Epistemologies of Sacred Sound: Oral Transmission and Performance Practice in *TārtamVāṇī.*

Abstract

TārtamVāṇī, also known in the NijanandSampradāya as Kuljam Swaroop or TārtamSāgar, is a multilingual sacred corpus engaged through reading, listening, singing, memorisation and devotional practice. This article argues that oral-aural transmission and performance are central, not merely supportive, to sustaining and interpreting TārtamVāṇī. To support this claim, the study uses a qualitative, interpretive method that combines close textual analysis, musicological examination of two compositions, and a performance-based review of a publicly available recording of "SāthJīJāgiye." The first case study, "Gun ketekahūṁ mere piu jī," examines devotional language, rhetorical strategies, and musical features in the transcription. The second analyses the recording's introductory sargam, refrain, instrumental interludes, Dādrātāla, and the interplay between lyrical exhortation and musical repetition. The analysis shows oral transmission as embodied learning, where listening, imitation, repetition, memory, and contextual guidance convey nuances beyond written notation. The discussion also addresses digital dissemination and contemporary instrumentation as ways to expand access and documentation. It emphasises that recordings capture particular performances rather than definitive representations of a living tradition. As the research relies on provided textual and recorded materials rather than original ethnographic fieldwork, its interpretations remain provisional and require further validation through interviews and comparative recordings. The article concludes by proposing a community-oriented safeguarding framework that emphasises intergenerational learning, ethical documentation, precise attribution, and community governance of access to sacred materials.

Keywords

TārtamVāṇī; NijanandSampradāya; oral transmission; devotional music; performance practice; guru–śiṣyaparamparā; musical memory; intangible cultural heritage

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1. Introduction

Music in devotional traditions is not simply a vehicle for conveying a text. In performance, pitch, duration, breath, phrasing, rhythmic cycle, repetition, and singers' and listeners' expressive intentions shape words. Scholarship on music and religion shows that sound can shape theological understanding and ritual experience, while research on Hindustani vocal pedagogy shows that oral teaching transmits performance knowledge through listening, imitation, and correction, as well as through verbal explanation (Alter, 1997; Beck, 2012, 2021). These perspectives provide a useful framework for examining Tārtam Vāṇī, the sacred corpus central to the NijanandSampradāya.

Community accounts say the tradition comes from Sadguru Shri Devchandraji Maharaj and Mahāmati Prannāthji, and they use titles like Kuljam Swaroop and Tartam Sagar for TārtamVāṇī. The text is connected to devotional worship, spiritual awakening (*jāganī*), and a rich multilingual literary tradition. One community-published introduction mentions a corpus of 18,758 verses and highlights the use of Gujarati, Hindustānī, Braj, Sindhi, Arabic, and Persian. These numerical and linguistic details are internal accounts and should be checked against a critical edition if exact data are needed (Nijanand Sampradaya, n.d., 2021).

Although the written corpus is important, musical performance adds aspects that notation and print cannot fully capture. Features like phrase shape, how devotional words are handled, breath timing, the mix of text and ornamentation, and where refrains are placed are learned through practice. Studies on Hindustani vocal transmission show a close link between teaching methods and the musical forms that develop in performance (Alter, 1997). Experimental research also suggests that oral transmission can change melodic features as they move between singers, but these findings should not be applied without care to specific devotional communities (Anglada-Tort et al., 2023).

This article looks at TārtamVāṇī as both a text and a performance. It highlights two examples: *"Gun ketekahūṁ mere piu jī,"* listed in the supplied materials as part of PrakāśHindustānī, Chapter 36, and *"SāthJīJāgiye,"* a recorded version linked to the Kirtan Prakaran. These examples work together but are not interchangeable. The first focuses on interpreting the text and its aesthetics, while the second gives a closer look at a specific recorded performance.

2. Research Aim and Questions

The aim is to examine how oral-aural learning and musical performance mediate the transmission and interpretation of TārtamVāṇī, and to consider how documentation and digital circulation may support continuity without displacing community practice.

1. How do listening, imitation, repetition, memorisation, and embodied practice contribute to learning and remembering TārtamVāṇī?
2. How do phrasing, melodic contour, rhythmic organisation, and repetition shape the devotional interpretation of selected song-texts?
3. What can a close analysis of a recorded performance reveal about the relationship between text, melody, tāla, and instrumentation?

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3. Literature Context and Research Gap

Three strands of scholarship inform the present discussion. First, research on Hindustani music pedagogy provides a model for understanding oral transmission as an active system rather than a deficient form of notation. Alter (1997) demonstrates that teaching practices and musical structures are closely connected in Hindustani vocal music. Anglada-Tort et al. (2023) offer a broader account of how imitation and social transmission can shape melodic features, although their experimental findings are derived from a different research context. Second, scholarship on music and Hindu religious experience situates sound within devotional and theological life (Beck, 2012, 2021). In the materials reviewed for this article, TārtamVāṇī is more frequently discussed in terms of its religious significance, textual corpus, and historical identity than through detailed accounts of how musical knowledge is acquired and enacted in performance. This article addresses this gap by placing textual interpretation and close readings of recorded renditions within the same analytical framework. This constitutes a focused contribution rather than a comprehensive survey of the field. A full systematic review of scholarship on the NijanandSampradāya and its musical practices remains a task for future research.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design and materials

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive case-study design. The materials include: (a) textual and descriptive information provided for “Gun ketekahūṁ mere piu jī”; (b) musical notes and metadata for “SāthJīJāgiye”; (c) a publicly accessible recording identified below; and (d) selected scholarly and community-published sources relevant to oral transmission, devotional music, and heritage safeguarding. However, the analysis is not based on interviews, participant observation, or newly collected field recordings.

4.2 Analytical procedure

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The textual analysis addresses devotional address, semantic emphasis, multilingual vocabulary as outlined in the supplied materials, and rhetorical interpretation. The performance analysis adheres to the provided section timings and transcription to examine the opening sargam, sthāyī, instrumental interludes, antaras, refrain returns, and the reported Dādrā framework. Analytical categories encompass melodic contour, text–music relationship, phrase recurrence, instrumental texture, and rhythmic organisation. Interpretations of expressive effect are offered as analytical readings rather than as quantifiable psychological outcomes.

5. Oral Transmission as Embodied Musical Knowledge

Oral transmission should not be understood merely as the absence of written records. It is a process through which learners develop an ear for melodic movement, pronunciation, phrase shape, timing and expressive convention. Listening (śravaṇa) enables the learner to attend to details that may be difficult to encode in notation, while imitation provides a practical means of reproducing them. Repetition (abhyāsa) strengthens recall and gives the learner opportunities to refine pitch, breath, articulation, and coordination. These processes are consistent with broader research on the oral transmission of Hindustani vocal music (Alter, 1997).

The guru–śiṣya relationship can provide personalised demonstration and correction, while family and community settings may offer repeated exposure to repertoire in devotional contexts. These channels should not be treated as uniform or universal: the balance between formal instruction, family participation and collective worship may differ between communities and practitioners. In this study, they are discussed as relevant transmission pathways described in the supplied materials, rather than as findings from newly conducted fieldwork.

Transmission setting	**Learning practices described in the source materials**	**Potential contribution to continuity**
Guru–śiṣya instruction	Demonstration, attentive listening, imitation, repetition, correction, and explanation of textual meaning.	Can support stylistic detail, repertorial accuracy, and an interpretive relationship between text and performance.
Family and community settings	Repeated exposure to devotional singing, shared repertoire, and participation in collective practice.	Can embed repertoire in everyday and ritual life and create opportunities for intergenerational learning.

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Written and digital resources	Printed text, notation, audio recordings, and online circulation.	Can assist recall, access, and documentation, but cannot by themselves reproduce all embodied and contextual knowledge.

A key implication is that notation and recording should be treated as supports for transmission rather than substitutes for it. A notation system can represent selected pitch and rhythmic information, but it may not capture the full range of pronunciation, timbre, timing flexibility, ornamentation or devotional intention. Similarly, a recording preserves a particular performance instance, not the entire range of legitimate practice.

6. Textual and Aesthetic Reading: *"Gun ketekahūṁ mere piu jī"*

The texual analysisidentify*"Gun ketekahūṁ mere piu jī"* with Prakāś Hindustānī, Chapter 36. The phrase *"piu jī"* establishes an intimate devotional address, while the question *"gun ketekahūṁ"* may be read as an acknowledgement that the qualities of the beloved exceed the speaker's capacity to enumerate them. This interpretation makes the limits of language part of the devotional message: praise continues, yet the divine remains beyond complete description.

The source notes associate the composition with a blend of Hindustānī syntax, Braj expressions and devotional vocabulary, including terms such as *"piu jī," "anek," "ākar,"* and *"vivek."* These linguistic observations require confirmation against a reliable edition of the text, particularly where dialect identification or word-level interpretation is consequential. As an interpretive reading, the composition may be discussed through atiśayokti (hyperbole), where praise exceeds ordinary measure, and indirect praise, where the speaker's inability to express the beloved's qualities itself magnifies their infinitude.

The supplied musicological notes describe a tonic centre of C *(Ṣaḍja)*, a Kalyan-associated melodic framework, and *Keharwatāla*. They also interpret a reported mīṇḍ on *"kete"* as reinforcing the sense of unbounded praise, and a strong arrival on *"piu"* as emphasising the devotional addressee. These observations provide a useful analytical hypothesis, but they should not be treated as independently verified facts until the audio and notation are checked. In particular, a *rāga* or thāṭ classification requires sufficient evidence from the melodic context rather than a single phrase or a descriptive label.

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The case study demonstrates a method for connecting verbal meaning and musical gesture: identify a salient word or phrase, establish its textual function, document the corresponding musical event, and then explain how the event may intensify or nuance the meaning. Such an approach avoids treating rasa or bhāva as automatic properties of a *rāga* and instead considers how they are shaped by the interaction of text, melodic movement, performance choices, and devotional context.

7. Performance Analysis: *"SāthJīJāgiye"*

7.1 Recording and performance context

The second case study concerns a recording titled *"SāthJīJāgiye"*attributed in the supplied materials to a performance and arrangement by Shravan Dhital. The materials identify the composition with the Kirtan Prakaran of *TārtamVāṇī*, name *Rāga Jog* as its melodic basis, and identify *Dādrātāla* as the rhythmic framework. These attributions are reported as supplied metadata and should be verified against the source edition and recording.

The refrain is transcribed in the supplied materials as: *"Sāthjījāgiye, sunkesabdaākhirā / Sakal āudhaṅgsājke, dauṛmiliyedhanīnijgharā*." In the interpretation offered here, the text calls upon spiritual companions to awaken, listen to the final message, prepare themselves and move towards their true abode. The sequence of actions—sleeping, waking, sitting, standing and moving forward—gives the text a progressive structure. The refrain repeatedly returns the listener to the central exhortation to awaken and listen.

7.2 Opening sargam and melodic establishment

The supplied transcription records an opening sargam before the lyrics enter : "ṖaNi Sa GaGa Sa – | ṖaNiSa [Pa] Ma Ga – | Ni [Pa] Ma | Pa Ga Ma GaGa Sa." The passage begins in the lower register and moves towards the middle register, creating a melodic introduction before the text. A short sarangi passage follows, transcribed in the supplied notes as "Pa – – | Ṡa | Ni [Pa] Ma | Pa Ga – –." The sarangi's sustained tone and capacity for gliding pitch movement can provide continuity between the instrumental introduction and the vocal entry.

The supplied notation key appears to distinguish both *shuddha*and*komal* forms of *Gandhar*. This distinction is significant for the identification of Rāga Jog and must be represented consistently in the final notation. The phrase sequence should therefore be checked against the recording,

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with octave markers and accidental signs standardised. Until that verification is complete, the opening is described as a passage associated with the reported Rāga Jog framework rather than as conclusive proof of rāga identity.

7.3 *Sthāyī,* refrain, and text–music relationship

The sthāyī introduces the central appeal, *"SāthJīJāgiye, Sunke Sabda Ākhirā,"* followed by *"Sakal ĀudhAṅgSāj Ke, DauṛMiliyeDhanī Nij Gharā."* Repetition of the opening line establishes a recognisable refrain and helps organise the subsequent sections. The phrase *"DauṛMiliyeDhanī Nij Gharā"* is particularly useful for considering how musical phrasing may reinforce semantics: the word *"dauṛ"* conveys urgency, and the supplied swara sequence—*"Pa Ma | Pa Ga | Ma Ga | Sa Ga | Ni Sa Ga"*—is described as a succession of short melodic units. This can be interpreted as suggesting forward motion, although the precise syllable-to-swara alignment should be verified against the recording.

The interpretation does not require assuming that the passage changes rāga or tempo. Instead, it focuses on phrase organisation and the way musical recurrence supports the text's exhortative quality. The returning refrain restores the composition's central message after each antara, linking different verbal themes through a stable musical point of reference.

7.4 Instrumental interludes and texture

The supplied timeline identifies an extended sarangi interlude at approximately 1:23–1:51. It separates the refrain from the first antara and allows melodic development to continue without words. The notes also identify a keyboard interlude at approximately 2:43–3:08. The sarangi contributes a sustained, gliding melodic line, while the keyboard introduces a contrasting timbre and may provide tonal support. The actual harmonic role of the keyboard should not be specified without transcribing the notes or chords that are audible.

The source notes suggest that a brief *"Ni*Ṡ*a Dha"* sequence may recall *Rāga Nand*. A short sequence alone is insufficient to establish rāga-miśra or influence from another rāga. Such a claim would require analysis of the full phrase, note emphasis, characteristic movements, and surrounding melodic context. The present analysis, therefore, treats the passage as melodic variation within a performance identified in the supplied materials as based on *Rāga Jog*, leaving any secondary-rāga attribution open for verification.

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7.5 Dādrātāla and rhythmic organisation

The supplied metadata identifies Dādrātāla, conventionally understood as a six-mātrā cycle divided into two groups of three. A commonly used thekā is *"Dha Dhi Na | Dha Tu Na,"* although performed bols can vary. The first mātrā is sam and the fourth is commonly associated with khālī. The tabla provides the main cyclic reference, while the percussion shaker adds a supplementary pulse and timbral layer.

The source materials also report a 3/4 time signature and tempo value of 116. These should be described as supplied recording metadata unless independently measured. A 3/4 display may indicate a grouping of three beats, but it does not, by itself, represent the full six-mātrāDādrā cycle.

7.6 Antaras and formal continuity

According to the supplied notes, the composition contains three antaras that share a basic melodic framework while presenting different lyrics. The first antara—beginning *"Koī Det KasālāTumko, Tum BhalāCāhiyo Tinā"*—is interpreted as addressing perseverance in the spiritual path. The second, beginning *"SūtāHoī So Jāgiyo, Jāgyā So Baiṭhā Hoī,"* develops the sequence from sleep to awakening and purposeful action. The final antara, beginning *"Mahāmat Kahe Mere SāthJī, LījoĀkhir Ke Bacana,"* foregrounds the exhortation to heed the message and illuminate one's own being.

The recurrence of a shared melodic framework, as reported in the supplied notes, gives continuity to these changing textual emphases. The closing refrain returns the listener to the initial call to awaken and listen. The structure can thus be understood as cumulative in meaning but circular in form: the antaras develop distinct aspects of the message, while the refrain continually re-establishes its central devotional proposition.

7.7 Performance timeline

Approximate time	**Section**	**Analytical function reported in the supplied notes**
00:03–00:23	Opening sargam	Introduces melodic material associated with Rāga Jog.
00:25–00:32	Sarangi passage	Extends the introductory melodic atmosphere.

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00:32–01:00	Opening sthāyī	Establishes the refrain through repetition.
01:00–01:05	Sarangi interlude	Connects the refrain to its continuation.
01:05–01:23	Second sthāyī line and refrain	Presents the "Sakal Āudh…" line and returns to the principal statement.
01:23–01:51	Sarangi interlude	Provides instrumental development before the first antara.
01:51–02:31	First antara	Develops the theme of perseverance.
02:31–02:42	Refrain	Returns to the central message.
02:43–03:08	Keyboard interlude	Introduces a contrasting instrumental timbre.
03:08–03:49	Second antara	Develops the stages of awakening.
03:49–04:00	Refrain	Re-establishes the principal statement.
04:00–04:24	Sarangi interlude	Prepares the final antara.
04:25–05:06	Final antara	Presents the concluding exhortation.
05:06–05:35	Closing refrain	Reinforces the central message through repetition.
05:35–05:40	Final sarangi phrase	Brings the performance to a close.

The audio source YouTube, https://youtu.be/drAOlY5DwWE.

8. Discussion: Transmission, Performance, and Digital Circulation

Taken together, the two case studies suggest complementary ways of studying TārtamVāṇī as performed knowledge. *"Gun ketekahūṁ mere piu jī"* foregrounds devotional address, rhetorical expression, and the interpretive possibilities of word–music relationships. *"SāthJīJāgiye"* provides a performance-centred account of refrain, melodic recurrence, rhythmic cycle, and instrumental interlude. Neither example should be treated as a universal model for the tradition. They are two distinct analytical windows into the relationship between sacred text and performed sound.

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The recording of *"SāthJīJāgiye"* demonstrates how digital media can make a rendition accessible beyond its immediate performance setting. Online circulation can support study, memory, and intergenerational access; however, a recording may also encourage listeners to treat one rendition as a standard. The distinction between documentation and prescription is therefore important. Documentation should preserve contextual information—performer, date, location where known, repertoire attribution, permissions, and any restrictions on circulation—so that recordings remain intelligible as situated performances.

10. Conclusion

TārtamVāṇī offers a productive case for examining the relationship between sacred text, oral-aural learning, and devotional performance. The materials considered here indicate that the experience of a song-text depends not only on its verbal content but also on the ways it is voiced, repeated, phrased, and situated in devotional practice. Listening, imitation, repetition, memory, and guidance are therefore central analytical concepts for understanding how musical knowledge can be transmitted across generations.

The two case studies illustrate different but related approaches. The reading of *"Gun ketekahūṁ mere piu jī"* connects devotional language and rhetorical interpretation with reported musical features. The analysis of "SāthJīJāgiye" examines how a refrain, antaras, instrumental passages, and a reported Dādrā framework organise a particular recorded performance. These interpretations remain provisional where they depend on supplied transcriptions and metadata; direct verification and comparison with further performances are necessary before making definitive claims about rāga, tāla, or stylistic norms.

Digital recordings can support access and documentation, but they should be understood as records of particular performance events. A sustainable safeguarding approach should therefore combine ethical documentation with active, community-led teaching, accurate attribution, and appropriate control over access to sacred materials. The article's principal contribution is to bring oral transmission and performance analysis into a single framework for studying TārtamVāṇī, while identifying the empirical work needed to deepen and validate that framework.

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