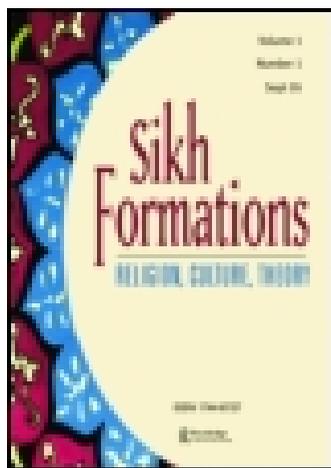


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# Francesca Cassio

## FEMALE VOICES IN GURBĀNĪ SANGĪT AND THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN PROMOTING FEMALE KĪRTANĪE<sup>†</sup>

*This paper discusses the performance of Gurbānī kīrtan rendered by female singers, an activity that is an integral part of the Sikh spiritual practice, yet at a professional level has always been considered a male domain.*

*The study is framed within the wider context of Indian traditional culture, analyzing the social norms that for centuries prevented women from public exposure in the fields of religious and classical music. In relation to the Sikh tradition, the author explores the variety of musical forms (classical and folk) adopted by female kīrtanīe for performing Gurbānī hymns, raising important issues about music education.*

*Based on ethnographic research among the community of contemporary kīrtanīe, the article explores the key role of media in promoting female performers during the last three decades, through dedicated TV and radio shows, social networks and web sites. In the author's analysis, each decade has brought about radical shifts in the strategies of production and perception of Gurbānī kīrtan, opening up new opportunities for performance by female kīrtanīe.*

The performance of *Gurbānī kīrtan* is one of the core practices of the Sikh tradition, and it entails the singing of spiritual hymns. As transmitted in the holy book, the *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib* (SGGS), most of these hymns have been set to modal melodies or *rāgas*<sup>1</sup> by the Sikh Masters, in a period of time dated between the late fifteenth and the early eighteenth centuries. Based on the medieval idiom of Hindustani<sup>2</sup> music, the repertoire of the Sikh tradition forms a genre focused on the *Gurū's bānī* (divine word). The concept of *Gurū's bānī* is a key aspect of the Sikh philosophy, akin to the notion of *śabad* (word) as *Gurū* (spiritual Master). As described by Mandair (2009, 359), this determines 'the primacy and the sovereignty of the text, the word/language-as-guru, whose function is to instruct and transform the self-ego of the reader/listener'.

Rather than describe it as a merely musical act, *kīrtan* would be better defined as a 'sonic event',<sup>3</sup> internally related, and totally dependent upon the nature of the *text* and its *context*. The performance of *kīrtan* is thus an integral part of the spiritual practice,

<sup>†</sup>I wish to dedicate this script to Sardarni Harbans Kaur, whose love for *Gurbānī kīrtan* inspired Dr Hakam Singh to establish the Chair in Sikh Musicology at Hofstra University, and to all the female *kīrtanīe* of the past, famous and unknown.

performed as a selfless service to the congregation, during the daily ceremonies held in Sikh temples, and anywhere the SGGS is present.

In a domestic context, the hymns from the Sikh Gurūs' tradition were rendered either by a male or a female singer, but at the professional level, until recent times, public *kīrtans* have always been performed by male musicians only. In terms of repertoire, this custom seems to have created a gap between the male *kīrtans* rendered in a classical way by the *rāgīs* (lit. knowers of *rāgas*), and the domestic performances given by women in a plain-folk style, accessible to singers who do not receive musical training.

Supported by ethnographic research among the community of contemporary *kīrtan singers*, the present study explores the social and cultural circumstances that contributed to produce this unspoken norm, as well as the sudden rise of female *kīrtanīe*<sup>4</sup> on the media scene (national TV and Radio) in the early 1980s. Starting from the case study of Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā (figure 1), I will discuss the key role of the media in promoting the image and music of the professional female *kīrtanīe* during the span of the last three decades. More recently, the phenomenon expanded with regular broadcasts of *kīrtans* performed by women on Panjābī private TV channels, echoed at a global level on social networks and websites. Framed within the history of women performers in India, this article aims to shed light on the female contributions to Sikh music, as well as on the social conditions that encouraged women into public participation in the practice of *kīrtan*. In addition, important questions about musical education and aesthetics are posed.

The present study is probably one of the first essays that locate women's contribution to *Gurbānī sangīt* in a historical and musicological perspective. Interestingly, in his pioneering accounts on the *rāgī* and *rabābī* tradition, Paintal (1971, 1978) did not mention women singing *kīrtan* at professional level. The only women quoted in his work were mothers, wives or sisters of deceased *kīrtanīe*. Although Ajit Paintal's analysis presents a number of controversial issues that are still debated by contemporary scholars (Khalsa 2012), his work – based on an ethnographic fieldtrip done in North India



**Figure 1.** Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā interviewed by the author. Ludhianā, August 2012 (photograph by Manprīt Singh).

between 1966 and 1970 – provides us with a picture of the *kīrtan* tradition during the second half of the twentieth century. From Paintal's work, we understand that either the female *kīrtan* practice was not en vogue at that time, or that the scholar did not consider female performances as significant as the renditions of *śabad kīrtan* done by male singers. In two sections of this article, I have attempted an analysis of the reasons why so far women did not have a public role in the *kīrtan* tradition.

Only recently some publications acknowledged the names of professional women in the field of *Gurbānī kīrtan*. This mirrors the growing importance of the issue among the community, as well as the increasing number of female performers supported by the media and new technologies.

The first book on contemporary female *kīrtanīe* was published in August 2013 by Bhāī Nirmal Singh Khālsā, a singer from the Golden Temple in Amritsar. The volume opens with a brief script on Mātā Sundrī (1671–1747), the tenth Sikh master's wife who was an accomplished *kīrtan* singer, followed by a collection of contemporary singers' biographies, listed without any alphabetical order or a historical criteria. Not only Bhāī Nirmal Singh Khālsā does not cover the gap of 250 years between Mātā Sundrī and the contemporary *kīrtanīe* tradition, but also many of the *kīrtan* singers who are mentioned in the publication were born in the last three decades, when the phenomenon of female *kīrtanīe* started on a large scale under the influence of the media.

Thus, I would like to begin the present article with some reflections on the role of media in promoting female *kīrtan* performers in the early 1980s.

### The first female Gurbānī singers' recordings, radio and TV shows

Between 1982 and 1983, Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā (b.1966) from Talwāra, accompanied by her two sisters, performed a series of *kīrtans* for *All India Radio (AIR)*, and later for the Jalandhar *Dūrdarshan (TV)*. For the first time, a female group of *kīrtanīe* had the opportunity to be exposed to a vast audience, producing a strong impact on the Sikh community at the local and national level. In Bībī Baljīt Kaur's words:

When we got the chance to perform our first *kīrtan* on TV, we could not imagine that one day we would become professional *kīrtanīe*, but we received such a tremendous response from the *sangat* (community) and from the *Dūrdarshan* that we felt encouraged to continue. And now, by *Gurū*'s grace and with the blessing of the *sangat*, it is for about 35 years that we have been practicing *kīrtan* at a professional level. I dedicated all my life to *kīrtan*.<sup>5</sup>

Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā told me that she started to practice *kīrtan* at a very young age, following her brother's playing on harmonium. She did not receive any formal training in classical music, and defines her *kīrtan* as a personal, 'light' style. Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā's music actually resembles what Paintal (1978, 259) calls *jotīyan-de-śabad*, a repertoire based on 'traditional plain-song style sung in simple notes', meant for congregational singing. According to Paintal, the *jotīyan-de-śabad* does not refer to the *rāga*

system prescribed in the *SGGS*; thus its performance does not require a specific training or peculiar technical skills.

Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā spontaneously composes the music for most of the *śabads* (hymns) she sings. She describes the process of composing in this way:

When I do *Pāth*,<sup>6</sup> especially the *Sukhmani Sahib* recitation, sometimes in this state of meditation tunes come to my mind, naturally. Then, if I remember the melody, I fix it in a composition. If I forget, I forget, but I never refer to anyone else's music. Whatever comes from inside, that is what I sing.<sup>7</sup>

In 1988, the label *Sarab Sānjhī Gurbānī* released Bībī Baljīt Kaur's first cassette, and in only one year it sold 300,000 copies. Since then the *Talwāre walī* (as Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā and her sisters are also known) have published about 45 recordings, which made them one of the most popular *kīrtanīe* in the web community, as well as a model for the younger generation of female *Gurbānī* singers, opening a new music market in India and abroad. A major role in the promotion of Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā was played by national radio (*All India Radio*, elsewhere called *AIR*) and national television (*Dūrdarshan*) in the early 1980s, as part of a cultural agenda. In his study on the development of popular music in India, Manuel (1988, 170) wrote:

Radio broadcasting is state-controlled in South Asia, and official policy has included attempts to promote music other than commercial film music.

Over the time, *AIR* and *Dūrdarshan*'s role was reinforced by the first private TV channels that emerged in the 1990s. In this regard, Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā said:

*ETC*, for instance, was crucial in popularizing *kīrtanīe*, and even now the Channel plays a role in bringing new people into the main stream.

Along with *ETC*, she also recalled the TV channels *MHI*, *PTC*, and labels like *Sarab Sānjhī Gurbānī* and *T-Series*, which introduced into the music market cassettes and CDs of *Gurbānī sangīt*. The success of Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā popularized on a large scale a female style of singing characterized by a plain rendition of the hymns, easily accessible by non-musicians, encouraging women to actively participate in the *kīrtan* practice. Prior to Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā, there were instances of famous female singers in Panjābī folk and 'light' repertoires, who recorded *śabads* in musical arrangements more suited to the contemporary music market than actual spiritual practice. Among the folk singers Surinder Kaur (1929–2006) represented an important step in the history of female music tradition. Born in Lahore, she started her career in 1943 with her elder sister Parkash Kaur, performing for the Lahore Radio and recording for HMV. As she recalled in an interview:

Even though my parents, who were devout Sikhs, were initially reluctant, they sent me to learn music from Master Inayat Hussain, a nephew of Bade Ghulam Ali Sahib. My elder sister, Prakash Kaur, was married by then, but her husband, too, encouraged her to learn the finer points of music. I still remember the day, August 31, 1943, when my first program was aired on All India Radio, Lahore, and was

widely appreciated. [ ... ] The folk songs that I sang were learned from my mother or other relatives, especially during weddings. But I picked up a lot of tunes and songs from unknown people, as they sat humming them.<sup>8</sup>

After Partition (1947), Surinder Kaur moved to Delhi, and then to Bombay, where she worked as a playback singer for Hindi movies. In the rising Bollywood industry, Surinder Kaur became one of the contemporary stars along with Lata Mangeskar and Asha Bhosle. But in the following years, with the support of her husband, Surinder Kaur focused her career on Panjābī folk songs, blending traditional repertoire with classical and contemporary orchestral Bollywood arrangements. Adopting a hybrid musical style, Surinder Kaur recorded *śabads* from the Sikh Gurūs' tradition, bringing into the female rendition of the religious repertoire a new flair. Due to her fame and access to media (such as radio, television and cinema), Surinder Kaur's style became very popular, and started a new vogue of singing *Gurbānī śabads* in a modern fashion. Popularly known as the 'nightingale of Panjāb', in 1984 Surinder Kaur received the prestigious Sangīt Natak Academy Award for her contribution in the field of Panjābī folk music, and in 2002, the Gurū Nānak Dev University (Amritsar) conferred on her a doctorate. Few months before she passed, in 2006, Surinder Kaur has been awarded by the Government of India with the title of *Padmashrī*, the fourth highest civilian recognition.

Another popular singer of the time was Nīlam Sahni.<sup>9</sup> Her rendition of the *slokas* from the ninth Master Gurū Teg Bahādūr in duet with the playback singer Mohammad Rafi, and her recordings of Sheikh Farīd's hymns performed along with the *ghazal* vocalist Jagjit Singh, increased her fame as a *Gurbānī* singer. Despite their valuable contributions, both Bībī Surinder Kaur and Nīlam Sahni cannot properly be categorized as *kīrtanīe*. But then, who is a *kīrtanīā*?

## Kīrtanīe

In an article published in a previous volume of *Sikh Formations* (2011), Bhāī Baldeep Singh<sup>10</sup> attempted a study of *kīrtan* intertwining the analysis of the music idiom, and its aesthetics, with the spiritual meaning of performance.

Kīrtan is not merely the singing of gurbani but it is gurbani itself – in other words gurbani was revealed musically. To understand gurbani kīrtan, one must ask some other essential questions beyond music – questions about spirituality, about spiritual music.

(2011, 259)

While I redirect the reader to Bhāī Baldeep Singh's work for a critical discussion about the meaning of the *kīrtan* practice, I would like to introduce the role of the *kīrtanīā* through a beautiful description given by the fifth Sikh Master Gurū Arjan Dev (1563–1606). *Rāga Rāmkalī, Mahlā 5, Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib*: 885.

ਰਾਮਕਲੀ ਮਹਲਾ ੫ ॥

ਓਅੰਕਾਰਿ ਏਕ ਧੁਨਿ ਏਕੈ ਏਕੈ ਰਾਗੁ ਅਲਾਪੈ ॥ ਏਕਾ ਦੇਸੀ ਏਕੁ ਦਿਖਾਵੈ ਏਕੋ ਰਹਿਆ ਬਿਆਪੈ ॥

ਏਕਾ ਸੁਰਤਿ ਏਕਾ ਹੀ ਸੇਵਾ ਏਕੋ ਗੁਰ ਤੇ ਜਾਪੈ ॥੧॥

ਭਲੇ ਭਲੇ ਰੇ ਕੀਰਤਨੀਆ ॥ ਰਾਮ ਰਮਾ ਰਾਮਾ ਗੁਨ ਗਾਉ ॥ ਛੇਡਿ ਮਾਇਆ ਕੇ ਧੰਧ ਸੁਆਉ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥  
 ਪੰਚ ਬਜਿਤ ਕਰੇ ਸੰਤੋਖਾ ਸਾਤ ਸੁਰਾ ਲੈ ਚਾਲੈ ॥ ਬਾਜਾ ਮਾਣੁ ਤਾਣੁ ਤਜਿ ਤਾਨਾ ਪਾਉ ਨ ਬੀਗਾ ਘਾਲੈ ॥  
 ਫੇਰੀ ਫੇਰੁ ਨ ਹੋਵੈ ਕਬ ਹੀ ਏਕੁ ਸਬਦੁ ਬੀਧਿ ਪਾਲੈ ॥੨॥  
 ਨਾਰਦੀ ਨਰਹਰ ਜਾਣਿ ਹਦੂਰੇ ॥ ਘੁੰਘਰ ਖੜਕੁ ਤਿਆਗਿ ਵਿਸੂਰੇ ॥ ਸਹਜ ਅਨੰਦ ਦਿਖਾਵੈ ਭਾਵੈ ॥  
 ਏਹੁ ਨਿਰਤਿਕਾਰੀ ਜਨਮਿ ਨ ਆਵੈ ॥੩॥  
 ਜੇ ਕੋ ਅਪਨੇ ਠਾਕੁਰ ਭਾਵੈ ॥ ਕੋਟਿ ਮਧਿ ਏਹੁ ਕੀਰਤਨੁ ਗਾਵੈ ॥ ਸਾਧਸੰਗਤਿ ਕੀ ਜਾਵਉ ਟੇਕ ॥ ਕਹੁ ਨਾਨਕ  
 ਤਿਸੁ ਕੀਰਤਨੁ ਏਕੁ ॥੪॥੮॥

(Translation)<sup>11</sup>

Rāga Rāmkaḷī, Mahlā 5

The Lord's eulogist imbibes love for the One and sings the melody of but One God. He abides in the country of One God, shows the way to One God, and sees the One God pervading all. He visualizes One God, serves only the One Lord, who is known through the Guru. (1)

O praise-worthy, praise-worthy is such an eulogist (*kīrtanīā*). He sings the praise of the Omnipresent Lord Master, shedding all the relishes of the worldly pursuits. (1) Pause (*Rahāo*)

The five virtues like contentment, he makes his musical instruments and walking in the Lord's love his seven notes. The forsaking of pride of his power, he makes the note of his musical instrument and places not his foot in the crooked path. He ties the One Name to his skirt and enters not the circuit of coming and going ever again. (2)

To play like Narad is for him to realize the Lord to be just present. To shed his sorrows is for him the tinkling of anklets. To abide in celestial beatitude is exhibiting his dalliance. Such a dancer is born not again. (3)

If anyone out of millions becomes pleasing to his Lord; that mortal alone thus sings the Lord's praise. Says Nanak, I repair to the saint's society. They sing there the praise of the One Lord alone. (4) (8)

This hymn is considered an essential composition in illustrating the *kīrtanīā*'s nature. Interestingly, the hermetic language of this *śabad* is based on musical vocabulary, and presents analogies with music practice that make the translation interesting as well as problematic. An exhaustive explanation of the hymn would require a specific space for its exegesis. In regard to its interpretation, I have so far interviewed several Sikh scholars and musicians. For instance, in the opinion of the renowned Bhāī Balbīr Singh (b.1933), who served as *rāgī* at the Golden Temple in Amritsar from 1955 to 1991, 'a *kīrtanīā* is the one who serves the Gurū by singing his *śabad*, and the *śabads* should be sung in *rāga*. That *kīrtanīā* is blessed'.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Bhāī Randhir Singh (b.1961), a contemporary *rāgī* from the Darbār Sāhib,<sup>13</sup> affirmed that the *rahāo* provides the key to the understanding of the hymn: a *kīrtanīā* is the one who only sings praises of the Divine, and in doing so he renounces entanglements and tastes of *Māyā* (illusion). The *dhun* (song), the *rāga* (modal melody) are here only a means for attuning oneself to the One. In other words, the *kīrtanīā* who immerses him (and herself) totally in the sonic dimension of spiritual practice, beyond the technicalities of the singing, is thus distinguished from mere musicians who practice music as a profession to earn worldly benefits such as money and prestige.

Following Gurū Arjan's description, the present study focuses on female *kīrtanīe* of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, not as a category of mere professional singers but as performers who are in the actual spiritual Sikh path. Prior to the media era, the

names of such *kīrtanī* were not as popular as the contemporary singers are nowadays, but there is still memory of some exceptional female performers of the past. And, although musical training was rarely imparted to women at a professional level, in the recent history we find some interesting cases of Sikh women educated by *rāgīs* and *rabābīs*<sup>14</sup> in the classical forms of *śabad kīrtan*, like *dhruṭpad* and *khyaḷ*. I would like to name, for instance, Bībī Mansa Kaur, who according to Bhāī Gurcharan Singh (b.1915),<sup>15</sup> was a disciple of the legendary Bābā Jwālā Singh (Bhāī Gurcharan Singh's father). Mansa Kaur was skilled in both the *dhruṭpad* and *khyaḷ* genres, and performed *kīrtan* according to the 31 *rāgas* (modal melodies) prescribed in the *SGGS*. Apparently, she sang for the Jalandhar *AIR*, but it is not known to the author whether any performances have been recorded and kept in the *AIR* archives.

Bhāī Gurcharan Singh (figure 2) also remembers a woman called Joginder Kaur, a singer of *kīrtan* in the *dhruṭpad* form and she was, interestingly, also part of a *dhāḍī jathā* (bards), although no recordings or pictures of her are available to us. This information matches surprisingly with an old testimony from the *Ā'in-i-Akbarī* by Abū-al-Fazl Allami (c.1590). In a chapter about the classes of singers and the musical genre en vogue at Akbar's time (1542–1605), the author mentions female Panjābī *dhāḍīs* singing *dhruṭpad*<sup>16</sup> and *sohilā*.

The *dhāḍīs* are the Panjābī singers who play upon the *dhadda* and the *kingara*. They chiefly chant the praises of heroes on the field of the battle and lend fresh spirit to the fight. [ . . . ] The *dhāḍī* women chiefly play on the *daf* and the *duhul*, and sing the *dhruṭpad* and the *sohilā* on occasions of nuptial and birthday festivities in a very accomplished manner. Formerly they appeared only before assemblies of women but now also before audiences of men.<sup>17</sup>

This passage from the *Ā'in-i-Akbarī* shows not only that the *dhāḍī* female tradition goes back to the sixteenth century, but indicates as well that even *dhāḍī* women performed 'dhruṭpad', one of the main genres of the medieval tradition associated with *Gurbānī*.



**Figure 2.** Bhāī Gurcharan Singh during the interview with the author. New Delhi, August 2012 (photograph by the author).

According to Sanyal and Widdess (2004), the term ‘**dhurpad**’ (bold mine) stands for a vernacular version of the court music known as *darbārī* ‘**dhurpad**’ (bold mine), reducing therefore *Gurbānī* to a regional form of the classical genre. This thesis was suggested earlier also by Paintal, who affirmed that ‘during the times of the various Sikh Gurus, the form of Sikh devotional music was based purely on the dhrupad style of Hindustani classical music’ (1978, 258).

As demonstrated elsewhere (Cassio, forthcoming), although based on a similar structure (probably derived from a stanzaic form called *prabhanda*), *Gurbānī* was already established before the rise of the classical *dhrupad* in the Moghul court of Akbar (1542–1605). Thus, the term *dhrupad* may be suggestive of a distinctive song form that would fit the Sikh hymns’ repertoire.

The medieval *Gurbānī dhrupad* has been performed and transmitted by *rāgī* and *rabābīs* till the first decades of the twentieth century, superseded by a form of *kīrtan* inspired by *khyāl*, a modern genre of Hindustani classical (court) music. Thus, nowadays most of the male and female contemporary *kīrtanīe*, render a so-called classical *kīrtan* performance referring to the idiom of *khyāl*, rather than to the medieval *Gurbānī* form.

One exception was the late Bībī Jaswant Kaur (1920–2010), a *kīrtanīā* of rare finesse, a treasure of the *Gurbānī* tradition discovered in 1997 by Bhāī Baldeep Singh. According to him, her father was a senior police official from Amritsar, a great admirer of classical music and friend with Bhāī Arjan Singh Tarangar as well as Bhāī Santu, both master percussionists. Bhāī Arjan Singh Tarangar would often visit Amritsar and especially their household, where he would teach and lead the practice sessions for the young Jaswant Kaur. The legendary *rabābīs* Bhāī Sundar and Bhāī Chand would also be occasionally invited to join the gatherings.<sup>18</sup> Subsequently, for 16 years Bībī Jaswant Kaur (figure 3) received training in Amritsar under the guidance of the famous *rabābī* Bhāī Tābā (1885–1963), a Muslim musician who performed his duty of *kīrtanīā* at the Sī Harmandir Sāhib in Amritsar for 35 years before he moved to Lahore at the time of Partition (Kanwal 2010, 182).<sup>19</sup> Bībī Jaswant Kaur’s repertoire thus includes *dhrupad* masterpieces of the *rabābī* tradition preserved in archival recordings available in the Internet.<sup>20</sup> Bībī Jaswant Kaur performed *Gurbānī kīrtan* not as a profession but only as a personal spiritual practice and as a *sevā* to the community. Her recordings<sup>21</sup> were taken during *kīrtan* sessions or during classes with students, but they constitute an exceptional documentation that testify the way the ancient compositions of the *Gurbānī* repertoire were sung by men and women.

Another relevant personality in the recent history of female *kīrtanīe* was Bībī Jaspīr Kaur Khālsā (1947–2011). Far from the spotlights of media, Bībī Jaspīr Kaur Khālsā was a charismatic figure who played an important role in establishing *Gurbānī sangīt* as a discipline in India and abroad. Her mission of educating young generations to the spiritual values and music of the Sikh Gurūs started in the early 1970s, when she was appointed as *Gurmat* Scholar at the Gurū Nānak Foundation in New Delhi. Her support and inspiration have been crucial in creating the first Indian academic institutions dedicated entirely to promoting the research and education on *Gurbānī*. In the middle of the 1980s, Bībī Jaspīr Kaur Khālsā contributed to establishing the *Gurdwārā Gurū Giān Prakash* at Jawaddī Kalān (Ludhiānā). This institution, also known as Jawaddī Taksāl (‘the mint’), was founded in 1985 by Sant Suchā Singh (1948–2002) and since its beginning has been a leading center for debate and research on *Gurmat*<sup>22</sup> *sangīt*, the Sikh



**Figure 3.** Bībī Jaswant Kaur. New Delhi 2005 (photo courtesy Sarbprīt Singh).

Gurūs’ music tradition. It should be noted that Bībī Jaspīr Kaur Khālsā is the only woman who participated in the *Rāga Nirnayak Committee* formed in 1991 by Sikh scholars and musicians who congregated at the *Gurū Giān Prakash Gurdwārā* to reform the practice of performing the Sikh Gurūs’s hymns according to the *rāgas* designated in the SGGS.<sup>23</sup>

The pioneering vision of Bībī Jaspīr Kaur Khālsā culminated in 2003 when, as Chairperson of the *Srī Gurū Giān Prakash Foundation*, she signed an agreement with the University of Patiala to establish the first Chair of *Gurmat Sangīt* in which *Gurbānī* would be taught for the first time in an academic context. As Pashaura Singh writes in Bībī Jaspīr Kaur Khālsā’s obituary: ‘For her selfless service she was honored jointly by the three wings of power within the Sikh Panth: the Akāl Takht, the S.G.P.C. and the Shiromani Akāli Dal.’ With her encouraging presence, Bībī Jaspīr Kaur Khālsā shared her knowledge with Sikh students abroad, including the Western followers of Yogi Bhajan who converted to Sikhi.<sup>24</sup>

The so-called Renaissance of *Gurbānī sangīt* was promoted more widely after the Jawaddī Taksāl started its activities in 1991 (Khalsa 2012). Bībī Jaspīr Kaur Khālsā was not only a source of inspiration, but also demonstrated that the *Gurbānī* ‘Renaissance’ could happen only with the active participation of women in a core practice of the Sikh faith, such as *kīrtan*.

## Feminine voices and the female singers in Indian music

In her volume *Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent* (1993), Nikki-Guninder Kaur Singh raises, for the first time, the issue of the feminine voice in the Sikh scriptures. The author observes that the vocabulary of the SGGS presents many feminine nouns, and that among them the most relevant and crucial term is *bānī*:

My point is that the Sikh Gurūs, who were all male, understood their poetic utterance as feminine. *Bānī*, grammatically feminine, is the general designation for the sacred poetry.

According to Nikki-Guninder Kaur Singh, through the (female) *bānī* agency the Sikh *Gurūs*' tradition was perpetuated, becoming an 'object of devotion for the Sikhs and their singular religious reference'. A similar approach is found in the interpretation of the term *bānī* given by Bhāī Baldeep Singh, who affirmed: '*Bānī* is the mother. Is the greatest incarnation of *Shaktī*'.<sup>25</sup> In this regard, the theory proposed by Nikki-Guninder Kaur Singh moves even further, envisioning a sort of union between the male 'communicators' (the *Gurūs*) and the female principle (*bānī*), perceived as a single entity.

As a medium of divine revelation, poetry conjoins the male and female principles in the Sikh tradition. [...] The celebration of the feminine principle within the Sikh tradition not merely acknowledges this principle as a significant component of Sikh identity but also gives us a measure of the autonomy of Sikh identity.

(Singh 1993, 45; underscoring mine)

While on the one hand Nikki-Guninder Kaur Singh points out the autonomy of the Sikh culture in comparison with other traditions, on the other hand her views may be misunderstood as aligned with the Orientalist notion of divine revelation, as well as embedded in the philosophical principles of the Vedic culture. In this regard, Mandair (2009) clarifies that the concept of *Gurū's bānī* (and *śabad Gurū*) represents the innovative contribution of *Gurū Nānak*, untied from the so-called Vedic economy, a term that stands for the Brahmanical ideology of sacred sound, with its paradigm of *śruti* (that which is heard) and its sonic *mimetology* (the hearing/understanding of sound). Through the deconstruction of the Orientalist and Vedic interpretations, Mandair identifies the *bānī's poetic* process as a result of a mystical experience based on the absence of subjectivity. It is an experience which transcends the male/female agency.

In other words, *Nānak* becomes a subject only on the condition that the Word (language as Unconscious) speaks. When the Word speaks, *Nānak* himself is silent. Thus *Nānak* does not speak, the Word speaks, a fact that inverts the normal relationship between language and subjectivity, wherein language is merely a tool at the disposal of the subject.

(2009, 367)

In this interpretation, and in contrast with Indic spiritual traditions based on the Vedas, the poetry of the Sikh hymns appears as neither mediated by male 'communicators'

(with their subjectivity) nor ‘composed’. This absence of subjectivity marks an essential aspect of the *Gurbānī* repertoire, making the *kīrtan* practice theoretically accessible to all, without distinction of gender.

On the contrary, we can observe that in the Hindustani music literature, a large number of texts ‘speak’ with a feminine voice, which often represents the (male) composer and singer, and his human condition.<sup>26</sup>

Mandair’s criteria offer a valid heuristic tool for determining the peculiar features of Sikh (*kīrtan*) tradition as an autonomous system and yet, historically musical repertoires of Vedic inspiration have indirectly affected the *Gurbānī kīrtan* practice over time.

I will give some examples to illustrate this concept.

The first instance is a traditional *havelī* (devotional) *dhrupad* in *rāg* Bihāg (*tāl chartāl*, 12 beats), as transmitted in the Darbhāngā *gharānā* (music style).

सीहर सीहर पवन चलत है माइ री फैल रही चंदनी विथुर री  
निस-दिन पल हूँ न लगे लालन बिन कपोलन गोल निथुर निथुर री ॥

Very gently, the wind blows, moonlight has spread, o friend:

Day and night I do not close my eyelids for not to be without Lāl (Krishna) whose cheeks are round, o friend.<sup>27</sup>

These lyrics are inspired by the Vaiṣṇava literature, as the context refers to the medieval bhakti tradition of Madhyadeś, where the Rādhā–Krishna relationship serves as an analogy to mankind (Rādhā) and the Divine (Krishna). This *bandīś* (music composition) is traditionally performed in the Vaiṣṇava temples by male singers, for a composite audience of male and female devotees. It is significant that since the fifteenth century, both the *havelī* (domestic, temple) and *darbārī* (court) *dhrupad* have been transmitted mainly in male lineages, and it was only from the middle of the last century that women accessed the professional career of *dhrupad* vocalists (Cassio 2005).<sup>28</sup>

The political and social changes that occurred in the twentieth century included the active participation of women in the cultural and musical life. Women then had, for the first time, the opportunity to receive a professional training in classical music (*dhrupad* and *khyāl*), and to find a platform in the contemporary music market. The major problem women had to face was not the complexity and technicalities of the classical music, but rather the wall of prejudice that associated female performers with the class of courtesans. *Khyāl* compositions are often set to texts inspired by the *bhakti* literature, where the ambiguity of the message and the Rādhā–Krishna analogy (as given below) may be interpreted in a worldly key if the role of the heroine is rendered by a female singer.

नैनन में आन बान  
कौनसी परी री  
बार बार सोवन पलक न लगन  
जिन देखूँ उन , शयाम सी परी री ॥

What kind of image has appeared before my eyes?

Again and again I try to sleep,

But my eyelids won’t shut

Wherever I look, a vision of the dark one (Krishna) comes into view.<sup>29</sup>

(Rāg Multānī, *tīn tāl*, 16 beats)

Also the Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) adopted a similar vocabulary to voice his mysticism. In the following excerpt from the *Gitanjali* (1913, 44), the poet focuses on the theme of union with the beloved, envisioned even within separation. This concept is articulated through the sentiment of longing for the absent lover expressed from the feminine perspective, a recurring theme of the Vaiṣṇava literature designated with the term *virahā*.<sup>30</sup>

I see your *virahā* everywhere all the time  
 In every world  
 It takes so many forms  
 In woods and fields and sky and sea  
 Your *virahā* is multiplied by the anguish  
 Of so many homes  
 It echoes in so many loves and longings  
 And pleasures and pains.

One may wonder why – in general – the female voice of poetry becomes problematic when rendered in public by a female professional singer. It appears that the key element of interpretation lies in the historical context of performance.

One musical form in which the female voice is strongly represented is *thumrī*. *Thumrī* is a semi-classical and romantic genre, associated in the past with the *tawāī-fs*, the courtesans' tradition which flourished in Northern India during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The lyrics in *thumrī* share with *bhakti* and classical repertoires the theme of love, in the union and separation moods, though with substantial differences. One of the major characteristics of the old *thumrī* tradition was the feminine voice of poetry rendered by female singers. The female persona, and the peculiar context of performance, contributed in creating ambivalence in the message, which became an essential trait of *thumrī*. The performers were in fact expected to entertain a male audience, in a worldly environment such as a court or a music salon (Burckhardt Qureshi 2006). While the content of the lyrics may swing between the worldly and the mystical interpretation, it was the context of the performance that shifted the meaning toward a secular understanding. In her study on *thumrī* poetry, Du Perron (2002, 183) writes:

The multi layered position of *thumrī*'s audience is crucial to the text. Although we find no shifting mode of address within the narrative, there certainly is ambivalence as to whom it is actually addressed. From a secular perspective, the lovelorn heroine is voicing the desire to see her lover; from a devotional angle, Radha is missing Krishna. There is no doubt that the ambiguity between worldly and religious moods has pervaded most *viraha*-poetry, including *thumrī*, and the tension between the two moods can be considered an inherent component of the genre.

Eye contact and the visual aspects, in general, were essential elements of the courtesans' performances. For instance, in this famous *thumrī* composition, the heroine (*nāyikā*) meets the eyes of the beloved (Krishna), and her mind becomes intoxicated with love.

रस के भरे तोरे नैन  
 आ जा साँवरिया तोहे गरवा लगा लूँ

दिन नही चैन रैन नही निंदिया  
कासे कहूँ जी के बैन  
रस के भरे तोरे नैन ॥

Your eyes are full of charm  
Come dark one (Krishna), come and I'll embrace you.  
No peace in the day, no sleep at night  
To whom can I say what's in my heart?  
Your eyes are full of charm.<sup>31</sup>

(Rāg Bhāīravī, Jāt tāl, 16 beats)

The visual aspect had its *raison d'être*. A distinctive element of the courtesans' performance was the singer's beauty, enhanced by makeup and proper attire. Body movements and gestures (*abhinaya*) derived from *kathak* dance were used to emphasize the meaning of the poetry, reducing the mystical flair of the lyrics. The body language verbalized seduction.

The courtesans' tradition came to an end in the late nineteenth century, but the case of women publically voicing a 'female' poetry through a seductive modality largely contributed to discouraging female performances of other genres, such as *dhrupad*, *khyāl* and *Gurbānī kīrtan*.

For instance, when asked for the reason women were not allowed to sing at the Golden Temple (Amritsar), Bhāī Gurcharan Singh maintained: 'the audience would be distracted by the presence of a woman on stage. People would look at her, without paying attention to the message of the *bānī*'.<sup>32</sup>

The memory of the North Indian courtesans (*tawāif-s*) as well as the example of the temple dancers (*devadāsīs*) of the South Indian tradition are deeply rooted in the Indian culture as the negative symbol of female seduction. In an interview,<sup>33</sup> Manjit K. J. Singh, a contemporary *Gurbānī* singer who now lives in the USA, shared with me that in her childhood (1945 ca.) singing in her family was not allowed.

When I was a child, my father would say: 'Girls from good family do not sing.' But later on, he changed his ideas when his brother told him that girls were starting to be trained in music. So I had the possibility to take *sitār*<sup>34</sup> lessons. When I got married, I could learn *khyāl* from Ustad Munawar Ali Khan in Kolkata. My husband was proud of the fact that I could sing, but he considered it as a hobby. In the morning if I started practicing he would say: 'You are not going to be a *mirasi*.' (A low category of Muslim musicians, also associated with courtesans).

In contrast to the courtesans, the performances of female professional singers of classical music, who emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, were distinguished by a very strict etiquette on stage. Makeup, gestures, hand movements and facial expressions were forbidden. I remember one of my teachers, Smt. Girija Devi, instilling this notion in us during our classes. Born in 1929 into a culture still influenced by the impact of the courtesans' tradition on Hindustani music, Girija Devi established a new standard of performance, becoming one of the first female singers to share the same level and command an equal respect with her male peers. Singers like Girija Devi became an important example for the next generations of female performers. This cultural shift was possible due to the radical change in Indian society, which opened new platforms (and markets) for musicians of every social milieu and gender.

In this new context, Indian women are liberated from the stereotypical image of seduction associated with the old courtesans' culture. Since the mid-twentieth century, it has become increasingly clear that a female voice does not necessarily imply a seductive modality. This new awareness has opened opportunities for women to pursue professional careers in the fields of classical and religious music.

### The *rāgī* tradition: is performing *kīrtan* a 'gendered' profession?

The term *rāgī* designates a Sikh musician expert in singing the *śabads* (hymns) from the *SGGS* according to the prescribed *rāgas*. In a broader sense, the term is used to indicate professional singers who regularly serve in the *gurdwārās*. Often the term *rāgī* is reinforced with the title *Singh*, denoting the male identity of the musician.

During my ethnographic research in India, over the years I had the opportunity to interact with male and female *Gurbānī sangīt* exponents of diverse status and age, and questioned them as to whether performing *kīrtan* as *rāgī* is a 'gendered' profession. In the opinion of the older generation's male *rāgīs*, singing professionally in the *gurdwārās* is basically a male activity. According to the traditional lifestyle, they affirm, women are not in a position to perform all related duties of a *rāgī*, which include traveling on their own and interacting with a male audience (on and off the stage). In the words of Professor Kartār Singh (b.1928, figure 4), women are excellent students of *Gurbānī sangīt*, but cannot embrace the profession of *rāgī*. He suggests for women a career as teachers rather than performers as more appropriate, suiting their lifestyle and family duties. Professor Kartār Singh is a legendary figure in the field of *Gurbānī*, a prolific composer, writer and instructor. He is presently head of the *Gurmat Sangīt Vidyalyaya* at Anandpur Sāhib, one of the major academies where male students (only) receive a three-year intensive training before beginning their careers as *rāgīs*. During his interview he affirmed:



**Figure 4.** Professor Kartār Singh, during an interview with the author. Ludhianā, August 2012 (photograph by Jasprīt Singh).

In a big *gurdwārā*, daily a *rāgī* must perform *kīrtan* in the morning and in the evening, in order to get his salary. For a girl it would be difficult to perform these duties, she cannot live (do) like this. A woman in the professional field of *Gurbānī sangīt* may become a teacher, but not a *rāgī Singh*.<sup>35</sup>

Another major issue is the performance of *Āsā dī Vār*, involving not only the prescribed time of the duty (very early morning), but the complexity and length of the structure, which requires proper instruction and practice. In this traditional social context, Bībī Baljīt Kaur's activity as a professional performer of *kīrtan* and *Āsā dī Vār* was groundbreaking, and with the help of media (TV channels, Radio, music labels, and now the Internet), she and her sisters created a significant platform for women to emerge in a male-dominated scenario. When I asked Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālāsā if she would define herself as *rāgī*, she answered, 'I prefer the term *kīrtanīā*, but people refer to us also as *rāgī Singh*, or mahan (great) *kīrtanīā*.'

Bībī Baljīt Kaur did not focus on the question of gender, but rather brought out the subtle distinction between the musical aspect (*rāgī* is a 'knower of *rāgas*') and the spiritual dimension of *kīrtan*, as defined by Gurū Arjan Dev. This notion matches with the repertoires she sings, which is less *rāga*-oriented, and it rather falls in the category of *jyotian-de-śabad*.

Since her time, professional female *jathe* (groups) have been invited to sing in most of the Sikh centers of pilgrimage, such as Keshgarh *gurdwārā* in Anandpur Sāhib and Hazūr Sāhib in Nanded. At Amritsar, female *jathe* are invited on special occasions to give *kīrtan* at the Manji Sāhib Dīwān Hall, at the Akāl Takht, and in the *parikarma* area of the Golden Temple. Although there is not any written restriction, up to the present time female *kīrtanīe* are still not allowed to perform inside the *sanctum sanctorum* of the Srī Harmandir Sāhib (Golden Temple), where professional *rāgīs* perform according to a fixed schedule, divided into 15 *śabad kīrtan chaunkīs* (sessions), starting in the early morning around 2:45 am and up to 9:45 in the evening (P. Singh 2011).<sup>36</sup> The norm that does not allow women to sing any of the 15 *kīrtan chaunkīs* at the Srī Harmandir Sāhib derives from the specific practices established since Gurū Arjan Dev's time (early seventeenth century) and later sanctioned by the SGPC.<sup>37</sup> As Pashaura Singh reported in relation to a recent attempt to have a female *jathā* performing inside the Golden Temple (2011, 108):

Notwithstanding her announcement on 3 February 2003, Bibi Kiranjot Kaur, a former general secretary of SGPC, could not arrange kirtan by Sikh women in the sanctum sanctorum because other members of the executive committee of the SGPC objected by claiming that women could not be allowed to perform kirtan due to a variety of reason. They said that the Almighty had differentiated man from women at the time of birth; hence nobody should raise such a demand. [ ... ] Thus far Sikh orthodoxy has explicitly said 'no' to Sikh women to perform kirtan inside the Golden Temple.

Although the exclusion of female participation in the *kīrtan chaunkīs* may be perceived as a discrepancy, we could view this social norm in the historical context that generated certain rules originally meant to protect Sikh women. As discussed above, one of the major duties performed by the *rāgīs* is the *Āsā dī Vār*, which at the Srī Darbār Sāhib

consists of a long and complex *kīrtan* session<sup>38</sup> (about three hours) taking place from 3:45 to 6:45 am,<sup>39</sup> a time of the day in which it is considered unsuitable for a woman to engage in public activities.

In respect for the tradition, and of the authority of SGPC, women have always accepted this unwritten rule. But since the beginning of the 1980s, there seems to have been a change in this regard. An impulse in this direction was given by Yogi Bhajan (1929–2004), founder of the 3HO (Healthy Happy Holy Organization) and the spiritual leader of the *Sikh Dharma in the Western Hemisphere*. In his teachings, Yogi Bhajan encouraged Sikh women to participate actively in the social and spiritual life, performing ceremonies and *sevās* generally done by men, including *kīrtan*. Since the Khālsā Women's Training Camps were instituted in the middle of the 1970s, Yogi Bhajan invited male and female *kīrtanīe* from India to give music classes and workshops to Western followers converted to Sikhi. Among the instructresses, Bībī Jashīr Kaur Khālsā is still remembered as an exemplary devout teacher and *kīrtanīā*. According to Elsberg, the Sikh way of life, poetry and music as taught by Yogi Bhajan had a particular appeal to Western women in the 3HO movement.

The newly minted Sikh valued the poetry and music of the Gurū Granth Sāhib. They interpreted their adopted religion in ways that were congruent with their previous backgrounds and values. Thus they saw it as an egalitarian one in which all were spiritually equal, whatever their station in life. They tended to construe it as universalistic, independent of Panjābī culture, and as an experiential religion in which beliefs and creeds mattered less than a direct experience of God.

(2010, 309)

*Gorī* (white) Sikh women (as Westerners who converted to Sikhi have been described) started to question the prohibition on performing certain duties at the Golden Temple, including *kīrtan*. As Shanti Kaur Khalsa wrote in her book on the *History of Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere* (1995, 136):

The Western women were growing impatient, however, with the restrictions placed upon them by the old traditions and customs of the Golden temple. [ ... ] If Khalsa was truly without gender, why, they asked, were they not allowed to participate in *seva* and *kirtan* at the Golden Temple? Sikh dharma International formally passed these questions on to the Jathedhar o the Akal Takhat, Jathedar Gudial Singh Ajnoha. Through meeting and correspondence they requested greater equality for women in the traditions of the Golden temple. [ ... ] They requested to be able to play *kirtan* in the main *darbar* of the Harimandir Sahib, and to have certain Akand Paths around the *parikarma* that would be served only by women. They established a deep dialogue with the Jathedhar, and reached an agreement that progress was to made, even if only in small steps.<sup>40</sup>

In a recent work, Professor Karen Leonard mentioned an incident happened in 1982, when a group of *gorā* Sikhs performed an *Akhand Pāth* on the roof of the Golden Temple (Leonard and Caldwell, *forthcoming*).<sup>41</sup> At the end of the ceremony, Krishna Kaur Khālsā<sup>42</sup> was invited by her group to play the harmonium and sing. For the first time in Sikh history, a woman performed a *śabad kīrtan* inside the Golden Temple.

Interestingly, as soon as she begun, the *sevādārs*<sup>43</sup> started to protest, but they were stopped by the *nihangs*<sup>44</sup> attending the ceremony.

Yes, we of the Guru Ram Das Ashram did work for changes at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, changes that would give Sikh women more equality there. In fact, I believe I was the first woman to play kirtan there, on my harmonium, at an akand path for Yogi Bhajan in 1982. We were there, our kirtan group from Los Angeles, and there was the bhog, and then to complete the cycle the rāgis should play. One of our people nodded to me, inviting me to play; and I was aware that local practice did not sanction that but I was ready. And just as I was about to begin, I saw the Punjabi Sikh man, the leader there, get up to object, but just then a beautiful Sikh, Baba Nihal Singh, walked in the door, then smiled at everyone, and smiled at me as I sat to play. So I played.

(Leonard and Caldwell, [forthcoming](#))

Since then, both Indian and Western *amritdhārī* (baptized Sikh) women have been admitted in singing the Sikh Gurus' hymns at the Srī Harmandir Sāhib complex, but not yet in the *sanctum sanctorum* of Golden Temple. In 1999, Bībī Jagīr Kaur Khālsā became the first woman President of the SGPC,<sup>45</sup> and she tried to support the female *kīrtanīe*'s cause, under the direct request of Yogi Bhajan's wife, Dr Inderjit Kaur, who 'has been active in pushing the SGPC to give women more visibilities in Sikh rites' (Elsberg 2010, 320). As reported in the Hindustan Times:

Soon after assuming the charge, she (Bībī Jagīr Kaur) got embroiled in a controversy by supporting women's demand of being allowed to conduct 'kīrtan' inside the sanctum sanctorum of Harmandir Sāhib.<sup>46</sup>

As in the case mentioned above by Pashaura Singh, also Bībī Jagīr Kaur's proposal did not eventually receive a positive response from the Sikh Community. But it is interesting to note that since the 1980s – for multiple reasons – the women's role has increased in political, social, cultural and religious activities previously managed by men only. The process of female empowerment in the modern Sikh tradition, including music, has its roots in the historical context of the early twentieth century. With particular regard to the Singh Sabha reform established in 1925, Jakobsh observed:

Within the context of the debates taking place, similar to those within other reform movements within the colonial milieu – Hindu, Sikh and Muslim – women became *sites* on which larger political, even communal claims were made.

(2010, 9)

The opportunity to take on substantial status and roles within the religious establishment was ultimately liberating for Sikh women. For, with attempts to displace un-Sikh element during ritual or other ceremonial occasions came novel and highly significant roles for Sikh women; for example, in replacing professional musicians at ritual events women occupied spaces that had earlier been barred to them. While these modifications were largely based on an augmented understanding of women's gratuitous duty to the cause of reform, they opened doors

for women to become far more active in the religious establishment than ever before.

(2003, 243–244)

In the 1980s, the cultural agenda of the State and regional Radio and TV largely contributed to the construction of the modern Sikh female identity. We may assume that in a very dramatic period in Sikh history, the presence of female performers giving a rendition of *Gurbānī* in a pure ‘Har rasa’ (expression of sentiment, pervaded by the Divine presence) helped to ease the social-political tension of that time. In a very gracious and dignified manner, generally young unmarried *amritdhārī* (like Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā and her sisters for instance) would provide, through their image, a reassuring message. In this regard, very interesting comparisons with the female *dhādī* tradition were reported by Nijhawan (2006). It may not be a coincidence that women *dhādīs* started to perform at the Akāl Takht Sāhib (Golden Temple complex, Amritsar) in the same timeframe that Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā appeared on TV screens. But there is also a significant analogy in terms of musical aesthetics. As Nijhawan reported from his fieldwork:

In 1999 I had a series of conversation with female singers and musicians, recent converts to Sikhism, whose motivation to perform the dhadi genre has to be understood against the background of this entanglement of performative voice with political violence. At one point I asked Pawandeep Kaur, the leader of a dhadi group and of one of my fieldwork interlocutors, why she was attracted to performing the heroic songs of the Sikh martyrs. [ ... ] Her answer was: *We do this to gain a state of inner peace. It is good for us and there will be no tension. We will not incite tension. [ ... ]* Beyond the immediate context of violence, the rendering of aesthetic experience becomes related to the self-understanding of the performers as responsible public and pious actors.

(Nijhawan 2006, 42–43)

In order to explain the pious, peaceful, sentiment that her *kīrtan* would instill in the listeners, Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā affirmed:

Whatever you sing, in *rāga* or not, you should immerse into the *śabad*, and then you receive its *rasa*. One should be able to render it from the bottom of the heart.<sup>47</sup>

The complex topics of *rasa* and *rāga* lead us to talk about the actual music performed by the contemporary *kīrtanīe* and their *jathe*. I have often noticed that women are keen to sing – and compose – *śabad kīrtan* according to folk or light music genres, with little regard to the grammar of Indian music and *Gurbānī sangīt* repertoire. This has been addressed by some contemporary *rāgīs* as one of the reasons women are not allowed to perform *kīrtan* at the Golden Temple. But we may ask whether women may not have had their own style of singing *Gurbānī śabad kīrtan*.

### The female folk tradition

During my fieldwork, I had the chance to interview Dr Jasbūr Kaur Khālsā (b.1958) who recalled the contribution of the past female folk tradition to the construction of some of



**Figure 5.** Dr. Jasbīr Kaur Khālsā, during the interview with the author. Patiālā, August 2012 (photograph by the author).

the *Gurbānī* repertoires, highlighting a specific style of performance as a female domain. Dr Jasbīr Kaur Khālsā (figure 5) is one of the few contemporary female *kīrtanīe* who combines her music activity with field research and academic publications. She holds a Ph.D. in musicology from the Panjābī University of Patiālā, and authored a book on *Gurmat sangīt* and several articles. For her original contribution to the field, she received the Akālī Kaur Singh Award, Dr M. S. Randhava Award, Bhāī Satta Balwand Award, and Bhāī Mihār Singh Award, and in 1995 was honored by *Vismād Nād* (Jawaddī Taksāl, Ludhiānā).

A scholar, gifted with a powerful and melodious, voice, Dr Jasbīr Kaur Khālsā is the only woman mentioned in the history of *rāgī* and *rabābī* compiled by Kanwal (2010, 301–303). Trained in the classical music genre of *khyāl* (Gwalior *gharānā*) and in *Gurbānī Sangīt*, Dr Jasbīr Kaur Khālsā specialized in the female folk repertoire, doing pioneering research in the remote villages of Panjāb, Rajasthan and Pakistan. During her interview, she sang a number of fascinating examples of Panjābī folk songs from the female repertoire, and *Gurbānī śabad rīts* (classical compositions), highlighting similarities between the two song forms. According to her theory, Bībī Nānakī encouraged Gurū Nānak to set his hymns to music, and gave him money to buy a *rabāb* for Bhāī Mardānā. Moreover, Dr Jasbīr Kaur Khālsā maintains that in his *udasis* (journeys), Gurū Nānak composed some hymns apparently inspired by the female folk tradition:

For instance, during his *udasis* Gurū Sāhib heard a group of women singing loud. He followed them to find out why they were crying, and what they were singing. When he went closer, he noticed that it was a wedding procession and women were singing *ghorian*, like this (sings an example). Then Guru Sāhib adopted the *ghorian* melody to suggest the atmosphere of the (mystic) marriage (sings an example). So, we can say that Gurū Nānak composed his *bānī* adopting the (female) style of singing. Gurū Sāhib also suggested women: ‘Do *kīrtan* in this way, using this same melody, but with the *bānī* that will bring you closer to the *Gurū*’.

A second form is the *alahnia*. Similarly, Gurū Sāhib saw a group of women weeping for the death of a dear one, singing a folk song called *alahnia*. Gurū Sāhib composed

*bānī* on this melody to help people to accept the will of God. Thus, the style sung by women was incorporated by Gurū Nānak in 19 *rāgas* and 976 *slokas*.<sup>48</sup>

Dr Jasbīr Kaur Khālsā's arguments present some critical issues that are still debated in the field of musicology. Although it is not widely accepted, her thesis posits the accent on the folk and popular (*deśī*) component in *Gurbānī* that makes the repertoire accessible to people (especially women) not trained in music. According to Paintal (1978), the original form of *kīrtan* practice was based on the pre-extant Panjābī folk repertoire. Set on common the performance of folk-based *kīrtan* does not require technicalities and, therefore, is apt for mass singing, where the *rahāo* (refrain) is sung by the *sangat* (congregation), and the stanzas are rendered by the leader and his group. Within the category of folk *kīrtan*, Paintal includes also the *jyotian-de-śabad*, described above (page 3), as based on 'some traditional plain-song style sung in simple notes', and meant for congregational singing only. What I often observed is that this 'folk-ish' flair is a distinctive trait of some female *kīrtan* renditions. Despite her feminist interpretation of *Gurbānī* and her strong defense of folk music, Dr Jasbīr Kaur Khālsā sees in the lack of proper musical training one of the reasons why women are not considered equal to *rāgīs* and are still banned from performing at the Srī Darbār Sāhib.

Women should know *Gurbānī* by heart. For instance, putting a piece of paper on the harmonium is not allowed in the Srī Darbār Sāhib. [ ... ]. Female *kīrtanīe* should also be able to render the *śabads* in the proper *rāgas* prescribed in the *SGGS*, and to sing the *Āsā dī Vār* in the early morning.<sup>49</sup>

In her opinion, women nowadays are given the opportunity to study *Gurbānī sangīt*, and there are a number of female *jathe* ready to perform at the Golden Temple, once the SGPC allows it. In this regard, Dr Jasbīr Kaur Khālsā seems confident that the SGPC will soon give women permission to sing at the Srī Harmandir Sāhib.<sup>50</sup>

## Education

The issue of female education was raised at the end of the nineteenth century, in synergy with the social and political reforms within the Sikh community. Bhāī Gurcharan Singh recollected the example of the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya, a pioneering project started by Bhāī Takhat Singh and his wife Harnam Kaur in Ferozpur in 1892. This was one of the first schools in which an equal education was imparted to boys and girls, and training in *Gurbānī kīrtan* was part of the pedagogy.<sup>51</sup> At Bhāī Takhat Singh's school, some of the first female *jathe* (musical groups) took their first steps, although they remained unknown to the great public. In her accounts of the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jakobsh (2003, 145) writes that a 'Ladies Khālsā Dīwān' celebration took place in Amritsar on *Baisākhī* day of 1905 in order to support Bhāī Takhat's project of a female boarding house, and as reported by the *Khalsa Advocate* (22 April 1905) for the first time:

The usual program of singing *śabads* from the Sikh Scriptures was carried out solely by the women. Several of them delivered speeches at the occasion, which according to reports was exceptionally large; it included the respectable Sikh women from the leading families of Amritsar and of the Province in general.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Sikh women actively participated in educational programs and, with particular regard to music, the career of teacher was considered a suitable field in which women could contribute, and thus achieve a professional level. *Talīm* (music training) is a central issue in Indian music traditions but, as discussed in a previous article (Cassio 2011), the professional schools dedicated to the teaching of *Gurmat sangīt* are restricted to male students and teachers only, as the career of *rāgī* is traditionally considered a male activity.

Over the last decades, Sikh High Schools and institutions attached to *gurdwārās* began to organize courses on *Gurbānī Sangīt* taught by women teachers, in order to provide to young female students the knowledge of *rāga* and *tāla*, according to the rules of modern Hindustani classical music. *Gurbānī sangīt* courses for girls generally have an amateur spirit, meant to give only a basic musical education, which only would allow students to sing the Sikh Gurūs' hymns in the prescribed *rāgas* in a simple way. I had the opportunity to visit, for instance, the Mātā Sundrī Gurmat College in New Delhi (figure 6). This school is attached to a historical *gurdwārā*<sup>52</sup> named after Gurū Gobind Singh's wife, who was herself a *kīrtanā*. I was positively impressed by the teacher, Bibī Jaswinder Kaur Khālsā, who has been working at the Gurmat College for a decade. Trained in *khyāl*, *dhrupad*, *thumrī* and *Gurbānī sangīt*, Bibī Jaswinder Kaur Khālsā received an MA degree in music from the University of Chandigarh. She teaches and composes *śabads* in the prescribed *rāgas*, not only following the Bhatkhande theoretical system, but also taking the past tradition of classical music as source of inspiration for her compositions.



**Figure 6.** A class held at the Mātā Sundrī Gurmat Sangīt Vidyalaya. New Delhi, August 2012 (photograph by the author).

My teachers taught me how to sing old *Gurbānī* compositions, in the old *tāls*. But I also used to listen carefully to other singers, in order to catch their style and compositions. Contemporary generations do not listen to the old music, but only to the (commercial) music on TV, Radio and Internet. But, you see, education in *Gurmat sangīt* is very important, as this is a part of our own culture and identity.<sup>53</sup>

Another important example in the field of female education, with particular reference to *Gurbānī sangīt* and the cultural and ethical values that it conveys, is the Akāl Academy at Baru Sāhib.<sup>54</sup> According to Dr Purvi, a Hindu *khyāl* singer presently the Head of the Music Department:

Most [female students] come from disadvantaged rural backgrounds and their families are struggling. They tend not to have studied, but are devoted to gaining learning and doing *sevā* for the institution for a while. Babaji wanted me to train them so well that once they leave, they will be empowered as women. That way they will not have to rely on anyone for the rest of their lives. *Tablā* and *Gurmat sangīt* are compulsory for every girl. I focus on teacher training and allow my students to develop competency in teaching others. In India, becoming a teacher is an important job opportunity for women, as in this country unemployment is very high. Most of my students who left have found jobs in music teaching.<sup>55</sup>

Dr Purvi also explained that she teaches girls to play *tablā*: ‘So that women don’t end up dependent upon men to play *tablā*, as is culturally the case. Also, so they are independent and versatile in all instruments.’

Young (male and female) students from the Akāl Academy participate in national competitions and festivals (such as the prestigious Adutti Sangīt Sammelan at Jawaddī Kalān, Ludhiana). They became very popular for their *kīrtans* and *Āsā di Vār* broadcasted live on local TV channels as well as for videos posted to YouTube, confirming the leading role of media in promoting *Gurbānī sangīt* among the new generations.

Music is also an important vehicle for spiritual education among the *Nāmdhārī-s* (a sect of Sikhism). As affirmed by Ustad Harbhajan Singh, in the middle of the 1970s, the living authority of the *Nāmdhārī* sect, the Sat Gurū Maharāj Jagjit Singh (1920–2012), accorded that equal education in music should be imparted to boys and girls. Since then, male and female students have been trained in the classical renditions of the Sikh Gurūs’ *śabads*, incorporating in the repertoire also some refined *dhrupad* compositions from the *rabābī* tradition that Sat Gurū Maharāj Jagjit Singh aimed to revive.

Among our *Nāmdhārī* community, girls are allowed to sing *kīrtan* and also the *Āsā di Vār*. Our *Sat Gurū* is delighted in listening their renditions in the traditional *rāgas* and in big *tālas* like *dhrupad*, *dhamar*. But he does not allow the *dadrā* and *kaharwā* (meaning the semi-classical genres used to perform modern ‘light’ *kīrtan*).<sup>56</sup>

The system of education adopted by the *Nāmdhārīs*’ mirrors the traditional perspective on *talīm*, as reported by Bhāī Baldeep Singh:

The tradition bearers have had no hesitation in training the women alongside the men. Through the centuries women were very learned and adept at singing even

the most intricate of musical compositions and playing musical instruments synonymous to the Gurū's court.<sup>57</sup>

Following the traditional *talīm's* system, since 1996, Bhāī Baldeep Singh started to impart regular training in *Gurbānī Sangīt* to a group of students in the USA, the majority of whom have been women. Presently, these are the only female *kīrtanīe* trained in the *Gurbānī dhrupad* repertoire. Among them Nirinjan Kaur Khalsa Ph.D. in Sikh Studies and a *joī – pakhāwaj* player, is the first woman exponent of the Sultanpur Lodhi Amritsari Bāj, one of the oldest surviving percussion traditions of South Asia.

At an academic level of education, in India, female students find a source of inspiration and support in scholars, singers and teachers like Dr Nivedita Singh, who is presently the Head of Music Department at the Panjābī University of Patiala. Dr Nivedita Singh is a disciple of Professor Tara Singh, who trained her in both *khyāl*<sup>58</sup> and *Gurbānī sangīt*. Dr Nivedita Singh composes, performs and teaches *Gurbānī sangīt* according to the Hindustani classical tradition. During our engaging conversation about women in the world of Indian music, noticing that she learned only from male teachers, I asked her whether she missed receiving training from a woman:

Sometimes I feel that if I had learned from a female teacher, I would have adopted much earlier the female voice culture. In my case, in order to catch the nuances typical of feminine voices, I listened to many female *khyāl* singers (among them Kishori Amonkar, Prabha Atre, Ashwini Bhidhe Deshpande, Hirabai Barodekar, Shanti Sharma). I balanced myself in this way, learning from male *gurūs* (teachers), listening to female voices, and trying to combine both of these and creating my own style.

Dr Singh, who is also the author of a study on the sociological aspects of Hindustani music (Singh 2004), affirmed that it is only due to the historical and social conditions of the past that women were not allowed to sing in public. And, in regard to the ban on performing at the Sī Darbār Sāhib, Dr Singh affirmed:

I think that this rule should be reviewed, and that women should be allowed to sing at the Golden Temple. Women organizations should take up this matter, and even males should support this request. It is not a female issue, it is a social issue. I would love to sing there. It is the seat of music, of Sikhism, a sacred place that the *Gurūs* have given us. It would be a dream come true.

Surprisingly, in a debate I attended at a *gurdwārā* in Delhi, one of the male participants affirmed that if women performed at the Golden Temple, it would be an example for other female singers, who could be inspired by listening to the sound of a feminine voice. The question of the 'sonic' model discussed also with Dr Nivedita Singh and Bībī Jaswinder Kaur (Mātā Sundrī College) is very important and is not to be underestimated. As Dr Nivedita Singh maintained, in the past, a woman who studied under the tutorage of a man would have to adjust pitch, style and voice production in order to find a comfortable way of her own to sing, and yet still need a female vocal model. In the absence of a female *Gurbānī* model (as nowadays proposed in schools, or by media) a

girl would have to look in other genres, such as *khyāl*, semi-classical (*thumrī*) or folk music.

Since the 1980s, media like Radio and TV promoted not only an image, but also a female sonic model that could be easily adopted and reproduced without any previous training. I believe that the success of Bībī Baljīt Kaur's plain style of singing may be framed in this context. The later development of the Internet broadened the spectrum of choices, and today on the Web there is a varied offering of *Gurbānī*'s renditions, from the old *dhrupad* recordings of Bībī Jaswant Kaur to the modern *śabads* performed with a Westernized pop flair, posted on YouTube. But without a critical approach and study, the variety brought on by the Internet may be misleading rather than educating.

*Gurbānī sangīt* is one of the vehicles of Sikh identity and, especially for the diasporic communities, websites became virtual places for discussion and education. A very recent phenomenon in this regard is 'e-learning'. The *on-line* courses offered by private institutions<sup>59</sup> and universities<sup>60</sup> apparently bring in enormous advantages, especially for Sikh students who live abroad and may have not access to direct learning from a teacher in India. According to the traditional Indian system of education, students need to undergo an intense and long period of training under the guidance of their (generally male) teachers. In the past, especially for girls, this aspect represented an obstacle to pursuing a course in music, with the result that women were rarely educated in *Gurbānī sangīt*. Thus, *e-learning* facilitates the modality of education, also cutting down on expenses, since some of the on-line courses are free of charge.

But on the other hand, a risk of *on-line* programs is to propose a pedagogy based on a new (simplified) music *corpus* specifically created for distant learning courses, with inevitable consequences on the future of the tradition. Nowadays, the Sikh Gurūs' repertoire is rendered in such a great variety of musical idioms and arrangements as to raise important questions about its musical coherence and identity. Thus, a key issue of academic studies on *Gurbānī sangīt* is the research on the specific music idiom and repertoire that distinguish the Sikh Gurūs' tradition from any other genre of Indian music. In this regard, preserving the traditional 'strategies of education' is considered vital to the life of an oral culture that has its roots in the medieval era, and the role of Universities should be to promote academic research and criticism.<sup>61</sup>

In a previous article published on *Sikh Formations* (Cassio 2011), I have already expressed my reservations about the pedagogy recently introduced to teach *Gurbānī sangīt*. The musical reform established in 1991 by the Rāga Nirnayak Committee (at Jawaddī Taksāl), was shaped on Bhatkhande's system and took the aesthetics and the form of twentieth century classical *khyāl* as paradigm. As result of this process of 'khyālization' of *Gurbānī kīrtan*, previous original forms have been forgotten. Most contemporary *śabads*' renditions are nowadays based on the modern *khyāl* form, in terms of structure, *tālas*, *rāgas*, instruments and vocal techniques. Like *dhrupad* and other medieval genres (Raja and Rao 1999), Sikh Gurūs' music had its own educational method (*talīm*) that should be rediscovered and revalued before introducing new systems. As a result of this process of 'khyālization' of *Gurbānī*, nowadays non-Sikh *khyāl* singers are emerging with their renditions of *Gurbānī* compositions, in the context of *gurdwārās* as well as within the global web-community.

## New generations of kīrtanī in the Internet era

I would like to conclude this article by focusing on the new generations of female *kīrtanī*, bringing to your attention the very interesting case of Ashuprīt, and the *jathā* composed by her elder sisters Anuprīt and Pūjaprīt, from Jalandhar (figure 7). Ashuprīt is a Hindu born singer of *khyāl* and a young star in the field of music. Daughter of a professional *tablā* player,<sup>62</sup> at the age of seven she won the prestigious Harivallabh competition in the category of *khyāl*, and later began to sing Sikh Gurūs' *śabads* set in *khyāl* and semi-classical arrangements. In 2002, Ashuprīt and her sisters converted to Sikhi, and started to perform professionally in historical *gurdwārās* and at the Golden Temple complex (Manji Sāhib Dīwān Hall). In the same year, her first CD of *Gurbānī sangīt* was published by Plasma Records, followed by another five recordings released by the famous T-Series and Sarab Sānjhī Gurbānī, which increased Ashuprīt's fame within the Sikh community in India and abroad.



**Figure 7.** Ashuprīt Kaur Khālsā and her sisters, rehearsing at their residence in Jalandhar, August 2012 (photograph by the author).

With the strong support of her father, Ashuprīt filled a space in the *Gurbānī* music market and media opened up in the 1980s by Bībī Baljīt Kaur, who served as a model to Ashuprīt's career. The image of a young girl and her sisters (figure 8) reinforced the concept of purity and spirituality contained in the poetical message of the hymns, visually taking a distance from any political association, as well as from the seductive body language promoted by contemporary Bollywood and the old courtesans' tradition.

Interestingly, the music of the first CDs was composed by contemporary musicians who infused the Sikh Gurūs' hymns with an appealing Bollywood *ghazal* flair, although more recently Ashuprīt Kaur and her elder sisters have specialized in the *khyāl* rendition of *Gurbānī śabads*, composing most of their musical repertoire in that genre.

Ashuprīt's exceptional vocal skills suit the complex ornamentation of *khyāl*, and she maintained during an interview that she has been inspired by famous *khyāl* female singers

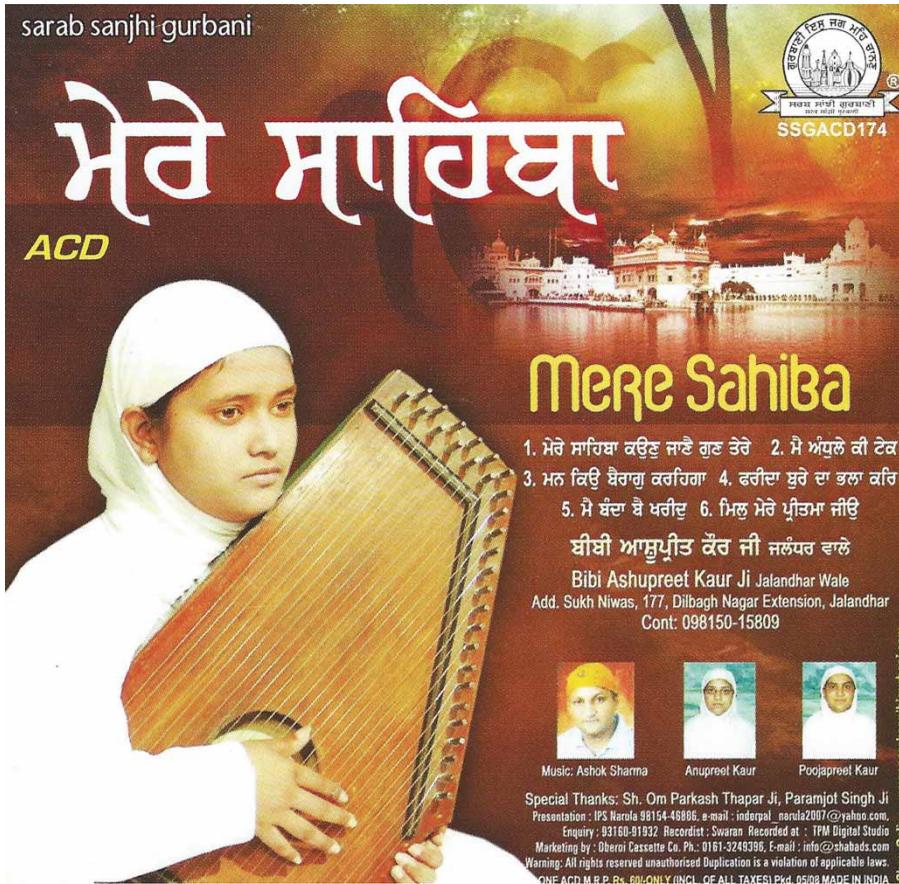


Figure 8. Ashuprīt Kaur Khālsā's CD cover.

such as Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, who recently became her teacher. Today, Ashuprīt Kaur and her sisters are acclaimed artists. They received the 'B high grade' from AIR, for which they perform regularly, and their recordings are advertised on private satellite TV channels that telecast their *kirtans*.

On the Internet, they contend with Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā for the attention of the web community, inspiring and encouraging other female *kirtānīe* to share the web platform. But in contrast to Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā, Ashuprīt Kaur established a new standard of compositions based on *rāgas* prescribed in the SGGS, in a modern *khyāl*-based rendition. Born at the beginning of the 1990s into the Internet era, Ashuprīt Kaur and her sisters are aware of the importance of the Web for their career. And although they do not directly manage their own videos posted on YouTube, they are familiar with social networks, and post announcements of their *kirtans* there.

On the wake of young Ashuprīt's fame, promoted by the media, private institutions are beginning to create competitions for girls in the field of *Gurbānī saṅgīt*, posting the performances to video-sharing websites. Surprisingly, the winners of 2011 *Anhad Nād Kīrtan* competition for ladies (organized in collaboration with the Govt. of Delhi to commemorate Bhāī Avtar Singh),<sup>63</sup> in both the young and senior

artists categories, were two Hindu *khyāl* singers. In this new scenario, it is significant what the winner of the final competition, Shivangini Rastogi, shared with me in a personal note:

Being a student of Hindustani Classical Music, I think it is extremely important to also cover *Gurbānī*. [ ... ] I went on to learn *Gurbānī*, because I thought my repertoire would be incomplete without that, like it would be so without *khyāl gāyakī*, or *thumrī ang*, folk etc. I took to *Gurbānī* because Gursharan maam (Gursharan Kaur, Shivangini's teacher) would refer to *śabads* and *rāgas* and *tāls* in *Gurbānī* while demonstrating a *khyāl*. [ ... ]

Interestingly, like in the case of Ashuprīt and her sisters, it is the musical challenge that brought Shivangini into the field of *Gurbānī*, and the practice of *śabads* then deeply affected her life at a personal level.

In comparison with other genres of Hindustani music, singing and learning, *Gurbānī* helps me to be conscience driven, further understanding what is right and wrong, what are the qualities of an exemplary human being.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusions

Although *Gurbānī sangīt* was practiced by women within the domestic context, history shows that the exposure of female professional singers to media is only a recent phenomenon. Until the twentieth century, most of the Hindustani musical genres were transmitted and performed in the male lineage (Neuman 1980; Cassio 2005), and thus it appears that music as a profession connected with exposure to an audience has long been a male privilege. In the last 30 years, media have popularized the image of the female *kīrtanīe*, creating an active interest in this regard within the Sikh community in India and abroad, as well as among non-Sikhs. The present article has aimed to shed a light on multiple styles and strategies adopted by female *kīrtanīe*, over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in order to perform the hymns from the Sikh sacred scriptures. In particular, we may distinguish three different periods that in fact coincide with three distinguished decades in which media evolved, bringing a significant change in the strategies of production and perception.

The first period was in the 1980–1990s, when *AIR* and the National Television produced dedicated shows in which the first female *kīrtanīe* publically appeared. Nijawans also noticed that *dhādī* women were allowed to perform at the *Srī Darbār Sāhib* in the same timeframe. There is evidence of female *kīrtan* and *dhādī* singers existing in the past as well, but it was in a dramatic period of recent Sikh history, in the 1980s, that women emerged on a large public platform with a strategic reassuring image of Sikhi, promoted through the media. Another important factor that contributed in popularizing female *kīrtanīe* was the pressure that came in the same years from Western women converted to Sikhi, who insisted on performing *kīrtan* in equal ways – and on the same stages – as their male peers.

A similar quest came from their Sikh Indian sisters who migrated abroad. In the early days, the Sikh diasporic communities could not arrange regular functions with

the *rāgīs*, and so women started to take their place (stage) singing and, in some cases, set the *śabads* on new music for ceremonies held during the weekends.<sup>65</sup>

This could be considered the first generation of professional and semi-professional female *Gurbānī kīrtan* singers who, in the absence of a proper music education and previous female sonic models, adopted a style meant for congregational singing inspired by the folk and semi-classical music. A plain style similar to what Paintal described as the *Jyotian-de-śabad*, enhancing the sentiment (*rasa*) of the spiritual hymns rather than the grammar of the modal melodies (*rāgas*) prescribed in the *SGGS*. In this context, the first shows organized by AIR and National Television seemed to respond to a cultural need and a political agenda.

An evolution of musical aesthetics and communication happened at the beginning of the 1990s, along with the music reform promoted by the *Rāga Nirnayak Committee* at Jawaddī Taksāl, to re-affirm the practice of performing the Sikh Gurūs's hymns according to the *rāgas* mentioned in the *SGGS*. An important contribution in establishing the Jawaddī Taksāl's initiative was played by Bībī Jaspūr Kaur, who fostered music education for female students at the national and international level, also collaborating with the 3HO Foundation in the USA.

Since then, women actively became part of the Sikh music 'Renaissance'. The phenomenon was echoed on the first independent Panjābī TV channels, which began to regularly broadcast performances of female *kīrtanīe* educated on the basis of the music principles established by the *Rāga Nirnayak Committee*. Through independent TV channels, the educational aspect improved, with dedicated programs that spread at a social level the active participation of women in *kīrtan*,<sup>66</sup> along with the evolution of *Gurbānī sangīt* in the music market.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the affirmation of the Internet, websites have become virtual places for debating and constructing the modern Sikh identity. But, it should also be noted that the *khyāl*-oriented imprint of the Jawaddī Taksāl's music reform ignited a process of *khyālization* of *Gurbānī*, which attracted also non-Sikh *khyāl* female singers to compete successfully in the field.

In this new context, the practice of *śabad kīrtan* assumed a multi-layered, global, dimension free of censorship. Video-sharing websites (such as YouTube) and new applications for electronic devices are substituting for the role of Radio, TV channels and CDs, giving everyone the possibility to appear in the contemporary context, without any particular agenda.<sup>67</sup>

In this new scenario, we may still distinguish the two major forms of *Gurbānī sangīt* identified by Paintal (1978). On the one hand, we have the so-called *classical* version, in which the hymns are mainly rendered according to *khyāl*, which demands technical training and vocal expertise, as demonstrated by the manneristic recordings of Ashuprīt Kaur. On the other hand, the plain renditions of the hymns, as performed by Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā, constitute an alternative sonic model for non-trained *kīrtanīe*.

As far as research is concerned, within those two categories (classical and folk) the most interesting cases are represented by the late Bībī Jaswant Kaur, who inherited old *rabābīs'* *dhrupad* compositions from Bhāī Tābā, demonstrating how the medieval form of *Gurbānī kīrtan* was still performed at the beginning of the twentieth century. The other interesting contribution comes from Dr Jaspūr Kaur,<sup>68</sup> whose fieldwork and analysis on the female folk style of singing shed a new light on the early *Gurbānī's* construction, suggestive of an original female style of *kīrtan*.

Along with traditional repertoires more recently, with the support of media technologies, *popular* and *new age* music productions (influenced by Western music) are quickly establishing new syncretic sonic models that need to be critically analyzed.

With the uncontrolled expansion of the Internet, the web has now become a ‘net’ where everything is displayed, apparently without any criteria or policy. Here, the fragmented picture of the tradition appears like a broken mirror, where the *Gurū*’s *bānī* is reflected intact, but in many different shapes.

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## Notes

- 1 The hymns of the *SGGS* are set to 31 main *rāgas*, and their 31 varieties (*mishrat rāgas*). The main *rāgas* are: (1) *Srī Rāga*, (2) *Mājh*, (3) *Gaurī*, (4) *Āsā*, (5) *Gūjarī*, (6) *Dev-gandhārī*, (7) *Bihāgrā*, (8) *Wadhans*, (9) *Sorath*, (10) *Dhanāsrī*, (11) *Jaitsrī*, (12) *Todī*, (13) *Bairarī*, (14) *Tilang*, (15) *Sūhī*, (16) *Bilāval*, (17) *Gond*, (18) *Rāmkalī*, (19) *Nat Narāin*, (20) *Mālī Gaurā*, (21) *Mārū*, (22) *Tukhārī*, (23) *Kedār*, (24) *Bhāīro*, (25) *Basant*, (26) *Sārang*, (27) *Malhār*, (28) *Kānrā*, (29) *Kalyān*, (30) *Parbhātī*, (31) *Jaijāvantī*.
- 2 Hindustani is a term used to define the classical music tradition of North India.
- 3 As suggested by Shelemey (2006), the term *sonic event* provides a neutral description of performances that do not refer to the western concept of music and its aesthetics.
- 4 The term *kīrtanīe* is used here to indicate the plural of the Panjābī word *kīrtanīā*.
- 5 During this interview, held in Ludhiānā in August 2012, Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā shared with me that in order to pursue her career as *kīrtanīā*, she studied privately for her BA and MA and, like her sisters, did not marry.
- 6 Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā refers here to the recitation of the Sikh scriptures.

- 7 Interview with Bībī Baljīt Kaur Khālsā, Ludhiānā, August 2012.
- 8 From an interview by Ruchika M. Khanna, *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 24 April 2004 (<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2004/20040424/edit.htm#7>).
- 9 Nīlam Sahni's date of birth is not known to the author.
- 10 Bhāī Baldeep Singh is the 13th generation *kīrtanīā* belonging to the family of the legendary Babā Jwālā Singh. Chairman and Founder of the Anad Foundation and the Anad Conservatory, Bhāī Baldeep Singh is uniquely devoted since more than two decades to the study – and the Reinassance – of the ancient Gurbani sangīt idiom and instruments.
- 11 *This śabad* is quoted in the same article published by Bhāī Baldeep Singh (2011, 253), but he does not provide a translation of the hymn. When I asked him about the missing translation, he explained that it is a mystical composition and only a person who experienced the profound spiritual meaning of *kīrtan* would be able to understand this *śabad* in all its complex nuances. So rather than using a translation that would not fully render the spirit of the mystical experience, Bhāī Baldeep Singh decided not to publish any. This reflection brings about not only the question of translating a mystical experience into words, but also the problematic issue of translating the native poetry into a foreign language. For a reference about translation strategies of sacred Sikh scriptures into English, see Shackle and Mandair (2005, xlvii). Here, for the sake of explanation, I have adopted the translation done by Manmohan Singh (1982), published and approved by the Shiromanī Gurdwārā Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), Amritsar, in 1965. However, along with the important point highlighted above, it should be noticed that, in place of the prosaic versions that appear in the current English publications of the *SGGS*, a literal version of this hymn would probably render the hermetic structure of the poetry as well as the specific music vocabulary which has no equal in the Western music tradition.
- 12 Interview with Bhāī Balbīr Singh, Amritsar, 08/28/2013.
- 13 Interview with Bhāī Randhir Singh, Amritsar, 08/24/2013.
- 14 The term *rāgī* designates a Sikh musician who is expert in singing the *śabads* (hymns) from the Sikh *Gurūs'* tradition, according to the prescribed *rāgas* indicated in the *SGGS*. And in a broader sense, this term is used to indicate a professional singer who serves in the *Gurdwārās*. The term *rabābī* literally designates a category of Muslim musicians expert in playing the *rabāb*. The *rabāb* is a fretless lute, originally played by Bhāī Mardānā (1459–1534), who accompanied Gurū Nānak (1469–1539) in his spiritual and sonic journeys. It is thus considered the first instrument of the Sikh tradition. Over time, the term *rabābī* designated not only a category of accompanists, but in general all Muslim musicians (singers and instrumentalists) who performed *kīrtan* at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, and at other historical Sikh places of worship before Partition (1947). For a reference about the recent history of the *rabābī* tradition, see Purewal (2011, 365–382).
- 15 Interview with Bhāī Gurcharan Singh, New Delhi, 08/18/2012.
- 16 For discussion about *dhrupad* and *dhrupad* B. Singh (2011), and Cassio 'Gurbānī Sangīt: Authenticity and Influences. A study of the Sikh Gurūs' tradition in relation to other genres of Indian music' (forthcoming).
- 17 Abul-Fazl-Allami (Engl. Transl.) (1907, 256).
- 18 Personal communication with Bhāī Baldeep Singh, Marsciano, January 17, 2013.
- 19 According to Kanwal (2010, 182–183), Bhāī Tābā trained some of the most important musicians of the last century. Among them: Bhāī Arjan Singh Tarangar, Bhāī Pīārā

Singh and Bhāī Giān Aibtābādī. In 1957 Bhāī Giān Aibtābādī hosted Bhāī Tābā in Delhi to work on the transcription of some of the most important compositions from the *rabābī* tradition, as sung in Amritsar before the partition. These compositions were published in 1961 in Bhāī Giān Aibtābādī's book 'Gurbānī Sangīt' in two volumes (published in Amritsar by the S.G.P.C.).

- 20 According to Sarbprīt Singh, who met and interviewed Bībī Jaswant Kaur through Bhāī Baldeep Singh in 2005, the great percussionist Bhāī Nasīrā used to accompany on *jorī* Bhāī Tābā's classes. Source: <http://www.gurmatsangeetproject.com/Pages/JaswantKaur.asp>.
- 21 Source: <http://www.gurmatsangeetproject.com/Pages/JaswantKaur.asp>.
- 22 The term *Gurmat sangīt* has been recently introduced in the Indian academia to designate the study of the Sikh Gurūs' music tradition. It is considered synonymous with *Gurbānī sangīt*, which is a term used for the Sikh music tradition since the time of Gurū Nānak. According to Bhāī Baldeep Singh, the two terms are radically different and it is inappropriate to use the word *Gurmat* in regard to the musical aspect.

The word *Gurmat* literally means Gurū's *wisdom* and refers to the Sikh doctrine. In *Gurbānī*, we find expressions such as "*gurbānī gāvho bhāī*" by Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Sikh Gurū in *rāga Sorath* (page 628), it has never been written *Gurmat gavo Bhāī*. *Gurmat* is the perception – the *athār* or accordance with which one must sing *Gurbānī*. For instance the *partāl* composition in *rāga Kānrā* by the fourth Gurū, Gurū Rāmdayā, "Har jas gāvho bhagvān, jas gāvat pāp lahān, mat Gurmat sun jas kān" (Listen, to the wisdom of the Gurū, and sing *hari jas*; thus you will be rid of your sins). *Mat* will be revealed because one has found the *Sat*, the Gurū in a state of *ānand* (bliss).

Personal communication with Bhāī Baldeep Singh, New York, June 2013.

- 23 In 1991, Sant Baba Suchā Singh formed a committee on the usage of Rāgas. The great musician Pt. Dalīp Chander Bedī headed this committee. Pt. Bedī not only gave direction to the collective thought of the scholars, but also created new forms of Rāgas from the ancient religious books, through his deep and vast knowledge of music. The committee on the usage of the Rāgas consisted of Bābā Suchā Singh as Trustee, Gurmat Sangeet Sammellan and Pt. Dalīp Chander Bedī as head of the above committee. The other members included Principal Rajinder Singh of Lucknow, head advisor of Rāga Darbar Committee, Bhāī Avtār Singh of Delhi, Bhāī Tejpal Singh (Singh Bandhū) of Delhi, Bhāī Prithīpal Singh Kang of Indore, Bhāī Baldev Singh of Amritsar, Dr Ajīt Singh Paintal of Delhī, Principal Baldev Singh of Delhi, Prof Kartār Singh of Ludhiānā, Prof Paramjot Singh of Mullānpur, Prof Charanjīt Singh of Ludhiānā, Principal Chanan Singh Majboor, Ustad Jaswant Singh Bhanwrā, Bībī Jasbir Kaur, Principal Shamsheer Singh Karīr of Patialā, Dr Jagīr Singh Chandigarh, Prof Harchand Singh, Prof Avtār Singh (Nāz), and Dr Gurnām Singh of Punjābī University Patiala. After an exhaustive discussion among the different scholars and musicians, they came to the following conclusions on the basis of available books on the Indian Music, books on Gurmat Sangeet and the ancient recordings of the old religious traditions. (Singh 2008, 2)
- 24 At the beginning of the 1980s, Bībī Jasbir Kaur Khālsā has been invited by Yogi Bhajan to teach *Gurbānī sangīt* at the 3HO Women's Training Camps annually organized in the USA.

- 25 Singh, B.B., recorded during the 34th biannual *Gurbānī Sangīt* Intensive Retreat held in Marsciano (Italy), January 2013.
- 26 Interestingly, if we look at the history of Indian music, apart from the Rajasthani medieval poetess Mīrābāī (1498–1557), all the famous authors of lyrics set to classical and devotional repertoires are male.
- 27 Example quoted in Thielemann (1997, 184) and taught me by the *dhrupad* singer Amelia Cuni.
- 28 An exceptional case was Asghāri Bāī (1918–2006), a *haveī dhrupad* singer rediscovered (and then re-abandoned) by the media in the 1980s.
- 29 Quoted in Bor et al. (1999, 123).
- 30 According to Radice, *virahā* is ‘Pining, longing for the absent lover; a very important concept in the Vaiśnava tradition, in which Rādhā pines for Krishna as a metaphor for the human longing for the divine perfection’ (2011, 60). The topic of mystic union and separation is also widely represented in the Sikh scriptures with a slight and meaningful difference. As noted by Mandair, the female agency (the bride longing for her husband) is used as metaphor for the self, whose focus in the state of separation and union remains centered on the *Gurū* through the pining sentiment. ‘In the writings of the Sikh Gurus a person who maintains this state of *birhā*, and its attendant balance of separation–fusion, self–other, action–inaction, attachment–detachment in the course of daily life is known as Gurumukh’ (Mandair 2009, 373).
- 31 This is one of the most famous compositions from the *thumrī* tradition. The English translation is by Du Perron (2002, 184).
- 32 Interview video recorded by the author, New Delhi, August 2012.
- 33 Interview recorded by the author, New York, May 2013.
- 34 *Sitār* is an Indian fretted lute.
- 35 Interview with Professor Kartār Singh, Ludhiānā, August 2012.
- 36 Interestingly, male Western *amritdhārīs*, who received training in *Gurbānī Sangīt*, are allowed to perform one of the *kīrtan chaunkīs* at the Sīrī Darbār Sāhib.
- 37 The SGPC is an organization established in 1920, in charge of the administration of the Sīrī Harmandir Sāhib (Golden Temple) in Amritsar, and of other historical *gurdwārās*.
- 38 For a reference, see Protopapas (2011, 339–364).
- 39 The time slightly changes according to the season.
- 40 But the Siri Singh Sahib had taught them that the status of women in the Khalsa was totally equal to that of man, holding the same right and responsibilities. Acknowledging that the grace and the dignity of women must always be maintained, they discussed having days or hours of *seva* inside the Harimandir Sahib set aside for women only. (Kaur Khālsā 1995, 136)
- 41 The same event is also mentioned by Shanti Kaur Khalsa, but in her book is reported that the facts happened in 1980.
- 42 Krishna Kaur Khālsā is an Afro-American Minister of the Sikh Dharma, and the founder of the International Association of Black Yoga Teachers.
- 43 *Sevādārs* are those who offer a voluntary service in the temple.
- 44 *Nihangs* belong to the Sikh army order.
- 45 Bibi Jagīr Kaur has been elected President of SGPC two times, in 1999 and in 2004.
- 46 ‘From school teacher to first woman SGPC chief’. Jasdeep Singh Malhotra, *Hindustan Times Begowal* (Kapurthala), 30 March 2012.

- 47 Video interview (in Panjābī) recorded by the author in Ludhiānā, August 2012. During the interview, Bibī Baljīt Kaur shared with me that in 1995 she had been invited to perform at the Golden Temple, but when she eventually reached the Sṛī Harmandir Sāhib, a group of people from the Sikh congregation protested, and she decided to respect the *sangat*'s opinion. A few years earlier, a similar event had happened, and at that time she had received a ban from the Singh Sabha.

In spite of all that, I don't want to have an argument, nor create a discord within the *sangat*. If the Sikh Panth agrees, we will welcome the decision, and it will be an honor for women to perform at the Sṛī Harmandir Sāhib. As far as I'm concerned, I have done *kīrtan* in all the major *gurdwārās*, and I'm happy with that.

- 48 Video interview (in Panjābī) recorded by the author in Patiālā, August 2012.  
 49 Video interview (in Panjābī) recorded by the author in Patiālā, August 2012.  
 50 In her interview Dr Jasbīr Kaur Khālsā maintained: 'If women can go in the battle-field, as Mai Bhago did, then women can also perform *kīrtan*.'  
 51 According to Jakobsh, Bhāī Takhat Singh and his wife Harnam Kaur came to embody the ideals of the Singh Sabha reformers (2003, 154), but not without resistance by some of its members. In Bhāī Takhat Singh's words:

When I approached Singh Sabha about the opening of a girls' school, only a few supported the idea. There were numerous objections. Someone said, 'Are they to do service after studies?' Someone else said, 'Girls will get spoiled after their studies. They will write letters to their boy-friends. No secrets can be safe from them.' Another said, 'Only the shameless will send their daughters to an unmarried man for schooling'.

(<http://www.sikhnet.com/news/Bhāī-takhat-singh-zinda-shaheed>)

- 52 Here, in the past, the *hazūri rāgī* Bhāī Avtar Singh and Bhāī Gurcharan Singh lived for a number of years, employed as *kīrtanīe*.  
 53 Video interview (in Panjābī) recorded by the author in New Delhi, August 2012.  
 54 Akāl Academy, Baru Sāhib is a boarding school in Himachal Pradesh, about 100 km from Shimla. The 1532 students try not only to explore the world of knowledge, as in other schools, but also imbibe human virtues, by emulating exemplary faculty and staff, and by availing themselves of the various opportunities offered by the state-of-the-art infrastructure. (Source: <http://www.akalacademy.in>)  
 55 Interview published on [http://www.akalacademy.in/Advancement\\_women.asp](http://www.akalacademy.in/Advancement_women.asp).  
 56 Ustad Harbhajan Singh sadly also admitted that, despite the efforts to achieve a satisfactory music level, most of the female students give up the practice once they get married.  
 57 Personal communication, recorded during the 35th biannual *Gurbānī Sangīt* Intensive Retreat held in Albuquerque, July 2013.  
 58 Dr Nivedita Singh has been trained in *khyāl* (Gwalior *gharānā*) by Professor Tara Singh, and by Dr Ajit Paintal (Indor *gharānā*) and Pandit Ganesh Prasad Sharma. In regard to her *gāyakī* (style of singing), Dr Singh affirmed that she does not follow any *gharānā* in particular. 'With the help of my gurūs (teachers), I have formed my own style, and still I am in search of something that suits my voice, and it is a constant process.' Video

interview (Hindi and English) taken by the author, August 2012, at the Panjābī University of Patialā.

- 59 Among the private institutions, the Rag Academy (UK) offers a distance learning program called *Gurbānī* Outreach.

With our Gurmat Sangeet Outreach program, we want to offer everybody in the world the possibility of studying Gurmat Sangeet and Sikh Music with Raj Academy. This idea proved to be very successful and popular, and currently 130 students are signed up for combination or distance learning. The requirements for the student are a medium to view DVDs and a daily commitment for practice and studies of 30 minutes maximum.

(Source: <http://www.rajacademy.com/content/gurmat-sangeet-outreach/index.php>)

Online courses are also offered by <http://harsangeet.com> whose purpose is: ‘To contribute to increasing the performance standards of Spiritually Charged Music by average people around the world. To make the practical study of Indian Classical Music accessible to everyone, anywhere, anytime’.

- 60 In 2013, the Gurmat Sangīt Chair, University of Patialā has launched an online course. According to the organizers, who sent out a public email to promote the course, this initiative provides:

Lot of benefits for anybody, who may be interested in learning through Online Teaching – Gurmukhi, Gurmat Studies, Gurmat Sangeet (Gayan), Gurmat Sangeet (Tanti Saaz Vadan) and Gurmat Sangeet (Taal Saaz Vadan). The course has Remote Quality Instructional Support through Text, Audio, Video with questions and answers. Process-based evaluations and measurements & award of Certificates, Diplomas and Degrees etc., and many more, as you very rightly mentioned above, and the Gurmat Gyan Elementary Courses, is free of cost for everyone. (<http://www.gurmatgyanonlinepup.com>)

- 61 According to the Philosophy Department of the San Jose State University: ‘Such courses, designed by elite universities and widely licensed by others, would compromise the quality of education, stifle diverse viewpoints and lead to the dismantling of public universities.’ Tamar Lewin, *New York Times*, 2 May 2013. (Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/03/education/san-jose-state-philosophy-dept-criticizes-online-courses.html>)
- 62 Ashuprīt’s father was born in Amritsar from a Hindu family and later he embraced the Sikh faith. Ashuprīt’s mother is Hindu, and in their house along with Sikh symbols, pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses coexist (see figure 6).
- 63 *Anhad Nād Kīrtan Group* came into being in 2010 during the *Gurbānī* Singing Competition for ladies. This program was unique in the sense that it sought to promote *kīrtan* singing by ladies. The focus of the program was on the importance of propagating the message of *Gurbānī* through *kīrtan*. Special care was taken to ensure correct pronunciation and correct pauses while singing the *śabads*. The group comprises the winners of the competition in the junior and senior groups’. (Source: <http://mvlse.org/anhad-naad-video-download-1.html>)
- 64 Personal communication, by email, 09/02/2012.

65 In her interview, Manjit K.J. Singh affirmed:

When we came to America in 1975, the week-end ceremonies at the *gurdwārās* took a special significance, and for me it became very important to sing *śabads*. So I started working on *śabads* on my own. In the beginning, I would just remember the tunes, and practice with a *tablā* player. Then, I was used to sing almost every week at the *gurdwārā*, and in order not to repeat the same *śabads* I started to compose new ones.

At the end of the 1980s, Manjit Kaur performed at the Golden Temple, in the *parkarma* opposite the Akāl Takhat. Interview recorded by the author in New York, May 2013.

- 66 There are educationally important programs, like the one transmitted in the early morning from the Akāl Academy at Baru Sāheb. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_Ajcg8PDHqk&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Ajcg8PDHqk&feature=related).
- 67 We may notice that in most cases, the recordings of female *kīrtans* are performed and posted by Indian Sikhs who live abroad, or by Westerners converted to Sikhi. In this regard, it was not my intention to explore the ‘new age’ music productions of *Gurbānī*, mainly composed by and for the use of the Western Sikhs practitioners, since this is a topic that requires an appropriate space for discussion.
- 68 On YouTube is posted an interesting conference given by Dr Jasbīr Kaur at Jawaddī Kalān (Ludhiānā) in June 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zAEUZamUBQ>.

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