

Scriptural Singing and Human Life

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Life's elixir, the *shabad kirtan* performed by *kirtankaars* at Harmandir Sahib is unique feature of Sikh Religion. This sublime recitation of *Gurbani* in the form of *raagas* is the main attraction of this sanctorum. *Kirtan* starts in the wee hours of the morning, or what is called the "*Amritvela*" in religious parlance, and it continues till late night. The *kirtankaars* are perhaps not aware of the kind of spiritual sustenance they are providing to all those who savour the *bhakti sangeet* or *Gurbani* recitation. The "*Hazoor Raagis*" is the term used for the *kirtankaars* who perform while they are present right inside the Harmandir Sahib. Jalandhar radio has been relaying live *shabad Kirtan* straight from Harmandir Sahib and has been fulfilling the spiritual hunger of people living far and wide. This one and a half hour programme begins with the words "*Sun vadbhagiyaa, har Amrit Bani Ram*" which when translated into English means that those who savour the nectar of *Gurbani* are the luckiest people. The *kirtan* of the most celebrated *kirtankaars* is readily available in the form of cassettes.

Guru Granth Sahib has thirty one prescribed *raags*, but few *kirtankaars* sing in classical tradition of *Gurmat Sangeet*, yet many have such intensity in their voice that can move one to tears. It is not only the voice that has the magic but the truth and beauty of the *bani*, coupled with a melodious voice that make the rendition all the more sublime. The repetition of the *Shlokas* for instance : "*Tere Bharose Aayeya, Kirpa Aayeya, Jeo Bhave Teo Rakho Swami*", have the capacity to involve the audience and, once the words become familiar, audience also get involved in singing along with the *Raagi Singh*. This is the time when the height of ecstasy is experienced both by the singer and the *sangat*. One actually feels the upliftment of the soul, lighter in mind and purer in heart. Music, especially the religious music, definitely has the ability to purge and purify. The beautiful *Gurbani* in the lines : "*soi karave, jo tud bhaave, mohe syanap kachhu naa aave, mera maat pita har raiya*", shows the total surrender one exhibits while in presence of the Almighty.

In the Gurdwara, people are seen sitting totally engrossed, with their eyes closed, trying to experience the exhilaration of soul. At home people are seen holding their transistors next to their ears in bid to grasp the deeper meaning and rhythm. It is life-line for old people who cannot go to the Gurudwaras daily but have access to it through the radio. "*Tu mera pita, Tu hain mera mata, Tu mera bandhap, Tu mera bhrata, Tu mera Rakha sabni thhain, Ta bhoau keha kara jeeyo*" –this beautiful couplet articulates a devotee's total faith in Almighty. The entire *Gurbani* is a repertoire of ultimate

truths and practical wisdom. Mortal being's incapacity to do things on his own and his all-time dependence on God for all kind of sustenance is shown in the lines : "*Hum bheekhak bhekari tere, Tu nij pat hai data dayaal na tum sar, ab patyaar kaya keeje*". Gurbani is replete with adoration and love of the Almighty, e.g. "*Hum moorakh Tum chatur syane, sarab kala ke gyata*" and "*Teene tap niwaranhara, Dukh hanta suk rass*".

Nature's beautiful seasons are discussed in it time and again. There are *shabads* which announce the advent of "*basant ritu*" and "*saawan*", in exalting spiritual poetry. In today's world, it is very hard to experience the solace, serenity and comfort that kirtan has the ability to give.

Kirtan is singing of the scripture and Lord's praises in the Guru's presence. It is a part and parcel of the congregational services in Sikhism, and it has been the most popular form of religious services among the Sikhs for centuries. Today, it is an important part of every gurdvara service and is almost an exclusive form of activity by many Sikh groups. They hold unceasing exercise of the singing of Holy scripture for an overnight or a weekend. Akhand keertan jatha and Brahm Bunga Samagams are two prime examples but there are many associations attempting to promote keertan.

The attraction of keertan is attributed to the claims of its potency in reviving contemplative consciousness. It offers occasion for hearing the Divine Word. It is said that by listening and chanting of the transcendental reverberation we can cleanse away all filth of mind and eliminate all doubts within our hearts. This is a devotional method of meditation and is recommended in many faiths.

There is no doubt that keertan may take some to the spiritual highs, and one sees the first sign of this ecstasy in the urge to sing along with the cantors. We have seen this often to happen in the Sikh congregations. However, for a great majority of devotees the scene is different. After a life time of bodily participation in thousands of congregation they feel that they really gained nothing spiritually. There is no awakening of divine within and the divine consciousness is not in sight.

Mind is Not Attentive

First and the foremost reason for not gaining anything from the keertan is that whereas we listen to the keertan in flesh our mind and consciousness are not tuned to the listening. The scripture describes the inattentiveness of mind to the keertan beautifully.

Some sing hymns with tunes of songs and melodies, but their minds do not sing of the lord, Har, Har.

Mind Is Still-less

We got to the sangat or present ourselves to the keertan-listening and, instead, find our wandering mind to take over. This is the most troubling characteristic of our mind that it tends not to ever stand still to listen. The scripture says,

The human is restless (fickle, volatile) and it keeps on running and rushing.

The restless nature of the human mind can be very well felt during any attempt to listen to the spiritual voice via the keertan. Attempting to listen to the keertan is very troubling example where we wish to hold our thoughts still and do not succeed. When we close our eyes in any attempt to listen, we are amazed to discover a boiler factory inside of us. As the Guru says,

Countless waves begins to trouble the human mind continuously. During every attempt to listen or connect to the sabad, all sorts of thoughts begin to flash through our mind, simple things such as: did I turn off my Internet phone line? Did I turn off my car's headlights? Did I put the cat outside? Other thoughts, not so simple or unimportant, also come in. Thoughts of fear or doubt, places and people, revenge and animosity, and exorcism or sensuality are some of the other examples. The reason for the unprecedented still-less-ness is that our mind is created with instincts that act like antennas scanning and picking up all the voices of mental processes. The voices are entertained not only from the outside world but more so from the inside world. Guru describes this :

The restless mind wanders in all ten directions-even though it seeks to be pacified and restrained.

Deluded by doubt, the mind wanders around in the ten directions. In an instant, these mind go around Four Corners of the world and come back again and again.

The mind runs around in all directions like a mad dog.

This unstable mind cannot be held steady. Attached to duality, it wanders in the ten directions.

The still-less-ness of mind is essentially the classic psychology of modern person. It relates to mental impulses that drive people ceaselessly to run around in order to seek new experiences and possessions without ever finding fulfillment. The Guru describes this phenomenon of mind in his words as:

O people longing to brings your mind under control, this mind cannot be restrained. Fickle tendencies dwell within. As a result, it cannot remain unwavering.

Wandering Mind Gather Little

The still-less-ness is a great concern to the seekers of spirituality through meditative approaches, because it present a great hindrance on the path to spirituality. The goal of spirituality is betrayed when the mind roams around away from the domain of the soul.

Origin in Past Lives

Before we can venture to control our mind and its thought, it is more appropriate to first understand the basis of our mind's restlessness. To wander in mind is neither your fault nor mine. It is mostly the result of deep-rooted habit with us from our evolutionary history where the laws of jungle prevailed. The rote of our evolutionary history in establishing many of the habits of mind.

It is well accepted that we spent many of our previous lives in the form of lower and higher animals. The animals world learns to constantly take in information from is surrounding and music their reflexes to fight or flight at every opportunity or challenge. Have you ever seen a cat or rat sit still without a wandering mind? Children who wish to catch a frog or a bird know teh seep and efficiency of these animals well, which these animals which these animals exhibit in sensing any charge in their surrounding. You may try an attempt to kill a cockroach with a fly swatter and you will notice the incredible ability of the animal to sense your moves and intentions. When you go near a seemingly quite bird or cockroach, it instantaneously takes notice of your coming and immediately takes a flight. Throw some food in a fish tank watch countless fish coming to fetch it instantaneously as if they were expecting it. Animals at all levels of evolution are always found to be scanning their surroundings for any danger to life or their possessins. They also scan for any opportunity for food or other life necessities. The human animal inherits these tendecies and carries those with him/er to all human lives. The initiatives for the real purpose of the juman form are lost in practicing those animal instincts.

During the evolutionary history, the instincts of ceaseless attention to outside distractions would be very valuable for the survival of the species. Thus the skill of spreading the mind in all directions was practiced and preserved very diligently during each form of life that we have gone through, until this habit was thoroughly perfected and selected to be well embedded in our genetic codes. Just like it is in the animal world, in the earlier forms of our human life continued to build this animal trait. It ensured that we would always be on the alert and on the lookout for any danger or any opportunities. This trait would help us obtain more things and to control more energy. All of these instincts and their manifestation in human behaviors would help us obtain more things and to control more energy. All of these instincts and their manifestation in human behaviors should make our offspring and us move viable. That was the intention of evolution. But we must be cognizant of the price we have to pay for this neat scheme of our genes. Like Faust, we shall never rest contented or be still with what we have achieved. Our mind will always be on the run to scan every thought inside, and every real or imaginary sensation from outside. It everyday life, even in the more developed human form, this Faustian dissatisfaction can be easily documented. Try to still and think or mediate, you, will find your mind to begin wandering every second obliterating any gain from such an exercise, and even if it is to our detriment. Scripture describes this state by saying. *The mind is very restless and does not come under my control.*

In the Sikh history there is a very interesting story. Guru Nanak was invited to a local mosque in the Pakistani town of sultanpur to join the Qazi in an afternoon prayer. In the mosque when the Qazi conducted his prayer, the Guru was observed to remain standing and not kneel as required of all those

who pray. The Qazi complained on Guru Nanak apparent refusal to join in the Muslim prayer. To this Guru Nanak responded, "what prayer was I expected to join? The reverend Qazi's mind wandered to his new – born foal which he had left untied in his yard before coming to the mosque. He recalled that there was a wall in the enclosure and feared lest the foal should fall into it." 'The Guru further explained that the prayer in flesh was no prayer until the mind was attending to it. The audience was moved by the profound lesson in the Guru's demonstration.

The lesson is this. The spiritual gains are not likely from listening to the Keertan or other expositions from the Guru unless our paying a visit to the holy place is contingent upon achieving the presence of mind in the Guru's Court. Presence of these alone will never suffice.

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