

Sikh Music in Bangkok: The Sangeetacharya Band

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to study Sikh Sangeetacharya Band in Bangkok, with regards to their background, their performances of music to accompany devotional hymns, their musical knowledge learning and transmission and their musical art. It was found that Sikhs from Punjab state in India have migrated to Thailand since the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910). The first Sikh temple was founded in Ban Moh district, Bangkok and the Sikh association was established in 1932 to be a center of religious activities. The important identity of the Sikhs, which they strictly observe, is their musical accompaniment to hymns performed every day and at every stage of their lives. Concerning musical knowledge, the Sangeetacharya members have to learn Gurmat Sangeet, which emphasizes the musical performance to accompany hymns from sacred scriptures. To transmit this knowledge, those who are interested in learning the music can enroll in courses taught by the musical masters of the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Sikh Association; they first learn prayers from the sacred scriptures. Instruments used to create the music used with the chants are the sitar, mandolin, harmonium and tabla drums.

Keywords: *Sikh Music, Sangeetacharya Musician, Bangkok Music, Musical Hymns, Urban Music Culture, Religious Performance*

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Introduction

Bangkok, the metropolitan center of Thailand, is a city in which people of many races live together. According to the Bureau of Registration Administration, the population in Bangkok in January 2021 was 5,586,051 (Bureau of Registration Administration, 2021: online) while according to a 2008 survey, there were 70,000 Sikhs in Thailand (Sajjamit, M. Interview, 2019).

“Sikh” means “disciple” in Panjabi. Every Sikh is considered a disciple of the Guru, meaning master, which is the name Sikhs call their prophets. Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak in the Punjab region, north India in 1469 with 10 human Gurus in succession. At present, the Sikhs hold faith in the sacred scripture that designates Sri Guru Garanth Sahib as their eternal prophet (Department of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Culture, 2011:138-140). The Sikhs, one of the large Indian groups in Thailand, can trace their ancestors to Punjab in Northern India since the reign of King Rama V. According to Kamwang, A. (2011:71-74), these Sikhs from Punjab were traders who came to Siam and Lanna as a consequence of negative and positive factors. The negative factor was the suppression of Sikh natives by British colonists and the partition of India which created the Republic of Pakistan which included most of the Punjab state, while the positive factor was the trading prosperity of Siam (original name of Thailand) and Lanna at that time. The first evidence in Thai history of these Sikhs can be found in King Rama V’s royal writing at the time His Royal Highness made a journey to the Malay Peninsula in the year 1883. The King wrote about the strong and disciplined Sikh soldiers he found on the way, and later, by order of His Royal Highness, 30 Sikhs were engaged as patrolmen in Bangkok. Meanwhile, Sikh merchants began to arrive in Thailand. The first one, Kirpa Ram Madan entered the country in 1886 initially to trade; eventually he settled in Thailand (Kamwang, 2011:70). His success at the time attracted more Sikh merchants to go and settle in Thailand. According to the Sikhism code of conduct, a shrine for the sacred scripture should be set up in an area in which more than five Sikh families live. Accordingly, the first shrine was set up in a small, rented house in the Ban Moh area of Bangkok – this was one of the first Sikh communities. In 1932 when there were about 100 Sikh families, the Sikh Association was established as a center for Sikh religious activities, with Mr. Jampee Sajdev as the first chairman. The first permanent Sikh temple, or Gurdwara, was founded in the Phahurat area in 1937 and after World War II it was rebuilt into a larger structure, and this is the largest Sikhs community in Bangkok we see today. Sajjamit, M., a former president of the association, explained that ‘Guru’ means teacher and ‘Dwara’ means gate, thus Gurdwara means ‘a gate to the teacher’ (Sajjamit, M. interview, August 9, 2019). One of the most important daily activities of Sikhs is to pray. Sikhs start their day with a morning prayer, chants to hymns composed by the prophets, ritual of opening the sacred scripture Sri Guru Granth Sahib with prayers, followed by the chants of the Sangeetacharya accompanied with music. The evening prayers are short chants without music called Sohera, performed to honor the prophets and to consider any mistakes a Sikh devotee may have made during the day. From background research, it was found that Sikh ways of life are unique.

For this research, the Sangeetacharya group of the Bangkok Sri Guru Singh Sabha Association was chosen for a case study on Sikh performing art, one of the com-

munal cultures of Bangkok, and to bring about cross-cultural learning which may result in better understanding and happier co-existence of different ethnicities in society. The research was supervised by the Center of Excellence for Thai Music and Culture Research, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University.

The objective of this research is to study the Sikh Sangeetacharya group's musical performances for the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Association, with regards to its background, musical transmission and musical art as well as the physical characteristics of the instruments and the musical characteristics of their songs. Using qualitative methodology, the research was conducted by collecting data from documents and accessing musical data through individual interviews and focus group discussions with four musicians or Sangeetacharyas from the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Association, three of them from India and who temporarily stay in Thailand, while another one who works at the association.

The Background of Sangeetacharya Band



Figure 1. The Sikh Sangeetacharya Band: (from left) Mr. Jaspreet Singh (sitar), Mr. Amninder Singh (mandolin), Mr. Rashender Singh (harmonium), Mr. Maninder Singh (tabla). Source: Author, August 9, 2019.

Sikh devotional hymns are called Kirtan, Gurbani Kirtan or Shabad Kirtan since Kirtan is the genre of devotional chants, Gurbani refers to the composition of the Sikh Gurus and Shabad (or Shabd) means a musico-poetic passage from the Guru Granth Sahib. According to Khalsa (2014:viii) Gurbani Kirtan refers to the musical rendition of the poetic hymn of the Guru Granth Sahib. Sikh devotional music originated in Northern India in 15 century A.D. and was derived from different kinds of singing in the Bhakti tradition called “desi” together with “margi;” desi is a kind of popular folk style song used for life-cycle rituals and other ceremonies; and margi is a dhrupad genre (classical style of Hindustani vocal music) popularly used for devotional singing (Ibid:26-27). In addition, Kaur (2011:252-253) explained that Sikh Shabad Kirtan began with the songs of Guru Nanak (1469-1539) as the sonic expression of his Divine inspirations and the tradition of Shabad Kirtan was continued by the following Gurus.



Figure 2. Manjit Sajjan, representative of the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Association.

Source: Author, August 9, 2019.

At present, the center of Sikhism lies at the Harmandir Sahib (the golden temple) in Amritsar, Punjab state, India. Hence, all rituals including music orchestration performed by Sikhs around the world follow the standards of Harmandir Sahib. A group of musicians who play the devotional hymns is called Ragi Jatha in Panjabi in which Ragi means singers and Jatha means a group of people. The Ragi Jatha consists of two musicians or more, but usually three musicians are included; two of them sing and play harmonium and one plays tabla. The Ragi Jatha with three musicians is the most popular style found in India and around the world, including the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara in Bangkok (van der Linden, 2013:129-130). These musicians, called Ragi in Panjabi and known in Thai as Sangeetacharn or Sangeetacharya (master of music), are capable not only in music but also in religious philosophies as well. Kamwang (2017:110-11) remarked that famous Sangeetacharya groups are often invited to perform their music and rituals in various Sikh communities. Their musical performances are regarded not as a profession, but as a religious dedication; as a consequence, there is no demand for payment. This is similar to the Om Uma Devi Shiva, a small Hindu band which is popular among Hindus who live in communities in the business districts in Bangkok and who still maintain their religious rituals accompanied with music as a way of maintaining their identity and roots. (Pornprasit, 2021:225).

The Performance of Music to Accompany Hymns

The Sikh Sri Guru Singh Sabha Association occasionally invites Sangeetacharya musicians from India who take turns to come and perform their Kirtans at various Gurdwaras in Thailand. Sajjan, A. explained that these Sangeetacharya musicians pay for their trips to Thailand themselves and stay for two months at a time. They are rewarded with gifts and money from faithful Sikhs attending their performances while the association provides accommodation and meals and pays for their trips to Gurdwaras in provinces such as Chiang Mai, Chonburi and Phuket. Sangeetacharya band members who are widely admired for their beautiful music

and chanting and they can attract large audiences like a superstar concert. At the time of the research we observed a father and two sons of the Singh family; Rashender, Amninder and Maninder who came to perform in the Sangeetacharya band in Bangkok. Normally they are stationed at a Gurdwara in New Delhi, India and are often invited to many different countries (Sajjamit, A. interview, August 9, 2019).

The Occasions of the Performances

The Kirtan or the musically accompanied chants is the important identity of the Sikhs religious ritual. Kirtans are included at every stage of their lives, the details of which are as follows:

The Daily Praying Ritual

The daily rituals of the Sikhs are to pray and recite Kirtans. Sajjamit, M. explained that the daily praying ritual at the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Association Gurdwara begins at 5 a.m. with the opening and reading of the Guru Granth Sahib for which five Granthi or five virtuous Sikhs will be responsible for carrying the sacred scripture out with great respect. The sacred scripture is opened at a random page, and the verse on that page will be read and considered as the moral of the day. The scripture is read from right to left and taking about 15 minutes to finish each page, all of which were written in Gurmukhi (meaning the scripts of Guru's disciples), using ancient Punjabi, similar to Hindi and Urdu. Finishing the sacred scripture opening and reading, Sangeetacharya band accompanied Kirtans for around 1.30 hrs. (Sajjamit, M. interview, August 9, 2019).

The Ritual of Naming a Child

Sometimes after giving birth to a baby, a mother and her family will go to the Gurdwara to perform a naming ritual. The Granthi will randomly open the sacred scripture and the hymn on the opened page is recited. The first word or first letter of the hymn is selected as the name or the first letter of the child's name (Department of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, 2011:166).

The Dastar Bandi Ritual

Dastar Bandi is the tying of the first turban ritual for a boy who reaches the age at which can take care of his uncut hair himself. The parents will prepare the Dastar Bandi ceremony for their son, held before the Guru Granth Sahib at a Gurdwara (Ibid: 161-162). Explaining the importance of keeping long hair and wearing a turban, the Granthi will tie the turban on the boy's head while the Sangeetacharya band perform their Kirtans. Sajjamit, M. explained that Dastar, meaning a crown in Punjabi, symbolizes honor and dignity for the Sikhs (Sajjamit, M. interview, August 9, 2019).

The Amrit Ritual

It is the important ritual of initiation into the Sikh faith, for someone ordained as a disciple of the gurus, held before the Guru Granth Sahib at a Gurdwara. In the ritual, the Sikhs vow to observe and follow the Gurus' principles. The ritual includes baptizing with holy water and chants of Kirtan (Department of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, 2011:163-164).

The Anand Karaj or Marriage

When a Sikh woman reaches the age when she is ready to have a family of her own, a man would approach for her to marry, irrespective of his caste or family, provided that they both are Sikh (Ibid:166-168). The Anand Karaj or Sikh wedding takes place in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib and consists of the couple revolving around Guru Granth Sahib four times as the hymns are recited. Sajjamit, M. explained that in the past, the parents were responsible for proposing a suitable man for their daughter. However, the tradition is out of practice today, and a marriage depends on the couple's agreement (Sajjamit, M. interview, August 9, 2019).

The Funeral

According to Sikh commitments, when a Sikh dies, he will be cremated without any mourning ritual as who so ever takes birth, must die sooner or later; and that is the law of the creator. Sikh funeral prayers are recited during the service, including a communal prayer called Ardas. Close relatives and friends of the deceased will light up the cremation fire while the Sangeetacharya band recite the hymns. After the cremation, the deceased loved ones will gather together at the home of the bereaved family or at the Gurdwara nearby to read the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. This ceremony is known as the Akhand Paatth (Department of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, 2011:163-164). Sajjamit, M. added that Sikhs believe that a human being is made of four elements; earth, water, wind and fire. The funeral kirtans of Sangeetacharya band are meant to comfort the family of the deceased and help them realize the truth that the deceased has just returned to his former elements (Sajjamit, M. interview, August 9, 2019).

The Learning and Transferal of Musical Knowledge

Sangeetacharya members have to learn the Sikh musical tradition called Gurmat Sangeet, which is solely focused on performing the musical accompaniment and chants from the sacred scriptures without any other form of music. Khalsa, N. K. (2014: viii) explained that Gurmat Sangeet, literally "music in the Guru's way," is the Gurbani Kirtan in raag (or raga; prescribed formula of melodic mode) accompanied by stringed instruments based on a modern standard. The basic patterns are the same Indian seven patterns of rhythmic cycles and seven notes (svara) as used by singers, musicians or Bharat Natyam performers. Sajjamit, A. (interview, 2019) added that, except for the first chapter, the 1400 texts in the sacred scripture Sri Guru Granth Sahib are all poems with annotations assigning the raga, tala (rhythm) and scale used with each poem, which altogether total 31 talas and 31 ragas. Singh, R. (interview, 2019) mentioned that in the past, Indian musicians used no more than the 31 ragas accompanying the sacred scripture; however, nowadays other ragas are also applied. Concerning the Sangeetacharya band studied in this research, it was observed that Singh, Rajender learnt to play both harmonium and tabla from his father since he was young, while his two sons Singh, Amninder and Singh, Maninder have learnt their instruments in the educational system in which they received a bachelor degree from universities in stringed instruments and tabla drums, respectively.

As for the transmission of musical knowledge, Sajjamit, A. said that at present, there are youths who are interested in Kirtans and ask to learn the music with Sangeetacharya musicians. The classes often take place at students' houses. He also added that the students have to learn first the prayers in the sacred scripture and both male and female students can attend classes (Sajjamit, A. interview, 2019).

The Musical Art Content

It was found from the interviews that there are three important songs used to accompany the religious chants, as follows:

- Sukhmani Sahib. According to Nayar, K. E. and Sandhu, J. S. (2020:1), the Sukhmani (The Pearl of Happiness) is the most celebrated text composed by Guru Arjan (1563-1606 CE), the fifth of a succession of ten human Gurus. Sajjamit, M. explained in an interview that Sukh means happiness, Mani is a jewel, so that Sukhmani means 'the jewel worth happiness.' It is a lengthy composition of one hour's recitation. The prayer means that there is only one way to achieve happiness, to face the truth. The law of truth is the main philosophy of Sikhism (Sajjamit, M. interview. August 9, 2019).
- Asa di Vaar. The name Asa di Vaar: Asa means dawn and Vaar means time. It is the morning prayer which talks about expectations in life which cannot be achieved. Therefore, one should not expect, but rather let life go on as it should and all our wishes cannot be fulfilled. This prayer is the Guru's philosophy aimed at enabling Sikhs to close their minds to the five enemies, which are lust, anger, greed, delusion and arrogance (Sajjamit, M. interview, August 9, 2019). Moreover, Li (2015: 65) mentioned that Asa di Vaar is the most important chant practiced by Sikhs around the world as it enables devotees to pray and listen to the prophets' teachings together before going on to do their daily duty.
- Ananda Sahib: Ananda, implied the forever happiness is the last hymn used to end the praying ritual. Saowaphakpongchai, C. (2012:23) noted that this hymn is used as the conclusion in nearly every Sikh ritual.

Sajjamit, M. (Interview, August 9, 2019) explained that the morning prayer begins with the Sukhmani Sahib, the Asa di Vaar and is followed with the ritual of opening the Guru Granth sahib at a random page, whose contents are explained by the Granthi or the preacher and regarded as the moral of the day. The Ananda Sahib is the last performance to thank God and indicate that the congregation has truly understood their commitments and will follow them.

The Instruments

Sajjamit, M. (interviewed August 9, 2019) explained that in former times in Thailand, instruments used in the performances of Sikh musical accompanied hymns were the sitar, harmonium, tabla drums and cymbals. The Sangeetacharya musicians studied in this research use sitar, mandolin, harmonium and tabla drum.

The band members and their instruments are as follows: Singh, Rajender plays harmonium; Singh, Amninder sings and plays mandolin; Singh, Maninder plays tabla drum; and Singh, Jaspreet plays sitar. The instruments of the Sikh Sangeetacharya band are described in details as follows:

Sitar

Sitar, the main instrument in Hindustani music, is a stringed instrument of the lute family that is popular in Northern India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Chaturvedi (2007:10-11) said that sitar created from the vina, an ancient Indian instrument, by Amir Khusro in the 14th century A.D. The first Sitar has three strings and so-called she-tar (meaning three- stringed in Persian). The typical length of a Sitar is 1.2 m. (4 feet) with a deep pear-shaped gourd body, a long wide hollow wooden neck, front and side tuning pegs, and 20 movable frets. The sitar can comprise either 7 main strings and three rhythmic drone strings (Kharaj Pancham Sitar) or three main strings and four and drone strings (Gandhar Pancham Sitar) while the sympathetic strings (Taraf) are 11-13. All the strings are metallic. (Weisser, S. and Lartillot 2013:33) Jaspreet Singh, one of the Sangeetacharya members who plays Sitar, works with the Sikh Sri Guru Singh Sabha Association as a Granthi or a preacher and as a coordinator for the association's activities.

Mandolin

Wright (1997 as cited in Sparks, 1989:14) explained that the old type of mandolin, called mandolino, probably originated in 10th century A.D. in South Europe. In 13th century A.D., this kind of instrument was known around Europe in various names; quitaire, gytern, gittern and chitarra. Sparks (1989:14-25) went on to state that at that time, the whole instrument; round body, neck and peg-box, was carved from a single piece of wood and fitted with between three single and four double guts, or possibly metal, strings. By the late sixteenth century, the instrument was known in France as the mandore and in Italy, a similar instrument was known as the mandola, mandolin and mandoline. In 18th century A.D., the golden age of Neapolitan culture, the Vinaccia family of Naples developed the 4-course mandoline with movable bridges. This Neapolitan mandoline is said to be the prototype of the present mandolin. Amninder Singh, the Sangeetacharya musician who sings and plays mandolin skillfully, graduated with a degree in stringed instruments.

Harmonium

Harmonium is a free reed instrument of the aerophone kind. Harmonium was invented by a Frenchman, Alexandre Debain, in 1842. The original one, similar to an organ, was a large instrument equipped with keyboards and two pedal pumps for its bellows. At the end of the 19th century, Europeans introduced harmoniums into India. However, their large size and the way that a player needed to sit on a chair to play did not correspond with Indian culture where people normally sit on the floor. According to Brockschmidt (2003:14-19), in 1875 a Calcutta man named Dwarkanath Ghose (or Ghosh) invented the Indian-style harmonium based on Debain's. Ghosh's Harmonium was a portable box instrument with its bellows in the back and its keyboard on the top. Its structure and mechanism were simplified

to be less expensive and easier to repair. Ghosh also added drone reeds to make Indian drone sounds which were not present in the European harmonium. Abels, B. (2010: 26-33) explained that the most significant difference between an Indian harmonium from its European counterpart is that the bellows are attached to the back of the instrument and is operated with the player's left hand and it is intended to be played whilst sitting on the floor. In Abels' opinion, the Indian harmonium of Ghosh was based on the harmonium flute, a small accordion with a bellows at its back, and the table organ, a small portable box organ, rather than based on Debain's version. Rajender Singh, the Sangeetacharya musician who plays Harmonium, has learnt to play the instrument from his father since he was 8 or 9 years old with 2 to 3 hours for practicing every day. He is so well experienced in Harmonium and Tabla that he also serves as a Guru (music teacher) in Sangeetacharya band.

Tabla Drum

The drum is a percussion instrument that has played important roles throughout history. In addition to entertainment, drums are played in various rituals such as funeral ceremonies, praying for rain, healing and exorcising rituals as well as signaling during wartime battles, stated by Buathong & Binson (2020:113). Tabla is a kind of twin drum of Hindustani or Northern India music, which first appeared around 11-12 century A.D., when Islam dominated Northern India. Pikulsri (1987:26-27) explained that the new instruments in Northern India that came from Muslims were the sitar and the tabla. The tabla consists of two drums. The one on the left of the player, called baanya, is a kettle drum with bass tones whose barrel is made of copper. The baanya's head is 24 cm. in diameter and 27 cm. in height (excluding its pedestal). The drum on the right of the player, called dhaanya, gives higher tones than baanya at the fifth interval. Its head is 18 cm. in diameter and 26 cm. in height (excluding its pedestal). To play the tabla, the player sits on the floor with the drums on their ring-shaped pedestals in front of him. The Tabla is played to accompany instrumental songs, vocal songs and dances. The most important characteristic of the tabla is its clear echoing pitch, which is similar to metal tapping. The particular sound is created with black tuning paste (gab or syahi in Hindi) made of plant resin, ashes and various metal powders such as iron and manganese, all ground together and applied on the center of each drum's head. The precise mixture is responsible for the drum's unique bell-like sound that distinguishes the tabla from other Hindustani drums and allowed clear accurate pitch tuning as required.

Roda (2015:194) said that the tabla has been popular in North India since the 18th century, and there are six commonly recognized lineages of playing Tabla, called gharanas; Delhi, Lucknow, Ajrara, Punjab, Farukhabad, and Banaras which differ from one another in terms of their repertoires and their distinct execution of drum strokes. The Sangeetacharya musician, Maninder Singh, who plays Tabla drum, is a professional in the instrument since he graduated with a degree in Tabla drum from Allahabad University in India.

The Refrain*The Instrumental Ending Melodies**The Ending Melodies (ending with a fade out)*

Figure 3 cont. Sukhmani Sahib: the song of happiness. Source: Author, August 9, 2019.

From figure 3, patterns of the song consists of an introduction and melodic sections. A refrain is included between melodies in the short song. This song is used to accompanied Kirtans during several occasions.

Conclusion

The Sikh band in Bangkok is mainly played to accompany Kirtans or devotional hymns in Sikh rituals, not for entertainment. The hymns are from prayers in Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The musicians have to learn the Gurmat Sangeet tradition of musical playing to accompany prayers from Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Though different from regular music, the Gurmat Sangeet based on Indian musical rhythmic and note system. The Sangeetacharya band's duties are similar to those of missionaries connecting Sikhs around the world to the religion center at Amritsar, India. They take turns in travelling to perform their Kirtans in Sikh communities in various countries, and considered the travels as performing religious activity. It can be said that the Sikh ways of life, both day-to-day and in every developed stage from birth to death, strictly adhere to religious rituals for which musically accompanied chants are present at each of them.

Naksuwan, N. (2017:389) said that although Sikhs in Thailand strongly maintain their identities of religion, language and attire with rare mixed-marriages, they can harmoniously live in Thai society, under the Gurus' principle of, "No Hindu, no Muslim, humans are all one. Regardless of caste or physical appearance, every person is of equal honor as they have come from God." The study of Sikh musically accompanied chants is in one aspect a multiple cultural society approach. According to Phra Maha Punya Suwatako, N. (2560:5), the study of ethnic minority cultures regarding their differences in language, tradition and faith is meant to accept their freedom, rights and roles based on equal opportunities for all, which will lead to peaceful co-existence in a better society. Apart from Sikh, there are

local culture clusters of Laotians, Khmers, Mon, Chinese, Islam and Brahman-Hinduism as well as Westerners. It was also found that the respective culture owners are devoted to preserve their multi-generational heritage. The natural beauty of these cultural sites remains clearly evident and vibrant, even though there remain difficulties hampering their retention (Binson et al., 2011:42).

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