

Understanding the Musical Framework of Guru Granth Sahib

Since the time the article '[Give The Man A Break](#)' (Nov. 22), my mind has been posing some questions like:

"What does Guru Granth Sahib, our eternal Guru command us on the subject of *Keertan*?"

"Why is it that the Gurus chose *raag*s to classify Gurbani?"

"What is the relation between *Shabad* and *raag*?"

"Do we need the aid of experimental music to propagate the message of Guru Granth Sahib?"

"Have our *Keertanias* experimented with the vastness of *raag*s and *taals* as prescribed by Gurus?"

"What impact will experimentation have on our future generations?"

Keertan today has been commercialized to such an extent that barring a few, most *Keertanias* are only concerned with making quick money. Their limitations to experiment with the prescribed vastness of Guru Granth Sahib always gets camouflaged in the excuse that the *Sangat* does not prefer to listen to *Keertan* as prescribed by the Gurus.

Gurus wrote *Shabads* in poetical-metric forms and then associated them with *raag*s and *ghars* (beats/*taals*). Does this mean that Gurus have left no scope for experimentation with music? The indication of *raag* and *ghar* (beat) with every *Shabad* implies that Gurus had a definite motive behind fixing a framework. This framework was not set to limit the ability of the human mind to experiment with music but to act as an aid in spiritual development. A simple mathematical permutation and combination on notes of any *raag* will indicate that each *raag* offers thousands of tunes to experiment with.

Poetry (the form in which Gurbani is written) and music (*raag*s) are two sides of the same coin. They are independent but yet complement each other. Music versifies and provides melody, uniformity and cadence to poetry. The factor that binds music and poetry is their metrical-form (*ghar* or beat). Music (*Raag*) is based on sound (*swar* - notes) and a combination of notes produce distinct musical effects. Poetry is determined by Word (*Shabad*), which communicates a message. Music (*Raag*) on the other hand conveys a feeling to the heart and is therefore universal. Spirituality, after all, is striking the right balance between mind and heart. Therefore, when Gurbani (poetry) is complemented with *raag* (music) and bound by *ghar* (beat), the resulting effect on mind and body can become the catalyst for change.

As explained earlier, *raag* conveys a feeling and *Shabad* a message. A *raag* is capable of touching the heart with feelings like joy, sorrow, detachment, etc. Upon studying the structure of Guru Granth Sahib it can be seen that *Shabads* relating to common themes are generally placed under each *raag*. When the broad themes of *Shabads* are overlaid with feelings conveyed by *raag*s, there emerges a reason behind classification of *Shabads* under a broad classification of thirty-one *raag*s.

Common Themes of Shabads placed under Raags of Guru Granth Sahib

1. *Soohee* - Being away from home. The soul being away from the House of Lord and the joy of meeting the true husband.
2. *Bilaaval* - beautification of soul, happiness.
3. *Gaund* - Separation, union, surprise.

4. *Sri* - Maya and detachment
5. *Maajh* - yearning to merge with Lord, giving up of negative values.
6. *Gauri* - Principles, serious, thoughtfulness, composed
7. *Aasa* - Hope
8. *Gujri* - Prayer (Pooja)
9. *Devghandhari* - Merging with spouse, self - realization
10. *Bihaagra* - Yearning due to separation of soul and happiness due to meeting the Lord.
11. *Sorath* - Merits of God
12. *Dhanasari* - Mixed theme
13. *Jaitsree* - Stability
14. *Todi* - Maya, separation
15. *Bairagi* - motivation to sing praises of Lord
16. *Tilang* - many words from the vocabulary of Islamic origins are used, sadness, beautification.
17. *Raamkali* - to give up the life of a wandering Jogi.
18. *Nat Narayan* - Joy of meeting the Lord
19. *Maali Gaura* - Happiness
20. *Maaru* - Bravery
21. *Tukhari* - Separation and union with Lord
22. *Kedara* - Love
23. *Bhairav* - Man's state of hell
24. *Basant* - Happiness
25. *Sarang* - Thirst to meet God
26. *Malaar* - State of separated and united soul
27. *Jaijawanti* - Vairaag (Detachment)
28. *Kalyaan* - Bhakti (Prayer) Ras
29. *Vadhans* - Vairaag (Detachment)
30. *Parbhati* - Bhakti (Prayer)
31. *Kaanra* - Bhakti (Prayer)

Feelings communicated by the music of Raags

1. *Soohi* - joy and separation
2. *Bilaaval* - happiness
3. *Gaund* - strangeness, surprise, beauty
4. *Sri* - satisfaction and balance
5. *Maajh* - loss, beautification
6. *Gauri* - seriousness
7. *Aasa* - making effort
8. *Gujri* - satisfaction, softness of heart, sadness
9. *Devghandhari* - no specific feeling but the Raag has a softness
10. *Bihaagra* - beautification
11. *Sorath* - motivation
12. *Dhanasari* - inspiration, motivation
13. *Jaitsree* - softness, satisfaction, sadness
14. *Todi* - this being a flexible Raag it is apt for communicating many feelings
15. *Bhairaagi* - sadness, (Gurus have, however, used it for the message of Bhakti)
16. *Tilang* - this is a favourite Raag of Muslims. It denotes feeling of beautification and yearning.
17. *Raamkali* - calmness
18. *Nat Narayan* - happiness
19. *Maali Gaura* - happiness
20. *Maaru* - giving up of cowardice
21. *Tukhari* - beautification
22. *Kedara* - love and beautification
23. *Bhairav* - seriousness, brings stability of mind

24. *Basant* - happiness
25. *Sarang* - sadness
26. *Malaar* - separation
27. *Jaijawanti* - viraag
28. *Kalyaan* - Bhakti Ras
29. *Vadhans* - vairaag, loss (that is why *Alahniya* is sung in this Raag when someone passes away)
30. *Parbhati* - Bhakti and seriousness
31. *Kaanra* - Bhakti and seriousness

It's clear that the Gurus used *raags* to increase the delivery power of shabad to our mind by invoking complementary feelings in our hearts through the usage of the prescribed *raags*.

Another interesting aspect of *raag* and Gurbani classification is understood by studying daily time-cycles. A *raag* has a preferred timing associated with it. There are some morning *raags*, evening *raags*, afternoon *raags*, etc. The human mind and heart also undergo varying degrees of mood change during a twenty-four hour time cycle.

Upon classification of thirty-one main *raags* used in Guru Granth Sahib based on the prescribed *raag* timings, we find that no *raags* fall under the time zone 12 AM - 3 AM. Normally one would sleep between 10PM - 4AM.

Timings of Raags

- 6 AM - 9AM: *Bhairaagi, Devgandhari*
- 9 AM - 12 PM: *Sarang, Suhi, Bilaaval, Gujri, Gond, Todi*
- 12 PM - 3 PM: *Vadhans, Maru, Dhanasari*
- 3 PM - 6 PM: *Maanjh, Gauri, Tilang, Tukhari*
- 6 PM - 9 PM: *Sri, Basant, Maali Gaura, Jaitsree, Kedara, Kalyaan*
- 9 PM - 12 AM: *Bihaagra, Nat Narayan, Sorath, Malaar, Kaanra, Jaijawanti*
- 12 AM - 3 AM: -----No Raags from Guru Granth Sahib-----
- 3AM - 6AM: *Aasa, Raamkali, Bhairav, Parbhati*

Some *raags* also have seasons associated with them as seasons also denote feelings.

Seasonality of Raags

1. *Basant raag* can be sung at any time in Basant season. *Shabads* with the theme of happiness are clustered under this *raag* in Guru Granth Sahib.
2. *Malaar raag* can be sung at any time in the rainy season. *Shabads* with the theme of separation are clustered under this *raag* in Guru Granth Sahib.

The Gurus have also indicated the beats associated with the poetry of every *Shabad*. In Guru Granth Sahib seventeen *ghars* (*taal* - beat) are mentioned. These seventeen *ghars* denote the following beats:

- GHAR 1 - DADRA TAAL (There are 1 Taalis and the Beat has 6 Maatraas)
- GHAR 2 - RUPAK TAAL (There are 2 Taalis and the Beat has 7 Maatraas)
- GHAR 3 - TEEN TAAL (There 3 Taalis and the Beat has 16 Maatraas)
- GHAR 4 - CHAAR TAAL (There are 4 Taalis and the Beat has 12 Maatraas)
- GHAR 5 - PUNJ TAAL (There are 5 Taalis and the Beat has 15 Maatraas)
- GHAR 6 - KHUT TAAL (There are 6 Taalis and the Beat has 18 Maatraas)
- GHAR 7 - MUT TAAL (There are 7 Taalis and the Beat has 21 Maatraas)
- GHAR 8 - ASHT MANGAL TAAL (There are 8 Taalis and the Beat has 22 Maatraas)
- GHAR 9 - MOHINI TAAL (There are 9 Taalis and the Beat has 23 Maatraas)

GHAR 10 - BRAHAM TAAL (There are 10 Taalis and the Beat has 28 Maatraas)
GHAR 11 - RUDRA TAAL (There are 11 Taalis and the Beat has 32 Maatraas)
GHAR 12 - VISHNU TAAL (There are 12 Taalis and the Beat has 36 Maatraas)
GHAR 13 - MUCHKUND TAAL (There are 13 Taalis and the Beat has 34 Maatraas)
GHAR 14 - MAHASHANI TAAL (There are 14 Taalis and the Beat has 42 Maatraas)
GHAR 15 - MISHR BARAN TAAL (There are 15 Taalis and the Beat has 47 Maatraas)
GHAR 16 - KUL TAAL (There are 16 Taalis and the Beat has 42 Maatraas)
GHAR 17 - CHRCHARI TAAL (There are 17 Taalis and the Beat has 40 Maatraas)

Within the rules of Indian Classical Music, uncountable *raag*s can be created. In fact any form of music (non-Indian and non-classical) can be classified under some form of *raag*. Hence it is a misconception that *raag*s are something highly classical and beyond the realm of the common man's understanding. In fact, any form of music is *raag*. But in Guru Granth Sahib, the Gurus have gone into depths of poetry, music and metrical forms to lay the framework that is best suited to convey the feeling and message of the *Shabad* simultaneously to the human mind and heart.

When each of the prescribed *raag*s offers uncountable permutations and combinations of musical compositions, then why is it that modern *Keertanias* are not experimenting within the prescribed framework of the Gurus?

Downfall in Keertan

Gurbani says:

"Among all raags, that one is sublime, O Siblings of Destiny, by which God comes to abide in the mind."
(Page 1423)

Clearly, only that *raag* is prescribed by which a feeling of spirituality is aroused.

The Gurus have not prescribed catchy musical tunes that dominate the *Shabad*. The essence of *Keertan* lies in effective delivery of the message of *Shabad*, using *raag* and *taal* as a medium. The medium must not dominate the essence.

This is where our modern day *keertanias* are making the mistake of experimenting beyond the prescribed framework of Guru Granth Sahib and singing *shabads* in catchy tunes. At the end it's the tune that remains in the mind and not the message.

Music is a double-edged sword. While it can be effectively used for constructive *Keertan* by operating within the prescribed framework of Guru Granth Sahib, on the other hand it can also be used for arousing destructive feelings by use of catchy tunes (as explained in '[Understanding the Musical Framework of Guru Granth Sahib](#)', Dec. 10, any form of music can be classified into a *raag*).

It is interesting to note that the main object that has caused the current day deterioration in quality of *Keertan* is the most widely used musical instrument called 'Harmonium'.

Harmonium is not an Indian instrument. Over one hundred years ago, Europeans brought the harmonica to India. The air box of this European instrument was experimented on by Indian musicians to develop a new instrument, the harmonium. This instrument is not best suited for Indian classical music.

According to Indian classical music, the human ear can recognize twenty-two musical notes in an octave. The harmonium only offers twelve discreet keys in an octave. Only string instruments offer the ability to play all twenty-two notes in an octave, by pressing the string at midpoints. It is for this reason that Indian Music was always played with the accompaniment of only string instruments. In fact if one sees the old pictures of Harmandir Sahib, one only finds string instruments being used by the *Keertanias*.

Although the harmonium offered a compromise to Indian classical music and should never have been used in the Indian system, it gained rapid acceptance because it was very easy to learn and use. Learning a string instrument requires close to four to five years professional training but the harmonium can be learnt in less than two months.

This was a great blessing to aspiring Sikhs who also wanted to be able to do *Keertan*. While there is no harm in using a harmonium and we must also accept its contribution in making it easier for the masses to learn *Keertan* and help them start their spiritual journey, it also caused the biggest deterioration to *Keertan* singing.

The professional *Keertanias* were now finding it hard to keep pace with rapid generation of a new breed of amateur *Keertanias*. Materialistic desires lead them to shorten their classical training period by moving to the harmonium. Over generations, these trends lead to complete elimination of string instruments from the Gurudwaras. Lack of dedication that crept in because of the ability to learn *Keertan* in just two months also lead *Keertanias* to start doing *Keertan* in catchy filmy tunes.

Yes, our modern day *Keertanias* should be given a one hundred percent score for having the ability to experiment with music. But unfortunately, this experimentation with catchy tunes is causing more harm than good to *Keertan* as they have stopped experimenting within the prescribed framework of Guru Granth Sahib.

An instrument that was supposed to attract Sikhs to Gurbani has become the very reason for the downfall in present day standards of *Keertan*. It would have been fine for the harmonium to be adopted but not at the expense of compromise on string instruments. The harmonium should have acted as a stepping-stone for budding Sikh *Keertanias* to quickly acquire musical sense and move forward to experimenting within the prescribed framework of Guru Granth Sahib. Instead they have chosen the short cut.

The reason for citing the above example is to show the long term pitfalls associated with un-checked experimentation. Modern day experimentalists like Dya Singh need to be cautious and introspect. The first question that needs to be answered is: What is attracting the youth to this new style of *Keertan*? In all probability, it is the music that is attracting them because *Keertan* is being done in a modern day, highly dramatized form.

I have heard a shabad "*Mittar Pyarae Noon...*" in which Thunder, Lightning and sounds of wild animals complement the *shabad* to project the scene of Machiwara jungle. The only reason one would get attracted to such style of *Keertan* is because of music. Like any MTV Top of the Charts, such music can't last long in the minds of the youth, nor the message remain in their hearts.

On the other hand, maybe the youth is getting attracted to this style of *Keertan* because English translations are being provided. If that is the case, then the translations can also be provided while doing *Keertan* in the prescribed framework of Guru Granth Sahib. After all, there are thousands of tunes that can be created from each of the prescribed *raags* and these tunes need not be highly classical in order to cater to popular tastes of the youth. Even the Gurus did not allow the dominance of classical music over the *Shabad*.

Our Gurus support forwardness but where should we draw the line? Who knows, next there could be an experiment with Jaap Sahib being sung in the Rap style! Will Jaap Sahib in Rap style lead to feelings of spirituality?

The future of *Keertan* lies in the hands of present day *Keertanias*. They need to definitely look at ways of improvising and attracting the youth but not at the cost of further deterioration of *Keertan*. Our *Keertanias* should first make the effort to acquire full knowledge of the musical framework of Guru Granth Sahib and then adapt from within it, to attract the youth not on a short term basis but on a long term basis.

I have full faith in the Guru and believe that if our *Keertanias* make an earnest effort to implement the commands of Guru Granth Sahib in their *Keertan* singing style, then the pied pipers will not need to walk the streets to attract the youth, they will come to the Gurudwaras by themselves.

In the next section we will examine another aspect of *Keertan* singing that has gone unchecked for years and is leading us on the path contrary to that of Gurmat. 'Flow and Pause in Gurbani and *Keertan*' follows.....

Flow and Pause in Keertan.

It is important to understand a few terminologies before we proceed further.

rahau - While reading through a *shabad* in Guru Granth Sahib, we find that one line has the word '*rahau*' written at the end. Except for *raag* Majh, we find the mention of *rahau* in nearly all the other Bani.

Depending on its type, for example, *Chaupada* (of 4 lines), *Ashtpadi* (of 8 lines), etc., a *shabad* has that many defined lines. Somewhere in the middle or in the beginning of the *shabad* one line has the word *rahau* mentioned with the numeral 1. *Rahau* means 'wait' or 'pause' in Punjabi - "*Therau*". The Gurus have clearly indicated that, while reading a *shabad*, pause on this line.

Why the pause? Because the line with *rahau* is the central theme of the *shabad*.

This is the line in which Guru is conveying the topic discussed in the *shabad* and it contains the *Gurmat Vichar*, the 'right thought'. Therefore, we are required to pause on this line and contemplate the message. The other lines in the *shabad* are used to explain/extrapolate the contents of the central theme given in the line of *rahau*.

These other lines (the non-*rahau* lines) talk about prevalent practices, arguments, reasoning, intention, etc. and are used for strengthening and explaining the Central Theme.

The point to note is that the numbering of lines is meaningful: the numbering conveys a definitive message. The message here is: Wait/Pause and contemplate on the message. In this line the Guru is telling us the theme of the *shabad*. The number 1 of *rahau* indicates, read this line carefully. Now read the other (non-*rahau*) line, and correlate it to the message in *rahau*. Now proceed to the other (Non-*rahau*) line thereby keep proceeding with all the other lines in a sequential manner.

At times, if rarely, we find more than one *rahau* in a *shabad*. All the *rahaus* in that *shabad* (usually 2,3 or 4) convey the same central theme: reflect on truth. Gurus thought it appropriate to explain the same central theme in different combination of words and therefore gave more than one *rahau*.

asthai - In Keertan, or any music, we find one line keeps getting repeated time and again. This common line, which is repeated each time after a different line, is known as *asthai* in Indian classical music, or Chorus in the western music.

antra - In Keertan, or any music, after singing the *asthai*, the repetitive line, a different line is sung and upon its completion the *asthai* is sung again and then a second different line is sung, followed by *asthai*. This changing line is known as *antra* in Indian classical music.

The purpose of Keertan is to deliver the Gurus' message sweetly to the listener. As *rahau* has the central theme of the *shabad* and contains the spiritual message, its usage, as an *asthai* is repeated time and again after every *antra*, which helps in the message getting drilled into the listener's mind. The result is that the Guru's message gets delivered many times while the *shabad* is being sung. This increases the probability of retention of the central theme, *Gurmat Vichar*, by the listener's mind.

Let us take a very popular *shabad* from Siri Raag, Page 44, which is sung by *raagis* during a happy occasion in the family. Most of the Sikhs will remember the *shabad* by its popularly known line:

"*Lakh khushiyaan patshahiyaan*
jey satgur nadar karey"

It's commonly found that *raagis* make the above line as the *asthai* while singing the *shabad* because of the word *khushiyaan* (happiness). This line is the second non-*rahau* line in the *shabad* and gets commonly used as the *asthai* while singing.

The English interpretation of the *shabad* is:

SRI RAAG, MEHLA V: All happiness is achieved only by Thy Grace. The precious gift of this human life becomes fruitful when one chants the True Word. One who has such destiny written on his forehead enters the Mansion of the Lord's Presence through the Guru. || 1 || O my mind, focus your consciousness on the One. Without the One, all involvements are worthless; emotional attachment to a mirage is verily false. || 1 || Pause || Hundreds of thousands of princely pleasures are yours to enjoy if the True Guru bestows a Glance of Grace. If God bestows the Name of the Lord, even for a moment, my mind and body are soothed. Those who have such pre-ordained destiny hold tight to the Feet of the True Guru. || 2 || Blessed is that moment, and fruitful is that time, when one is in love with the True Lord. Suffering and sorrow do not touch those who have the Support of the Name of the Lord. Grasping the seeker by the arm, the Guru lifts them up and out, and carries them across to the other side. || 3 || Embellished and immaculate is that place where the Saints gather together. That person alone finds shelter who has met the Perfect Guru. Nanak builds his house upon that site where there is no death, no birth, and no old age. || 4 || 6 || 76 ||

If we were to sing this *shabad* in proper Keertan singing style by making *rahau* (Mere man eikas sio chit laaye/eikas bin sabh dhund hai/sabh mithiya moh maye) as *asthai* for repetition, then, upon reaching second *antra*, the message that will get repetitively delivered to the mind will be that we need to first make an effort to get our mind to focus on One God, give up attachment to *maya* and emotional entanglements. If we succeed in achieving this state of mind, then, as stated in the second non-*rahau* line, thousands of pleasures will be attained only if God's Grace falls upon us.

Note that the **condition** (*rahau* line to be used as *asthai*) is that we make the effort to rid our mind of attachment/*maya*, then the **result** (non-*rahau* line to be used as *antra*) is - if Satguru deems it worth then Satguru provides hundreds of pleasures to the devotee.

Unfortunately, this *shabad* is commonly sung by *raagis* by making the non-*rahau* Line No.2 as the *asthai* (Lakh khushiyan patshahiyan jey satgur nadar karey....), which gets repeated many a time during the *shabad* singing. Now see the change in deliverability of the message to our mind. We are seeking from our Guru thousands of pleasures by God's Grace and, upon getting them, we will then strive towards ridding our mind of attachment/*maya*!

Note that by using the non-*rahau* line as *asthai*, the **condition** has changed to: if Satguru deems it worth, then Satguru provides hundreds of pleasures to us and the **result** (*rahau* line being used as *antra*) is that we will make the effort to rid our mind of attachment/*maya*!

By using the non-*rahau* line in this *shabad* as *asthai*, our mind is subconsciously being told to live on HOPE, rather than make the EFFORT, which is the reverse of what the Guru is telling us in this *shabad*, viz.- Devotee first makes the EFFORT and then HOPE should arise for God's Grace.

Interesting, isn't it? We tend to ignore the finer details of Gurus' message, which is so clear.

Probably that's the reason why Sikhs of today lack the spirit/spiritual discipline for which our forefathers were known. I hope people will start making the effort of getting the Sikhs in their immediate contact to understand the importance of *rahau* in Keertan singing and strive towards singing Keertan in the correct manner.

Those who are active in Gurudwara Management/teaching Keertan should make it a point to teach the youth only those *shabads* in which *rahau* is made the *asthai*. For a teacher to correct what he has already

learnt in so many years is a tough proposition, but he can definitely make an effort to select those *shabads* from his Keertan bank for teaching the youth/children, in which the *rahau* is made the *asthai*. In this way, we may be able to slowly steer in the direction of true deliverance.