure and content of these kirtan *chauṅkīs* are distinctively Sikh. For the visiting devotees, these musical sessions transform the fabric of ordinary living in the commonplace of hours, days, and seasons into extraordinary or sacred time (P. Singh 2011, p. 125). Michael Nijhawan has aptly shown in his research that "the sequence and pattern of musical performance have an immediate impact on the senses and in this way serve to structure ritual time and set it apart from ordinary time" (Nijhawan 2006, p. 44). In sacred time, while listening to the kirtan in the Darbar Sahib, the lives of the devotees discern an orientation toward the divine Name (*nām*), and they enjoy the ineffable mystical presence of the divine and aesthetic experience (P. Singh 2011, p. 125). In fact, these visiting devotees are transported into another realm of extraordinary experience where they lose the sense of ordinary time and temporality.

In my ethnographic study, I have interviewed many professional Sikh musicians (*rāgīs*) belonging to old "family traditions" (*gharāṇās*) about the ragas being performed in different musical sessions (*chauṅkīs*). They informed me that all Sikh musicians follow a long-standing tradition of beginning with the melody of *Āsā* during *Āsā Kī Vār dī Chauṅkī* in the morning, continuing with it for some time and then returning to other melodies suitable for the morning such as *Bhairau*, *Rāmakālī*, *Prabhātī*, and *Bhairavī*. They also employ popular folk tunes of *chhants* ("lyrical quatrains") for the benefit of common people entering the Darbar Sahib. Similarly, other sessions must begin with the assigned ragas in the beginning, followed by other suitable ragas and folk tunes. The sessions of *Anand* and *Ārtī* also follow a long-standing tradition, employing ragas and folk tunes. Moreover, it depends upon the training of numerous *rāgī-jathās* who perform their duties at the Darbar Sahib. Sometimes the head Granthi, sitting in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib, directs the Sikh musicians to revert to the assigned raga if they have been performing light music based on filmi tunes. In addition to the assigned melodies (*nirdhārit rāgas*), there are many folk traditions in the Guru Granth Sahib that maintain independent styles of performance. The sociological significance of this medium and its message should never be underestimated (P. Singh 2006a, pp. 158–60). In fact, Guru Arjan proclaimed: "If one sings in folk tunes with a devotional attitude without the use of any ragas, even then it becomes the 'nectar of immortality'" (P. Singh 2006b, p. 47).

A significant change occurred in the tradition of Muslim *rabābīs* performing kirtan in the Darbar Sahib. At the time of Partition of India in 1947, many of them left for Pakistan. Even before this event, they had become the target of the Tat Khalsa ("Pure Khalsa") wing of the Singh Sabha reformers who spoke derogatorily about these low-caste hereditary musicians. In the 1940s, the SGPC passed a resolution that only Khalsa Sikhs could perform kirtan in the Darbar Sahib. As a result, the *rabābīs* who remained in India after Partition had to become Khalsa Sikhs in order to perform kirtan in the Golden Temple (P. Singh 2011, p. 123). Further, after taking over as a SGPC chief in 1999, Bibi Jagir Kaur urged people to treat Khalsa women on a par with Khalsa men for discharging religious duties in the Golden Temple. However, other members of the executive committee objected by claiming

that women could not be allowed to perform kirtan in the Darbar Sahib due to a variety of reasons. They argued that the Almighty had differentiated man from woman at the time of birth; hence nobody should raise such a demand. Gender discrimination in the Golden Temple became a burning issue at the international level on 15 February 2003, when two England-based Khalsa women were allegedly assaulted by SGPC volunteers when they tried to participate in the *sukhāsan* ceremony, carrying Guru Granth Sahib in a palanquin from the Golden Temple to the Akal Takhat. Thus far, Sikh orthodoxy has explicitly said 'no' to Khalsa women performing kirtan inside the Darbar Sahib or participating in the *pālki-sevā* (P. Singh 2019, p. 292). Furthermore, celebrating the 400th anniversary of Guru Arjan's martyrdom in 2006, the SGPC decided to hire a number of interns to play stringed instruments such as the *sirandā*, the *dilrubā*, or the *tānpurā* along with the *rāgi-jathās*, who did not have skilled stringed-instrument players. Since then, fresh measures have been taken to ensure that Gurmat Sangeet does not become extinct when the SGPC made a formal announcement to *rāgīs* using stringed instruments to perform kirtan at the Darbar Sahib. More recently, in a decolonizing process, the preparation of *rāgi-jathās* skilled in stringed instruments was undertaken to completely remove the usage of the harmonium inside the sanctum sanctorum of the Golden Temple in the coming three years. One should keep in mind that as a statutory body, the SGPC has become the 'authoritative voice' of the Sikhs. As a democratic institution, it has always represented the majority Sikh opinion. As such, it has laid claim to representing the authority of the 'Guru-Panth', although it has been frequently challenged by Sikhs living outside the Punjab. It is commonly regarded as the 'mini parliament of the Sikhs' (P. Singh 2021, pp. 11–12). One can criticize the SGPC for their misuse of power and manipulation of the term 'decolonization' as a mere political strategy, whereas it is a simple 'revival' of instruments with no concern for the making of stringed instruments and the related issues of pedagogy. It is true that the SGPC's new norm of reintroducing traditional instruments follows more than three decades of struggle and research by Sikh scholars and performers (Cassio 2023, pp. 322–25).

Most instructively, I have argued elsewhere (P. Singh 2018) that all Sikh identity is constructed through a process shaped by our cultures, value systems, performative practices, festivals, histories, and narratives. Like all religious communities, Sikhs have a basic human need to identify with something larger than themselves, a need to belong. For instance, the modern form of Nagar Kirtan has evolved from the earliest processional *chauñkīs* held at Darbar Sahib in Amritsar. In recent years, Vaisakhī celebrations have drawn up to 375,000 enthusiastic Sikh participants from far and wide in the Nagar Kirtan processions in Surrey, British Columbia, in Canada (Surrey Leader Staff Writer 2016). Similarly, these public processions are a regular occurrence in New York, Los Angeles, Yuba City, Toronto, London, and even in some European countries on Sikh festival days. It is edifying to underscore the important cohesive role played by this powerful public celebration in the last forty years or so in the Sikh diaspora. It has been a major factor in promoting the sense of belonging. Therefore, the global Sikh community at large is interconnected and interdependent, in the sense that any Sikh can freely participate in the Nagar Kirtan and enter any gurdwara where they can feel spiritually at home. Thus, diaspora Sikhs assert their distinctiveness vehemently in public discourse because the ideal before them is integration into the multicultural mosaic of North American, British, or European societies without the loss of their identity (P. Singh 2018, p. 265).

In sum, this study has elaborated the historical context in which Sikh musical performances at the Darbar Sahib were established by Guru Arjan after installing the Adi Granth in 1604, while highlighting the issues of Sikh musical aesthetics, the experience of the public performance of Nagar Kirtan, and the historical change in the evolving Sikh tradition. Diaspora Sikhs freely tune-in to listen to the tele-broadcasting of the sacred music of the Darbar Sahib on a daily basis and vibrate in harmony with the divine Word, experiencing divine bliss through the transforming power of devotional singing. This study has also highlighted the intersection between the sacred music of the Darbar Sahib and the power politics of government actors to control the vote bank of the Sikh community in

modern times. In fact, state interference in the Golden Temple's affairs has been a constant feature in Sikh history, whether it was the Mughal regime in premodern times, or it was the British administration during colonial rule, or it was the Congress government, or even the most recent AAP government in Punjab in postcolonial India. Sikhs have always resisted this interference boldly at various junctures by remaining steadfast in their commitment to the teachings of the Sikh Gurus and by listening to the sacred sounds of devotional singing emanating from the inner sanctum of the Darbar Sahib.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the author on request.

Acknowledgments: I am grateful to the three anonymous readers for their useful feedback. I am thankful to my son, Maninderpal Singh, for processing the two figures in this article to protect the portrait rights of the individuals seen in the images. All the citations from the *Guru Granth Sahib* are taken from the standard version of 1430-page text. For instance, "GGS, p. 849" refers to the citation on page 849 of the standard volume. The translations of scriptural passages are adapted from Sant Singh Khalsa's internet version of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The code word 'M' [or *Mahallā*, "King"] with an appropriate number is used for the Sikh Gurus in the Sikh scripture.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ From the structure of the *Adi Granth*, it is quite evident that Guru Ram Das added eleven new ragas to the Sikh scripture. He employed technical terms to provide direction in the musical performance of his hymns. For instance, the use of the word *sudhaṅg* ("Pure Note") in the title of the *Āsāvārī* hymn clearly indicates that his hymn must be sung by using the "pure notes" of that raga (GGS 369). In the *Naṭ-nārāyaṇ Rāga*, Guru Ram Das prescribes the changing of rhythmical cycles (*partāl*) after each verse in the singing of those particular hymns (GGS 977–978). It is instructive to note that Guru Ram Das used this style for the first time in the Sikh scripture. The bracing throb of changing rhythms in this style evokes a ready response in the hearts of the listeners. There are 55 hymns of both Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjan in eleven ragas that must be sung in the *partāl* style. Thus, Guru Ram Das's hymns in the text of the *Adi Granth* provide us with clear information about his sense of melody and rhythm. For further details, see my earlier work (P. Singh 2006a, pp. 156–60).
- ² Although *Yaman*, *Hamīr*, and *Bagheshwarī* are not specified (*nirdhārit*) ragas of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, Sikh musicians do employ these ragas in their devotional singing, drawing from the 20th century Hindustani tradition. Similarly, they perform the *Madhūwantī Rāga* in the evening session. There are thirty-one major ragas and an equal number of regional varieties of certain ragas that are used in the final version of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Again, the text of the *Rāga-mālā* at the end of the *Guru Granth Sahib* follows the *Rāga-Rāginī-Putra* classification of six–five–eight, giving rise to a total number of eighty-four ragas. Only one-fourth of the *Rāga-mālā* list is accepted in the Sikh tradition. The exclusion of sixty-three ragas from its list that are not employed in the *Guru Granth Sahib* reveals choices made by the Gurus. This *Rāga-mālā* was quite popular in the musical tradition of Punjab, a peak period of North Indian music during Emperor Akbar's reign. Thus, there is a great deal of variety of ragas available to Sikh musicians to employ in their performances apart from the specified (*nirdhārit*) ragas.
- ³ The process of decolonizing is a theoretical approach to rediscovering indigenous epistemologies, and (when applied to music) it refers to the rediscovery of heritage repertoires, notions, vocabulary, and pedagogy systems that predate colonialism. This process is a work not only in the field of music, but also in history and the study of religion. Western scholarship on texts often speaks from a position of ideological power, a position that must be recognized. Reacting against this kind of intellectual colonialism based on "European epistemological hegemony", some scholars are as harsh as to recommend that a "true" history cannot exist at all, while others suggest alternative methods to help decolonize historical knowledge, such as working in ethnography in the archive, deconstructing historical documents, or completely exiting the Western epistemes and constructing ethical realms of producing knowledge. In the case of the revival of ancient musical instruments, for instance, the SGPC has given a call to prepare Sikh musicians by training them in the stringed instruments (*tantī sāj*), the playing techniques, pedagogy, and the repertory of heritage ragas, *tālas* ("rhythmic cycles"), and compositions. This is happening at Anandpur Sahib and Punjabi University, Patiala, and around the world in different gurdwaras where proficient *rāgīs* are teaching Sikh children.

References

- Arora, Kusum. 2023. Explained: The Controversy Around a Bill to Amend the Sikh Gurdwaras Act. *The Wire*. June 30. Available online: <https://thewire.in/government/explained-controversy-bill-amend-sikh-gurdwaras-act> (accessed on 20 June 2023).
- Beck, Guy L. 1993. *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

- Bhogal, Gurminder Kaur. 2022. Tracking the Harmonium from Christian Missionaries Hymns to Sikh Kirtan. *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* 8: 1–37. [CrossRef]
- Bhutia, Lhendup G. 2022. The Rise and the Sudden Fall of the Harmonium: A Fading Music. *Open: The Magazine*. June 10. Available online: <https://openthemagazine.com/feature/the-rise-and-the-sudden-fall-of-the-harmonium/> (accessed on 1 January 2024).
- Cassio, Francesca. 2023. Singing the Scripture: Sikh Kīrtan in Literature, Practices, and Musicological Studies. In *The Sikh World*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 313–27.
- Curtiss, Marie Joy. 1996. Gurmat Sangit. In *The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*. Edited by Harbans Singh. Patiala: Punjabi University, vol. II, pp. 157–79.
- FP Explainers. 2022. Explained: Why Akal Takht wants the harmonium to go from the Golden Temple. *Firstpost*. May 24. Available online: <https://www.firstpost.com/india/explained-why-akal-takht-wants-the-harmonium-to-go-from-the-golden-temple-10711331.html> (accessed on 1 November 2023).
- Gill, Giani Indar Singh, ed. 1977. *Srī Gur Bilās Pātashāhī 6: By Kavi Sohan*. Amritsar: Vazir Hind Press. First published 1968.
- Grewal, Jagtar Singh. 1990. *The New Cambridge History of India: The Sikhs of the Punjab*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grewal, Jagtar Singh, and Irfan Habib, eds. 2001. *Sikh History from Persian Sources: Translations of Major Texts*. New Delhi: Tulika, Indian History Congress.
- Habib, Irfan, trans. 2001. Sikhism and the Sikhs, 1645–46—From ‘Mobad’, Dabistān-i Mazāhib. In *Sikh History from Persian Sources: Translations of Major Texts*. Jagtar Singh Grewal, and Irfan Habib, eds. New Delhi: Tulika, Indian History Congress, pp. 59–84.
- Kerr, Ian. 1999. Sikhs and State. In *Sikh Identity: Continuity and Change*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Norman Gerald Barrier. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, pp. 147–74.
- Khalsa-Baker, Nirinjan Kaur. 2019. Engendering the female voice in Sikh devotional music: Locating equality in pedagogy and praxis. *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* 15: 246–86. [CrossRef]
- Malm, William P. 1996. *Music Cultures of the Pacific, the Near East, and Asia*, 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall History of Music Series. First published 1967.
- Mann, Gurinder Singh. 2004. *Sikhism*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall.
- Mansukhani, Gobind Singh. 1982. *Indian Classical Music and Sikh Kirtan*. New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publishing Co.
- McLeod, Hew. 1997. *Sikhism*. London: Penguin Books.
- Moosvi, Shireen, trans. 2001. Akbar Meets Guru Arjan, 1598, From Abu’l Fazl, Akbarnāmā. In *Sikh History from Persian Sources: Translations of Major Texts*. Jagtar Singh Grewal, and Irfan Habib, eds. New Delhi: Tulika, Indian History Congress, p. 55.
- Murphy, Anne. 2012. *The Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in Sikh Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Myrvold, Kristina. 2008. Personifying the Guru: Ritual Procession of the Guru Granth Sahib in India. In *South Asian Religions on Display: Religious Processions in South Asia and in the Diaspora*. Edited by Knut A. Jacobsen. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 140–156.
- Nijhawan, Michael. 2006. *Dhadi Darbar: Religion, Violence and the Performance of Sikh History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Pettigrew, Joyce. 1991–1992. Songs of Sikh Resistance Movement. *Asian Music* XXIII: 85–118. [CrossRef]
- Pincott, Frederic. 1886. The Arrangement of the Hymns of the Adi Granth. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* XVIII: 437–61. [CrossRef]
- Schwartz, Susan L. 2004. *Rasa: Performing the Divine in India*. New York: Columbia University.
- Shackle, Christopher. 2008. Repackaging the ineffable: Changing styles of Sikh scriptural commentary. *Bulletin of SOAS* 71: 255–77. [CrossRef]
- Shankar, Vijay N., and Ranvir Bhatnagar. 2004. ETC Channel Punjabi: Gurbani for the World. In *The Golden Temple: A Gift to Humanity—400 Years of The Guru Granth Sahib*. Gurgaon: Ranvir Bhatnagar Publications.
- Sikhnet. 2011. Bibi Jasbir Kaur Khalsa: A Tribute to the Doyenne of Gurmat Sangeet. *Sikhnet.com*. February 15. Available online: <https://www.sikhnet.com/news/bibi-jasbir-kaur-khalsa-tribute-doyenne-gurmat-sangeet> (accessed on 1 January 2024).
- Singh, Gurbeer. 2023. The Nagar Kirtan. In *The Sikh World*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 103–13.
- Singh, IP. 2023a. Gurbani Telecast: SGPC Shelves Plan for Tenders, to Start Own YouTube Channel. *The Times of India*. June 29. Available online: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/gurbani-telecast-sgpc-shelves-plan-for-tenders-to-start-own-youtube-channel/articleshow/101358896.cms> (accessed on 20 July 2023).
- Singh, IP. 2023b. Kairon’s amendment in 1959 led to Nehru-Tara Singh Pact. *The Times of India*. June 22. Available online: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/kairons-amendment-in-1959-led-to-nehru-tara-singh-pact/articleshow/101181845.cms> (accessed on 20 July 2023).
- Singh, Pashaura. 2006a. Sikhism and Music. In *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions*. Edited by Guy L. Beck. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, pp. 141–67.
- Singh, Pashaura. 2006b. *Life and Work of Guru Arjan: History, Memory, and Biography in the Sikh Tradition*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Singh, Pashaura. 2008. Scripture as Guru in the Sikh Tradition. *Religion Compass* 2: 659–73. [CrossRef]
- Singh, Pashaura. 2011. Musical Chaunkis at the Darbar Sahib: History, Aesthetics, and Time. In *Sikhism in Global Context*. Edited by Pashaura Singh. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 102–29.
- Singh, Pashaura. 2018. The millennial generation of Sikhs in North America. *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* 14: 260–79. [CrossRef]

- Singh, Pashaura. 2019. The music and poetics of devotion in the Jain and Sikh traditions. *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* 15: 290–300. [CrossRef]
- Singh, Pashaura. 2021. Ideological basis in the formation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee and the Shiromani Akali Dal: Exploring the concept of Guru-Panth. *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* 17: 16–33. [CrossRef]
- Singh, Pashaura. Forthcoming. *The Routledge Companion to the Life and Legacy of Guru Hargobind: Sovereignty, Militancy and Empowerment of the Sikh Panth*. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. 1993. *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- SSMS. 1967. *Sikh Sacred Music*. New Delhi: Sikh Sacred Music Society (SSMS).
- Surrey Leader Staff Writer. 2016. No Problem—This Is Surrey at Its Best. *Surrey Now Leader*. April 27. Available online: <http://www.surreyleader.com/opinion/377344281.html> (accessed on 20 July 2023).
- Thackston, Wheeler M. 1996. trans., ed., and annotator. *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thielmann, Selina. 2000. *Singing the Praises Divine: Music in the Hindu Tradition*. New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation.
- Townsend, Charles M. 2015. Music in the Gurus' View: Sikh Religious Music, Memory, and the Performance of Sikhism in America. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Riverside.
- Van der Linden, Bob. 2008. Sikh Music and Empire: The Moral Representation of the Self in Music. *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* 4: 1–15. [CrossRef]
- VBG. 1977. *Vārān Bhāī Gurdās*, 9th ed. Edited by Bhai Vir Singh. Amritsar: Khalsa Samachar.
- Wade, Bonnie C. 1998. *Imaging Sound: An Ethnomusicological Study of Music, Art, and Culture in Mughal India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.