

O Nanak! Thou art Immortal!

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FOR CENTURIES NOW, day in and day out, the Sikh disciples of Guru Nanak's decree:

ਸਬਦੁ ਗੁਰੂ ਸੁਰਤਿ ਧੁਨਿ ਚੇਲਾ ॥
ਅਕਥ ਕਥਾ ਲੇ ਰਹਉ ਨਿਰਾਲਾ ॥
ਨਾਨਕ ਜੁਗਿ ਜੁਗਿ ਗੁਰ ਗੋਪਾਲਾ ॥
ਏਕੁ ਸਬਦੁ ਜਿਤੁ ਕਥਾ ਵੀਚਾਰੀ ॥
ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਹਉਮੈ ਅਗਨਿ ਨਿਵਾਰੀ ॥ (SGGS: 943 'Siddha Gosht')

have felt the mesmerizing and ennobling effect of 'Kirtan', i.e. melodious rendition of divine poetry, set in the classical and timeless measure of 'Ragaas'.

According to the fourth volume of the book titled 'The Cultural Heritage of India', "*Kirtan* means a laudatory recital, verbal and literary of the name and qualities of a person.....divine being or beings". Aristotle, the renowned Greek philosopher placed music at the highest pedestal amongst all performing arts. The tradition of offering prayers through 'Kirtan' can be traced to the Aryans, who sang Vedic mantras. Even the poetry in the Upanishads was sung. The Bhagwad Gita is also termed as 'A Song of the Blessed'.

History is replete with accounts of people imbued with divine qualities like Shankracharya, Madhav, Vallabh, Mira Bai, Tuka Ram, Chaitanya, the Sufis, etc, all using 'Kirtan' as a medium of communion with God. 'Kirtan' received great impetus during the Bhakti movement wherein it became an instrument to exalt the audience to new heights of consciousness.

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh religion had unflinching faith in the divine spirit of man. For the propagation of his message of love and devotion, he undertook four missionary odysseys and met people of different faiths, singing melodious hymns, with unique sanctifying and spiritual brilliance. As an embodiment of Divine Poetry and Music of the highest order, as reflected in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Nanak composed 'Bani' (divine poetic verses) in nineteen Raagas. Usually accompanied by playing of 'rabab' (rebeck) by Bhai Mardana, he used 'Kirtan' as a means to preach the gospel of God. His rendition metamorphosed many a diabolic character. Babar, after listening to Nanak's hymns, symbolizing the agony of the suffering masses, was moved to the extent that he released all from captivity. Nanak popularized the tradition of 'Kirtan' in congregations and homes, especially the singing of 'Asa di Vaar' before sunrise, and this convention is followed till date by Sikhs all over the world.

The aim of 'Kirtan' has been elucidated beautifully by Guru Nanak in Raag Asa:

ਵਾਜਾ ਮਤਿ ਪਖਾਵਜੁ ਭਾਉ ॥
ਹੋਇ ਅਨੰਦੁ ਸਦਾ ਮਨਿ ਚਾਉ ॥
ਏਹਾ ਭਗਤਿ ਏਹੋ ਤਪ ਤਾਉ ॥

ਇਤੁ ਰੰਗਿ ਨਾਚਹੁ ਰਖਿ ਰਖਿ ਪਾਉ ॥ (SGGS: 350)

When translated this would mean:

Make intellect thy organ and love thy tambourine. These will produce joy and true pleasure in the mind. Let termination of duality be your music and song. In such affection, you dance with your feet in rhythm.

The tradition set by Guru Nanak was followed by his revered successors. Guru Angad Dev, Guru Ram Das and Guru Teg Bahadur composed 'shlokas' in different Ragas. Guru Arjun Dev, the fifth Nanak is known to be the inventor of a string instrument named 'Saranda', which is used by the 'Kirtanias' till date as an accompaniment to vocal performance.

Guru Arjun also started the tradition of four 'Chaukis' i.e uninterrupted 'Kirtan' performance according to different time spans of the day in Darbar Sahib, Amritsar. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Nanak was the paradigm of heroism and quite stoic about maintaining his regimen of reciting Kirtan of 'Asa di Var' even in times of various battles he fought against religious bigotry.

Following these examples of our worthy Gurus, 'Kirtan' today touches all aspects of our lives, be it formalizing ceremonies of birth, baptism, weddings, etc or be it an immersion in the boundless ocean of spiritual self realization. 'Kirtan' has been likened to a valuable diamond- the treasure trove of intense happiness and virtues

ਕੀਰਤਨੁ ਨਿਰਮੋਲਕ ਹੀਰਾ ॥ ਆਨੰਦ ਗੁਣੀ ਗਹੀਰਾ ॥ (SGGS: 893 Ramkali M: 5)

It is the harbinger of true beatitude and solace. It neutralizes the egoistic strain in human psyche and purifies the soul from sins of omission and commission, as beautifully expressed in '*Gauri Sukhmani*' (*Gauri* measure of the pearl of peace)

ਗੁਨ ਗਾਵਤ ਤੇਰੀ ਉਤਰਸਿ ਮੈਲੁ ॥

ਬਿਨਸਿ ਜਾਇ ਹਉਮੈ ਬਿਖੁ ਫੈਲੁ ॥ (SGGS: 289)

The Indian mythological thought expounds the idea that the desires and wishes of human beings are fulfilled by either a cow named 'Kamadhenu' or the 'Kalap' tree in heaven. Our Gurus assure us that, unlike mythology, the fulfilment of all the aspirations of one's hearts can be derived by singing 'Kirtan' of God's Name.

The ultimate aim of man is to realize God and feel a state of oneness with him. This state can be attained - not by going on a pilgrimage or following any rituals - , but by singing praises, or Kirtan of God with a loving devotion.

ਕਲਜੁਗ ਮਹਿ ਕੀਰਤਨੁ ਪਰਧਾਨਾ ॥

ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਜਪੀਐ ਲਾਇ ਧਿਆਨਾ ॥ (SGGS: 1075)

Our tenth Master, Guru Gobind Singh invested Guruship in Guru Granth Sahib in the year 1708 and, since then, the Sikh community has been ordained to follow the dictum -

ਸਬਦੁ ਗੁਰੂ ਸੁਰਤਿ ਧੁਨਿ ਚੇਲਾ ॥ (SGGS: 942-43)

i.e. attunement of the faculties of the intellect with 'Shabad' as enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib ji. Attuning the internal senses to the 'Shabad', specially while singing or listening to

'Kirtan' empowers the seeker with strength, peace, fortitude, steadfastness and a vast reservoir of virtues!

Today, when the nations are warring, crime rate is going up, perversion is on the rise, families are breaking up - there is much turbulence around us. The society needs people who epitomize virtues like compassion and piety — quite in the foot steps of Guru Nanak to lead the way for our youth.

Families participating in community activities, like regular attendance in Gurdwara proceedings, listening as well as singing 'Kirtan' are ways to refine the intellect as well as be instrumental in giving a balanced direction to our progeny.

For reinforcing their love for 'Shabad Guru', 'Kirtan' is the easiest option! Music and love are inter-twined and form the edifice of real joy or 'Anand'.

'Kirtan'- the captivating legacy of Nanak, is unequivocally the food of divine love, and Sikh votaries are definitely going to play on and on...

