

**Discovering the meaning of *ghar* in *shabad* headings of Guru Granth Sahib**

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**Dedication**

This research is a humble offering on the joyous occasion of the tercentenary celebration of *gurgaddi* of Guru Granth Sāhib.

**Introduction**

*Shabads* in Guru Granth Sahib are arranged by *rāg*, composition type, authorship and *ghar* numbers. As an example, the first *rāg* section contains *shabads* in Srirāg. The first subsection of Srirāg contains *shabads* that are *padey* compositions. Within this subsection Guru Nānak's *padey* are presented first and are arranged in *ghars* 1 through 5. This principle of organization is carried through for the *shabads* in all the *rāg* sections, and these form the main body of Guru Granth Sāhib.

What did Guru Arjan mean by the *ghar* numbers? This has been a major puzzle facing both the academe and community. Some interpretations have been offered, but do not stand up to scrutiny and do not have practical applicability. Sikh musicians consider the meaning of *ghar* to be forgotten<sup>2</sup>. Bhāi Baldeep Singh (2001 lecture at UC Berkeley) states, "This is one significant area still open for research."

**The research**

The research consisted of studying the pattern of *ghar* in the *shabad* headings and analyzing the findings in the context of Indian music during the Guru Period.

The meaning of *ghar* discovered by this research is contextually sound, fitting naturally in Guru Granth Sāhib and the context of Indian music at the time of Guru Sāhibān. It can be practically

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<sup>1</sup> More detailed articles with references will be available in journals and magazines.

<sup>2</sup> Late Bhāi Avtār Singh Rāgi (1926-2006), in (videotaped) interview with the author in 2005, expressed regret that it never occurred to him to ask his father, the illustrious 10<sup>th</sup> generation Sikh musician, Bhāi Jwālā Singh Rāgi (1879-1952). Bhāi Kāhn Singh Nābha's lament of the loss in Gur Shabad Ratnākar Mahān Kosh (1930) indicates that the meaning of *ghar* had been forgotten by then.

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applied and also opens doors to a rich melodic repertoire for *rāg*-based *keertan*, as the Guru Sahibān must have employed for the many *shabads* they sang.

### **Rāg Gaudi stands out**

In looking at the pattern of *ghar*, Rāg Gaudi immediately stands out. The *shabads* in Rāg Gaudi do not have any *ghar* number specification. Instead they are presented in several named melodic varieties. This indicates that in Gaudi, melodic varieties occupy the place of *ghar* numbers. In other words, *ghar* refers to melodic varieties. For Gaudi the names of the melodic varieties have been spelled out. Thus, Gaudi serves as a guide.

### ***Ghar* numbers as melodic systems – supporting observations**

The word *ghar* is used here to mean system<sup>3</sup> - a system of melodies, regional such as Dakhani or performance styles like Kāfi. Melodic details were important to Guru Sāhibān – they even specify particular *dhunis* (melodies) in several *shabad* headings. The use of many melodic varieties would be natural for Guru Sāhibān, singing so many *shabads* and addressing diverse communities. During Guru Sāhibān's times, melodic systems such as the Persian *dastgāh* and Arabic *maquām* were influencing the *rāg* system.

For *ghar* numbers to be melodic varieties, it must be that each *rāg* section starts with *ghar* 1, i.e., version 1, and that *ghar* numbers are presented sequentially, since it would not make sense to have version 2 without there being a version 1, and so on. A detailed study of the *shabad* headings confirms that this is in fact the case.<sup>4</sup>

For each *rāg*, composition type and author, *ghar* numbers occur sequentially. So, for example, the Srirāg section begins with Guru Nānak's *padey* in *ghars* 1 to 5, followed by Guru Amardās' *padey* in *ghar* 1, Guru Ramdās' *padey* in *ghar* 1, and finally Guru Arjan's *padey* in *ghars* 1, 2, 6 and 7. The next section of *asthpadeeā* begins with Guru Nānak's *shabads* in *ghars* 1 and 2, Guru Amardās' in *ghar* 1 and finally Guru Arjan's in *ghar* 5. In this manner, each sub-section is presented in the order of the *ghar* number of the *shabads*.

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<sup>3</sup> As in the *shabad*, ਛਿਅ ਘਰ ਛਿਅ ਗੁਰ ਛਿਅ ਉਪਦੇਸ ॥ ਗੁਰੁ ਗੁਰੁ ਏਕੋ ਵੇਸ ਅਨੇਕ॥੧॥ ਬਾਬਾ ਜੈ ਘਰਿ ਕਰਤੇ ਕੀਰਤਿ ਹੋਇ ॥ ਸੋ ਘਰੁ ਰਾਖੁ ਵਡਾਈ ਤੋਇ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥

<sup>4</sup> Nat Nārāyan, Māligauda, Tukhāri, Jaijivanti are only in one version, so there is no need for *ghar* numbers for them. Bihāgra does not have *padey* in its first version, so it does not begin with *ghar* 1. Two other exceptions are likely scribal errors – for Kalyān the specification of *ghar* 1 at the beginning seems to have been missed, and for Bairāri *ghar* 1 is specified even though it is only in one version. In the sequencing of *ghar* numbers there are some exceptions, which are explainable and will be explained in detail in journal papers.

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Further, the order in which the Gaudi varieties are presented for Guru Nānak's *padey* is preserved in the rest of the section, with Guāreri always occurring first. In other words, Gaudi versions are presented in order just like *ghar* numbers.

The use of numerical ordering, as well as names, to refer to melodic varieties is also found in medieval texts of Indian music - for example, the second Gaudi or the fourth Gurjari, and version names like Maharāshtrā Gurjari, Saurāshtrā Gurjari, Dakshinā Gurjari and Draividā Gurjari. But there is no instance of any other musical concept being represented numerically.

### ***Ghar* without numbers in *shabad* headings**

*Ghar* is also used, with a different spelling and without numbers, in some *shabad* headings. For example, ਸਿਰੀਰਾਗੁ ਕਬੀਰ ਜੀਉ ਕਾ ॥ ਏਕੁ ਸੁਆਨੁ ਕੈ ਘਰਿ ਗਾਵਣਾ ॥ [Srirāg, of Kabir. Sing to the Ghar(i) of Ek *Suān*]. This research indicates that the reference is to melodies used either in particular *shabads* (e.g. the *shabad Ek Suān*) or by particular people. Indeed, in such cases *ghar* has been widely translated as melody, albeit without any explanation. Presumably, the translation followed the meaning of *dhuni* (melody), which is similarly used in some other *shabad* headings. This research provides the explanation. Without the analysis and explanation of this research, *ghar* in these *shabad* headings could be interpreted otherwise.

### **Analysis of other interpretations**

Other interpretations offered in the past have been that *ghar* numbers refer to versions of *tāl* or of the *shruti* (microtone) to be emphasized.<sup>5</sup> However, there would be no reason why the *tāl* or *shruti* would not be specified for *shabads* for only a handful of *rāgs*, namely Gaudi, Nat Nārāyan, Māligauda, Tukhāri and Jaijavanti.

Further, the *shruti* interpretation also does not fit with sequential *ghar* numbers. *Rāgs* often do not use consecutive *swars*, and therefore, consecutive *shrutis*. For example, (the contemporary) Rāg Āsā does not use any *vikrit swar* (altered notes, i.e. flat or sharp). So it could not be that *ghar* numbers 2, 3, 6, 7, 12, 13, 15 and 16, which would correspond to *shrutis* of *komal* (flat) *Re*, *Ga*, and *Dha* and *teevra* (sharp) *Ma*,<sup>6</sup> could be emphasized in Āsā. Similarly, the note *komal Re*

<sup>5</sup> Two other meanings that have been mentioned (without any explanation), clef and *gharāna*, are not applicable, musically and historically, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Table below shows *shruti* numbers corresponding to *swars*, where small case refers to altered notes.

<i>Swar</i>	S	r1	r2	R1	R2	g1	g2	G1	G2	M1	M2	m1	m2	P	d1	d2	D1	D2	n1	n2	N1	N2
<i>Shruti</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22

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is not used at all in any (current) version of Rāg Sārāṅg. Then it could not be that *ghars* 2 and 3, which would correspond to *shrutis* of *komal Re* could be emphasized in Sārāṅg. Many other examples can be cited.

Finally, in medieval Indian music texts, *tāls* and *shrutis* are not referred to by numbers.

### **Gaudi as guide**

This research shows that *ghar* numbers are melodic varieties and Gaudi serves as a guide. What clues do the Gaudi varieties give us? Most are regional variants - Guāreṛi from Bengal, Dakhani for the South, Poorbi from Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Mālvā from Madhya Pradesh, Mājḥ from Punjāb, and Sorath from Saurāshtra. Cheti is a folk style of spring songs and Bairagan of *birah* (separation) songs from Uttar Pradesh. Deepaki is sung in the manner of Rāg Deepak – with peace, heroism and wonder, and Mālā in the manner of rāgmālā – a garland of *rāgs*.

Considering Guru Nanak's *udāsis* (travels), the use of regional versions of *rāgs* is very natural. In fact, Indian music at that time saw a rapid expansion of *desi sangeet* with a proliferation of regional melodies and *rāgs*. The use of regional *rāg* varieties by the Guru Sāhibān is both a natural participation in that process and a celebration of diversity.

The Gurjari versions (shown above) from medieval Indian music texts are regional too.

### **Other named melodic varieties in Guru Granth Sahib**

In addition to the Gaudi versions, certain other melodic varieties have been named. Kāfi (Sindhi song style) versions have been used for Āsā, Tilang, Soohi and Māru. Dakhani (Deccan) versions have been used for Vadhans, Bilāval, Rāmkali, Māru and Prabhāti. The other versions are Āsāvāri, Āsāvāri Sudhang (using natural *Re*), Bilāval Mangal (auspicious songs), Bilāval Gond (from Central India), Basant Hindol (Spring songs) and Kalyān Bhopāli (from Madhya Pradesh).

### **Why is Gaudi used as a guide, rather than Āsā?**

Guru Sāhib specified the names of the varieties of Gaudi since it was a well known, and widely known regional *rāg*. It is also the longest section of Guru Granth Sāhib with *shabads* by all 5 Guru Sāhibān (who are the major authors in Guru Granth Sahib) and 3 *bhagats*.

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### **Third position for Gaudi section**

Even though Guru Sāhib used Gaudi as guide, Srirāg was presented first in Guru Granth Sāhib. It was an ancient and auspicious *rāg* with a large presence. Mājh, from the local tradition, was presented second.

### **No *ghar* numbers in Guru Teg Bahadur's *shabads***

The *rāg* system was undergoing a great deal of change during the first five Guru Sāhibān's time. Evidence in medieval Indian music texts indicates that the Kāfi scale emerged as the natural scale in the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>7</sup>, i.e. after the Adi Granth was compiled. Many *rāgs* would have changed their form by Guru Teg Bahadur's time. Hence, *ghar* numbers are not used in his *bāni*. And more than one named version is used in only two *rāgs*, Tilang and Basant.

### **Practical applicability of *ghar* numbers**

What would be the musical characteristics of each melodic system? Medieval Indian music texts offer significant clues. To continue with the Gurjari example from above, while all versions of Gurjari are stated to have *Re* as an important note, the distinguishing characteristics are stated to lie in the note embellishments, such as vibrato rendering of different notes. In some cases different notes are omitted.

The various *rāg* versions available with different *kirtankārs* and from Hindustani music are ready sources for use.

To establish the prevalent versions that would likely have been used by the Guru Sāhibān, careful detailed research will be needed<sup>8</sup>. During the lives of the first five Guru Sāhibān, Indian music was undergoing rapid change, with new regional melodies being constantly discovered, and with influences from Persian and Arabic music. New *rāgs* and *rāg* versions were being sung. For example, Kāfi was a Sindhi song style, and not yet a *rāg*.

The practical application of *ghar* numbers as melodic systems opens new doors for Sikh musicians and musicologists. It vastly expands the range of melodic variety for use for singing *shabads*. It diminishes the need to turn to non-*rāg* based melodies for variety.

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<sup>7</sup> The emergence of Bilāval as the natural scale is dated by Indian musicologists to be in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>8</sup> And forms the author's book project on Sikh musicology.

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## Conclusion

Several factors support the thesis that *ghar* numbers in *shabad* headings of Guru Granth Sāhib refer to melodic systems.

1. *Shabads* in Gaudi are not presented in *ghar* numbers but in several named melodic varieties such as Guāreṛi and Bairāgan, indicating that melodic varieties occupy the place of *ghar* numbers.
2. *Ghar* numbers occur sequentially, just as Gaudi varieties do.
3. *Shabad* sections of all *rāgs* that have more than 1 version begin with *ghar* 1, i.e. version 1, which in the case of Gaudi is Guāreṛi.
4. *Shabads* in Nat Nārāyan, Māligauda, Tukhāri and Jaijavanti do not have melodic varieties and therefore no *ghar* numbers.
5. *Ghar* refers to a system - of melodies, regional such as Dakhani and in various performance styles such as Kāfi.
6. Melodic details were important to Guru Sāhibān – they even mention particular *dhunis* (melodies) in several instances.
7. The use of many melodic varieties would be natural for Guru Sāhibān, singing so many *shabads* and addressing diverse communities.
8. *Ghar* cannot be *tāl* (rhythmic cycle) or *shruti* (microtone) since there would be no reason to omit the *tāl* or *shruti* specification for certain *rāgs* such as Gaudi, Nat Nārāyan, Māligauda, Tukhāri and Jaijavanti.
9. The *shruti* interpretation also does not fit with sequential *ghar* numbers.
10. Medieval Indian music texts use numerical ordering for *rāg* versions, but not for *tāl* or *shruti*.

These factors and the practical applicability of the melodic-system interpretation are strong support for its reasonableness. This interpretation opens the doors to developing a rich repertoire of *rāg*-based melodic varieties and reduces the need to use non-*rāg* melodies. The Guru Sahibān were not interested in musical complications but rather the use of regional melodic systems and vernaculars to bring the Divine Word to diverse people.

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