



REVIVING THE SACRED STRINGS: BHAI AVTAR SINGH JI AND THE PRESERVATION OF TAUS BASED KIRTAN

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the historical lineage and significant contributions of Bhai Avtar Singh Ji in the preservation and propagation of Kirtan using Taus- a traditional bowed string instrument innovated by Guru Hargobind Singh Ji. Central to the Sikh musical tradition, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji is organized according to 31 raagas and emphasizes performance of Gurbani through Gurmat Sangeet, a practice routed in rendering sacred verses within prescribed raagas using instruments developed by the Sikh Gurus, such as the Saranda, Taus and Dilruba. Bhai Avtar Singh Ji a distinguished eleventh generation exponent of his tradition, received rigorous training from his father, Bhai Juwala Singh Ji, and became renowned for his Dhrupad Kirtan marked by precise articulation and spiritual depth. His extensive performances across Historical Gurudwaras and Takhts, along with his role as a dedicated teacher, underscore his lifelong commitment to revive this tradition. This endangered art form. Drawing upon personal interviews, archival recordings, and historical analysis, this paper critically examines Bhai Avtar Singh Ji's musical journey and his pivotal role in sustaining the Taus tradition, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on the preservation of Sikh intangible cultural heritage.

Key Words- Gurmat Sangeet, Taus, Bhai Avtar Singh Ji, Kirtan, Sikh musical heritage

Introduction

The Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, the eternal Guru of Sikhs, stands as an unparalleled spiritual and literary master piece. It comprises the divine revelations of the Sikh Gurus alongside the devotional poetry of 11 Bhattas poets, 15 Bhagats, and 4 Gurumukhs (devoted Sikh). One of its most distinctive is its organization according to 31 classical Raagas signifies the intrinsic role of music in Sikh philosophy. Unlike many other scriptural traditions, the Sikh Gurus not only composed sacred hymns (Gurbani) but also prescribed their musical rendering through specific raagas, thereby laying the foundation of a unique musical tradition known as Gurmat Sangeet.

Gurmat Sangeet is not merely an aesthetic or cultural expression but is a spiritual discipline. Through this form of music, the Sikh Gurus conveyed their inner mystical experiences, reflections on social and historical contexts, and teachings on ethical living and Naam Simran (the remembrance of the divine name). Music was deliberately chosen as the medium to engage the human mind and soul simultaneously, encouraging both contemplation and emotional resonance. The practice of singing Shabad Kirtan (devotional hymns) in prescribed raagas thus became a sacred method of internalizing spiritual wisdom and achieving union with the divine.

The roots of this tradition trace back to Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of Sikhism, who introduced the concept of expressing divine revelation through melodic poetry. His hymns were sung aloud, often accompanied by his lifelong companion Bhai Mardana Ji on the Rabab. This initiated a living tradition of Rabab accompanied Kirtan that continued with the successive Gurus. Recognising the transformative power of music, the later Gurus developed new string instruments to support the musical rendition of Gurbani. Among these were the Saranda (introduced by Guru Amar Das Ji), the Taus (invented by Guru Hargobind Ji), and the Dilruba (Created by Guru Gobind Singh Ji, as a lighter more portable version of the Taus).

During the Guru period, many accomplished Rababis (musician-devotees) were entrusted with the responsibility of performing Kirtan in the Guru's court. Notable names include Bhai Sadhu Ji and Bhai



Badhu Ji (Descendants of Bhai Mardana Ji), Bhai Satta Ji and Bhai Balwand Ji during Guru Ramdas Ji's time and Bhai Mukand Ji and Bhai Kidara Ji during the Guru Arjan Dev Ji's era. Guru Gobind Singh Ji also maintained this tradition with the support of Rababis such as Bhai Abdulla Ji and Bhai Natha Ji, who performed Kirtan as central component of spiritual and communal life.

Even after the conclusion of the Guru period, the tradition of Kirtan with string instruments survived through dedicated musical lineages. However, with time and changing socio-political landscapes, especially during and after colonial rule, the prominence of traditional instruments like the Taus began to decline. Amidst this gradual fading of the original the Sikh musical tradition, certain individual emerged in the modern era who took it upon themselves to revive and protect this endangered heritage.

Among these, Bhai Avtar Singh Ji stands out as one of the most revered figures of the 20th century. Belonging to an unbroken lineage of Kirtanias that traces its roots to the time Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji, Bhai Avtar Singh Ji represented the eleventh generation in his family devoted to the service of Gurbani Kirtan. His performances were marked by strict adherence to classical Raag Vidya, impeccable pronunciation of Gurbani and the use of the Taus, thus re-establishing a deep connection with the historical and spiritual ethos of Gurmat Sangeet.

This research paper seeks to explore and critically analyze the life, musical contributions, and pedagogical legacy of Bhai Avtar Singh Ji, with a particular focus on his role in preserving the Taus based Kirtan tradition. Through historical research, oral testimonies, and musical analysis, the study aims to highlight the cultural and spiritual significance of his work, and to reflect on the broader implications of preserving intangible heritage within Sikh devotional practice.

Research Objectives

- To document the familial lineage of Bhai Avtar Singh Ji and its historical continuity in performing Kirtan with the Taus from the era of Sri Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji.
- To critically analyze the musical style, Raag-based compositions, and Dhrupad influence in Bhai Avtar Singh Ji's Kirtan performances.
- To examine Bhai Avtar Singh Ji's pedagogical contributions and efforts in mentoring a new generation of musicians committed to Gurmat Sangeet.
- To assess the cultural and spiritual significance of Bhai Avtar Singh Ji's revival of the Taus tradition within the broader context of intangible Sikh musical heritage.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach to investigate the tradition of Kirtan performed with the Taus instrument in Bhai Avtar Singh Ji's family, as well as his personal contributions to this musical heritage. A combination of primary and secondary data collection method was used employed to ensure the credibility and depth of the study.

Primary data was collected through structured and semi-structured interviews, conducted both in person and via telephone, with individuals knowledgeable about Bhai Avtar Singh Ji and the Taus tradition. Informal conversations and oral histories were also used to gather nuanced perspectives.

Secondary data sources included a thorough review of existing literature such as historical texts, previous research papers, published books, academic journals, and archival recordings. Additional credible online databases and digital resources were utilized to support and contextualize the primary findings.



By integrating these various research methods, the study aims to present a comprehensive and historically grounded understanding of the subject.

Study Area

Bhai Avtar Singh Ji was a distinguished and influential Raagi of the 20th century, known for his significant contributions to the preservation and propagation of Gurmat Sangeet, particularly through the use of the Taus- a traditional string instrument. He was born on January 8, 1926, in the village of Saidpur, located in the Kapurthala district of Punjab. His father, Bhai Juwala Singh Ji, was a prominent Raagi who also performed Kirtan using the Taus. His mother, Mata Ranjot Kaur, belonged to a devout Sikh household that upheld and supported the tradition of Gurbani Kirtan.¹

The tradition of performing Kirtan with the Taus in Bhai Avtar Singh Ji's family can be traced back to the era of the sixth SikhGurus, Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji. This musical heritage was transmitted orally, generation after generation, with Bhai Avtar Singh Ji representing the eleventh generation in this sacred lineage.²

From an early age, Bhai Avtar Singh Ji began his musical journey under the guidance of his father. He initially participated in Kirtan programs by playing auxiliary instruments alongside his father's Jatha (ensemble). At the age of approximately five, he commenced formal training on the Taus, and by the age of eleven, around the year 1937, he gave his first public performance in Lahore, accompanying his father in a Kirtan recital. Following this debut, Bhai Avtar Singh Ji consistently performed in various Kirtan programs across different regions, gaining recognition for his deep commitment to the traditional forms of Sikh devotional music. He played a pivotal role in preserving the original Raaga- based recitation of Gurbani, as prescribed in the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. His style of Kirtan was deeply rooted in the classical Dhrupad tradition which emphasizes purity of Raaga and disciplined vocal expression.³

Throughout his career, Bhai Avtar Singh Ji not only remained steadfast in his adherence to musical and linguistic accuracy in the rendering of Gurbani but also actively worked to reconnect the Sikh community with its rich musical and spiritual legacy through the Taus. His contribution is regarded as vital in sustaining and reviving interest in traditional Gurmat Sangeet in the modern era.

Family Lineage and Musical Heritage of Bhai Avtar Singh Ji

Bhai Avtar Singh Ji's musical heritage traces back to the era of the third Sikh Guru, Sri Guru Amar Das Ji (1479-1574), with the family's tradition of performing Kirtan – a form of Sikh devotional music, being firmly established during the Fifth Sikh Guru, Sri Guru Arjan Dev Ji (1581-1606). This lineage of sacred music has been maintained across generations.⁴

The documented lineage begins with Bhai Kapoor Singh Ji in the 18th century, who performed Kirtan using classical string instruments such as the Taus and Saranda. His son, Bhai Rai Singh Ji, continued the family tradition by mentoring the next generation. Successors Bhai Gokha Singh Ji and Bhai Bhag Singh Ji further upheld this musical legacy. In the 19th century, Bhai Tahil Singh Ji and his son Bhai Deva Singh Ji actively promoted Kirtan with the Taus and Saranda, enriching Sikh devotional practices. Bhai Deva Singh Ji's son, Bhai Narayan Singh Ji, also contributed by preserving family's musical tradition. The tenth generation produced Bhai Juwala Singh Ji, a distinguished Raagi who excelled in Taus performance and trained his son, Bhai Avtar Singh Ji. Bhai Avtar Singh Ji carried this tradition forward for merely seven decades, performing Kirtan with the Taus and connected Sikh audiences to Sikh sacred music.⁵



Contribution to Kirtan Performance and Pedagogy

Bhai Avtar Singh Ji rendered a significant contribution to the tradition of Gurmat Sangeet (Sikh Sacred Music), both as a performer and a pedagogue. His formal engagement with Kirtan began in collaboration with his father, Bhai Juwala Singh Ji, with whom he performed from approximately 1936-1937 to 1946. During this formative decade, he not only participated in Kirtan using Taus- a bowed string instrument historically associated with Sikh musical heritage.

On February 8th, 1946, at the age of 20, Bhai Avtar Singh Ji performed independently for the first time, leading his own Kirtan ensemble. This performance was conducted in memory of Sant Baba Bhaag Singh Ji and marked the beginning of his career as distinguished solo Kirtaniya. While continuing his independent contributions, he also remained involved in prominent congregational Kirtan events alongside his father. Over the course of his career, Bhai Avtar Singh Ji had the distinction of performing with the Taus at many historically significant Sikh Shrines and Takhats. These included such as- Sri Harimandar Sahib, Sri Anandpur Sahib, Sri Paunta Sahib, Sri Keshgarh Sahib, Sri Hazoor Sahib, Sri Patna Sahib. Additionally, his musical service extended to major Gurudwaras under the administration of the Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee (DSGMC) including- Gurudwara Sis Ganj Sahib, Gurudwara Bangla Sahib, Gurudwara Rakab Ganj Sahib and other Gurudwaras of the Delhi region. Beyond these institutional venues, Bhai Avtar Singh Ji also brought the tradition of Taus accompanied Kirtan to a diverse range of communities throughout India, including in Assam, Kolkata, Bhopa Rai (near Ludhiana), Johal Bulena (near Ludhiana), Hoshiarpur, Tatanagar, Multan, Shimla, and at academic institutions such as the University of Delhi.⁶

In 1954, he was formally appointed as a Hazoori Raagi (Residential devotional singer) at Gurudwara Sis Ganj Sahib, a position he held with distinction. During his tenure, he continued to perform extensively, maintaining a regular presence at both local and National Kirtan events. In 1976, Bhai Avtar Singh Ji embarked on his first international tour to the United Kingdom, introducing global audiences to the Taus and reviving historical Sikh musical traditions. His performances abroad garnered widespread acclaim and were instrumental in strengthening the diasporic connections to Gurbani (Sikh Scripture) through music. Subsequent international tours followed in 1979, 1989, 2000 and 2006, including visits to the United States, Canada, France and Spain.⁷

In addition to his role as a performer, Bhai Avtar Singh Ji was deeply committed to the transmission of Gurmat Sangeet. He played a pivotal role in sustaining and revitalizing the Taus tradition by mentoring the next generation of musicians. His disciples include- Bhai Kulthar Singh (his son and currently Hazoori Raagi at Gurudwara Sis Ganj Sahib), Bhai Bikramjeet Singh Ji (Delhi), Dr. Inderjeet Singh Ji (Australia), Bibi Eksharan Kaur Ji (Delhi) and Bibi Bhawna Kaur Ji (Delhi).⁸

Awards and Recognitions

His exceptional service to Sikh devotional music recognized by multiple institutions through a series of prestigious awards and honors such as Special recognition by the Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee at Gurudwara Rakab Ganj Sahib (1980), Shiromani Raagi Award by the Government of Punjab, Chief Raagi Award DSGMC (1982), Gurmat Sangeet Honor from the Indian Council for Sikh Affairs (1983), First Shiromani Raagi Award by language department of the Government of Punjab (1984), Bhai Mardana Memorial Award (1996), Music Award from the Punjabi Sangeet Natak Academy, Chandigarh (2004) and Senior Fellowship from the Gurmat Sangeet Chair, Punjabi University (2005-06).⁹



Bhai Avtar Singh Ji's lifelong dedication to preserving and promoting the Sikh Musical heritage particularly through the revival of traditional instruments and the mentoring of future generations establishes him as one of the foremost figures in the history of Gurmat Sangeet.

Result and Discussion

Bhai Avtar Singh Ji's legacy is emblematic of individual agency of in cultural preservation, especially within the context of Sikh devotional music. His contributions emerge as pivotal during a time when traditional instruments such as the Taus were facing a rapid decline in usage and visibility, due to both colonial disruption and modernization. Through his mastery of Dhrupad based Kirtan and steadfast use of the Taus, Bhai Avtar Singh Ji revitalized the oral and spiritual landscape of Gurmat Sangeet by reintroducing an authentic sonic aesthetic rooted in the Guru's vision.

A critical analysis of his performances reveals a meticulous adherence to Raag Vidya (Knowledge of Raaga), showcasing a disciplined understanding of Sikh musical philosophy. His interpretation of Gurbani went beyond mere musicality; it was deeply infused with spiritual intension, aligning with the Gurus' directive of singing the divine word within the prescribed raagas. This approach helps re-establish the foundational principles of Gurmat Sangeet, which had often been overshadowed by simplified popularized versions of Kirtan in the post-colonial period.

Equally significant was his pedagogical role. Bhai Avtar Singh Ji not only performed extensively but also institutionalized his knowledge through teaching. His mentorship nurtured a new generation of Kirtan ensuring the continuity of the Taus tradition. In an era where oral transmission of musical heritage is vulnerable to erasure, his role as a teacher becomes just as crucial as his performances. The disciples trained under his guidance continue to serve as living vessels of this tradition, keeping intact the integrity of the musical and spiritual practices he upheld.

Furthermore, his international tours were strategic in building transnational awareness and appreciation of Gurmat Sangeet. By bringing the Taus and traditional Sikhraagas to global audiences, Bhai Avtar Singh Ji extended the cultural boundaries of this sacred art form. His role as a cultural ambassador not only elevated the profile of Sikh music on a global stage but also reconnected the diaspora authentic practices that may have otherwise been lost to assimilation.

Conclusion

Bhai Avtar Singh Ji's contribution to Sikh musical heritage is both profound and multifaceted. As a performer, he was a torch bearer a merely extinct instrumental tradition, reviving the Taus in the mainstream Kirtan practice. As a pedagogue, he laid the foundation for sustainable transmission of Gurmat Sangeet by training disciples who continue to uphold the spiritual and musical ethos of this tradition. As a cultural custodian, he re-established historical continuity between the teachings of the SikhGurus and contemporary practice through precise and devotional Raag-based Kirtan.

In safeguarding the Taus tradition and restoring its dignity within Sikh liturgical music, Bhai Avtar Singh Ji, not only preserved a musical form but also reaffirmed the spiritual discipline envisioned by the SikhGurus. His life and work served as a compelling case study in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, exemplifying how individual devotion and scholarship can resist cultural erosion and inspire revival. His enduring impact underscores the importance of conscious transmission and the role of tradition bearers in maintaining the sacredness of religious music.



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