



CENTRE FOR CULTURAL STUDIES & DEVELOPMENT

Excerpt from the Study on Practice of Kirtan

‘Naam Kirtan and Rasa Kirtan of Bengal: Historical Evolution, Musical Structure, and Contemporary Transformations’

Abstract

Bangla Kirtan is one of the most significant devotional musical traditions within the Vaishnava cultural framework. It is broadly classified into two principal streams: Naam Kirtan, which is based on the repetitive chanting of divine names, and Rasa Kirtan (Lila or Padavali Kirtan), which is narrative in nature and centers on the divine pastimes of Radha and Krishna. This study explores the historical evolution, musical characteristics, and contemporary transformations of these traditions through qualitative interviews with two scholars and practitioners of Kirtan: Dr. Kankana Mitra (Roy Choudhury) and Dr. Monalisa Bandopadhyay. The findings highlight the socio-religious role of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in democratizing Kirtan, the stylistic diversification of Rasa Kirtan, and the ongoing tension between traditional authenticity and modern performances influenced by media and commercialization. The study concludes that while Kirtan continues to evolve, its preservation requires structured pedagogical and institutional support.

Introduction:

The practice of singing devotional songs in Bengal is very ancient. Kirtan originated as a genre of Bangla songs in the form of worship by the Vaishnavas. Naamkirtan refers to devotional songs in which the name of Hari (Lord Vishnu) is sung repeatedly.

‘Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare
Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare’

Whereas Rasakirtan or Lilakirtan refers to narrative songs based on the stories of Radha & Krishna & the Gopis (milkmaids). Lilakirtan is also called Padavali Kirtan.

The history of Kirtan dates back to Jayadev’s Geetagovinda, a Sanskrit lyric idealizing the love of Radha & Krishna. Vidyapati, a Maithili poet, was the next exemplary figure in the

history of Kirtan, followed by Badu Chandidas. It was Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu who turned Kirtan into a social movement. He used these songs to preach his ideas and ideals. He believed that the easiest way to worship God was through songs rather than reading religious texts. Mahaprabhu broke down the barrier of caste and creed and embraced all as his brothers. He democratized the practice of Kirtan by making it open to all and introduced new forms of Kirtan called Naam Kirtan and Nagarkirtan. On the other hand, Rasakirtan or Lilakirtan developed in five streams, namely Gadanhati, Manoharshai, Reneti, Mandarin, and Jharkhandi (these names were given after their places of origin).

**Interview of Dr. Kankana Mitra (Roy Choudhury), Professor, Dean,
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Dr. Kankana Mitra (Roy Choudhury)

Q. Kirtan, an ancient musical form in Bengal, flourished in two streams—Naamkirtan & Rasakirtan. Please say more about the ‘Kirtan of Bengal’.

A. Let me begin with Naamkirtan. This stream of Kirtan started many centuries ago in India. As we know, since time immemorial, humans used to worship nature in the form of Gods and Goddesses to safeguard themselves from natural calamities or disasters. They worshipped by uttering the names of the deities in proper tune, beat, and rhythm. This practice prevailed for a long time, with no proper development or innovation in the style of singing for the Lord. Now I will straightaway come to the era of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Here we have to understand the political setup during that period. Bengal was going through turmoil. The rulers who ruled Bengal at that period were sometimes Hindu rulers & sometimes Muslim rulers. When a Muslim king ruled, he would oppress Hindus by putting a ban on religious activities & poor Hindus would be forced to convert their religion into Islam. And when a Hindu king annexed the kingdom, he would create mental pressure upon those who had been converted. This situation created political as well as cultural turmoil. As people of Bengal were very confused about the practice of religion—how to deal with their daily rituals, whom they should worship when they woke up in the morning, who would be their Ishta Deva? That is when Chaitanya Mahaprabhu chose Naamkirtan as a weapon to bring stability among Hindu devotees. So before Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, we did not see any development. Chaitanya Deva used Naamkirtan as a weapon because to wage a war, one needs a weapon. The war was against the socio-cultural setup. He created a platform where he united people and motivated them to come together and meditate through Naamkirtan. He said just think of your Ishta Deva and sing Hare Rama, Hare Krishna. He advised Hindus & Muslims to come together, focusing the mind and singing Naamkirtan. His aim was to strengthen brotherhood, improve concentration, stabilize the mind, and stop society from moving into the path of

destruction. The journey began and continued, but after some time, singing Naamkirtan in the same tune again and again became a bit monotonous. Therefore, some classical raag-ragini were introduced to make it attractive. After that, everything fell into place, and codification can be seen in Naamkirtan like ‘Ashtaprahar’.



Rasakirtan or Leelakirtan is completely different from Naamkirtan. There is no similarity between the two styles. Rasakirtan is based on Kahini (story). ‘Lila’ means telling a story (kahini), & when rasa is created, that means there is Abhinaya (bhava). Bhava is expressed in Rasakirtan through Angika or sometimes Vachika. So to express abhinaya, we need kahini in Lilakirtan. In earlier times, Lilakirtan was not only based on the story of Radha-Krishna but also Kali, Rama, but it could not be established as a stylized version. Kali kirtan after some time converted to Shakta geeti, and Ram Lila Kirtan slowly diminished in Bengal. Bengalis accepted the Vaishnava Parampara (Krishna-Radha Prem Leela) due to the influence of Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu & Lila Kirtan helped flourish the Bhakti movement in Bengal. Mahaprabhu & his devotees depended on these Mahajani Padavali to promote & propagate Krishna Bhakti among the masses. Earlier only Krishna was the Ishta Deva of Vaishnavas. But later during Mahaprabhu’s era, Krishna & Radha duo were worshipped, as Bengal believed in Nari Shakti or the presence of Nayika along with Nayak to communicate the Premlila in appropriate manner. Based on Lila/Kahini, Rasa or Lilakirtan flourished in Bengal. Every Rasakirtan was based on raga, taal etc., written & composed by Mahajan. Though in present times, we can see some changes in the raga pattern. At one point of time during Muslim rule, North Indian ragas dominated Kirtan singing in Bengal. As a result, regional ragas diminished. These regional ragas were not all based on Hindustani classical music. For example, Basanta raag of Bengal was different from Basant of Hindustani music. Even the notes were different. Now you can see many Hindustani ragas have made their place in Bangla kirtan, but in ancient times during the era of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu & his predecessors, Bangla Kirtan ragas were not influenced by North Indian ragas.

Q. Who are the composers & Vaishnav scholars who contributed to the promotion of Kirtan?

A. Vidyapati, Chandidas, Govinda Das, Gyano Das, Shyama Nanda, Balaram Das, Lochan Das are a few composers who have contributed to the promotion of Bangla Kirtan.

Q. Kindly tell us about the journey of Kirtan in Bengal from temple/community to stage/auditorium. Please highlight the journey during pre & post-independence period.

A. India's independence did not make any impact on Bangla Kirtan. But if we see pre & post-independence of India as a timeline, then I will say that before independence, the stage of Kirtan performance was open from three sides. On one side, the singer & accompanists would sit & the other three sides were the sitting area for the audience; that was very similar to the Jatrपाला style. After independence, the concept of auditorium style emerged where three sides are closed with one side open. Audience would sit at the front, facing the performers. If we talk about the concept of presentation, then I would say that the way it was prevalent in the 18th century, i.e., Mool Gayak (lead singer) and two instrumentalists (Shreebayen) sitting beside the Mool Gayak, and other accompanists, i.e., four Dohar and kartal badak, all comprising a group, changed after independence. This happened mainly because of lack of interest among the masses. The members in the orchestra got reduced to one main singer and three to four musicians, and they use instruments of their choice, which may not be technically or traditionally part of the Kirtan style of singing. The freedom in using instruments has gone to such an extent that Kirtan singers are using synthesizers nowadays in their performances.

Q. It is said that Kirtan's root lies in the Dhrupad style. Kindly elaborate more.

A. Dhrupad is the adi (ancient) and predominantly occupies a basic style among the gamut of Hindustani music. Other styles of Hindustani music emerged from Dhrupad. Author Khagendranath Mitra compared Dhrupad with Garanhati Kirtan. But that does not mean Kirtan has originated from Dhrupad style. It is because Dhrupad has four tuks & four types of thekas, layakari, uttari & gamak. Kirtan does not have any of these; so how can we say that Kirtan has its root in Dhrupad? In Kirtan, the structure is set in such a manner that after the Sthayee and Antara, one can find the repetition of sur (tuneful melody), which is called Baikalpik Anta, which means stretching the same tune (sur), but the bhava changes; it is not static. It has a journey; it never stays back or returns to Sthayee or Mukhra after completing the Antara. So Kirtan is completely different from Dhrupad. Only a minor similarity we can find is that during ancient times there were many 'Prabandha Gaan' from which Dhrupad evolved. Mansingh Tomar's 'Ain-e-Akbari' talks about the Prabandha Gaan prevalent in different regions. Prabandha Gaan was practiced in eastern regions too, and a few loka anga got mixed, and Kirtan genre emerged. So Dhrupad has not created Kirtan. There are some groups who spread wrong information that Kirtan has its root in Dhrupad style. Prabandha Gaan is a structural Gaan (niyombaddha) completely set to particular taal and raag and performed without diluting the basic structure. There was no variation & singers did not have the freedom to change it. Now after some time, singers & audience did not want rigidity. When in North India Dhrupad evolved from Prabandha Gaan, various layakaris were

introduced in Dhrupad, which was not present in Prabandha Gaan. Prabandha Gaan is more codified, whereas in Dhrupad singing, singers have the freedom to use various layakaris, upaj & gamak, and many more. When this pradeshik Prabandha Gaan, Hindustani classical & certain levels of folk music mixed together, it took the shape of 'Kirtan'. We cannot relate Kirtan to Dhrupad as there is no upaj or layakari here.

Q. Tell us about the instruments played with Kirtan.

A. Shreekhhol, kartal and flute are the three main instruments. Apart from these, no other instruments are required. But now synthesizer is also played in a Kirtan performance, maybe to improvise the performance, and people are also accepting it.

Q. In your opinion, what should be done to encourage the present generation to learn this devotional form of music? As a Professor, do you notice eagerness and enthusiasm among your students to pursue this subject?

A. From my teaching experience, I can say that at the academic level, when students are learning Kirtan as a subject and as a performing art, they are being encouraged by their teachers, but the problem lies with their parents, as they hardly encourage their children to pursue Kirtan as a career option. They do not see any future for their ward if they opt for the subject. This is mainly because one generation has seen a bad phase when Kirtan was going through due to a lacuna between performance & academic education related to the subject Kirtan. If 20 students are ready to pursue a career in Kirtan as advanced training, their parents will discourage them from doing so. Very naturally, if a student is studying music, then parents would like to see the child sing in television reality shows or on stage. But now gradually the scenario is changing as the genre is becoming popular as a profession and we can see a good scope in the future. Kirtan now has a repertoire and talim (training) is disseminated properly with a pure classical base. TV serials & shows are promoting Kirtan, but the singer does not have the freedom to sing and perform authentic Kirtan pieces. These television channels only see their TRPs. So I feel private organisations should come forward to preserve the original form of Kirtan. We need to organize more workshops inviting young talents to come and learn the art and motivate them so that more and more students should opt for the subject. These events will inspire youngsters a lot. Kirtan is living in the rural belt. Temple trusts in rural belts of Bengal are still patronizing Kirtan, not on a large scale though. Television has highlighted Kirtan as a genre. Now at least urban audiences are listening to it, but Kirtan as a subject is dying, so we need to preserve that.

Interview of Dr. Monalisa Bandopadhyay, AIR approved B-High Graded Kirtan artist & Assistant Professor of Sanskrit Language & Literature at Acharya Prafulla Chandra College, Barasat State University, West Bengal



Dr. Monalisa Bandopadhyay

Q. Bangla Kirtan has been nurtured, preserved and disseminated by many exponents & gurus since its inception. In the present scenario, how much do you think this art form has made its place as a discipline of performing art?

A. The ancient and traditional form of Bangla Kirtan is Garanhati dhara. Now this form has become extinct and taken the form of Manoharshahi dhara. The difference between Garanhati & Manoharshahi is that Garanhati is rooted in Dhrupad anga, whereas Manoharshahi is based on Khyal anga. The tempo (laya) in Garanhati is slow & highly methodical, and Manoharshahi is more flowing & flexible. As we say ‘Gharana’ in classical music, similarly in Kirtan we have ‘Ghar’ and not gharana. The Garanhati dhara (Dhrupadanga) was formalized by Shri Narottam Das in the 16th century. This form is rooted in classical Dhrupad. Traditionally, this Garanhati style of Kirtan was based on only one taal, i.e., in a phrase (pada), the first line which starts in one particular taal, the remaining lines will follow the same taal. But now the world is changing rapidly and we are living in the internet era. So although the audience has interest, they lack patience to sit and listen to long Kirtan. As a result, what happened is similar to remix versions of old songs in other musical genres, which makes the song catchy & popular, and audiences enjoy the remix versions. Similarly, Shri Rasik Das, the founder of Manoharshahi dhara, introduced the same thing. He kept the first line of Garanhati in the same taal, for example Boro Ek Taali, and the rest of the lines continued with chhoto taal so that the audience who were getting bored listening to Boro Ek Taali in full songs now started enjoying the performance. This Manoharshahi form covered a long journey till the present generation of Kirtanias, who are presenting Bangla Kirtan on stage at different forums, introduced a new way of rendering the songs. Chhotul jinish aaro briddhi pelo. Audience as well as Kirtanias both have no patience and lack time. You may see one group of Kirtania might be performing 4 to 5 programmes in a day. Now if they sing in Garanhati or Manoharshahi form, they cannot do more than two programmes a day. Now if they include folk song or light music in the Kirtan programme, then the singer saves time as well as the audience is also entertained. Chhotul bhab manush pelo. Kirtan is a prabandha geet; it is shastriya sangeet. One cannot compare it with folk music. Both are completely different formats. If one listens to the Garanhati form, it is much higher than Dhrupad anga. Hence, it cannot be compared with folk music. Now if we talk about improvisation, then I will say there is no scope of improvisation in Kirtan because Kirtan sahitya is very rich & the use of taal is also authentic. Kirtan is quite difficult & complex. For example, a particular

pada ‘Damini Dam Damani Rupī Darshan’ is based on Baradashkushi taal on 28 matras. Now if a half-trained singer presents the same song, he/she will not sing it in 28 matras but complete the song in a different tune & reduce it to 8 matras. This is not improvisation; rather, this is compromising authenticity. The audience is happy to listen to the summarized new version & the singer is also satisfied not to sing a lengthy song. So the whole system is based on mere entertainment... chhotul entertainment. Hence, the original Kirtan is dying its natural death. Ever since women entered this profession, Kirtan has transformed into a visual treat. Many new instruments like Casio have become mandatory in performances. Whereas Shreekhhol, harmonium & kartal are Kirtan anga (accompanying instruments). Now with fast-changing times, the presentation of Kirtan is also changing. Now the audience wants Kirtan artists to sing & dance as well. I have faced this situation once when the audience objected that I should dance as well when I render my song. So the whole episode has become mere entertainment and the aesthetic flavor of Kirtan is diminishing. I have never compromised in my presentation. I always deliver what I have learned in Guru parampara and never bother who likes it and who does not. If I change myself for the audience, then what was the need for me to learn & get trained in pure form of Kirtan?



Pracheen Mayapur in District Nadia, West Bengal-Birthplace of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu

Q. Is there any NGO or organization in West Bengal that safeguards the interest of Kirtan?

A. Nikhil Banga Kirtan Samiti was once formed by renowned Kirtan artists to work for the promotion & propagation of Bangla Kirtan & to safeguard the interest of Kirtaniyas. But with the passage of time, the members of the Samiti became busy with their own singing profession & gradually started ignoring the activities of the Samiti. Eventually, as these

experts moved away, people who did not have knowledge of Kirtan took their place as members. As a result, the Samiti's existence became meaningless.

Q. Do you face any challenges in disseminating the art form among today's generation?

A. I teach at 'Chaitanya Shikhhayatan' & 'Kirtan Kotha'. The terms & conditions of both schools state that only those students who are interested in learning Borogaan (original Kirtan form) will be given admission. You will be surprised to know that when Chaitanya Shikhhayatan was launched, 122 students were enrolled, and now merely 11 students are learning Kirtan. Students who took admission had curiosity to know what original Kirtan is all about. But when they saw that serious riyaz & hard work is required, they lost interest & gradually left the school. They also felt that these songs will not help them make a career as artists, because audiences do not want to listen to these songs (Borogaan). Television has been projecting Kirtan in a very light manner. If one becomes an artist by singing 'Brindabono Bilasini Rai Amader', then where is the need to do hard work and learn Borogaan when audiences do not want to listen to these songs? The "idiot box" has completely finished Kirtan. People say that Sa Re Ga Ma Pa talent shows have introduced Kirtan in a new avatar to audiences & Bangla Kirtan has reached households because of reality shows. But the reality is that these talent shows have promoted Kirtan as very light music & eventually original & authentic Kirtan has taken a back seat. 'Hare Krishna Hare Krishna', 'Hari Bol Hari Bol', 'Brindabono Bilasini' are not Kirtan. There are only 5% people who listen to pure Borogaan & 95% are chhotul srota (listeners). Among 5%, I would say there are a few Harisabhas, for example 'Dobe' Harisabha in Murshidabad & Jambuni Harisabha in Bolpur where only Borogaan is strictly performed by artists & the sabhas promote original Kirtan form.

Q. In your opinion, what should be done to motivate youngsters to learn the original Bangla Kirtan?

A. I would say only time will change the scenario. We have always seen old forms/styles come back in new formats. As a student of Kirtan, I live with hope that time will change. The condition of Bangla Kirtan is declining at such a fast pace. But everything has its end. So one day, audiences will also get bored listening to chhotul gaan & will demand the 40 matra taal. So as Kirtan moved from Garanhati to Manoharshahi & then to Chhotul, similarly one day this journey will complete its return—from Chhotul to Manoharshahi & then to Garanhati. "Je shroter shonge Kirtan neme geche, ete keu kichhu korte parbe na, na parbe kono shrota etake atkate... shudhu somoy parbe atkate... jokhon shrota klanto hoye jabe, naach aar chhotul gaan dekhe aar shune."

A tour was conducted to Nabadwip, Pracheen Mayapur in Nadia district and Kolkata, West Bengal, to interview some eminent Kirtan practitioners with the objective of understanding the singing styles of Bangla Kirtan, namely Naam Kirtan and Rasakirtan. These artists provided valuable insights into the subject.

Sima Acharya Choudhury from Kolkata, a well-known Kirtan artist, said that love is the ultimate and supreme dharma. She explained that they sing Padabali Kirtan, which is basically a compilation of the works of great Padakars such as Joyodev, Vidyapati, Chandidas, Gyanodas, Dijo Chandidas and Boru Chandidas. According to her, there are different segments in Kirtan performance, but the central teaching of Kirtan is love for humanity. “Protyekti Pala Kintu Ek Ek Ta Benjona, Kintu Mul Kotha Holo Bhalobasha, Kirtan e Manusher Uttoroner Kotha Bola Hoyechhe.” However, she observed that Kirtan is gradually becoming a dying art and is now largely confined to religious functions. Though television reality shows have introduced Bangla Kirtan to the masses, much more needs to be done to preserve and promote its authenticity. She feels that scholarships should be provided to talented students so that the younger generation may choose Kirtan as a subject of study and a career. She remains hopeful that the lost charm of Kirtan will soon return. “Eta Premo Sangeet, Chaitanya Deber Prem Abar Phire Ashbe.”

Palash Sarkar from Bagula, a Kirtan practitioner and teacher, stated that in earlier times Kirtan was largely limited to villages, and mainly the older generation cherished listening to Kirtan because of its spiritual essence. However, he finds that the younger generation is now attracted to Kirtan for its literary richness. He has many students in the age group of 18 to 30 years and teaches Mahajani Kirtan with proper notation, raga and tala patterns. During the pandemic, he started online classes through his institute, ‘Kirtan Kotha’, and now has a few foreign students who learn authentic Padabali Kirtan from him. He strongly feels that Bengal should have a dedicated Academy of Kirtan and that such an initiative should be undertaken by the Government of West Bengal. According to him, this is the right time to preserve the 800-year-old Kirtan tradition.



Palash Sarkar performing in a Pala Kirtan

Gouri Roy Pandit from Pracheen Mayapur learnt Kirtan from the age of seven. She hails from a musical family and is now one of the most sought-after Kirtan singers in Bengal. She says, “Kirtan is my livelihood. I started singing at a very young age in various programmes across different districts. During my childhood, we did not have social media. A performance at one venue would earn us the next programme through word of mouth. Kirtan has given me name, fame and everything I could ever wish for.” She further states that while universities provide theoretical knowledge, one should also learn Kirtan through the Guru Parampara tradition. In her opinion, Kirtan as a profession has bright prospects today. However, she feels that insufficient efforts are being made by the Government to preserve the authentic Kirtan tradition. According to her, the Government of West Bengal has extended support to Baul Gaan but not to Kirtan. She points out that there is no formal association of Kirtan practitioners and that differences of opinion, coupled with a lack of academic education among many Kirtanias, have prevented the community from working collectively to protect this ancient tradition (Dhara). As a result, only a few individual artists continue to uphold and preserve the tradition inherited through the Guru-Shishya Parampara.

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