

The Supra Aesthetic Science of Kiirtan

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Kiirtan is not only *samgii*, i.e. song, instrumental music and dance, it is also “a way of worshipping god through singing”¹. Though kiirtan is known as a vehicle for reaching ecstatic heights (Rouget, Slawek, Henry) the actual kiirtan *music* has never been documented, to my knowledge, yet is essential to an understanding of *how* kiirtan „works“ or the mechanics behind its ability to take one highest for the longest period of time. In this article I will highlight some of the traditional „formulas“ that for centuries have been instrumental in creating a successful kiirtan performance. An investigation into the previously unknown kiirtan *music* has taken me to Rarh, (the region primarily in West Bengal and the border lands of Jharkand and Bihar), the homeland of the kiirtan tradition (Sarkar, Slawek), to unravel the musical components of this supra-aesthetic science.

Firstly I shall discuss relevant aspects of the aesthetics of kiirtan, not delving into aesthetics in general, which is beyond the scope of this essay and aspects of Indian philosophy that have been well documented, but to unravel specific structural components of the kiirtan performance. This is followed by a brief discussion of various meanings of the term *supra*, in a kiirtan context. On the term „aesthetics“, Sri P.R. Sarkar writes,

*“While trying to analyse the nature of this dynamism, one is bound to conclude that aesthetics is surely a science, for it moves according to fixed and self-created rules. But the realization of aesthetic feeling is not a science, rather it is a high-grade art.”*²

Just as Tantra is “a science or systematic process that liberates one from the bondage of dullness or lethargy”³ so too the aesthetic science of kiirtan, as one aspect of Tantra, embodies a “systematic process” that can assist one to reach their spiritual terminus. Science is the “study of the physical and natural world, and phenomena especially by using systematic observation and experiment” (Encarta Dictionary UK), and is relevant to an investigation of kiirtan *music* also. In *astaunga* yoga, it is common knowledge that yogis observed the postures and physical characteristics of animals to ascertain the possible effects these same postures could have on human beings. Their experimentation led to a system of yoga postures called *hatha* yoga. Similarly *kiirtaniyas* (kiirtan musicians) observe the effects of certain sounds upon themselves and their environment, to ascertain which talas/ragas are most effective in arousing devotion and creating ecstatic heights in communion with the Deity. Various practitioners of Shiva and Vaisnava Tantra (practitioners of devotional feats in worship of Shiva and Krishna/Radha) throughout the ages, such as Jayadeva (11th century), Candidas (14th century), Caitanya Deva (15th century), Narottama Das Thakur (16th century), have composed kiirtans in specific ragas and tala (even though many of these are unintelligible to us today), and developed kiirtan *music* to its present state of sophistication. Narottama Das Thakur for example, at the festival of Kheturi (1572 approx.) instigated a new form of kiirtan called *lila* kiirtan that began with a *Gauralap* (invocation to Gaur Caitanya) that *kiirtaniyas* in Rarh still perform today.

According to Sri P.R. Sarkar, there are three primary factors in the science of aesthetics, something that “*imparts joy to people.. I love those flowers..I like their decorative arrangement.. I appreciate a particular style of expression..*”⁴ i.e. it must uplift others, have a systematic arrangement of song melodies or ragas, and be performed in a particular style that is appropriate to kiirtan. Some of these musical pieces, would “*move(s) according to fixed*” and others to “*self-created rules*” (Sarkar, 1984).

Based on empirical data gained through investigations in the field (Jan.-June 2006, Jan – March 2007, Jan.- Feb 2008, Feb to April 2009, June 2010), intensive observation of musical performances and interviews of kiirtan experts in Rarh, as well as musical analysis, I uncover some of kiirtan aesthetics “fixed” and “self created rules” as exhibited by Rarhi *kiirtaniyas*.

My methodology in the field is comparable to local ethnomusicologist, Dr. Binapani Mahato’s, who states,

I have to listen, very carefully.. when I count the mātrās, [beats] and listen properly, very devotedly I listen, the way it sounds, like the ektāla rhythm, I hear that these are kīrtan bols [mnemonic syllables]. So I ask guruji, I say, I think this is ektāla bols and he confirms it, because they are the masters, usually they don’t like to tell everybody, they don’t like to sell off their wealth you see, this is their treasure. (2007: Pers.comm.).

In my research, I also watched attentively many performances before beginning to recognize some of the more distinctive kīrtan melodies that were sung. After learning the local musical terms, I could then ask relevant

questions of the kīrtan experts, who responded positively, understanding I had a genuine interest in their music. Aided by my research partner Sanjay Mahato, we created musical graphs plotting the rise of intensity in the kīrtan performance and made audio visual recordings for later analysis. The work in the studio was a solitary task however, involving hours of transcription and analysis of the musical data as well as video editing and the writing up process.



Sri Jagaran Mahato

In an interview with Jagaran Mahato, kīrtan expert who has been teaching kīrtan for seventeen years, he says

*“Kīrtan is not only singing, it is also the worship of God through singing, so it has some rules since ancient time. First you have to worship Sri Caitanya or Gauranga through the Gauralap, then the worship of the instruments coming together in the jhuran, and after that the kīrtan starts”.*⁵

In other words, there is a traditional musical sequence when performing kīrtan, each piece having a particular significance for the musicians and audience. Though kīrtan may appear to be a wild cacophony of sound to unfamiliar ears, it is in fact a highly structured performance, as seen in the chart below. In Rarhi kīrtan I have uncovered a systematic arrangement of specific kīrtan talas/ragas which form the central corpus of the tradition, while on the periphery there are *rang*, lit. „colour“, songs which in a kīrtan context refers to popular song melodies such as folk *jhumur* or more contemporaneous melodies such as Hindu film music. Lying somewhere in between the central corpus of kīrtan talas/ragas, and *rang* melodies are the mystical Baul melodies and selected traditional Hindustani ragas such as Shiva Ranjani which have cultural as well as spiritual significance to the local people.

Another key finding from my investigation is that the kīrtan performance structure drives towards higher and higher peaks of intensity in ever increasing, yet subtle increments. To give an example, the performance opens with the *Gauralap*, the riveting „opening call“ or „invocation to the Deity“, sung to Gaur or Caitanya, the 15th century Vaisnava saint who propagated kīrtan extensively throughout Bengal. It is then followed by an instrumental section called *jhuran*, performed in honour of the traditional kīrtan instruments, which increases in rhythmic intensity as it progresses. The traditional instruments are the khol drum, believed to symbolise the eyes of Radha, crying tears of longing for Krishna, and the handheld cymbals, called *kartal*, with their scintillating sounds that resonate with ever deepening states of meditation (although other instruments such as harmonium and clarinet have recently been an addition to the kīrtan ensemble).

After the *jhuran* the travelling or *patha* songs are performed along the village path, before the *kiirtaniyas* enter into the temple (*mandir*), where they begin with a powerful rhythmic crescendo, then embark on the *alap* (unmetered section) of Daspera, the first kīrtan raga/tala in twelve beat cycles (*matras*) called *ektala*. The *alap* leads directly into the introductory metered section of the raga that ends with a drum solo or *katan*. In between two major kīrtan tala/ragas is interspersed an interlude, usually consisting of a popular melody *rang* or in the case of the Kostuka group, a *ragini*, as well as a kīrtan *rang*. The interlude provides a diversion from the profundity of the kīrtan raga adding more „colour“ (*rang*) to the performance. Other significant kīrtan talas/ragas follow such as Pakachuta in seven *matras*, a very comprehensive raga, with at least five melodic parts and an extensive *katan* and Sohni, a very popular kīrtan raga/tala, also in seven *matras*. The performance may end with Jhorchuta, a very precise yet compelling raga/tala, in three and a half *matras*, before the kīrtaniyas leave the *mandir* and meander joyfully towards the house of the „headman“ of the village, where their journey began, singing a *liila* (Radha/Krishna) kīrtan song. Thus their kīrtan performance concludes *outside* the *mandir* where it began and their spiritual journey is complete as the next kīrtan group enter into the *mandir* and sing Hari’s name in a continuous stream of sonic devotion.



Sri Jagaran Mahato and group sing the patha songs on the way to the mandir

Secondly, through interviews and analysis, I have deduced that Rarhi kīrtan has a unique musical infrastructure, a strategic arrangement of melodic and rhythmic parts within the raga, organised in a systematic way to create mounting intensity, leading to ecstatic unity. The infrastructure includes the *la* „introductory melodic and rhythmic „part“ or „repeated refrain“, similar to the *sthayi* in classical *dhrupad*, followed by melodic improvisations called *udara mudara tara* in a higher tessitura than *la*, similar to *antara* of *dhrupad*, culminating in a combination of *la*

and udara mudara. The rhythmic texture that weaves in and out of the raga melody provides a powerful juxtaposition to the melodic parts, and creates in equal measure a fervour-like intensity of musical and devotional

Location:	Outside the <i>mandir</i> 'temple'	Inside the <i>mandir</i> 'temple'
Raga/Piece	I. The <i>jurán</i>	II. Daspera raga:
Music Section:		II. 1. <i>Gauraláp</i> II. 2. <i>la</i> II. 3. <i>katan</i>
Music Parts:	<p>I. A. <i>jurán</i> 'joining' instrumental introduction</p> <p>I. B. <i>guru vandana</i> 'invocation to the guru'</p> <p>I. C. <i>jurán</i> instrumentals - 1/2/3 rhythmic changes</p> <p>I. D. Gauranga song titled <i>Eso He</i></p> <p>I. E. <i>palha</i> or 'path' song on the way to the <i>mandir</i>.</p>	<p>II. 1A. percussive climax x 2, with <i>aláp</i>.</p> <p>II. 1B. percussive rolls/strikes x2 around the <i>mandir</i>.</p> <p>II. 2A. <i>la</i>, Melody = 1</p> <p>II. 2B. <i>udara mudara</i> 'higher register section', Melody = 2</p> <p>II. 2C. Alternation of <i>la</i> and <i>udara mudara</i> Melody = 2+1+2+1..</p> <p>II. 2D. <i>matán</i> 'climax' Melody = 1</p> <p>II. 3A. <i>katan</i> introduction in <i>ektála</i>, or 12 <i>matra</i> Melody = 3.</p> <p>II. 3B. <i>katan bol</i> compositions +7 recitations with playing + melody = 3.</p> <p>II. 3C. <i>katan duni</i> 'double time' with <i>udara</i>, higher register section + melody = 3.</p> <p>II. 3D. <i>katan cho duni</i> four times the original rhythm' <i>udara</i>, high register section + melody = 3.</p> <p>II. 3E. <i>katan matán</i> grand finale, melody = 3.</p>

expression. Moving from *la* fixed rhythmic pattern, and introductory *bols* to medium tempo called *duni*, or double time, to four times the original tempo, or *cho duni*, they reach a climactic rhythmic part called *matán*.

Similarly to a classical *dhrupad* structure with the cycle leading back from verse to refrain, is maintained only up to the point of the *matán* when it reverts to a traditional „through composed“ structure, with the inclusion of another section called *katan* or „skilled playing“ where a *bol* recital is performed simultaneously while playing. Hence rather than a purely cyclic structure the *kiirtan* performance encapsulates a „through composed“ or „narrative like“ structure at the *katan* and concludes with a mighty climax called the *katan matán*. This musical infrastructure is repeated in each of the *kiirtan talas/ragas* and in each *kiirtan* performance there are approximately three or more traditional *kiirtan talas/ragas* performed, with *rangs* interspersed between them, and at the end.



The systematic building of musical intensity towards ecstatic unity is achieved through: an increase in rhythmic density, acceleration as well as volume or crescendo as the performance develops; an interweaving of melodic and rhythmic highlights as both sections play equal yet diverse roles in the performance to maintain audience interest; a cooperative egalitarian spirit between the performers who work together throughout; and the *kiirtan* infrastructure with its diverse rhythmic patterns moving from *la* „introduction“ to *duni* „double time“

to *cho duni* „four time“ to *matán* „rapid, climactic“ to *katan* „drum composition“ that increase in acceleration and drive the *kiirtan* towards a pyramidal structure, as seen above.

Dance is another essential component of *kiirtan* as demonstrated by the performance of *lalita marmika*, the traditional i.e. “fixed” *kiirtan* dance, as well as “self created” choreography. The traditional occupation of the Rajwar *kiirtan* group for example is that of a soldier, hence their dance movements reflect their martial arts with a mixture of wild ecstatic devotion and military like precision. The traditional occupation of the Mahato „head men“, another indigenous and relatively wealthy group of Rarh, is agriculture, and hence their movements are a combination of fierce devotion (reminiscent of the ancient Shiva cult that is prevalent throughout Rarh) and classical composure. The Brahmins, situated at the top of the social hierarchy perform only *lalita marmika* as their position and beliefs in the purity of the Brahmanic culture necessitates their role as keepers of the status quo, setting them apart from other groups whose creative expression is accommodated within the *kiirtan* performance.



The Mahato Kirtan group of Bagra

Hence one can ascertain from the musical materials gathered and analysed above, that there is an aesthetic science behind kiirtan both on the macro level of performance structure as well as the micro level of musical infrastructure. Another significant way of exhibiting aesthetic science is presentation of the kiirtan performance, both in terms of personal appearance and the beautification of the kiirtan *mandir*. The *kiirtaniyas* take great care in their clothing, and their selection of colours to wear is symbolic of the sanctity of the kiirtan performance. Their clothing is usually: white, beige, gold, rose or orange colours of purity, devotion and renunciation. The men's cotton *dhoti* (a cloth tied around the men's waist, falling to the ground) sways in the movement of their dance steps, and they also wear garlands of flowers on special occasions. The kiirtan *mandir* is often decorated with paintings of Radha/Krishna and the Indian epics including the altar upon which various ceremonial articles are placed. Each of the households in the village offer sweets, fruit, and flowers to the Deity which are sanctified by the sound of God's name and distributed during and at the end of the performance by the Brahman priest as food „made holy“ by the Deity (*prasad*).



The Karandhi village kiirtan group with khol and Chorus girls dancing *lalita marmika*

The above musical materials and observations demonstrate aspects of the aesthetic science behind kiirtan, but what of the *supra*? As stated above, “the realization of aesthetic feeling is not a science, rather it is a high-grade art.”⁶ Similarly “that state of Supreme Bliss does not come within the scope of aesthetics; it comes within the scope of supra-aesthetics, that is, in the world of the absolute above the domain of relativity” (ibid).

*This quinquemental world has been born out of joy, is being maintained in joy, and into sacred joy will melt. This is the self-same joy which human beings realize out of love for ar ama uru a . This joy is the aesthetic enjoyment of the supra-aesthetic Entity.*⁷

One can enjoy the supra „transcending“, „above“ (Encarta Dictionary) aesthetic entity when devotion is aroused through the repetition of God's name and the systematic arrangement of song, dance and instrumental music, creating such a heavenly environment that one loses oneself,

*“In aesthetic science there is no scope for sorrow; and when the vibrations of happiness become straightened, it leads to *n andam*; happiness is transformed into bliss. When this undulating movement is directed towards *n andam* and the waves get straightened, it falls within the scope and jurisdiction of aesthetic science. When the waves become totally free from curvature, when they become fully and finally straightened, this falls within the scope of *mohana viji na* [supra-aesthetic science]”⁸.*

What is the relationship of the Rarhi *kiirtaniyas* with supra aesthetic entity. How do they experience Hari when singing his name? From interviews it seems that the predominant relationship is one of *sringara* rasa, the lover and beloved, as in *madhu* or *Radha bhava*, where they feel that they are Radha and Krishna (Hari is one name of Krishna), is the only male in the universe. In this devotional relationship the *kiirtaniyas* embody Radha's emotions, they experience emotional abandonment and absolute devotional surrender to the Supreme, as expressed in the original kiirtan song, the *Gitagovinda* by Jayadeva. There are also examples of this in Prabhat Samgita as shall be discussed at a later date. When one attains *ragatmika bhakti* and wants only to give pleasure to the Supreme, “*I love Parama Purusa because I want to give Him anandam. I don't care whether or not I get anandam. My only desire is to give Him joy through my love*”;⁹ when the love is so deep that one cannot remain separate from Hari, where there is no Him and I, there is only Him, then the *supra* aesthetic entity has been attained, as when the salt who goes to measure the cosmic ocean, merges into Him.

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¹ Jagaran Mahato, 2006: Personal communication.

² Sarkar, 1984: *A Few Problems Solved Part*

³ Sarkar, *ubh ita a graha a rt 12*

⁴ Prout in a nutshell Part 10.

⁵ JM, 2006: Pers.comm.

⁶ Sarkar, 1984, *A Few Problems Solved*

⁷ Sarkar, 1981, *am mi Kr asundaram*, rajagop la and Aesthetic Science, Discourse 25.

⁸ Sarkar, 1981, *am mi Kr asundaram*, rthas rathi Kr a and Aesthetic Science Discourse 26

⁹ Sarkar, 1981, *Namami Krsnasundaram*, Vrajagopala and Aesthetic Science, Discourse 25