

THE POSITION OF KABIR BHAJANS IN NORTH INDIAN MUSIC

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Abstract

Kabirdas is a poet who lived in medieval India. He visioned to spread social purity with philosophical thinking through the poems which are termed as Nirgun bhajans. Bhajan is simply known for chanting the qualities and the physical appearance of Hindu deity/deities. The bhajans or poems composed by Kabirdas are not consisting of the latter, but they are also put under the term 'bhajan' in terms of lyrics and their musical presentation. Traditionally, bhajans refer to devotional songs that depict the qualities and physical attributes of various deities. However, Kabirdas' bhajans deviate from this norm by focusing on different themes, while maintaining a certain essence of traditional bhajans. This study investigates how the melodies of Kabir bhajans effects in the absence of chanting the qualities and the physical appearance of a Hindu deity/deities in the lyrics. This study also aims to look at the broader significance of devotional music in promoting social and philosophical ideals in medieval India.

Keywords

Kabirdas, Bhajan, Nirgun tradition, Melody, Philosophy

Introduction to Kabirdas, Nirgun Tradition and Bhajan

Kabirdas

Kabirdas, a prominent poet from medieval India, held significant expertise in Hindi literature and actively supported a new path for individuals navigating diverse religious backgrounds of the era. He lived between 1445 and 1510 A.D. and, although born into a Muslim family, grew up in the Hindu pilgrimage site of "Kashi". Kabirdas is renowned for his non-religious stance, commonly referred to as Nirgun. During his childhood, he displayed little interest in reading or writing, but later received education under the guidance of his teacher, Pandit Ramanand. Given his Hindu upbringing under Pandit Ramanand's instruction, who adhered to the Hindu religion, Kabirdas likely encountered religious and cultural conflicts. Kabirdas expressed his thoughts and ideas in a language called Kichadi, which amalgamated khadiboli, Braj, and other languages. According to DeNapoli (2018), devotion (bhakti) was perceived as transcending earthly attributes, such as gender, names, physical appearances, racial and ethnic backgrounds, social class, and caste (Lorenzen, 1987). Kabirdas delivered his poems through two-line couplets known as Doha and four-line verses called choupai (Dhakde, 2022).

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Nirgun Tradition

The religious background of North India underwent significant changes during the Middle Ages due to Muslim invasions and migrations. As a result, alongside Hinduism, Islam gained popularity as a practiced religion. Vaishnavism, a prevalent form of Hinduism, coexisted with Sufism, which appealed to Muslims (Bose, 2019; Henry, 1991). Both religious traditions sought a connection with God, leading to the division of devotion into two categories known as Sagun Bhakti (devotion to a deity's qualities and physical attributes) and Nirgun Bhakti (devotion to the formless divine). The term "Nirgun" refers to the absence of specific qualities and physical appearance. Kabir Das emerged as a follower of Nirgun Bhakti, acting as a mediator and advocate of truth. Through his writings, Kabir focused on reconciling divergent perspectives within the community. While Kabir's poetry covered various themes, this study specifically examines the Nirgun tradition of Kabir bhajans. Nirgun (Gupta, K. S., 2016) also followed Rabindranath Tagore, who was a poet and artist introducing "Rabindra Sangeet" as a new form of Bangla music.

Bhajan

A bhajan is a form of devotional song that holds deep spiritual significance in Indian culture. bhajan traced back to ancient traditions which began through vocal musical forms known as prabandha shastra in medieval India (Pandit and Abeysekara, 2023). bhajans are melodic compositions that express devotion and reverence towards a particular deity or a divine power (Beck, 2017). The word "bhajan" has derived from the Sanskrit term "bhaj," meaning "to share" or "to adore" (Singer, 1963). As a musical expression of devotion, bhajans are considered a powerful means to connect with the divine and evoke a sense of inner peace and tranquillity. bhajans are typically sung in regional languages across India, such as Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, and Kannada, among others. These devotional songs are often composed in a repetitive and melodious manner, making them accessible and engaging for a wide range of listeners. The lyrics of bhajans typically focus on themes of love, surrender, gratitude, and seeking divine grace. They explore various aspects of spirituality and encourage individuals to cultivate a deeper sense of devotion and introspection. Bhajans are performed in various settings, ranging from intimate gatherings at homes and temples to grand public events during religious festivals. The music is accompanied by traditional instruments like Harmonium, Tabla, Dholak, and Manjira, creating a vibrant and rhythmic atmosphere. Many renowned artists and singers have dedicated their lives to propagating the tradition of bhajans, and their soulful renditions have touched the hearts of millions.

According to a survey conducted among Sri Lankan and Northern Indian university students who can sing bhajans, some individuals sing bhajans based on how they previously heard, either from their parents, the media or through learning from a teacher. A few of them also enjoy composing their own bhajans and incorporating them into their performances. However, it should be noted that all of these students were Hindustani music learners, and they preferred singing bhajans in accordance with that tradition. Interestingly, many of them tend to choose bhajans that resemble popular film songs due to various reasons such as the fame of the singer, the composer, or the nature of those melodies. It is important to mention that these bhajans, which originated from poems written by various medieval Indian poets, do not have fixed melodies. bhajans are sung in different ways as the performer prefers. Practitioners had the freedom to show their musical prowess by creating various melodic renditions

of Kabirdas's doha and choupai, drawing upon their musical training and heritage. Consequently, the Melodic Impact of Kabir bhajans remains dynamic and subject to stylistic variations. These compositions can be adapted to different musical forms in North Indian music such as bhajan, geet, khyal (bada khayal and chota khayal), as well as diverse styles like classical, semi-classical, light music, or folk, among others. Over time, artists have observed and incorporated existing melodies while making adjustments to the melodic and rhythmic aspects to suit modern band structures (Meddegoda, 2014).

Methods: Interviews and Micro-analysis

This study aimed to examine the meaning of the lyrics, scale systems, melodies, and systematic use of bhajans, specifically focusing on the context of Kabir bhajans. To achieve a multifaceted approach that combined musical analysis, literature surveys, and qualitative research, we utilized in-depth analysis, literature surveys, and musical transcriptions.

The in-depth analysis of the meaning of the bhajans revealed the philosophical views and messages conveyed to the community by Kabirdas. The melodic frame works used in Kabir bhajans involve various ragas. Additionally, the melodic structures, note combinations, and ornamentation techniques that contributed to the unique character of Kabir bhajans were explored. By focusing on their melodic contours, rhythmic patterns, and tonal variations, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the aesthetic qualities and stylistic features of Kabir bhajans through musical transcriptions and audio recordings.

Furthermore, the context of Kabir bhajans was extensively engaged in a literature survey. This survey involved a thorough review of scholarly works, historical texts, religious scriptures, and other relevant literature that provided insights into the cultural, religious, and philosophical aspects associated with Kabir bhajans.

Some Analyses of Selected Kabir Bhajans

A few tunes of Kabir bhajans are transcribed for further analysis. The musical transcriptions are provided in Hindustani notation system introduced by Bhatkhande in the mid of 20th century. The Bhatkhande notation system is one of the most preferable notation systems used in Sri Lanka (Meddegoda, 2018). The diatonic scale will be shown with Hindustani solfege syllables as S, R, G, M, P, D, N, S. The majority of bhajans are sung in rhythmic cycles known as keherva tal, bhajan tal, panjab tal and dadara tal. The notation system consists of few elements which are defined on the table at figure 1.

Name of the element	Meaning
Sthai	Interlude
Antara	Verse
Laya	Tempo
Tala symbols	A sign for the rest of the rhythm
Kan swar	Touch notes/grace notes
Solfege syllables in brackets	Khatka or musical tones which are sung fast by sounding nearby tones e.g. (G)= RGMG
—	Continuation between intervals (Meend)
X 0 2 3	The rhythmic divisions that are indicated though clapping and waiving hands at the first beat on each division. The symbol '0' indicates waiving hand and the rest indicates clapping.
+	Offbeat
—	Combining notes
Below the note ●	Lower octave
● Above the note	Higher octave
----	Rests

Figure 1: Definitions of signs indicated in Hindustani notations.

Data Exploration

Bhajan 1

Lyrics	Translated Meaning
Teerth k aun kare, hamare man me hi Ganga Man me hi Yamuna Man me hi snan kare	You don't need to go for pilgrimage (तीर्थ) ² if you just think of Ganga and Yamuna in your heart and take a dip in water.
Man me hi mala Man me hi moorat Man me hi dhyan dhare	You don't need to go to the temple to worship. If you just close your eyes and think of the almighty in your heart.
Kahat kabeer Suno bhai sadhu Bhatakat kaun fire	Kabeer says Pure intention and meditation are the key to achieve anything in life.

Figure 2: Kabir's bhajan 'hamare teerth kaun kare' with rough English translation by the author.

The song 'hamare teerth kaun kare' is one of the Nirgun bhajan by Kabirdas. The meaning and the lyrics deliver a message to the community. Saint Kabirdas says and suggests the people 'no need to be confused, just meditate and think'. Kabir does not praise any physical appearance of a God.

The rough tune of the above lyrics (bhajan 1) is provided in the below transcription (Figure 3). The composer of the tune is unknown. This bhajan is sung on madhyalaya³ Panjabital or teental which follows 4/4 beats. The composition is based on a Hindustani raga mishra pilu. Harmonium, tabla, flute, manjira and other instruments are used as accompanying music instruments.

2. तीर्थ is the Hindi equivalent.

3. Madhyalaya stands for medium tempo which is described as not slow and not fast (Mishra, 2006).

Sthai

		S	SR	(G)	G-	R-	-	GG	-M	DP					
		ha	ma-	-	-	re	-	thi-	-r	th-					
G	-R	N	-N	S	-	-	P	PM	MG	GR	SR	G	GG	-M	DP
kau	-	na	ka	re	-	-	ha	ma-	-	-	re	-	thi-	-r	th-
(G)	-R	N	-N	S	-	-	-								
kau	-	na	ka	re	-	-	-								
3				x				2							0

Antara

				S	-	G	M	P	P	P	P			
				man	-	mein	-	gan	ga	-	-			
+ GG	-M	DP	G	-R	S-	S-	G	G	G	G	- GG	-M	DP	
+ man	--	me	Ja	mu	na	--	bha	ta	ka	ta	-	kau	na	fi-
G	-R	N	S	SR	G	G-	R-	-	GG	-M	DP			
re	--	-	ha	ma-	-	-	re	-	thi-	-r	th-			
x				2				0				3		

Figure 3: bhajan 1, a tune of Kabir’s poem ‘hamare teerth kaun kare’ transcribed in Bhatkhande notations by the author.

Bhajan 2

The following tune is the second variety of the same lyrics of hamare teerth kauna kare (Figure 2). The composer of the tune is unknown. This bhajan is sung on madhyalaya teental or Panjabi tal. The sthai is composed based on the Hindustani raga ‘tilakkamod’ and the antara is based on the Hindustani raga ‘desh’.

Sthai

				S	M	GR	S	N	N	P	N	S			
				ha	ma-	-	-	re	ti	-	-r	th			
G	R	G	M	(G)	-R	S	S	SG	RG	S	N	N	P	N	S
kau	-	na	ka	re	-	-	ha	ma-	-	-	re	thi	-	-r	th
G	R	G	M	G	-R	S	-	-							
kau	-	na	ka	re											
3				x				2				0			

Antara

		M R M M	(P) P P P
		man - me -	gan ga - -
M M M M	MD PD M GR	M P N N	N S N S
man - me -	ja mu na --	bha ta ka ta	kau - na fi
<u>N</u> <u>DP</u> P M	G <u>-R</u> S <u>N</u>		
re - ha ma -	- - re -		
3	x	2	0

Figure 4: A tune of Kabir's poem 'hamare teerth kaun kare' transcribed in Bhatkhande notation.

Bhajan 3

Lyrics	Translated meaning
Mann lago mero yaar faqiri main	My heart is set on renunciation
Jo sukh pavo naam bhajan main So sukh naahi amiri main	What joy I experience while singing the name Divine, is not to be found in any riches or pleasures.
Bhala bura sabka suun lee je Kar gujran garibi main	Listen to the appreciation and criticisms of everyone yet live your life in simplicity.
Prem nagar main rahni hamari Bhali bani aayi saburi main	I stay in the land of love, and all good comes to me effortlessly as I wait in faith and patience.
Kahat Kabira suno bhai sadho Sahib mile saburi main	Says Kabir, listen! sadho! that the one is to be found only in deep contemplation and patience.

Figure 5: Kabir's poem 'Mann lago mero' with rough English translation by the author.

Below is the transcription of the bhajan 3. The composer of the tune is unknown. This bhajan is sung on madhyalaya keherwa tal or teen tal. This bhajan is composed in Rag Parameshwari. Antara is based on the raga desh. The singer has freedom to render the shadows of other ragas while improvising the composition and it is one of the special features in Hindustani semi-classical performances. The first part of the song is performed in the style of khyal in Hindustani music.

Sthai

		S N	S G M N	D - P M
		ma na	la go me ro	ya - ra fa
<u>D</u> P M G	G - S S	<u>MG</u> <u>GR</u> <u>RG</u> M	M - - -	
qi - ri -	me - ma na	la- go me ro	ya - - -	
<u>GG</u> <u>RR</u> <u>SS</u> <u>NN</u>	<u>D</u> - - S	G - - -	<u>DN</u> <u>DN</u> <u>DD</u> P	
-- -- -- ra-	- - - fa	qi - - -	-- -- ri- -	
S - - -	- - S N			
me - - -	- - ma na			
x	0	x	0	

Figure 6: A tune of Kabir's poem "mann lago mero" transcribed in Bhatkhande notation by the author.

Bhajan 4

Lyrics	Translated meaning
Sadho, Gagan ghata geherai re.	The roaring dense clouds are spread in the sky, those dense clouds are all over.
Poorab disi se uthi re badariya Rimjhim barse pani....	These clouds have arisen from the east and drizzling there, take control of your mind .
Man ke bail, turat harwaaha, jot khet nirbani	and use it as bull to plough your field and make your field ready for the plantation o f nirvana.

Figure 7: Kabir's poem 'Sadho, gagan ghata geherai re' with rough English translation by the author.

The song 'Sadho gagan ghata gaherai' is based on Hindustani raga ahir bhairav which is sung in the morning time. The song composed on Keherva tal/ Panjabi or bhajan tal in medium tempo (Madhyalaya). This bhajan is also sung in raga puriya kalyan. The rough tune of this bhajan is displayed below. The composer of the tune is unknown.

Sthai

		D	N	R	D	D	D	N	D	P	G	R
		•	•									
		sa	-	dho	ga	ga	na	gha	ta	-	ge	he
S	-	S	S	-								
ra	-	i	-	-								
X				0	X				0			

Antara

			G	MD	-N	S	S	S	-	-	-	ND	PD		
						•	•	•				•	•		
			man	ki-	-bail	-	-	-	-	-	-	--	--		
PM	GR	SS	S	-	G	MD	-N	DN	R	S	N	DD	P	MG	R
--	--	--	-	-					•	•					
			man	ki	bail	tu	ra	ta	ha	ra-	wa	--	ya		
N	DD	PM	G	-	MG	R	-	NN	DP	MG	RS				
jho	take	ta	nir	-	ba-	ni	-	--	--	--	--				
X				0				X				0			

Figure 8: A tune of Kabir's poem "sadho, gagan ghata geherai re" transcribed in Bhatkhande notation by the author.

Bhajan 5

Lyrics T	ranslated meaning
Guru govinda dou khade	My G uru and the Lord a re b oth standing before me.
kake lagu pay balihari guru paki jin	To whom should I bow first? 'O' Gurudev, I give myself completely to you.
govinda diyo batay	You are the one who has shown the Lord to me.

Figure 9: Kabir's poem "guru govinda" with rough English translation by the author.

The song 'guru Govinda' here is a poem written by Kabirdas. The melody of the song simply related to raga bhimpalasi. The song has composed on tal keherva in fast tempo. The transcription is provided as Figure 10.

Sthai

+ P	<u>N</u>	<u>N</u>	• S	• S	• R	<u>N</u>	• S	-	-	-	-	-	-
+ gu	ru	go	vin	-	da	ha	re	-	-	-	-	-	-
+ P	<u>N</u>	<u>N</u>	• S	• S	• <u>G</u>	• R	• R	-	-	-	• S	-	<u>N</u>
+ ka	-	ke	la	-	gu	-	pa	-	-	-	ye	-	-
+ R	• <u>G</u>	• <u>G</u>	• <u>G</u>	• R	• R	• S	• S	-	-	• S	<u>N</u>	-	D
+ ba	li	ha	ri	-	gu	ru	a	-	pa	-	ne	-	-
+ P	<u>N</u>	<u>N</u>	• S	• S	• S	• S	• R	• S	• S	<u>N</u>	<u>N</u>	-	D
+ go	vin	da	di	yo	-	ba	ta	-	ye	ka	bi	-	ra
+ <u>N</u>	• S	• S	• <u>G</u>	• R	-	<u>N</u>	• S	-	-	-	-	-	-
+ go	vin	da	di	yo	-	ba	ta	-	ye	ka	bi	-	ra
X			0				X				0		

Figure 10: A tune of Kabir's poem "guru govinda" transcribed in Bhatkhande notation.

Observation and Rough Analysis

The melodies composed by musicians for the bhajans written by Kabirdas are mostly based on one raga and employed other ragas occasionally. The latter practice of composing melodies is not specific for Kabir bhajans but it applies to other bhajans too. Bearing that in mind, looking into similar music genres/forms may help to locate how the Kabir bhajan could be different from other music genres/forms practiced in Northern India. Figure 11 indicates various music genres that are closest

to Kabir bhajan in the contexts of the areas shown in the first column. The italicized text indicates the idiosyncratic notions/features visible in Kabir bhajans.

	Kabir bhajan	Non-Kabir bhajan	Keertan	Khyal	Thumri	Ghazal	Film songs
Origin/History	Derived from the chanted shloka in Vedic period. The history begun from Prabandha Shatra	Derived from the chanted shloka in Vedic period. The history begun from Prabandha Shatra	derived from the chanted shloka introduced by Shri Chaitanyadev Shankaracharya	started in medieval India	derived from Folk music	In medieval India	From the begging of film industry in 1930s in India.
Proficiency based	not necessarily	not necessarily	Required	Required	Required	Required	not necessarily
Improvisation	Less	Less Based on one or more ragas. Depends on the artists skills	Not permissible Follows the rules of North Indian classical music	Highly required Based on one raga	Highly required Based on one raga while switching to many other ragas aesthetically	Optional Singer has the freedom to beautify the composition as the singer's wish	Fixed compositions The composer/music director has freedom to beautify the composition as they wish
Modification in original lyrics meanings	Little adjustments <i>Philosophical</i>	Little adjustments Praising God	Strictly unchangeable Praising God	Little adjustments Varied themes	Little adjustments Romantic	Unchangeable Varied themes	Unchangeable Varied themes
Performance	Solo	Solo	Group	Solo	Solo	Solo	Solo, duet, group
Style	Hindustani music and other musics	Hindustani music and other musics	Hindustani music	Hindustani music	Hindustani music	Hindustani music and other musics	Hindustani music and other musics
Frequently used musical instruments	Tabla, tanpura, harmonium, manjira, dolak	Tabla, tanpura, harmonium, manjira, dolak	Dhol	Tanpura, tabla, Sarangi, harmonium	Tanpura, tabla, Sarangi, harmonium	Tabla, harmonium	Indian and European musical instruments
Purpose	<i>Purification of the society through philosophical thinking</i>	Pleasing the deity	Spreading the religion and pleasing the deity	Entertainment	Entertainment	Entertainment	Entertainment

Figure 11: Comparison between bhajan and other relevant musical genres/forms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research paper has examined the unique characteristics provided through core lyrics and respective melodic dealings with them of Nirgun bhajans which is also known as Kabir bhajans and their approach in conveying messages, while still sharing common musical components with Sagun bhajans. Through the analysis of various aspects, including lyrical content, melody, and rhythm, it becomes evident that Nirgun bhajans are in a distinctive position within the realm of devotional music. The text analyses should be followed by a singing and other analyses in the future. An all-embracing analytical approach would be beyond the given framework of one article in this context. Nevertheless, the starting points seem to be clear and promising. Lyrical aspects and comparative listings of some outstanding features may contribute to the deeper understanding of musical functions in performances and their meanings in history.

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