

# **Gurbani's Musical Mediums**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the role of instruments within the Gurmat Sangeet tradition and how this role is evolving over time. Specifically, this research will analyze the instrument types that have traditionally been utilized in Sikhi, and why these instrument types have changed as society has come closer to the modern era. Throughout the paper, five main sections can be observed. The first will introduce the reader to Gurmat Sangeet as well as the overall structure of Guru Granth Sahib Ji. In this section, the reader will gain a basic knowledge of how Indian Classical Music has been adapted into Sikhi to create the practice of Gurmat Sangeet. The second section will then take a closer look at the fundamental role that Gurmat Sangeet has played within Sikhi. Next, the third and fourth sections will deepen the reader's knowledge of traditional Gurmat Sangeet instruments and explain the types of changes that have progressed in the instruments that Sikhs have used over time. Individually, the third section will discuss classic Gurmat Sangeet instruments, and the fourth will discuss non-traditional instruments that have been incorporated into the Gurmat Sangeet tradition. Ultimately, the main focus of this paper is the changes that have transpired in the instruments that Sikhs use. The fifth section will talk through the implications of these changes. By observing musical trends throughout time, a better understanding of how one's circumstances change musical developments can be obtained.

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## **1. Introduction**

Since Guru Nanak Dev Ji first revealed Sikhi to the world in the fifteenth century, the succeeding Sikh Gurus, as well as Bhagats, and Saints have written Bani, or holy scriptures, detailing the teachings of Sikhi. Together, these spiritual hymns were compiled to form Guru Granth Sahib Ji: the eleventh and eternal Guru of the Sikhs.

### **1.1 Pre-raag, raag, post-raag sections**

Within Guru Granth Sahib Ji, there is a very clear and concise manner of organizing Bani. With a quick glance, it can be seen that there are three overarching sections each with their own subsections. These three sections - consecutively - are as follows: the pre-raag, raag, and post-raag sections.<sup>1</sup> In order to understand these sections, it is first essential to know about the connection that lies between Gurbani's teaching and Indian Classical Music: Gurmat Sangeet. As a way of reciting the teachings within Gurbani, Sikhs have used instruments and techniques from Indian Classical Music to sing Bani. As a result, the holy scriptures within Gurbani become devotional hymns or Shabads. Apart from Shabads, Guru Granth Sahib Ji contains Sikh prayers, or Paath, which can either be recited or sung with accompanying instruments. Bani can be used as an umbrella term for both Shabads and Paath. Bani incorporates the raag system which is essentially the basis of all Indian Classical Music. A raag is a combination of different notes that

results in creating a certain emotion within the listener. Therefore, when we look at the three different sections of Guru Granth Sahib Ji, we can see that the raag section was written with a clear raag in mind, meant to be sung a certain way. The pre-raag and post-raag sections on the other hand, are able to be sung in any raag. All of Bani however, does not need to be sung, and can also be recited out loud.

## **1.2 Shudh and Mishrat Raags**

Within Gurmat Sangeet, though, most Sikh scholars can come to a consensus that there are sixty two raags in Guru Granth Sahib Ji. Furthermore, thirty one of these raags are considered shudh raags while the remaining thirty one are mishrat raags.<sup>2</sup> Shudh, meaning “pure,” raags are completely unique in their nature; they have no influence from other raags and are considered foundational raags. Mishrat raags on the other hand, are mixed, meaning that they are derived from shudh raags. There are three ways in which a mishrat raag can be derived from a shudh raag; mishrat raags are either a mix of two shudh raags, a structural variation of a shudh raag, or a geographical variation of a shudh raag.<sup>2</sup>

## **1.3 Shabad structure**

Both shudh and mishrat raags are found in Gurbani. Essentially, the majority of Shabads and Bani revealed by the Gurus are assigned a certain raag that they should be played in. As covered earlier, raags are meant to evoke certain emotions and are meant for specific times of day.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the raags chosen for Bani correlate the messages of the Shabads with emotions that enhance the meaning. The binding of one’s emotions to a spiritual message facilitates the ability of individuals to resonate with the Shabad, as well as better understand remember what the Bani is saying.

Throughout Guru Granth Sahib Ji, there is a certain organizational structure implemented so as to not cause any confusion. Bani within Guru Granth Sahib Ji begins with a sirlekh, or a title. Within the sirlekh, three items can be found: the intended raag, the style of singing, and the author of the Bani.<sup>3</sup>

Another essential part of Bani is the Rahao line. In any given Shabad, there can be either one or two Rahao lines that represent the main idea of a Shabad. When there are two Rahao lines in a Shabad, the first line introduces conflict, and the second one offers a resolution to said conflict.<sup>3</sup> Aside from the Rahao line, other lines of the Shabad support the main idea of a Shabad, perhaps going more in-depth or providing specific analogies. All of the stanzas of a Shabad are numbered to retain the accuracy of Gurbani, to ensure that there could not be any changes made to Gurbani. In general, the organizational details of Gurbani prevent anyone from altering Guru Granth Sahib Ji in any way, shape, or form.<sup>3</sup>

## **1.4 Introduction to raag**

Although raag has been previously mentioned in this paper, there are other important factors that deserve a mention. To reiterate, raags are a combination of musical notes that are created to evoke certain emotions.<sup>2</sup>

## **1.5 Aaroh and Avroh**

Every raag - both mishrat and shudh - has an ascending scale of notes as well as a descending scale of notes. These notes come from the Indian Classical Music scale, and are essentially rearranged into different patterns to create all raags. The ascending scale of a raag is known as the aaroh, and the descending scale is known as the avroh. Together these scales create the patterns that define a raag.<sup>4</sup>

## **1.6 Music Theory**

There is, however, more specific terminology within the realm of scales that can help us classify and categorize raags in detail. The vadi for example, refers to the note that is used the most frequently throughout a raag. The samvadi, is the second most frequently used note in a raag. After the vadi and samvadi, all other remaining notes used in that raag are known as the anuvadi. The Jaati is a term that simply tells one how many notes are present in both the aroh and avroh of a raag. Raags that share some similarities throughout their patterns can all be related to one of ten parent raags. These parent raags are known as thaats and consist of bilaval thaat, kalyan thaat, marva thaat, poorvi thaat, bhairavi thaat, asavari thaat, khamaaj thaat, and bhairavi thaat.<sup>4</sup>

Altogether the culmination of Indian Classical Music and the Guru's Bani can be clearly seen by the name of Gurmat Sangeet. Guru Granth Sahib Ji heavily relies on the usage of raag to inspire certain emotions within one.

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## **2. Gurmat Sangeet and Raag**

### **2.1 Contributions to Gurbani**

Over time, Bani from Gurus, Bhagats, Bhattas, and other Gursikhs was gathered until Guru Granth Sahib Ji as it is known today was compiled. Amongst the Gurus, the first five Sikh Gurus as well as the ninth Sikh Guru, contributed Bani to Guru Granth Sahib Ji: Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Guru Angad Dev Ji, Guru Amardas Ji, Guru Ramdas Ji, Guru Arjan Dev Ji, and Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji.<sup>5</sup>

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## **3. Traditional Gurmat Sangeet Instruments**

### **3.1 The Origins of Gurmat Sangeet**

Seeing as how a foundational understanding of raag, and Guru Granth Sahib Ji, and Gurmat Sangeet has been fixed, one may be wondering how Bani is sung. The tunes that Sikhs sing Bani in are of course within a certain raag, and typically these tunes are derived from traditional Indian folk tunes. Along with singing a Shabad, the voice will be accompanied by instruments.

Throughout the Gurmat Sangeet tradition, it has been commonplace to accompany one's singing voice with an instrument. Specifically, this phenomenon can be traced back to Guru Nanak Dev Ji's time.

In the early 16th century, Guru Nanak Dev Ji strove to spread the message of Sikhi far and wide, and as a result, he embarked on five Udasis or spiritual journeys. From 1500 to 1524, Guru Nanak Dev Ji spent nearly twenty five years traveling by foot, primarily throughout Asia but also reaching parts of the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> Throughout these Udasis, Guru Nanak Dev Ji was accompanied by his faithful ally, Bhai Mardana, who he met as a child in his village. Bhai Mardana was a very devout believer in Guru Nanak Dev Ji's teachings, and as a result was eager to accept Guru Nanak Dev Ji's invitation to join him on his Udasis. Bhai Mardana was a very gifted musician, who had begun playing the rabab - a bowed string instrument - as a young child. As Guru Nanak Dev Ji traveled, he would sing Bani everywhere he went and Bhai Mardana would play the rabab along with Guru Nanak Dev Ji's singing, thus beginning the tradition of incorporating instrumentals into Shabad Kirtan.<sup>7</sup>

As Sikhi began its spread, it became the norm to sing Shabad Kirtan with some sort of instrument. The instruments that were commonplace in Kirtan became known as Gurmat Sangeet Instruments. These instruments are traditional and authentic to Sikhi. They have been embedded in the history of the Sikh Guru's, and therefore hold a lot of significance in the Sikh Tradition. Generally, these instruments can be classified into two defining categories; percussion instruments and bowed/ string instruments.

### **3.2 Percussion Instruments**

Percussion instruments serve a very important purpose in Gurmat Sangeet as well as music in general. Percussion is crucial for keeping rhythm and beat throughout a composition, regardless of what type of composition it may be. In this way, the role of a percussion instrument within Gurmat Sangeet is very similar to the role a percussion instrument would hold in any other realm of music. When looking at the specific types of percussion instruments within Gurmat Sangeet, it is important to recognize the Pakhawaj as well as the Jodi.

The Pakhawaj<sup>3</sup> is a drum originating from North India that is the first of its kind within the region. Although not as popular now due to the rise of other percussion instruments, it is still a well-admired instrument that was integral in sparking interest around percussion instruments within India. One of the pakhawaj's main defining features is its barrel-like shape with two drum heads on either end. When it comes to the making of these instruments, they were previously made out of clay, but in modern times the pakhawaj has been constructed from wood. The parchment drum heads on either end of the pakhawaj produce sounds at differing pitches. Overall, the instrument is known for creating sounds that are deep as well as rich.<sup>8</sup>

The other percussion instrument surely worth mentioning in the realm of Gurmat Sangeet is the Jodi, created by Guru Arjan Dev Ji - the fifth Sikh Guru. The Jodi originates from the North Indian region of Punjab. The word Jodi means pair, which is fitting for this instrument. Rather than taking on the form of a two-headed drum like the pakhawaj, the jodi actually consists of two separate drums, created by splitting the pakhawaj in half. These two drums differ from one another however. One is called the poorha and it is capable of producing a resonating sound at a pitch that is more middleground. The dhama on the other hand, is the second drum and creates a low and deep sound. The Jodi is created out of wood and animal skin.<sup>9</sup> The Jodi is known for deep sounds that are very powerful.

### **3.3 Bowed/ String Instruments**

String instruments also hold a very important role in Gurmat Sangeet. They accompany one's voices, adding depth and character to a Shabad. It creates more dimension. It is important however, to emphasize that the words of Gurbani are never overshadowed by any instruments. The purpose of the instruments is to enhance the experience one has when absorbing the message of the Guru's Bani.

There is a large multitude of string instruments within the Gurmat Sangeet Tradition. The rabab as mentioned before, has played an absolutely essential role in the way we know Keertan today. The rabab, famously played by Bhai Mardana on Guru Nanak Dev Ji's Udasis<sup>7</sup>, is an instrument that one plays by plucking. Since the rabab is a plucking instrument, it can be considered both a string instrument as well as a percussion instrument due to its ability to keep tempo.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, Bhai Mardana used the firanda rabab. Its small frame constructed of tann wood is what made it convenient for Bhai Mardana to take on his travels. The belly of the rabab is made of goat skin and its five strings are made from guts.<sup>9</sup> The Apart from the firanda rabab, the Afghani rabab also exists and differs in that frets are included in its design and it only has three main strings.<sup>9</sup> The rabab is known for its deep and resonant sounds, as well as its ability to keep rhythm within a composition. The rabab can be credited with the beginning of Gurmat Sangeet, and is a crucial instrument to know.

Another traditional Gurmat Sangeet string instrument is the saranda which was created by Guru Arjan Dev Ji in the late sixteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Unlike other popularly used string instruments, the saranda is more specific to Sikhi, and is not as commonly used in greater India.<sup>10</sup> It is a smaller instrument, carved out from a singular block of wood. It has three main gut strings, but around thirty three strings overall because the instrument also includes sympathetic strings.<sup>9</sup>

The sarangi is also a traditional Gurmat Sangeet instrument, but unlike its counterparts, it is much more ancient. No one knows quite when the instrument was created, but there are many speculations. In fact, the sarangi is the oldest bowing instrument that is still in use today.<sup>9</sup> It is constructed from tann wood and also features gut strings. A sound box derived from goat skin is also a part of the sarangis design, and serves the purpose of amplifying the sarangi. Although the Sarangi had been around for a while, it wasn't incorporated into Sikhi until the sixth Sikh Guru, Guru Hargobind Singh Ji, decided to utilize the instrument. The sarangi is known for its soulful and powerful voice.

Similarly to the saranda, there are other string instruments that were created by the Sikh Gurus. One of these instruments is the taus. The taus is believed to be created by Guru Hargobind Singh Ji, although some schools of thought believe that it was created by Guru Gobind Singh Ji.<sup>9</sup> It is a larger string instrument inspired by the peacock (taus is the Persian word for Peacock). It has four main strings, twenty frets, and seventeen sympathetic strings. Just like the sarangi, the taus contains a sound box made of goat skin.<sup>9</sup> It is also worth noting that the taus is carved out of a singular block of wood.<sup>10</sup> Other than the fact that they were both created by Sikh Gurus, the taus and saranda both instrument bellies are covered with goat skin.

Guru Gobind Singh Ji is actually responsible for the creation of two string instruments: the taus and the dilruba. Dilruba roughly translates to hear stealer and is essentially the smaller version of the taus. During times of war, soldiers were not able to carry a taus with them, thus the dilruba was created for its accessibility.<sup>9</sup> Both instruments are played the same way and share the same twenty one strings, the taus however, is generally much more ornate. Overall, it is mostly personal preference when it comes to the playing of these two instruments.

Finally, it is also important to mention one more instrument: the esraj. Many compare the esraj to the dilruba seeing as how they share many features with one another such as the fact that they are both fretted instruments with four main strings. In fact, the esraj was a result of the dilruba being modified slowly over time. The esraj however, has fewer sympathetic strings and is a relatively newer instrument. The esraj is a very melodic and calming instrument.<sup>11</sup>

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## **4. Instruments that have become incorporated into Gurmat Sangeet Overtime**

### **4.1 Changing Mediums**

For a substantial amount of time, Gurmat Sangeet relied on the previously mentioned variations of percussion and string instruments to complement the singing of Bani. These instruments were considered traditional and standard for the practice of Kirtan. As time has gone on however, new variations of instruments have become incorporated into Gurmat Sangeet and have even become more commonplace than some traditional instruments. Sikhs have also taken to using instruments completely outside of the realm of Indian Classical Music to play Kirtan. This phenomenon can be clearly demonstrated by instruments like the harmonium.

### **4.2 Harmonium**

In the late nineteenth century, the harmonium was introduced to the region of India. Originally created in Europe around the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century, the instrument consists of a keyboard paired with an accordion pump. Initially, the harmonium was created in hopes of

replicating the pipe organ in a more convenient way: similar to how the dilruba was created to be a more convenient version of the taus. The harmonium is very much box-like and is played sitting down, with one hand pumping the accordion while the other hand plays the black and white keys. The instrument itself creates a melody with brass-like notes. Shortly after its introduction to India, the harmonium became widely popularized throughout the country and was adapted by the Sikh population as well. Not only was the harmonium popularized in India, but it was commonly used worldwide due to the ease of playing the harmonium, regardless of one's experience playing musical instruments.<sup>12</sup> In today's day and age, it has become the norm to play harmonium along with Kirtan. In fact, the harmonium has become far more commonplace than any traditional gurmat sangeet instrument, highlighting how what has been considered the norm for Gurmat Sangeet has transformed throughout time.

#### **4.3 Western instruments**

In modern times, globalization has created access to a multitude of instruments, regardless of whether they are native to one's region or not. This has led to Sikhs all over the world developing musical talents in all areas. As a result, some of these Sikhs have even begun to learn Kirtan on instruments that are not tied to Gurmat Sangeet nor Indian classical music. For example, Sikhs have utilized western instruments like the violin, guitar, and piano to play Shabad Kirtan. It is also common to see Sikhs who utilize non-traditional gurmat sangeet instruments, taking to social media to post their Kirtan. In this way, Sikhs across the world are reaching a broader and more diverse audience with their Kirtan.

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## **5. The Implications of Drifting Away From Traditional Instruments**

As Sikhs begin developing their music skills in areas other than Indian Classical Music, there are definitely consequences. Whether these consequences are negative or positive is open to discussion, but nonetheless this phenomenon is not going anywhere anytime soon. Some believe that expanding one's musical talents into other music cultures is benign as there is beauty in music from all places. Others may fear that Sikhs are drifting away from their roots, and leaving behind their cultures or traditions.

Ultimately, it is undeniable that there are a multitude of changes occurring within the realm of Gurmat Sangeet and even Indian Classical Music. As history continues, it is important to acknowledge these changes and analyze the trends that have occurred over time. These changes can have positive impacts for us, as long as Sikhs also remember to honor and practice their own unique traditions that have been created by the Gurus.

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