

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF HARIVALLABH SANGEET SAMMELAN

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**Abstract:** *The 148-year-old Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan began as a musical tribute to a saint. Every year, the Sammelan begins by conducting a Yajna near Baba Harivallabh Samadhi and distributing prasad. The event is held in the last week of December at Devi Talab Mandir in Jalandhar. To escape the late December chill, men and women wrap themselves in blankets and sheets and listen to music until the wee hours of the morning. Any eminent classical musician has performed on one or more occasions at the Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan. It is every artist's dream to present this prosperous spiritual platform. Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan is organized by Harivallabh Sangeet Mahasabha. Recognizing the importance of the Sammelan, the North Zone Cultural Center and the Department of Tourism and Cultural Affairs of the Government of Punjab have joined hands to take it from the national level to the international level. According to the Limca Book of Records, Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan is named the oldest music festival in India.*

*Against this backdrop, the uniqueness of the Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan is the reason why it has continued for 148 years. Accordingly, the objectives of this research was to trace the basis on which the Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan was started, to study the geographical area and cultural context in which the Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan takes place, to identify the unique moments and prominent personalities in the evolution of the Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan, and to identify the musical and socio-cultural characteristics preserved through the Harivallabh tradition. A review of the earlier literature found the matter related to the serial broadcasting of the Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan. The founding of the Sammelan in 1875 meant that it belonged to the late 19th century. In the early 20th century, the festival got rid of the religious aspect and took the shape of a music festival. According to the division of eras in Indian history, the whole period related to the Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan before 1947 can be read with the pre-independence period. It is also appropriate to separate the eras as pre-partition and post-partition, especially concerning Punjab. The context of the Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan after 1947 can be called the work of the post-partition or post-independence era. This research also describes the facts up to the late 20th century. The research was guided by the full prediction that the entire historical and evolutionary process effected directly and profoundly determining the shape of the present Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan.*

**Keywords:** *harivallabh sangeet sammelan, music concert.*

### SHRI BABA HARIVALLABH

Shree Baba Harivallabh was born in the 18th century in the village of Bajwara in the Hoshiarpur district of Punjab. After the death of his parents himself being at a young age, Baba Harivallabh was brought to Jalandhar by his maternal grandfather. Baba Harivallabh had the opportunity to visit Devi Talab frequently. Moreover, he had the opportunity to meet and listen to Baba Tuljagiri, who was a saint, a Sanskrit scholar, and a talented Dhrupad singer. In time Baba Tuljagiri started imparting the craft to Baba Harivallabh under the tradition of Guru Shishya Parampara. Baba Harivallabh started singing Bhajans in Dhrupad style under the guidance of his Guru. Baba Tuljagiri recognized Baba Harivallabh as his successor and appointed him to the Gaddi (sacred seat of music). In 1874, Baba Tuljagiri ended his ascetic life and thereafter, Harivallabh became Baba Harivallabh. Thus, the first Sangeet Sammelan begins as a tribute to one's Guru on his first death commemoration (Baba Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan, n.d.). Baba Harivallabh received formal musical training from Pandit Duni Chand at Ujahan (present day Sialkot) and maintained the Guru Shishya Parampara tradition in association with Devi Talab. There are many students who have studied under him and other masters. Baba Harivallabh wrote Sangeet Darpan and translated Raag

Darpan (Shukla, 2019). Sangeet Darpan is at least 150 years old. Baba Harivallabh has written this book in Gurmukhi script. The cover page contains the text 'Ik Omkar Shri Ganeshaa Namah'. These books reveal the value system prevailing at that time. Both texts are clearly about music, and Raag Darpan gives reference to various ragas (India, 2023).

It is important to inquire about Swami Hemgiri, who was the Mahant of Devi Talab Sakti— peeth before Baba Harivallabh, Swami Tuljagiri. Swami Hemgiri from Hoshiarpur was the Gaddi Nasheen Mahant at a site occupied by Muslim saints Shah Sikandar and Bhure Khan. After defeating these Muslim threats, Maharaja Ranjit Singh confirmed Devi Talab as a permanent Hindu site by giving it to Swami Hemgiri. Hemgiri's successor, Swami Tuljagiri, marked it as a sacred place for upper caste Hindus, instituting many rituals at the Sakti-peeth site.

### **RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MUTINY OF 1857**

It is important to examine how the Revolt of 1857 relates to the Sangeet Sammelan. Mir Nasir Ahmed was the founder of Kapurtala Gharana and introduced Tansen's Senia-Beenkar tradition to Punjab. After the revolt of 1857, the British dissolved the court of Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, and Mir Nasir Ahmed, a court musician, was imprisoned. Maharaja Nihal Singh's son, Bikrama Singh, who was a fan of classical music, went to Delhi and rescued Mir Nasir Ahmed and brought him to Kapurtala Haveli. He learned Rudra Veena from Ustad and became Ganda Bandhan Shishya. After the death of Maharaja Nihal Singh in 1870, Bikrama Singh left Kapurtala and established Bikrama Hall in Jalandhar. Ustad Mir Nazir Ahmed conducted the mehfil, and Baba Harivallabh may have also participated. After Baba Harivallabh's death, when his students expressed a desire to honor his memory with music, Bikrama Singh donated a plot of land in Devi Talab. Ustad Mir Nasir Ahmed coordinated the music festival to the extent that famous musicians participated (India, 2023).

### **COMPLIANCE OF PUNJAB TO CONDUCT HARIVALLABH SAMMELAN**

The longevity of a classical music festival in Punjab is a feature indicated by Harivallabh. Punjab is considered a culturally and qualitatively rural, noisy, and "low" area. It was modeled after the image of the Sikh or Jat farmer. In the late 1880s, Commander-in-Chief Lord Frederick Roberts' reconstruction of the colonial state army saw the Sikhs as a warrior race and included the Panchasila peasants. Post-independence India's Green Revolution and Punjab's emphasis as the nation's granary cemented its image as yet another agricultural land. In the fields of culture and art, Maharashtra and West Bengal became more firmly established as centers for the promotion of Hindustani classical music in particular (Kapuria, 2015). Punjab was thus cut off from them geographically and culturally.

### **GEOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL, AND CULTURAL IMPORTANCE OF JALANDHAR**

Jalandhar means the land within the water because it is located in the region between the Beas and Sutlej rivers. One of the oldest cities in Punjab, Jalandhar is geographically the hub of the 'Doaba' region and East Punjab in general.

Jalandhar is a settlement dating back to ancient times. The entire Punjab including Jalandhar district belonged to the Indus Valley Civilization. Accordingly, traces of the Harappa period have been found in Jalandhar. The name of the city is mentioned in Hindu legends. The Padma Purana mentions a demon king (Daitya) named Jalandhara, who was the son of the Ganga and the ocean. During the reign of Kanishka, AD. Around 100 BC, a fourth Buddhist congregation existed near Jalandhar. Hiuen Tsang visited the city, and Jalandhar is mentioned in the writings of Ptolemy and Hiuen Tsang. Maharaja Ranjit Singh seized power in 1807 after an exchange of power between Hindu and Muslim rulers (Sahapedia, n.d).

After defeating the Sikhs in the First Anglo-Sikh War of 1846, the areas beyond the Sutlej River, including Jalandhar, were placed under a Commissionership. When the whole of Punjab surrendered to the British in 1849, Jalandhar was one of the first areas of Punjab to come under colonial rule. The British set up camps there and connected it with the Grand Trunk Road and railways. Jalandhar was an important administrative center of East Punjab, located between the major cities of Lahore and Delhi (Sahapedia, n.d.).

The fairs of Punjab were highly valued. Most were religious gatherings and people's devotion was combined with entertainment. Occasionally, nomadic minstrels make an appearance and perform love songs by Sussi Punnu, Sohni Mahenwal, Hir Ranjha, and Buga. (Sahapedia, n.d.) The peasants themselves sing Boli (pieces) of these stories. Even the nearby villages will turn out to see a professional wrestling match. Sweetmeats and other food products are being bought and sold. Fairs related to three major religions of Punjab were held and members of many communities participated together. It is said that nearly 15,000 people, both Hindus and Muhammadans, attended the ceremony held at the shrine of Imam Nasir. Apart from this, the fair held for the Hindu festival of Dussehra is unique. Although it was stated that around 40,000 people participated, the number of participants on one day of the 10-day festival has not been specified.

A large number of farmers participate in the Harivallabh fair held in winter, as it is an agricultural low season. A farmer who knew the nuances of classical music, came from a distant village by bullock cart, and enjoyed classical music was a decisive factor. Punjab's deep-rooted vocation for classical music has to be read again because of the peasant audience that showed up in astonishing numbers. In 1881-1911, in Jalandhar, this rural population was about 85%. The Devi Talab, where the Harivallabh fair was held, consisted of a holy tank, a sacred shakti (peeth), and a Sufi shrine. Devi Talab was a famous geographical site in the city associated with fairs, as the Hindu Dusahra festival was combined with a horse and cattle fair. The horse and cattle fair familiarized the villagers with the area and provided the impetus for music lovers to attend the Harivallabh, or musician's fair, held in December a month or two later.

## **STABILITY AND INTEGRITY OF DHRUPAD SINGING**

Dhrupad singing was an integral, central part of the Sangeet Sammelan. Dhrupad was written in Sanskrit and practiced by Brahmins in Punjab. Dhrupad is closer to Hinduism as a genre of classical music. Dhrupad was offered in many North Indian temples. Dhrupad singing in Punjab is widespread. It is a well-known fact that Guru Nanak himself sang Dhrupad while playing Rabab.

Today, it has been transformed into Partaal Gaayaki, related to the Sikh religion. Muslim practitioners of Dhrupad singing also became prominent in Punjab. Ramagarhi Sikhs were also skilled in dhrupad singing and proficient in light musical genres. The musical traditions practiced by the Mirasis were exquisite. They showed a wide range across Folk, Qawwali, Bhajan, and Khyal. Folk music performed by Jat Sikhs with an instrument called the tumba was widely accepted. Qawwali music, associated with Sufi saints, is also a strongly recognizable musical genre (Sahapedia, n.d.).

According to Dr. Joginder Singh Bawra, in 1875, Baba Harivallabh organized the first festival in the form of Bhandara to commemorate his guru's death. Many sages, saints, and hermits were invited to it. As a music lover, Baba Harivallabh used to sing a little dhrupad. In 1876, the following year, musicians from many parts of Punjab participated. Bawra bears witness to the presence of musicians from Jadla, Amritsar, and Lahore, including Miyan Ahmed Baksh of Phillour, Muhammad Baksh of Hariyana, Vilayat Ali, and Meera Baksh of Shyam Chourasi gharana. Accordingly, the main audience of the festival consisted of Sadhus, Sants, Fakirs, and Pirs, in addition to devotees. They channeled divine communication through devout listening and singing at this annual mystical mela. Baba Harivallabh is said to have presented Miyan Kalandhar Baksh with Nazrana, a gift of one and a half rupees, in the first meeting (Sahapedia, n.d.).

Baba Harivallabh's distribution of dhrupad written by Naath Raam of Batala for musicians in Haryana is a sign of the popularity of dhrupad singing. This occasion serves as a reminder that the Harivallabh Mela was, in its infancy, a significant and esteemed hub for local musical interaction. Through these Dhrupad chants, Bhakti and Ibadat become the embodiment of a mystical, heavenly goal. (Kapuria, 2015)

### **ARRIVAL OF PT. V.D. PALUSKAR IN PUNJAB**

It developed year by year and took the shape of a Sangeet Mela, conducted by Baba Harivallabh in the area of devotional music. Baba Harivallabh passed away in 1885 and was succeeded by Pt. Tolo Ram. He further intensified the musical inclination here towards the Barsi (death commemoration rites).

Musical genres like Dhrupad, Dhamar, and Tappa have well nurtured the early context of the Sammelan. Also, this Mela has played an important role as a music exchange center (Sahapedia, n.d.).

The arrival of Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar in 1901 at Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan is unique. During this time, Paluskar as well as Pt. Bhatkhande were reforming Indian classical music. Paluskar's arrival at the Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan coincided with the establishment of the first Gandharv Mahavidyalaya in Lahore. This new interpretation of music was supported by the English-educated, middle-class Indian elite. Pt. Paluskar was popularizing Khayal-based classical music nationally and also influenced the format of the Dhrupad-based Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan. Till then, the Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan, organized under the leadership of Mahant Pt. Tolo Ram, started organizing under the Harivallabh Sangeet Mahasabha in 1922. It was a

combination of a young English teacher named Jagannath Parti and the middle-class elite of Jalandhar.

Pt. Paluskar popularized Khayal singing in Jalandhar and was added to a steady stream by his students, Vinayak Rao Patwardhan, Narayan Rao Vyas, and Omkarnath Thakur. In 1929, instrumentalists were allowed to perform at the Sammelan, breaking the monopoly of more than 50 years of singing. Balakrishna Buwa Ichalkaranjkar, Ustad Maula Baksh, Ustad Kale Khan, Ustad Chand Khan, Pt. Krishna Rao, Pt. Narayan Rao Vyas, Pt. Vinayak Rao Patwardhan, Gangu Bai Hangal, Pt. D.V. Paluskar, Pt. Mallikarjun Mansoor, Ustad Faiyyaz Khan, and Pt. Omkarnath Thakur were eminent artists who performed at that time.

Mahatma Gandhi had come to the Sammelan in 1919, and Pt. Bhaskar Rao, Pt. Krishna Rao, and Pt. Ram Krishna Buwa have sung a Bhajan titled 'Ram Bhajan Ko Diya Kamal Mukh' composed of Raag Khamaj. A new tradition was acquired in the 1930s by singing 'Vande Mataram' at the closing moments of the Sammelan, further confirming its status as a people's festival.

The main attraction of the Sammelan was classical raga music. It managed to address the event's patrons and elite fans. Enrichment of non-raaga popular music genres like Punjabi Kaafiyan, Shabd Saakhi, Devi Ki Bhetaan also shows that the convention attracted a wide audience.

It appears that the decisions taken in 1928 after the formation of the Harivallabh Sangeet Mahasabha influenced the historical changes in the Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan. Harivallabh is prohibited from offering any money or reward to an artiste in public. If any Sahib intends to give so he should invite the singer to his house. Or you can go to the singer's residence and offer the prize money. If an artist nevertheless accepted gifts in assembly, his fare and gifts were seized. Through this he attacked popular concepts of the time such as the Jajman-mirasi relationship, which depicted an asymmetric power relationship between the patron and the artist. In the Jajman-mirasi relationship, the upper caste patron usually offered money or gifts to the lower caste artisan. The Mahasabha has unofficially created a respectable middle-class audience for classical music, introducing modern, disciplined norms for audience behaviour. Along with religious piety, the self-presentation model became popular among artisans as well (Sahapedia, n.d.).

Another notable fact from the initial period was that women were not allowed to enter the Baba Harivallabh pandal and samadhi. In some cases, women ignored it and attended the Sangeet Sammelan dressed as men and covered with blankets. In such a background of women's eagerness to join the audience, it was not until 1946 that any female artist got the chance to perform on stage at the Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan. Hira Bai Barodekar was the first female artist to break stereotypes.

### **1947: PARTITION AND HARIVALLABH SANGEET SAMMELAN**

In 1947, the Sammelan lost many Muslim artists, patrons, and audiences due to partition. The Muslim artists who dominated the five gharanas of Punjab disappeared. This situation greatly affected the quality of the Sammelan and the audience attendance. At that time, the Sammelan



decided to give a platform to the local artists, and through it, the talent of the Punjab Gharana artists gained space (Shukla, 2019).

Knowingly or unknowingly, this marginalization of music by Pt. Paluskar and his students took place two decades before Partition (Sahapedia, n.d.). The resultant sidelining of local Punjabi musicians at the expense of more glamorous and renowned 'outsiders' from Maharashtra and elsewhere is presented as a seamless continuity with the pre-1947 era, masking partition's impact on the musicians performing at the festival. It is only through the oral record that we know of the exodus of stalwart Muslim musicians from East Punjab to Pakistan after 1947, such as Amanat-Fateh Ali (Patiala), Salamat-Nazakat Ali (Sham Chaurasi) and Fateh-Mubarak Ali (Jalandhar) and the remarkable impact this had on the festival. Thus, the patronage of this festival as well as the character of those now invested in it changed remarkably due to partition.

The most positive impact of this partition was the relocation of All India Radio from Lahore to Jalandhar. In physical proximity to the AIR Jalandhar festival (started on November 1, 1947.), the organizers of the Harivallabh Sangeet Mahasabha began to establish new relations with the AIR administration.

In the post-independence era, Dr. B.V. Keskar, after becoming Information and Broadcasting Minister, instituted a policy of broadcasting classical music for nine years, from 1952 to 1961. It directly affected the Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan.

## **REVIVAL DUE TO ASHWINI KUMAR**

Over this period, a number of circumstances came together to create the Harivallabh, a music festival of national distinction on par with those held in the more affluent cities of Calcutta, Bombay, Pune, and Madras.

In the 1950s, patronage—which was typified by affluent traders' unplanned voluntary assistance—became increasingly institutionalized. Though the Sangeet Mahasabha was officially founded in 1922, it wasn't until the 1950s that it reached its peak because of the diligent work and several modifications made by Mr. Ashwin Kumar (1929-2015), a renowned athlete and high-ranking police official who assumed leadership of the event.

Kumar introduced new features to the Sangeet Mahasabha festival, re-gaining financial support from the Bania community and official state patrons. He streamlined the festival's functioning, introducing technicalities like collecting Rupee 1 from audience members. Kumar used his proximity to government functionaries to make the festival a charitable institution, making donations tax-exempt. Donations became a symbol of civic voluntarism, deeply cherished by present-day Sangeet Mahasabha officials. Kumar's ideas contrast with the earlier phase of voluntarily supporting the festival in pre-1947 times.

Harivallabh patrons and audience members viewed the festival as a modern organization, with professional musicians receiving their dues. This modernization, led by Ashwini Kumar, was criticized by some Jalandhar residents as a crass monetization and a violation of the non-mercenary

spirit of the past. Jagannath Parti, a Jalandhar schoolteacher, lamented the new practice of artists demanding fees for performance, highlighting the negative impact of this change.

Before 1950, no performer's fee was agreed upon. Following 1950, President Shri Ashwini Kumar decided to grant Ghulam Ali Khan Saheb the requested sum of rupee 3,000. Subsequently, it became into a custom. Prior performers never requested anything beyond the cost of transportation. Because of their elevated standing, artists raised their demands in the 1950s. The Harivallabh Samadhi's honor and respect started to erode, and negotiations started.

In 1956, the Sangeet Academy was established by the Mahasabha, with donations from Jalandhar Municipality, Central Sangeet Natak Akademi, and Punjab Government. Despite its idealistic stance of showcasing Indian classical music for free, the academy closed due to funding constraints.

In 1956, the Mahasabha established a regular Sangeet Academy. Donations of ₹3000, ₹2000, and ₹1000, respectively, for its development were made by the Punjab Government, the Jalandhar Municipality, and the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi. The Akademi is recognized as an examination center, and it was a part of the Akhil Bhartiya Gandharv Mahavidyala Mandal of Bombay. But by the 1970s, the music academy had to close due to poor performance. This was brought about by the Sangeet Mahasabha's ongoing financial difficulties, which were mostly brought about by its idealistic position—which represented the compromise between tradition and modernity that we already discussed—of providing free performances of the greatest Indian classical music.

However, the 1970s also witnessed the start of another important institution, the Harballabh Sangeet Pratiyogita, which is still going strong today. This was the junior and senior level competition. Similar to other developments like paying musicians for their performances, giving artists hotel accommodations, and so forth, this was first met with scorn, but most Harballabhites gradually came to openly welcome the competition.

Since 1966, under the leadership of Mr. Ashwini Kumar, Harivallabh Sangeet Mahasabha has carried out the process of monetization and professionalization in a very transparent and democratic manner. This account balance was displayed along with a detailed record of the previous year's event-organizing process, the contributions of each member of the Mahasabha, and so on. What is clear from these accounts is that despite large proposals by government officials throughout this period, funding was bolstered by donations from the residents of Jalandhar.

Modernization was visible, however: state security agencies were used to increasingly discipline the large crowds participating in Harivallabh. In the decade before independence, volunteer groups belonging to Hindu organizations maintained order at the 1937 convention by the Hindu Sevak Sabha and the Krishna Dal, which began with the transfer of leadership from Devi Talab Mahant to Mr. Kumar with independence. A more visible difference was the presence of groups linked to the arms of the state.

## THE TEMPLE'S EMERGENCE AND CHANGES IN THE FESTIVAL'S ICONOGRAPHY

Ashwini Kumar's reluctance to build a temple for Devi Talab Mandir is unusual, contrasting with the enthusiasm of other patrons, including Jalandhar industrialists, who saw it as a sacral act of piety. Kumar's apathy towards temple construction was a notable exception. Temple Committee meetings were held at Leader Engineering Works, led by Lala Dwarka Dass Satgal, a Sangeet Mahasabha member. Apart from the Academy and Other Project Fund in Sangeet Mahasabha's financial sheet dated March 31, 1976, we find an intriguing entry headed Mandir Building Fund, with a balance of ₹7,508. As such, the Sangeet Mahasabha itself had a little but noteworthy influence on the temple's construction. But considering how strongly his Sangeet Mahasabha colleagues backed the initiative, even with Ashwini Kumar's passive backing, it was evident that he was not openly opposed to it. The temple's structure was completed by 1972, and its idols were installed in February of 1975.

From December 1976 on, the diversity on the souvenir cover was represented not only by the monotonous and monolithic image of Goddess Saraswati but also by the New Devi Talab Mandir in the background. This emphasizes how important the temple is in the sacred geography of Devi Talab as imagined by the majority members of the Sangeet Mahasabha. The qualities that were being Hinduized are evident in some of the performances. In 1977, Pt. Jasraj prominently featured invocations to the goddesses Kali and Durga. Increasing Hinduization can also be seen as a reaction to Sikh collective integration through the Khalistani movement of the 1980s.

## IMPACT OF KHALISTANI MOVEMENT

At the height of the Khalistani movement, the festival was virtually discontinued; in the four years between 1984 and 1988, there was just one celebration, which happened in 1985. In addition to the festival's cancellation, Mr. Ashwini Kumar moved to Delhi in 1982 and effectively retired from the presidentship of Sangeet Mahasabha. Only in 1989 did the festival resume, ushering in an overly Hinduized era typified by a practiced focus on customs like the Saraswati Vandana and the havan, along with growing hostility between the Sangeet Mahasabha and the Temple Committee.

## CONCLUSION

Attainment of shastras under Guru-Shishya Parampara was rooted in the Harivallabh tradition, a Sangeet Sammelan centered on Devi Talab Mandir and nurtured in the face of the Hindutva revival. Dhrupad singing is an essential part of the Sammelan initiation phase. Jalandhar, a geographical, economic, and cultural center of Punjab, was nourished by the musical practices of various ethnic groups such as Sufi, Mirasi, Ramagarhi, and Jat Sikhs. Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar introduced a form centered on Khayal singing, which changed the musical tone of the Sammelan. A significant impact on the Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan came through partition in 1947. After the Harivallabh Sangeet Mahasabha was entrusted with the responsibility of conducting the annual Sammelan, the Mahasabha was able to preserve the integrity of the Sammelan despite the difficulties and upheavals that occurred over time. Although the Sangeet Sammelan lost a great leader like Ashwini Kumar in the late 20th century, the glory of the Harivallabh mechanism being



fixed and strengthened over the years gave the opportunity to later leaders to conduct the Sarmelan well. Harivallabh Sangeet Sarmelan, India's premier classical music festival, will continue to play a role in the advancement of classical music for a long time to come.

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