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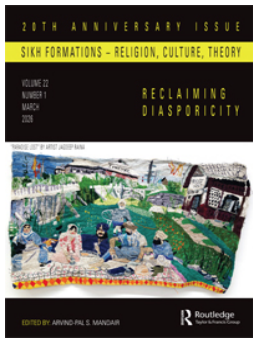
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## Sikh Kirtan & its journeys: Instruments, theories, technologies

by Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2025, i-xx and 333 pp., 101.26 (hardcover), 32.50 (paperback), \$30.87 (kindle), ISBN – 13: 978-0-226-84595-1

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Sikh Kirtan & its journeys: Instruments, theories, technologies**, by Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2025, i–xx and 333 pp., 101.26 (hardcover), 32.50 (paperback), \$30.87 (kindle), ISBN – 13: 978-0-226-84595-1

Gurminder Kaur Bhogal's *Sikh Kirtan & Its Journeys: Instruments, Theories, Technologies* is a delightful book, breaking new ground in the field of Sikh musicology. It offers much needed analysis of the sonic dimensions of the Sikh scripture, and the evolution of Sikh devotional practices over the last five centuries. Bhogal describes the purpose of her study succinctly as follows:

All this is to say that this book has taken many journeys – literal, virtual, metaphorical, and emotional – before arriving at its current form ... In grappling with many different forms of knowledge from a multi-migrant perspective, *Sikh Kirtan and Its Journeys* situates Sikh *kirtan* [devotional music] within a whole world of theories and practices (p. 25).

Any serious reader will be thrilled to see her engagement with multiple theoretical frameworks originating from the musical traditions of South Asia and the West. Let me offer a brief examination of each chapter in the following paragraphs.

The first chapter offers an expert analysis of the musical and sonic dimensions of Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS). Notably, the Figure 1.2 beautifully portrays the progression of the thirty-one pure (*shud*) and thirty-one hybrid or compound melodic modes (*mishrat rāg*) of SGGS (29). Bhogal compellingly argues that Sikh sacred verse is characteristically manifested through silent recitation, intoned delivery, and devotional song. Accordingly, *rāg* contributes to the structural organization of SGGS and, through close study of verse titles, we can see how *rāg* informs the content and expressive delivery of the verse (67). Further, the division of twenty-four-hour period into eight watches (*pehar*) and their intersection with the main eight musical sittings (*chaunki*) established by Guru Arjan at the Darbar Sahib (the present-day Golden Temple of Amritsar) is illustrated in Figure 1.4 (36), which Bhogal states that she has worked this out from my several works (277, n. 33).

Furthermore, the discussion of the enigmatic category *ghar* (45–51) in the first chapter provides us with various explanations given by scholars in the past, including her own very interesting digital analysis in Table 1.1, Table 1.2, Table 1.3 and Table 1.4 (48–50). Concluding her arguments, however, Bhogal recognizes that ‘the meaning of *ghar* remains opaque’ for her, suggesting that this ‘missing piece of the puzzle’ needs further research by exploring early manuscripts. The final sections of this chapter address the questions: How should *kirtan* be listened to and what does *kirtan* do for those who experience it? Bhogal skillfully argues that the act of listening, hearing, and audition highlights a cyclic, processual model where an externally produced music (*āhat nād*) generates an internally experienced vibration (*anahad nād*) that attunes the listener to divinity and promotes social activism through *seva* or self-giving service (67).

The second chapter is focused on the issue of tracking harmonium from Christian missionary hymns to Sikh *kirtan*. In a decolonizing process, the SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Kametti, ‘Chief Management Committee of Sikh Shrines’) reintroduced string 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 *chauṁkī* system at the Darbar Sahib’ (*Sikhnet* 2011). On 5 May 2022, however, a

*gurmata* ('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 string instruments. This declared ban set the stage for Bhogal to provide historical and cultural context for understanding how the harmonium made its way into Sikh *kirtan*.

By examining a range of primary sources from missionary literature Bhogal argues that native musicians adapted harmonium to suit their expressive needs, while using it alongside existing instruments. She further states that female missionaries and Mirasi played a central role in bringing this instrument into the Indian soundscape and into *kirtan*. Undoubtedly, the decolonizing process has led to a growing tension between practitioners who seek to banish the harmonium in attempts to revive and restore traditional string instruments (*tantī sāz*) and those who see a more inclusive future that acknowledges the important contributions of the harmonium to *kirtan* (109). Therefore, Bhogal stresses the need to use caution in the move to replace the harmonium with string instruments, which is not an easy task because of multiple factors:

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 (104).

The third chapter offers a sophisticated analysis of a mystical subject 'Anahad Nād and the Sonic Embodiment of Divinity.' This is indeed an original contribution by the author to explore it 'in conversation with intellectual companions across a range of fields, including indigenous studies, sound studies, voice studies, sensory studies, ecomusicology, and global transfer and hybridity' (114). Bhogal draws widely from Sikh sources, including the life stories of Sikh practitioners. Offering her theory of *Anahad Nād*, she begins with an episode of Bhai Hira Singh Ragi (1879–1926), who secretly performed *kirtan* all by himself during his Shimla trip at midnight when one of the organizers (*sevadār*) heard a faint voice coming from the mountains. The *sevadār* made his way into the mountains and found Bhai Hira Singh immersed in *kirtan* with closed eyes. Afterward, the *sevadār* asked Bhai Hira Singh two questions: Why had he retreated into the mountains to sing *kirtan* in the middle of night all alone, and why, in the midst of singing, did he sometimes stop for long periods of time? Bhai Hira Singh's response was that 'the *kirtan* he does during the day is for the *sangat* ['Sikh congregation'] who give him love and money but that the *kirtan* he does at night, at the feet of Guru Nanak, is for Guru Nanak. Whatever the Guru gives to him at that moment is his own wealth, which allows him to perform *kirtan* for the *sangat*.' He further told that during the moments of his silences he was not quiet but listening to the reverberations of *Gurbani* in a state of intense focus and awareness (*surti*) where his outward silence was answered inwardly for many hours by the loving sounds of the divine one's consciousness. This story highlights a uniquely Sikh notion of *anahad nād* where *kirtan* mediates between an outward and an inward experience of sacred sound (115).

The most interesting section of the third chapter relates to the critical commentaries of Bhai Vir Singh (1872–1957) and Bhai Randhir Singh (1878–1961), the two contemporary scholars 'whose perspectives, although contrasting in some ways, are also complimentary in that they transform existing discussions of *rāg* and *kirtan* in relation to embodied perceptions of *Anahad nād*' (118). Bhogal recognizes Bhai Vir Singh's contribution in two areas: first, in its original aesthetic evaluation of *kirtan*; second, in how it draws connections

between *kirtan* and *anahad nād* through the role of *rāg*. For Bhai Vir Singh, *rāg* is of divine origin, which has the intrinsic quality to link consciousness to divinity. Thus, a musical education focused on vocal training and access to high-quality instruments is essential to experiencing the intensity of *nād* (119). By contrast, Bhai Randhir Singh was a folk singer who did not consider *rāg* to be the only conduit to an aesthetic and ecstatic delight of the senses (*amrit ras* or *har ras*). He proclaimed: ‘When we become absorbed in divine color [*raṅg*], and when *kirtan* is begun in this realm of divine color, the hidden raag reveal themselves to us (*supharan*) on their own.’ Once when a member of the *sangat* praised Bhai Randhir Singh’s delivery of *kirtan* in *rāg Bilawal*, saying that he had never experienced such feeling of bliss (*anand*) upon hearing this *rāg* from other musicians. Bhai Randhir Singh wrote, ‘Upon listening, I laughed in my mind and was surprised because I didn’t even know which raag is known as Bilawal, how it is sung, or even what time of the day.’ Bhogal concludes that Bhai Randhir Singh’s emphasis on bodily attunement to the divine *shabad* (through *kirtan* and recitation) stands at odds with Bhai Vir Singh’s emphasis on pedagogy and training as powerful vehicles for initiating what he called *sookham ras* or ‘subtle aesthetic bliss’ (121).

To vouchsafe the truth of above narrative, I want to share my personal knowledge of an event. My own schoolteacher Master Jaswant Singh, who used to accompany Bhai Randhir Singh at *kirtan* programs, told me a story of a special all-night (*rain sabāi*) Kirtan Darbar at Lahore before the Partition of India, in which all the famous Sikh musicians and *rababis* participated. At the end of the program, all musicians praised Bhai Randhir Singh’s rendering of a *shabad* (*māhu jēthu bhalā prītamū kiurū visarai*// ‘The month of Jeth is so sublime. How could I forget my Beloved?’) in *rāg Tukhārī*. My teacher asked Bhai Randhir Singh: ‘Bhai Sahib, did we perform *kirtan* in *rāg Tukhārī*?’ Bhai Randhir Singh said: ‘Jaswant Singh, when I close my eyes and offer prayers before starting *kirtan*, the *rāgas* and *rāginis* appear with folded hands to offer their services.’ In the last sections of the third chapter, Bhogal competently distinguishes the Sikh experience of the *dasam dwar* (‘tenth door,’ an opening at the crown of the head that allows the consciousness to merge with divinity) from the *hath yoga* techniques and highlights the *chautha pad* (‘fourth state,’ the deepest state of mediation) and timbral resonance of *panch shabad* (‘five sacred sounds,’ a voluminous blend of heterogenous timbres that signal different instruments). In particular, illustration in Figure 3.6 illuminates Bhai Vir Singh’s and Bhai Randhir Singh’s models of divine sound (*nād*) set in parallel against the five stages of spiritual ascent outlined in SGGS, showing that the ultimate goal of both these mystic scholars was the same to arrive at the home of Ultimate Reality (*sach khand*, ‘Realm of Truth’).

The fourth chapter adroitly examines intrinsic quality of certain musical instruments in creating divine reverberations in the deepest state of meditation called the ‘fourth state’ (*chautha pad*). Bhogal thoroughly examines the works of the Gurus and the poet-saints in the SGGS to offer an extended exploration of the following instruments associated with the spiritual journey that *kirtan* facilitates and enacts: *bheri* (a single-headed kettle drum, cultivating royal aura), *ghungroo* (small tinkling bells), *kartal* (wooden clappers), *mridang/pakhawaj* (the double-faced drum), *tura* (a heavy, brass or copper instrument associated with martial sensibility), *sinyi* (animal horn, usually made of buffalo horn, but the horns of the deer and ox are also used), *bayn* (bamboo flute), *kinguri* (bowed chordophone), and *rabab* (plucked chordophone). These are listed as *anahad* instruments because of their internally experienced vibration (*anahad nād*) that attunes the listener to divinity. Among these instruments, however, the *rabab* enjoys a particular place of honor in Sikh iconography, depicting Bhai Mardana playing *rabab* to accompany Guru Nanak in devotional singing (Figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4). Bhogal presents *rabab* as the ‘first instrument of Sikh *kirtan* and its pervasive presence across all manner of Sikh visual media.’ She meticulously describes

different types of *rabab* (*Afghani rabab*, *Mughal rabab*, *Persian rabab*, *Indian rabab*, *dhrupad rabab*, *rabab sikandari*, *Firanda rabab*, *seniya rabab* and *Nanakshahi rabab*) mentioned in the Persian, Indian, Mughal and *Janam-sakhi* sources, their physical structures and their playing positions available in Sikh iconography. Finally, Bhogal concludes this chapter with her main hypothesis that ‘a focus on Sikh art allows the relationship between *ahat* and *anahad nād* to be examined from the new vantage point of the halo, which is tied to the notion of *dasam dwar* in the Sikh context’ (183). Here, the halo represents symbolically an external marker of an internal attunement to the divine one, an idealized state of unceasing corporeal vibration (180).

The fifth chapter carefully studies the role of digital media in enhancing the impact of *kirtan* in transforming the lives of Sindhi Sikhs in a collective manner. Bhogal features the activities of Amritvela Trust established in Ulhasnagar in Maharashtra in India as a case study. The main force behind the establishment of this Trust has been the influential figure of Bhai Gurpreet Singh (Rinku Veer Ji) who was inspired by Baba Kundan Singh (1925–2002) of Nanaksar Kaleran in Punjab to preach the message of Guru Nanak within the large Sindhi Sikh community settled in Maharashtra after their displacement from Sindh at the time of Partition of India in 1947. Bhogal elucidates how the Trust organizers innovatively adapted Bluetooth headphone technology for the purpose of early morning recitation of *gurmantar* (Vahiguru! Vahiguru!) and *kirtan* that facilitates an unprecedented experience of *anahad nād*: one that is carefully engineered in the outer realm to facilitate conscious meditation in the inner realm (218). Particularly, the forty-day *chaliya*, which commemorates the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak every year through a daily gathering of thousands of devotees during the early morning hours at an outdoor field in Ulhasnagar, displays how this innovative *kirtan* transports twenty-first century minds and bodies to the celestial realm through a means of inversion. Bhogal maintains that devotees participate in a cross-modal experience of worship, as their senses are stimulated by a mesmerizing display of light, color, sound, texture, fragrance, and taste. She concludes that the vibration of these individual elements in parallel with and through one another facilitates an experience of divinity that is rooted in community and whose transformative and lasting impact is seen through Amritvela Trust’s dedication to caring for their community through various forms of selfless service (219).

The sixth and closing chapter addresses the digital journeys of *kirtan* by pursuing innovation and gender equality. Bhogal employs insights from ethnographic methods such as participant observation and the open-ended interview method to show how digital innovators use their skills in composition, arrangements, performance, recording, and production to create an experience of *kirtan* that allows listeners to forge personal links to *Gurbani*. In her five major interviews she describes how each *kirtaniya* crafts a distinctive sound world and timbral profile: Jasleen Kaur mediates between *Gurmat Sangeet* and a semi-classical or contemporary Bollywood style, while Taren Kaur is firmly based in a Western pop aesthetic. Both Veer Manpreet Singh and Shivpreet Singh follow an approach of a *slow kirtan* because of their mutual efforts to create a wholly immersive experience of *Gurbani* by savoring the nuanced meaning of each word and line through repetition and contemplation over an extended period. On the other hand, Bhai Nirmal Singh Khalsa (Pipli Wale) was inspired by the success of Pakistan’s collaborative music platform, Coke Studio; and therefore, he presents a contemporary take on *kirtan* within an ‘aesthetic intimacy,’ a phenomenon observed by Annar Desai-Stephens but tweaked toward devotional ends by Khalsa. Notably, these five *kirtaniye* have a vibrant live and digital presence. Bhogal further addresses some thorny issues surrounding the biases and discrimination that female *kirtaniye* continue to face when they are not allowed to perform at the Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple of Amritsar) and some major historical *Gurudwara* in Punjab. For female *kirtaniye*, she argues, social media platforms have

become a refuge, ‘where the digital terrain offers endless possibilities for innovation and distribution without attempts at censoring or control’ (222).

Before I conclude my review of this very important book on Sikh musicology, I must point out some claims and interpretations that will require reconsideration. First, the author maintains that ‘Guru Arjan, the fifth Guru, had employed the brothers Bhai Satta and Bhai Balwand (descendants of Bhai Mardana) in his court’ (xvi-xvii). The assumption of Satta and Balwand as ‘brothers’ and ‘descendants of Bhai Mardana’ is questionable. There is no early evidence to confirm this familial relationship. If there is some new evidence, it should be discussed. Rāi Balwaṇḍ belonged to the clan of Bhaṭṭs among the high-class versifiers of Muslim society, while Sattā belonged to the family of Ḍūms or Mirāsīs who were hereditary minstrels and genealogists among the lower class of Muslims. Rāi Balwaṇḍ joined as a *rabābī* in the Sikh court during Guru Angad’s reign at the instance of Guru Nanak himself, and internal scriptural evidence clearly states that the first three stanzas (*paurīs*) of the ballad in *Rāmakaḷī* mode were composed by him to describe the historical events of that period. On the other hand, Sattā was both a drummer and a *rabāb*-player who joined Rāi Balwaṇḍ much later to perform in the Sikh court; and he composed the remaining stanzas of the ballad entitled *Rāmakaḷī Kī Vār Rāi Balwaṇḍ Tathā Sattai Ḍūm Ākhī* (‘Ballad uttered by Rāi Balwaṇḍ and Sattā the Ḍūm in the *Rāmakaḷī* mode,’ SGGS, 966–968). The Punjabi word *ākhī* indicates that it was used to be recited at the time of coronation of each Guru’s succession to the throne of Guru Nanak. That is why it is popularly known as the ‘Ballad of Coronation’ (*Ṭikke Dī Vār*) in Sikh literature.

Second, Bhogal claims that ‘Guru Arjan picked up his thirty-one *rāg* very carefully’ (34). Actually, the *Kartarpur Pothi* compiled under Guru Arjan’s direct supervision in 1604 CE contains only thirty *rāg*, beginning with *rāg Siri* and ending with *rāg Prabhati*. The final *rāg Jaijawanti* was the contribution of the ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621–1675), and his works were added to the original compilation by the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708) at the instance of his father. Bhogal retrospectively includes the thirty-first *rāg Jaijawanti* in Guru Arjan’s selection process. Third, Bhogal writes that ‘Guru Arjan’s visits to Varanasi and Agra were “intended to study the various conventions of Sanskrit learning”’ (46). Guru Arjan did not visit Varanasi and Agra for this purpose. Rather, it was Bhai Gurdas who went to these two centers of learning to become proficient in Sanskrit literature, Braj Bhasha, and contemporaneous regional traditions along with another scribe Jagna Brahmin who was the resident of Agra. Finally, the translation of *chaur sahib* as ‘fly whisk’ (202) is problematic since it reduces the royal dignity of the Sikh court (*darbar*). It should always be translated as ‘royal whisk.’ Let me make it clear that these minor corrections do not diminish the integrity of an otherwise exceptional work.

In sum, Gurminder Kaur Bhogal’s *Sikh Kirtan & Its Journeys* is a landmark in the field of Sikh musicology, setting the gold standard for future scholars to follow in their research. Written in lucid and accessible style this study will be of general interest to students, scholars, and lay people alike. Her interdisciplinary and pluralistic approach reflects her erudition and comprehensive understanding of sources. Thus, her book deserves a place in the personal libraries of Sikh families in addition to public and academic institutions.

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