

Sikh Religious Music in a Migration Context: The Role of Media

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Introduction

Sikhism is a very structured and organised religion, consisting of a specific rite, many worshippers, and a strong identity. The complex and multiform Sikh identity is composed of evident exterior elements, demonstrated by a series of behaviours in daily life. Participation in the religious rite is definitely part of the behaviours that must be respected by every Sikh, presenting oneself at the temple and participating actively in community life. For this reason, in the last few years in the areas with the greatest diasporic concentration, many *gurdwarās* (temples) have been built as copies of the Harimandir, the golden temple of Punjab, the sacred place of worship for Sikhism.

Music is a fundamental part of the religious rite; as I will explain soon, without musical performances the rite would not be possible. For this reason, the musicians acquire an important role and status within the Sikh community. There is in fact a large network of musicians working within the temples, especially outside of India, where professional musicians are hard to come by, the most competent artists being appreciated and needed by the worshippers for rites and festivities. Furthermore, always in the context of migration, special attention is given to the teaching and passing on of musical tradition to the younger generations, with the intention of keeping the tradition alive.

Music is important to safeguard the Sikh identity in a migratory context and is expressed through various languages and used as a privileged communication medium. As the musicians organise concert tours between temples, so the music and performances travel by way of media technology, used intensely to maintain ties with the motherland and the various communities throughout the world. The music played at the Golden Temple, the new trends in playing and performances by particular groups, are

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constantly monitored and also used as a form of legitimising the musical repertoire produced in the diasporic community.

This article is based mainly on field research conducted in some Sikh communities found in Northern Italy and will refer principally to this geographic area. By means of practical and concrete examples from direct contact with the musicians, the kind of media most used for musical communication (television, web radio, social network, smartphone applications) will be examined as it pertains to the definition of the musical Sikh identity.

In the following paragraphs I will supply a brief explanation of the background in which the Sikh religion and certain characteristics developed, also explaining the recent Sikh history and the migration phenomenon. I will then write about certain questions regarding identity and some information relative to music in Sikhism.

Punjab and migration

The historic occurrences linked to the Punjab state, the region with the largest majority of Sikh worshippers, are complex and need to be briefly touched on to clarify the importance of this place in connection to the definition of the diasporic Sikh identity.

With the independence of India won from British domain in 1947, on the occasion of the opening of the borders between the two new independent states, the Punjab state was literally divided into two pieces: 62% of the territory and 55% of the population went to Pakistan. Six million, between Hindu and Sikh had to move to the ‘new India,’ and the same number of Muslims moved on to the ‘new Pakistan.’ In 1948, a year after independence, the Punjab state lost another part of its territory, which became the state of Himachal Pradesh. The preceding capital of the province of Punjab, Lahore, went to Pakistan after the country’s division, and so a new capital, Chandigarh, was built ex novo for the Indian state of Punjab. In 1966, the eastern provinces of Punjab, predominantly Hindu, were separated to form the state of Haryana. In the remaining part of Punjab, the actual state that we know today, the Sikh population constituted around 60% of the population.

Because of these continuous divisions, various independent movements were born, with the aim of obtaining an independent state for the Sikh population. The tension between these movements and the central state became consistently stronger, coming to a head in the dramatic event known as Operation Blue Star, which in 1984 provoked the desecration of the Harmandir Sahib ad Amritsar and the killing of hundreds of worshippers.

Sikh migration from India is not a recent phenomenon: it began in the 19th century, with the Sikh’s enlistment in the British army, after Great Britain’s occupation of Punjab. After independence from Britain and following the Second World War, the Sikhs started moving to the United States, Canada

and Great Britain in search of work. From 1970 on, Europe became a favoured migration destination from Punjab. From the 1980s onwards, after the political unrest of 1984 and because of the merciless persecution the Sikhs had suffered in Pakistan, migration out of Punjab had a new direction; it is precisely during this period that the first arrivals are recorded in the Mediterranean area, including Italy. Today the Sikh presence in foreign countries is a stable and constant factor; in some communities in the US and in Canada, the Sikhs represent a high percentage of the Southern Asian population. This migration has assumed characteristics that have been described by scholars through the diaspora concept (Dusembery 1997, 2006, 2007; Tatla 1999; Hawley 2013).

The Punjab, which has become smaller and predominantly Sikh, is considered today as the point of reference for communities overseas. The Golden Temple is the destination of pilgrimage and welcomes thousands of worshippers from all over the world every day. From this small state arrive news, new trends and lifestyles that are accepted and followed by a large part of the Sikh community.

The identity matter in migration

To speak of the Sikh identity signifies entering into a complex terrain,² as its complicated history and political events have involved the habitants of the Punjab³ and the Sikhs since the founding of the religion. Even more complex is confronting this subject in the migratory context.

The consciousness on the part of the Sikhs of having a distinct identity (religious, but involving all aspects of daily life) seems to be strong, in contrast to their place of residence, and linked in some way to their country of origin. This identity requires maintenance and preservation, even more so outside of the motherland, as well as being shown openly in new social contexts.

If we consider the identity process as part of a path of definition of oneself based on the recognition of that which is other than ourselves (Remotti 2007), it is clear how the construction of the Sikh identity is well-applied to this concept, oscillating between a sense of belonging and a mechanism of distinction. For this reason, during the history of Sikhism, a series of symbols and rules were created with the goal of defining what it was to be Sikh. An identity that is realised with belonging to *kebalsa* (the 'pure community') and the respect of a series of codes of conduct, such as the use of the turban and the respect of the 'five k'.⁴ The externalisation of this identity is shown through a series of practices and behaviours that the Sikhs seek to strictly maintain, even though this is clearly not possible. Among these practices music certainly has its place.

² This is not the subject of the article.

³ It should be remembered that not all Punjab inhabitants (albeit a large majority) practice Sikhism, just as not all Sikh present in India are found in Punjab. For this reason, the study of the relationship between Sikh religious identity and Punjabi national identity (that oftentimes overlap) could reveal some interesting discoveries.

⁴ Long hair and beard (*kesi*), a wooden comb (*kanghā*), an iron bracelet (*kara*), a dagger (*kirpān*) and a particular kind of underwear (*katchera*).

In this religious “identity obsession” (Remotti 2010), music is not only necessary for the religious rites, but takes on a dominant role in cultural transmission (Toynbee and Dueck 2011; Kiwan and Meinhof 2011). The music is a means of communicating, especially to the young, a series of values and abilities that distinguish the Sikhs. In the present-day global flows condition (Appadurai 1996), music (but not only) can be a fundamental way to not only strongly maintain an identity in the present, but also to preserve it for the future (Stokes 1994).

Religion: The *Gurū Granth Sāhib*

At the centre of the Sikh religion today one finds the *Ādi Sri Gurū Granth Sāhib Ji*, usually called *Ādi Granth* or *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, or, more simply, *Granth*, the Book. This book is made up of 5,894 religious hymns, and in the modern edition is set out in 1,430 pages. It contains the *bani*, the words of the ten Sikh Gurus that succeeded each other in the spiritual guidance of the community, founded in 1469 in Punjab by Guru Nānak. The *Gurū Granth*, which is to be found inside the prayer room of every *gurdwārās*, is not to be considered a normal book of prayer but as a living representation of the Guru’s soul; for this reason it is treated with great respect, carried every evening to a small room and placed in a cradle for the night. In the morning it is woken up and carried, with great ceremony, into the prayer room of the temple.

The Holy Book’s contents can be divided into three parts: a short introduction, which contains the daily prayers; the central part, which is the longest section (page 14 to page 1,353) with the *shabad*, the Guru’s hymns; and the final section, which contains different poetic texts. As we will see next, the second section is the part that interests us most on this particular occasion, in as much as it contains directions regarding the performance practice of the hymns.

Music

Since the beginning of Sikhism, music has been very important within this religion. *Gurbānī*,⁵ according to Guru Nānak, was the best spiritual practice and was necessary to reach spiritual freedom. Nānak institutionalized *kīrtan* practice that consists in the musical performance of the sacred hymns contained in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*.

A *kīrtan* group is composed of two or more musicians. At present the trend is to accompany the singing with the tabla (or sometimes the dholak, a hand-played double-headed barrel drum) and the

⁵ According to Francesca Cassio: “The term *Gurbānī sangīt* is employed here to define the medieval and early modern Sikh tradition and its musical idiom. The word *Gurbānī* has been in use since the time of Gurū Nānak (late fifteen century), and in this script it is intentionally distinguished from *Gurmat sangīt*, an expression introduced in the early twentieth century and popularized in the 1990s. The word *Gurmat* literally means Gurū’s wisdom, and refers to the Sikh doctrine, not to the musical practice. Thus, the two terms are radically different, and it seems inappropriate to use the word *Gurmat* in regard to the musical aspect” (Cassio 2015, 30).

harmonium, which replaced stringed instruments like the rabab or the dilruba. Only the sarangi is used on occasion.



Figure 1: *Kīrtan* performance; *Gurdwārā* in Pessina Cremonese (CR), March 1, 2015. Photograph: Thea Tiramani.

Today the word *kīrtan* is a very general term, meaning simply the musical performance, singing and playing of the religious hymns contained in the Holy Book.

In what we have defined as the ‘second section’ of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, there are indications of the correct *rāga* (a total of 31) to be used for the performance of each hymn. There is no musical notation, nor a specific melody that you have to use, but only the name of the *rāga*. We unfortunately have no direct testimony about how *kīrtan* was performed during the Guru’s era: “the oral transmission of the ancient compositions is one of the most problematic issues. Music notation was known in India since the seventh century, but has been introduced into Sikh *kīrtan* pedagogy only in recent times” (Cassio 2015, 2).

This is the motive for which the *kīrtan* of today is for obvious reasons different from the original *kīrtan* of the past.⁶ Moreover, nowadays, only a few musicians use the correct *rāga* (specified in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*) to perform the corresponding hymn. If *rāga* theory is used to perform hymns, sometimes the ‘official’ *rāga* is not used and the correct *rāga* is substituted by a simpler one. In other cases, *rāga* theory is totally abandoned and simple and catchy melodies are used to perform the hymn’s words. In the end, the only fixed element that distinguishes a Sikh hymn from other Indian musical genres, is the centrality of the holy scriptures and *Gurū Granth Sāhib*’s words.

⁶ According to Francesca Cassio: “In the quite confusing contemporary scenario, we shall however distinguish the repertoire of medieval and early modern *Gurbānī sangīt* from newer forms, which for the sake of clarity I gather here under the general umbrella of *Gurmat sangīt*, in which the only element remaining to distinguish the performance of the Sikh hymns from other genres of Indian music is the central role of the holy scriptures, or *śabad*” (Cassio 2015, 2).

Despite these changes however, it can be established that a certain type of aesthetic research within the *kīrtan* groups is maintained, dictated by the desire to emphasise the Holy Book's words in the most efficient way. This gives rise to a variety of styles and interpretations that every group develops according to their own sensitivity.

To better explain this concept, I will use two different video clips, made during my field research, which exemplify the difference in style between two different musical groups.

The first group of musicians, Jaspal Singh at the harmonium and Aninder Singh at the tabla, performs the 'classical' *kīrtan* [Video Example 1], respecting the *rāga* indicated in the Holy Book. This way of performing *kīrtan* is the most prestigious but also the most difficult, as you need to know and use all of the 31 *rāga*. Like Jaspal said: "Today, both in Europe and in India, this way to perform *kīrtan* is considered archaic. Worshippers describe it as boring, helps you to sleep, not interesting. Most of these worshippers are not educated in *rāga* theory and do not understand the cultural importance of this way of making music."⁷ For this reason the theory of *rāga* has been gradually abandoned and the musicians, especially the semi-professionals, tend to know fewer *rāga*.

The second video clip [Video Example 2] is about *kīrtan* performed in the 'commercial' way that is so common today. Gurdeep Singh (the leader) eliminates *rāga* theory and uses some commercial music themes, usually taken from Bollywood film melodies, with the aim of attracting and involving more worshippers in prayer, and to obtain success as a player 'in vogue.' This style is oftentimes the most appreciated and requested for the performances in the *gurdwārās*.

Music in the gurdwārā

According to the mapping updated in December 2011 (Bertolani 2013, 18), there were around 40 *gurdwārās* in Italy; but today the numbers are increasing. Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, and Lazio are the regions with the largest quantity of Sikh temples, due to the higher number of Indian residents.

The driving musical centre of the *gurdwārā* is the prayer room (*darbar*) from where music and words flow into the temple. An amplification system allows the words of the *granthi*⁸ and the musical performances to circulate in the other rooms of the temple and in the outside courtyard.

The Sunday religious rite lasts a few hours, during which one part is dedicated to the spoken word (the *granthi* speaks about news, advice, orders of the day etc.) and another part to music, that is the

⁷ Conversation with Jaspal Singh and Aninder Singh. 17 September 2015, Grumello del Monte (BG).

⁸ The guardian of the temple.

intoning of the prayers and musical performance. Often the performances are *kīrtan* which are sometimes accompanied or substituted by *dhadi*⁹ or *kavisbrī*¹⁰ performances.

The temple does not have set musicians. Oftentimes the rite, especially in the smaller temples, is animated by the younger people who are studying their instruments at the temple and beginning their musical careers. For the more special occasions, temples try to secure the presence of professional musicians who travel on tour either from Europe or from India, visiting the various *gurdwārās*, including those in Italy.

The administration of the temple decides which groups must be called according to different parameters. One of these is the musicians' prestige, based on how well the groups are known and respected for their musical ability. Another is how much the congregation of worshippers admires a group of musicians (admiration is expressed through religious involvement and musical participation). The choice then depends on how much the temple can pay for a *kīrtan* session and how much it can increase its prestige thanks to the musical group.

Most often the temples' administration tries to book a prestigious *kīrtan* group on occasion of Sikh festivities, such as a Guru's birthday celebration, the *Bandi Chorr Divas*,¹¹ the anniversary of the construction of the temple, etc. Normally, guest groups perform on Friday and Saturday evenings,¹² in addition to the Sunday religious rite.



Figure 2: *Kīrtan* performance on Saturday night; *Gurdwārā* in Pessina Cremonese, 28 March 2015.
Photograph: Thea Tiramani.

⁹ Groups accompanied by dhadd and sarangī that tell through song of the heroic deeds of Gurus and the historic events connected to Sikhism.

¹⁰ Vocal groups that, without the aid of instruments but with an energetic vocal style, narrate specific historic facts of Sikhism, emphasising the main events through clear facial mimicry and gesture.

¹¹ In the *Bandi Chorr Divas* the freedom of the sixth Guru from prison is celebrated. This celebration corresponds to the Indian festival of lights, where each temple is illuminated with many candles and lights.

¹² The exhibition is always a religious moment.

Sometimes the local groups, especially those formed by the most promising musical students, open the performances of the known groups, hoping to show their talent and ability to a large public and gain some form of recognition and success.

The role of the media

From what has already been said, it is clear that an important feature of Sikh migration is the strong connection to the homeland and Sikh communities all over the world (Barrier 2007). Mass media and social networks have a fundamental role in this process, simplifying and speeding up information exchange (Davis, Fischer-Hornung, and Kardux 2011), so much so that in the case of the Sikhs, researchers refer to a diaspora in a cybernetic space (Sokol 2007).

Even from the musical point of view, new technology is being used intensely for various purposes. First of all, new technologies help the musicians that find themselves outside of India to follow what is happening on the Indian musical scene, in religious music as well as in the generically defined pop Punjabi. New musical trends immediately get to the musicians based in Italy, allowing them to appropriate or reinterpret the new styles. Social media permits them, myself included, to watch live stream musical performances and follow the global musical landscape.

Apart from communicating new musical trends, the new technologies are also used as a way to document and show events in real time, and to promote musical performances (Cassio 2014), including those in Italy. Oftentimes the musicians document their tours and their musical activity in the different contexts in which they find themselves, creating a cycle of exchange between diverse diasporic/motherland communities. Social media has the function of documenting and sharing but has also become a teaching vehicle. Didactic communication uses new technology as a channel (many teachers in India give music lessons online), as well as a support base (thanks to special teaching apps).

In the following paragraphs, all these situations are described, accompanied by various examples, in an attempt to explain in detail the intensive use of social media to recreate a Sikh musical setting in the diaspora communities, creating a constant connection, even if only a virtual one, with the homeland. In this way musicians can legitimise their own activity, declaring themselves to be part of and inspired by Indian musical trends, promoting their own image in a global musical panorama.

Re-create Punjab and connected Sikh communities with media

Web radio, TV channels, websites, social media and smartphone apps help to recreate a deterritorialised Punjab that virtually connects every Sikh (as long as he has an internet connection), no matter where he actually finds himself at the time. In the massive use of these technologies, the ‘desired imaginary home’ of many Sikh is created, where everyone can find and recognise themselves.

Foreign Sikh communities are often very well organised and life is focused around the *gurdwārā*, built using the Golden Temple in Amritsar as its model. The community life inside and out of the temples tends to reproduce the Indian community's structure, with the same rituals and tasks. When a Sikh moves from Punjab, he chooses an already formed community, and becomes part of it.

Apart from being a place of worship and prayer, in the diasporic community in particular, the *gurdwārā* becomes a place of socialisation and sharing, as well as an educational base. Owing to the frequenting of the *gurdwārā*, the young Sikhs,¹³ especially those born and raised in Italy, rediscover their roots of 'being Sikh' through a series of teachings presented by the temple such as the Punjab language, religious and historical aspects of Sikhism, martial arts and music.

From what is said by many young Sikhs, it seems that the chance to frequent a temple and a strong community in Europe has strengthened their sense of belonging to a group. Many of them go from feeling generically 'Indian' to displaying with a certain pride their 'being Sikh.' For some of them it has precisely been music that has brought them closer to the religion, thus becoming regular activity. This is the case of Aninder Singh, a young tabla player:

I have been here (in Italy) since August 2008. First my mother came to Italy and I stayed in India for another four years, then my dad came to Italy and I stayed with my grandparents and uncles. When in 2008 I also came to Italy I was very happy because I could stay with my family again. Living here however was difficult because my friends stayed in India and I did not know the language and I started a new life. Now many want to go out of India to find a better life. I would not go back to India now, because I have everything here. I go sometimes to India to meet my relatives, but I don't want to come back to live there, my life is here now. When I was in India I did not wear the turban, I cut my hair, I was a non-believer. I did not know about Sikhism. When I came here my mom started talking about my religion, taking me to the temple and explaining to me who is a Sikh, without forcing me to do anything. Then one day I started making *sewa*¹⁴ at the *gurdwārā*, I started to cut the grass in the garden.

In the summer of the second year of high school I attended a camp¹⁵ and decided to become a true Sikh, not cutting my hair and putting on the turban. One day at the temple I met the daughter of a friend of my mother who learned *kīrtan* and I was curious. I went to the *babaji*¹⁶ that was teaching music and my mom told me to try, because he wanted me to learn. However, I was not so interested in religion,

¹³ For a study about identity transmission to the second generation, see Bertolani (2009).

¹⁴ *Seva* is a volunteer service in the *gurdwārā*.

¹⁵ A summer camp is a summer school for children and adolescents, where they can play together and learn religion, Punjabi culture, *kīrtan*, *kata* (Sikh martial art), etc.

¹⁶ *Babaji* is another word for *granthi*.

culture or music, because I did not know much, but I tried. I decided to go all the time. I learned to play harmonium and tabla and now I make tours in the *gurdwārā*.¹⁷

At the beginning of his learning path, Aninder took music lessons at the *gurdwārā* where the *granthi* taught small children. As Aninder matured as a musician, it became necessary to find a better teacher. While not being able to frequent lessons in Italy with good Indian teachers, he was however able to follow lessons online, paying a teacher who gave lessons via Skype. Apart from lessons online given personally by professional musicians, there are many YouTube music channels offering step-by-step tabla and harmonium lessons, including theory lessons regarding Sikh musical heritage, made specifically for the Sikh who live abroad. Aninder stated that when he was unable to take lessons directly from a specific teacher, he found valuable help on the YouTube channels where he was able to watch a great number of videos of famous Indian artists. The online video makes different styles and techniques of performance accessible, allowing one to create a personal style.

It is of course necessary to bear in mind that not all Sikh are trained in music theory and are able to play *kīrtan*; on the contrary, the greater part of the worshippers possess only the most basic musical skills acquired during their scholastic and religious education. However, the ‘idea’ of religious music and the respect given to it is almost always present in every Sikh home.

Many television channels, seen in Italy as well, transmit primarily religious content, including the religious rites from different *gurdwārā* around the world.¹⁸

This is, for example, the case for the Sikh Channel. This is a free-to-air channel based in the United Kingdom, set up in 2009, accessible also online. It is an overtly religious channel, founded with the declared intent of connecting European Sikh communities, as stated on its internet site:

In the ethnic television category, there were numerous stations in Europe but none whatsoever dedicated to the Sikh faith and to a community making a significant contribution to everyday European life. Sikh Channel is the first broadcasting channel of its kind in the world broadcasting Sikh religious and cultural shows around the clock across the world.¹⁹

This channel was created with the intention of connecting all Sikh communities, based on religion, “the first channel to focus upon the essence of the Sikh faith,” but open to non-Sikh people as well. The Sikh channel “acts as a conduit for promoting participation and interest in the local community and greater

¹⁷ Aninder Singh, Grumello del Monte (BG), 27 May 2015.

¹⁸ In almost all of the homes I was able to visit during my research, the TV was always on even during my interviews, tuned to religious, or traditional Punjabi channels.

¹⁹ <https://sikhchannel.tv> (last access 26 April 2021).

understanding between all faiths with a strong commitment to intra-faith.” The channel is formulated “in particular for the elderly and housebound who are disconnected with the local community and also to connect the next generation Sikhi.”²⁰ This channel also has a Facebook page and a Twitter account, both with a great number of followers. On the YouTube channel many musical performances can be re-watched, and this becomes a valuable source for the musicians that need to prepare their performances in accordance with the interests and tastes of the congregation.

Taking as an example the *kīrtan* group formed by Jaspal and Aninder of whom I spoke earlier, it is interesting to observe how very careful they are about the worshippers’ tastes:

The music we make [speaking about a light classical *kīrtan* and commercial *kīrtan*],²¹ is not a *kīrtan* simplification. This music depends on audience taste. If the audience wants a classical *kīrtan*, we play in a classical style, if the audience wants a mixed style, we play in a mixed style. Today a lot of people prefer commercial music otherwise they get bored. If you adopt *rāga* theory, only cultured people can understand.²²

It is interesting to note that musicians refer to the audience, not the worshippers. The religious community naturally becomes an audience that expresses an aesthetic judgment about musical performance. Each community and each temple develop its individual musical idea and preference. To better explain this concept, Jaspal showed me TV channels with different *kīrtan* performances:

Watch, also at the Golden Temple today they make light classical and commercial *kīrtan*, sometimes they don’t use *rāga* because the audience prefers this style. [...] In England, instead, all want to listen to *rāga*. If you play commercial melodies, the audience stands up and goes away. You have to play *rāga*.²³

If a style is adopted in a prestigious temple, especially in the Golden Temple, a musician is justified in playing it. Even an extremely commercial style can be justified if an Indian musical group sees the same on the TV with large audience approval: “In Italy we are the only group that made *kīrtan* in this commercial way. But in India this style is very diffused. Watch this performance in this temple, how many people!”²⁴

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jaspal and Aninder consider ‘light classical *kīrtan*’ a *kīrtan* where *rāga* theory is not ignored but the *rāga* used to play a *shabad* is not necessarily the recommended one in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. Moreover, different *rāga* can be mixed. ‘Commercial *kīrtan*’ is a *kīrtan* without *rāga*, using simple and catchy melodies.

²² Jaspal Singh and Aninder Singh, Grumello del Monte (BG), 17 September 2015.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Gurdeep Singh, Solarolo Rainerio (CR), 29 September 2015.

Music on the air: Web radio, social networks and smartphone apps

Browsing the list of the most followed Punjabi web radio stations, we can see that the principal topics are entertainment, community life, religion, music and *bhangra*.²⁵ Normally these stations are transmitted either from India or major areas with a concentrated immigrated Indian population.

Of the radio stations that transmit exclusively or almost exclusively religious content, the best known is SikhNet radio²⁶ which, on the website homepage, defines itself as a “multi-channel service that allows you to listen to gurbānī, live from gurdwārā around the world, as well as providing various programmed gurbānī radio streams featuring all kinds of different kīrtan.”

This radio offers listening in streaming to religious rituals from principal *gurdwārā* from India and other countries. On the main page of the website there is an online *gurdwārā* list from which one can choose which *gurdwārā* to follow.



Figure 3: Two temples from the SikhNet Radio *gurdwārā* list. SikhNet radio <https://www.sikhnet.com/radio>.

Music and discourse are almost always broadcast from the major *gurdwārā*; the events at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, for example, are always on air.

[Audio Example 1: A live performance from the Golden Temple].

²⁵ *Bhangra* originated as a Punjabi folk dance, but has developed into different forms, including a popular music genre “which spread during the 1980s among the communities outside India, where it established itself as the means for immigrants, especially the second-generation youth, to assert a modern Punjabi identity in diaspora” (Leante 2009).

²⁶ <https://www.sikhnet.com/radio>, last access 15 February 2021.

Smaller temples broadcast only when the *gurdwārā* is involved in some kind of activity, usually for morning and evening prayers. For each channel there is a live map that shows the radio listener the various places of worship.



Figure 4: A listener's map. SikhNet radio <https://www.sikhnet.com/radio>.

This is interesting as it verifies the large diffusion of Sikh music and its importance for the Sikh living far from India. For a musician, the possibility of being able to listen to *kīrtan* from several temples from all over the world, through different media, is a great opportunity to explore the differences in performance practice without having to travel to the precise location. In this way musicians can hear a variety of *kīrtan*, from the most classic to the most hybrid.

One of the most extremes cases is that of the *Hacienda de Guru Ram Das*, in New Mexico, USA. This *gurdwārā* is mainly frequented by Western people converted to Sikhism or Sikhs coming from a Western background, all practicing *kundalini* yoga. The music played has almost nothing to do with either the classic or the commercial *kīrtan*, and is more connected to Western music in terms of style as well as the musical instruments employed. At times even the sung text is nothing but an English translation of the text of the Holy Book, or maybe even just prayers written specifically for the community.²⁷ [Audio Example 2].

Thanks to the direct streaming of the musical performances in this temple, however, Jaspal and Aninder Singh's group has learned new melodies and pieces to add to their repertoire, composed and

²⁷ Notwithstanding that the music produced in this temple clearly moves away from even the most commercial form of *kīrtan*, at times not even using the words of the Holy Book, it is interesting to note that this community is nonetheless included on the list of temples on the Sikh Channel.

played specifically for *kundalini* yoga academies that are now present in Italy as well. The need for musicians in yoga sessions is constantly growing, and Jaspal and Aninder Singh's group was quick to seize the professional opportunity.²⁸

Social networks, like Facebook and Instagram, are mostly used to show activity to the largest audience possible. Each event and musical competition²⁹ is always recorded with attention, both with smartphones and sophisticated cameras, and then shared on either Facebook or YouTube channels. During my research, I never witnessed an event that was not scrupulously filmed. Oftentimes these events are broadcast in streaming on Facebook and are followed by many people, indicated by the huge number of comments and 'likes.' In this way these platforms become an important publicity showcase for the groups that seek recognition and success.

YouTube, social networks and websites are fundamental for the artists' visibility and are used for self-promotion. A YouTube channel with a large number of visualisations is an important business card for a group, strengthening its prestige. Oftentimes during a performance in an important temple, artists stream live through Facebook or post Instagram stories, working hard to increase the number of 'likes.'

A practical example of what I am referring to happens during *nagar kīrtan*. *Nagar kīrtan* is an important religious procession on the occasion of the Vaisakhi festival in the Spring. Every community that revolves around a temple organises this procession,³⁰ which parades down the streets of the city, the main goal being to show themselves and become known to society outside of their community. For this reason, books, brochures and typical fare are distributed for free. The procession is enthusiastically followed by the community and is noisy and musical at the same time. The heart of the procession is a truck that carries the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* accompanied by the *kīrtan*'s musicians and followed by worshippers singing the sacred hymns.

²⁸ The leader of the group, Jaspal Singh, maintains himself exclusively with his work as a musician. For this reason, an engagement with a *kundalini* yoga academy is also interpreted as a work opportunity.

²⁹ This will be described afterwards.

³⁰ This event is celebrated on different Spring days in bordering cities, in order to allow the worshippers to participate in as many processions as possible.



Figure 5: The *Nagar kirtan* procession. Photograph: Thea Tiramani.

Images of the procession are directly broadcast by social networks, and the number of ‘likes’ and visualisations makes it clear that this service is much appreciated by the Sikh that cannot go to the *nagar kirtan*. The musicians directly involved with the performances usually live-stream the event on Facebook or Instagram from their position on the truck, showcasing the important role they have in the *nagar kirtan* to as many people as possible.



Figure 6: A Facebook live performance. A. S. Facebook profile.

As regards smartphone applications, it is enough to write the word ‘Sikh’ on the App Store to make a long list appear, a list that always starts with content relating to religion and music. There are notably many apps that, like Web radio, permit listening in streaming to *kīrtan* from different *gurdwārā*. Web radio and TV channels often have their own apps that can be used with smartphones, such as ‘live *kīrtan*’ streams from the Golden Temple. During *kīrtan* performances, some apps show the hymn texts simultaneously with the image, both in Gurmukhi³¹ and in English. It is very common to see musicians with smartphones either in their hands or propped up on the harmonium during performances and competitions.



Figure 7: *Kīrtan* competition; *Gurdwārā* in Novellara (RE), 15 March 2015. Photograph: Thea Tiramani.

This practice is mostly widespread among younger musicians and amateur groups, but can sometimes even be seen with well-known professionals. Traditionally the hymn text is memorised, but this is difficult not only for beginners but also for professional musicians participating in long *kīrtan* sessions. Fortunately, there are many helpful smartphone apps for this important purpose; all of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*'s hymns are contained on the apps, and it is enough to write one word of the text, the *rāga* or the hymn number and the correct hymn text appears. The words are then easy to read directly from the smartphone.

³¹ Gurmukhi is one of the two alphabets with which the Punjabi language is written. It is used in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* but also in contemporary India. In Punjabi the term Gurmukhi means ‘flowed from the mouth of the Guru’ in as much as this alphabet, according to tradition, was invented by Guru Angad, the second of the Sikh Gurus.

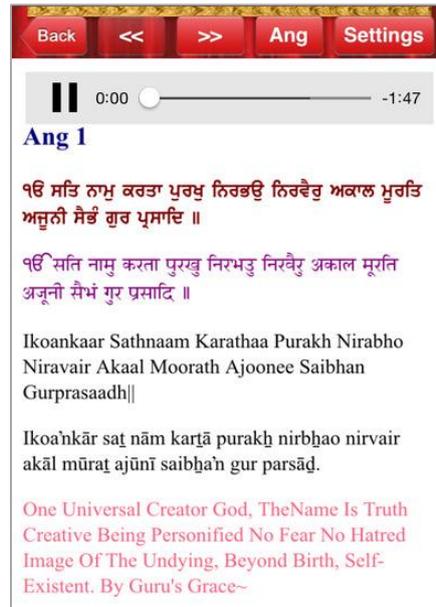


Figure 8: Smartphone application. Live Kirtan smartphone application.

Kirtan groups prepare a list of hymns for their performances, choosing text content in relation to the day's celebrations. Whether it is a festive anniversary or a sorrowful commemoration, or the audience has requested a particular hymn, these smartphone applications make remembering the words simpler. The smartphone becomes an essential aid for prayers and replaces the written text on paper. It is important to note that there exist applications pertaining to musical instruments as well, especially the harmonium, and these are often used by music teachers to explain the structure of the instrument. Children are able to begin learning the names of notes by visualising their positions on the harmonium keyboard, and an interactive learning aid, such as a smartphone, is helpful in capturing the children's attention.

Social media and the passing down of musical tradition: Sikh camps and music competitions

Another topic to take into consideration is the approach used to pass on cultural tradition. One of the main goals within the *gurdwārā* is to hand down skills and behaviour to the younger generations who will clearly be the most vulnerable to cultural dispersion.

It is in this case that music assumes an important role, as a means of communication and form of identity. Every temple organises music courses along with courses in language, history of the religion and martial arts, open to all children and adolescents. It is easy to imagine that the music courses and martial arts classes are the most popular activities. These courses attract the largest number of participants who are then engaged in the other less 'attractive' courses.

Apart from the courses offered by each single *gurdwārā*, there are 'international' summer courses called *Sikh camps* that bring children and teens together from various European countries. For a few weeks these children live together and receive lessons from teachers either from Great Britain or directly

from India, recruited especially for this event. This is how these courses assume a cosmopolitan aspect (Stokes 2007). The purpose of these courses is to encourage young people to get to know their religious, cultural and musical roots, securing them for their own future. Moreover, it gives them the possibility to learn at a high level with competent and expert teachers that most *gurdwārā* do not normally have at their disposition.

The use of social media during *Sikh camp* is substantial, as I will demonstrate in the following example from my field research. I will hereby focus my attention on describing an important *Sikh camp* at which I participated, in Bobigny, outside of Paris, from the 3rd to the 15th of August 2015. There is a school in Bobigny, founded by a businessman, where a Sikh camp is organised every summer, with a large number of participants from different European countries. Children and adolescents, along with their parents, live for about two weeks in close contact, totally immersed in a ‘Sikh reality,’ attending courses in religion, history, language, *gatka* and music. The days are well organised, with lessons in the morning and the afternoon, community meals and free time in between.

Observing the advertisement for the Sikh camp found on its website, on Facebook and various Sikh associations, it is clear that music has an important role and is actually the most publicised event. In reality, the images and photographs of the instruments that appear in the advertisement are not the instruments taught at the camp (harmonium and tabla) but the instruments belonging to the ‘ancient’ Sikh tradition: the taus, the dilruba or the sarangi. It is almost as if the message sent by the advertisement suggests the ideal of the ‘original Sikh identity,’ which one would hope to achieve but is afraid of losing.

The camp participants can follow group lessons in harmonium and tabla, but the groups are divided according to age. The most talented children are sometimes given supplementary private lessons. At the end of the camp, there is a kind of test to evaluate the level acquired during the course.

As I followed the music lessons, the need to teach the musical tradition in the most rigorous way possible, in its most ‘original’ form, was evident. Children, in fact, are introduced to the theory of *rāga* and are encouraged to perform religious music in the ‘correct’ way, according to the precepts of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. No smartphone apps are used in the teaching class, but the words of the *shabad* are written on paper, with the names of the notes, the rhythmical cycles and the musical theory elements. The *rāga* that are taught are few and relatively simple, and the rhythmic cycles used are the easiest to learn. Usually the teachers teach their own prefabricated *shabad*, in a simple *rāga*, with a catchy melody that the children learn and memorise as a group, which they will then have to recite for the final exam.

During music lessons, the camp organisers take photos, make many videos and Facebook live streams. Every one of these educational moments is amply documented by parents, relatives and organisers, then immediately shared on social media to promote the camp and to create more followers and potential participants for the next year. At the same time, music teachers make videos of the better

students to share on their YouTube channels or Facebook profiles, to enhance their reputation not only in Europe but in India as well. For the tabla teacher I met in Bobigny, giving lessons to me was a source of pride, and he made many videos that he then posted on internet, saying “I come from India to France, for a summer music camp. This my first Italian student and I am very proud of her!”³² In this mechanism of self-promotion the teachers obtain greater prestige and work opportunities, eventually being invited to teach again at this camp or others like it.

The principal role of the *kīrtan*, as we have seen, is to accompany the religious rite. Nonetheless this music is also performed and shown on different occasions,³³ moving away from the original exclusively religious context. This is the case of the *kīrtan* competitions, which are organised in the main *gurdwārās* present in the territory. On these occasions, the music certainly still has a religious function, but it also begins to show elements of pure performance. The last day of *Sikh camp* is dedicated to *kīrtan* competitions, during which acquired musical abilities are displayed to all present. Judges in these competitions, often called from India or Great Britain, are required to evaluate participants both in the children’s and then in the adult category, and in the end decide the winners of the competition.

Important parameters to be respected are, for instance, the correct *rāga*, the correct pronunciation of the text of the *shabad* and the attention to the rhythmic cycle. These rules are most important in the children’s category. For the adult category, on the other hand, it is important that they develop a sense of reflection in the way they perform *kīrtan* and are able to involve worshippers through careful use of their voice and the sound of the instruments that result in an exciting musical performance. In other words, to develop a personal aesthetic working idea of *kīrtan*.

In Italy, one of the most important music competitions³⁴ with a large number of participants from all over Europe, is held in Novellara (Reggio Emilia). The competition lasts all day and is recorded from beginning to end. A cameraman is ever-present to film and then share the competition on TV channels such as the Sikh channel or Akal channel,³⁵ and social media. It is incredible to note the number of ‘likes’ and comments made during the live streaming; it means that many people are interested in following the competition’s development, watching it on Facebook or other media. Followers are either European Sikhs, who already belong to the participant’s community, or simply people interested in music. In this way, a small place like Novellara becomes a musical centre that connects the Sikhs all over Europe and strengthens virtual bonds among communities. Judges themselves film the musicians with their smartphones, especially the most well-known groups, and have said that they use the videos to show their students what is happening in Europe.

³² Paramjot Singh, Bobigny, 12 August 2015.

³³ The *nagar kīrtan* procession, for example.

³⁴ The competition includes *kīrtan*’s exhibitions but there are also *dhādi* and *kaṛisbri* sessions.

³⁵ Both the Sikh and Akal channels are available worldwide, watched by Sikh all over the world.

Conclusion

In this article, I have reviewed some of the most applied technologies used by both musicians and followers of Sikh music in different contexts and situations, concentrating on practical examples as seen during my field research. The aim of this article is to provide an initial study of the relationship between music and media in relation to the Sikh community in a migratory context. My contribution is nothing but a first step in a study that I believe could reveal much, with the intention of giving a more comprehensive view of the music functions in a community in diaspora as complex as that of the Sikhs.

The intense use of these means is not, of course, exclusive to the Sikh community; the impact, however, of social media is strong and specific in relation to the complex history and migratory characteristics of this population. By means of various social media, networks and virtual connections are created that are at the root of the existence of the global and deterritorialised Sikh community, with its physical centre in Amritsar that transmits stimuli and trends all over the world. The nature of music allows it to travel easily through these channels, to be shared and displayed, thus becoming the bearer of an identity. The continuous connection to motherland influences guides the religious musical production to the extent that it becomes a product ‘made in India,’ even outside of India. In the same fashion, the inevitable changes in the *keṛtan*, which depend on the whereabouts of its production and its followers, are legitimised exactly because they can be monitored and thus controlled. Beyond the virtual diffusion of the music there obviously exists a real diffusion of musicians and teachers, which guarantees a certain uniformity of musical style and educational strategy. In any case, where the musicians cannot arrive, the smartphone can.

The need to share diverse musical experiences, educational moments and performances seems to be a consequence of the need to ‘feel Sikh’ wherever one is, and to show one’s own activities within the global network.

One of the consequences of the intense use of these technologies, particularly regarding the self-promotion of musical groups, is a change in the perception of skill. The value of a musical group (of any kind) and its known skills is communicated through the number of views on a Facebook page or YouTube channel, in a battle of ‘likes.’ In fact, musicians who are able to promote themselves well are contacted more easily and are more highly considered by a public made up of worshippers, musical or not, but who are certainly competent in the use of social network. It follows that the competence of the public is built on a different criterion, a criterion that considers ‘the best’ those who are in reality ‘viewed the most.’

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