

The Bengali Kirtan: An Essence of Bhakti in Indian Music

Dr. Krishnendu Dutta

Associate Professor and Head of Department

Department of Music, Sikkim University

Gangtok, Sikkim

Email address: kdutta@cus.ac.in

Abstract

India is a land of rich musical treasure and diversity as well where music is not only a medium of mere entertainment but also it has appeared as a tool or sometimes as a weapon of revolution. For example- the Bhakti movement where music led the way of a renaissance. That form of music was different in different places with a diversity of language, culture and contemporarily influence of popular music. 'Kirtan' is a form of music exists in Indian Music since very early times and evolved as the main component of Bhakti movement as well as religious vigil and is still in practice in a different form almost everywhere in India. The Bengali Kirtan is a very popular and strong musical practice that is derived from an ancient musical form of Prabandha Gaan. It is also considered an aesthetic emotional art of Vaishnavism. Here this paper is attempted to study the kirtan especially Bengali Kirtan in detail. This paper will discuss the origin and evolution of Kirtan. Again, will analyze the different structural information of Kirtan songs and will try to elucidate their historical significance. This study aims to disclose the importance of this rich form of music and various form of Bengali kirtan so that this music can be revived, retain and remain as it used to be an important part of Indian culture and tradition.

Keywords: Kirtan, Devotional, Hindu, Music, Bengal

Introduction:

“An example of what is special about Bengali kirtan is found in our kirtan. The joy we get in kirtan is not the joy of unadulterated music, but the joy of *kavyarasa* blended in it.” (Tagore 1966, 89)

‘Kirtan’ a form of musical composition in Indian Music has its own importance as a medium of praising divine god. Kirtan is a silent but very powerful musical form that could be found in different places in different form through out India. Devotion and emotion are the main ingredients of kirtan. Scholars have defined kirtan in many ways. They are like-

Definition:

“Śrābaṇaṅ kirtanaṅ biśnoḥ: smaranaṅ pādasebanaṅ|
archanaṅ bandanaṅ dāśyaṅ sakhyamātmanibedanaṅ||”¹

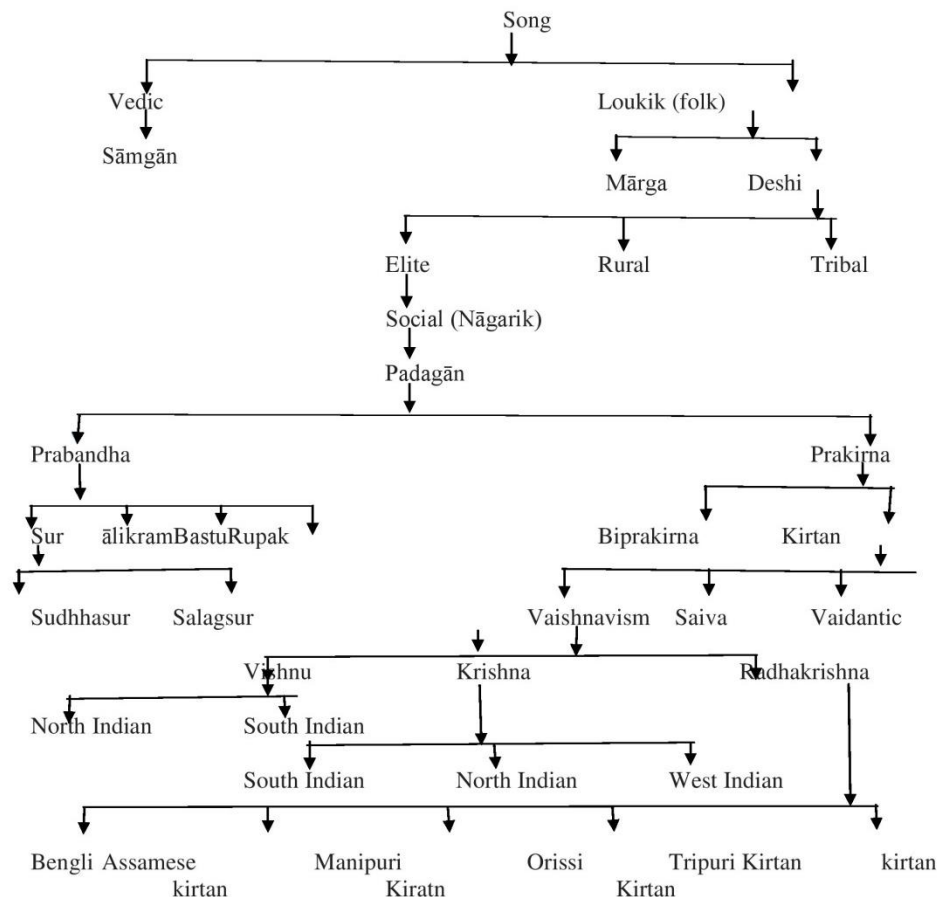
¹ Mitra, K. 1904. *Kirtan*. Visva Bharati, Calcutta: Visva Bharati. p. 3

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Music about the fame story or *gunakathan*.

- 2) The introduction of kirtan is probably at the beginning of the Christian century. Natyashāstrakār (Bharata) mentioned the Dhruva song of Shaurya-Birya-Guna-Gatha Praiseworthy songs as the kirtan.
- 3) Originally kirtan was the classical form of music that was prevalent in Vrindavan and its adjoining parts.
- 4) Simple devotional songs prevalent in South India. It is presented with full of affection. Kirtan of Karnataka is a combination of *Pallabi*, *Anupallabi*, and *Charanam*.
- 5) The second part of the dance song of the Oraon tribe of Andhra Pradesh is also known as kirtan.
- 6) Bengali traditional variety of elite songs enriched with raga-taal and Vaishnava poetry. Part of the kirtan Known as *Padābali*(phrases).²

The evolution of kirtan



² Sanyal, H. 1989. *Bangla Kirtaner Itihaas*, Kolkata. p.13

UGC-CARE enlisted & Indexed in the EBSCO International Database of Journals**Analysis:**

The content of the kirtan:

Kirtan mainly flows in two streams –

- A) Name chanting (Nāmasaṅkirtana),
- B) Dalliance chanting (Lilākirtana)

Name chanting (Nāmasaṅkirtana):

“*Kriṣṇanaammahāmantrereaitoswavāb |*
JejopetārkiṣṇeUpajayevāb ||
kriṣṇaBiṣayakpremā param puruṣārthak |
jārāgetrinatullyachāripuruṣārtha ||”

(Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita, KrishnadasKabiraj,
Seventh para., ādi)

The purpose of name chanting (Nāmasaṅkirtana) is the emergence of love. The mind in the desires of the great Nāmagradually enters in the realization of Bhagavata. Rati is the unquestioning obedience to God that sows the seeds of sincerity in the heart. The darker stage of this rati is pure inequities - Love; Unconditional love. (Chakraborty 1995,52)

Comparing with western church music, the *nāmasaṅkirtana* can be identified as choir music³. Nāmasaṅkirtan is a type of choir music derived from prabandha gaan of elite society. The contribution of *nāmasaṅkirtana* to the unity of Indian Sadhana is undeniable.

Lilākirtan:

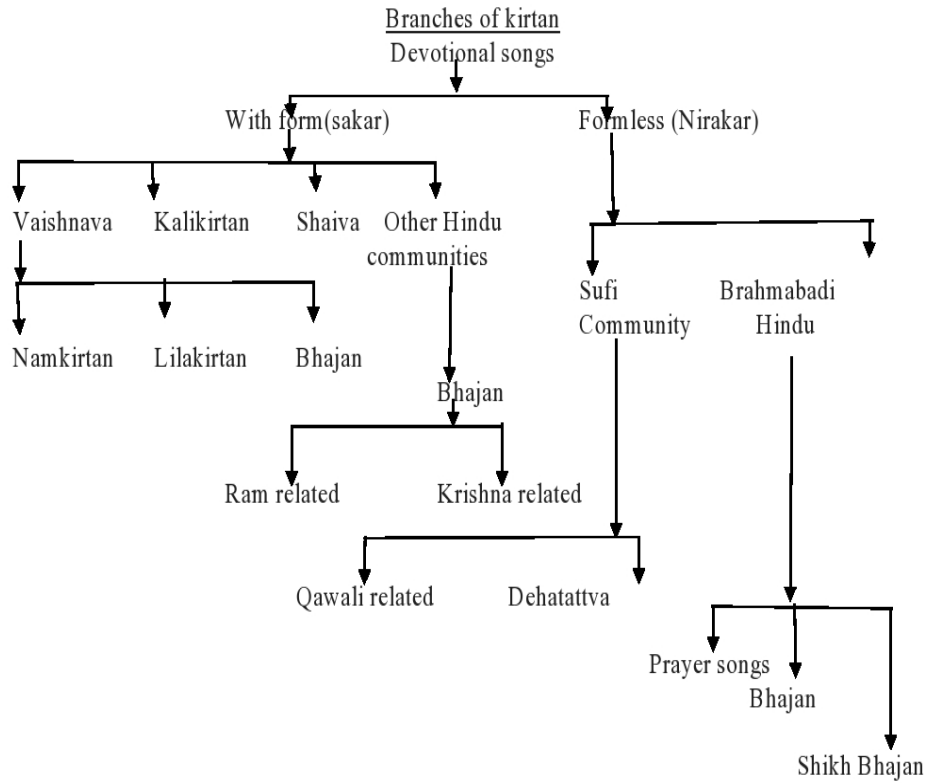
“Antaraṅga sane lilārasāswādan |
 bahiraṅgalaiyāharināmasaṅkirtan ||”

(Banshisiksha, Premdas)

Another category of kirtan is leelā kirtan or rasakirtan. The song based on various leelas(activities) of Lord Krishna is therefore known as Leela Kirtan (Chakraborty 1995, 57). Such as: *Janmalila*, *Nandotsav*, *Balyalila*, *Bosthalila*, *Surya Puja*, *Jalakrira*(Watersports), *Pashakrira*, *Danlila*, *Uttargostha*, *Nrittaras*, *Maharas*, *Basantalila* , *Holilila*, *jhulan*, *kunjabhanga*, *Purvaraga*, *Rupanuraga*, *Abhisara*, *Akhepananuraga*, *Basakasajya*, *Kalhantarita*, *Utkanthita*, *Banshisiksha* ... etc.

Katha (lyrics), Doha (repetition in the group), Akhar (lyrics in fast beat), Tuk, Chhat - It is necessary to combine these five elements in lilākirtan. Kamod Gauri, Dhanashree, Mayuri in the area of Rag-Raginisare more applied. The ragas of the Sampurnajati category are more in use in Kirtan. The collaboration of the trained artists is more compatible in the case of choir use.

³ Islam, S. M. 2019. “Khrishtiya Kirtan: ethnomusicology” in *Kirtan katha*. Edited by Jayanta Ray, 201

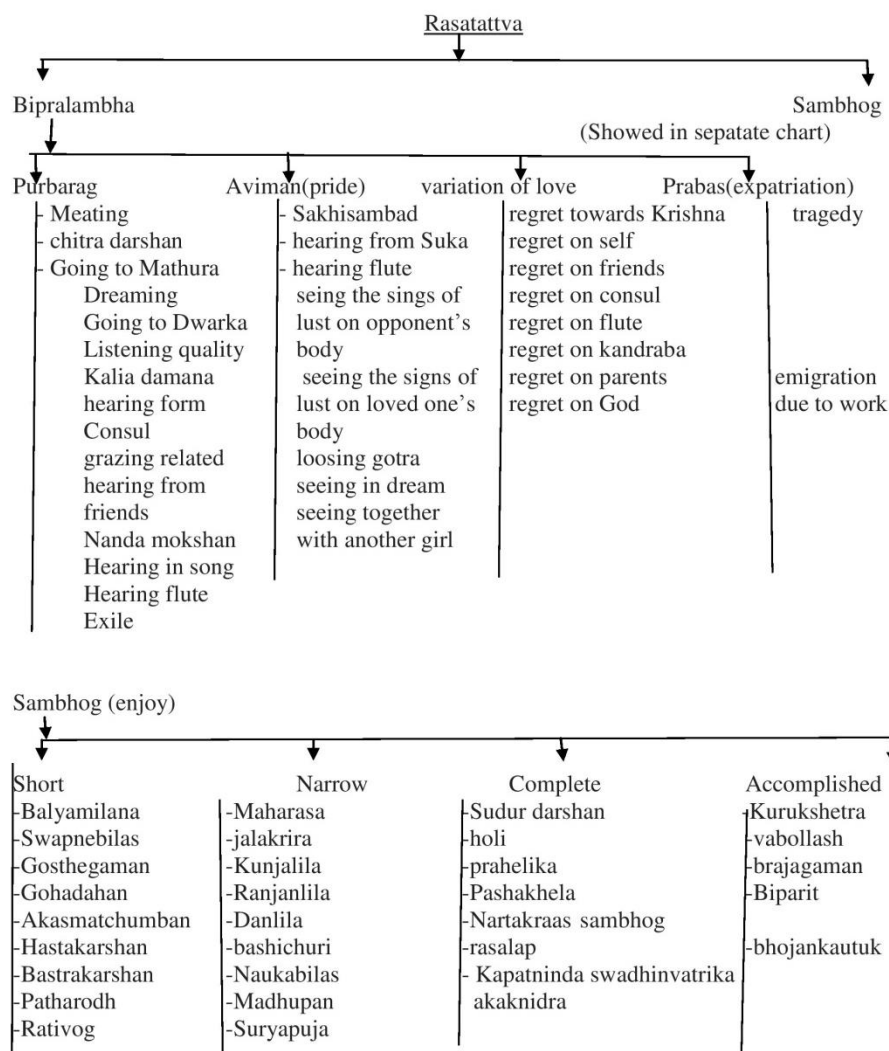
UGC-CARE enlisted & Indexed in the EBSCO International Database of JournalsThe Rasatattva of kirtan

*“Dāsyasakshyavātsalya Sringārchārīrasa |
Chārvābe bhakta kṛṣṇatāribasa |”*

(Chaitanya Charitamrita, Third chapter)

The four mentioned Rasas are main in Kirtan Song.⁴ These four rasas are divided into different senses.

⁴ Mitra, K. 1904. *Kirtan*. Visva Bharati, Calcutta: Visva Bharati. p. 46

UGC-CARE enlisted & Indexed in the EBSCO International Database of Journals**Preacher of Kirtan:**

*“Na dhanangnajanangnasundaring
 Kabimatya Jagadish kamaye |
 Mama janmajanmanishwarevabatada
 Baktirhaitukitwayee ||”*

- Shre Chaitanya Mahaprabu

In the early stages, Joydev, Vidyapati, Chandidas and other dignitaries enriched the kirtan. Jayadeva's Gitagovinda (12th century) is an outstanding lyrical poem or ode. In later times, Govinda Das, Gyan Das, Balram Das, Basudeb Ghosh, Balaram Roy and many others had played a significant role in the continuation of the Kirtan legacy by their contributions. Besides this, in Vaishnava devotees put their efforts to spread the kirtan in different parts of India. E.g. - Vidyapati of Mithila, Suradas of Uttar Pradesh, Mirabai of Rajputana, the Guru Granthsaheb of Punjab, Vallabhacharya of West India, Raskhan, Rahim Khan and the author

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of the Tamil Vedas, Thala bar of South India are particularly mentionable in this context. However, the advent of Sri Chaitanya created a new trend in the minds of the world humanity including Bengal and India. He showed the new ray of light by establishing kirtan Successfully. For this reason, he is known as the originator of the existing kirtan.

The great Rabindranath has spoken about kirtan - "What is special about Bengali music is its example in our kirtan available. The joy we get in kirtan is not the joy of unmixed music. The joy of Kavyas is mixed with it." (Tagore 1966, 69)

The lexical meaning of the word kirtan is kirtigan or the song saying the glory. Kirtan is sentimental music. Its highest form is seen in the eastern part of India. Kirtan is not the exclusive resource of Bangladesh, Tukaram, a pious poet from Maharashtra also created a music known as kirtan. Moreover, Padavali-Kirtan is a cultural resource not only of Bengal but of the whole of India.

The Taal system suitable for kirtan songs is called kirtananga Taal system. Determining the origin and continuity of the kirtananga Taal system is often a subject to conjecture. Various descriptions of Lord Krishna embedded in the form of melody and rhythm by the ingenious poets and singers like Jayadeva, Vidyapati, Baru Chandidas of pre-Chaitanyadeva era - was called kirtan. Later, in the early fifteenth century, Sri Chaitanya Deva's initiative on kirtan had a tremendous impact on common society⁵.

The application of the kirtananga taal system is unique in itself.⁶ This taal system is very complexed and diverse, as well as extensive and difficult with an effect of ancient taal system. Yet there is no lack of innovation. The main feature of the kirtananga taal system is as follows:

- 1) The number of Taal of Kirtan is 108.
- 2) The terms of Kirtanangataal method are derived from the terms of Bengali Language. Example - Saowa, prastuti, paran, lahar, chhakka, chakradar, mathat, hatutibadya, aartibadya, murchhan, dwipadi, Tripadi, Laghu, Guru etc.
- 3) There are two parts of kirtananga taal
 - (a) chhut - chhut is formed by the combination of a beat and a silent verb.
chhut - Two, four or eight matras are added. madhyamchhut mark = 0 0 0 and the mark of high speed chhut= o0 o0 o0.
 - (b) The chhut mark consisting of half a dimension of a double-double=
~~~~~.
- 4) In the kirtananga taal system, 'tal' means a beat.
- 5) 'gap' is displayed as a silent verb.
- 6) 'beat and 'gap' are used as indicative forms of part.
- 7) 'Koshi' - this term is similar to the 'gap'. The sign '0'.
- 8) 'Kal' - This is also a silent verb. It appears Either after the gap display. Sign= 0
- 9) In this taal method 'Kal' and 'Kushi' or 'Koshi' help to maintain the balance of rhythm.

<sup>5</sup> Chakraborty, R. 2009. "Chaitanyabadaan" in *Dashadishi* edited by Dashadishi, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Chakraborty, M.S. 1995, *Banglar Kirtan Gaan*, Calcutta, 151.

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- 10) The theka of kirtananga rhythm is called 'laowa'. 'Laowa' is generally added at 'bi-rotation'. The 'Laowa' can be quadrupled.
- 11) The initial presentation without the song inkirtananga taal system is called 'Hatuti' or 'Juani'. Hatuti is added with tehai.
- 12) The next part of hatuti is known as 'Apattan'. It is played in slow rhythms.
- 13) The second stage of applying taal is called 'lahar'.
- 14) 'Akhar' or 'Akshar' is an ornament of kirtan. 'katan' is applied when this ornament is used.
- 15) 'Matan' is played after the 'lahar'. Only metal instrument cymbals are played in this Matan part.
- 16) The next presentation of Matan is called 'Murchhan'.
- 17) The number of matras in taal may change in the 'murchhan' part.
- 18) In the kirtananga taal method, when the taals are played in fast tempo known as 'chhot', When played in medium tempo known as 'madhyam', and when played in very low tempo is known as 'Bara' or big. For example- 'chhotadashkoshi' with 7 matras, 'Madhyamdashkoshi' with 14 matras, and 'borodashkoshi' with 28 matras can be mentioned. In this case, the main rhythm is 'Dashkoshi'.
- 19) Kirtananga taal method deals with rasa or emotions. 'Bloodshot eyes' of tempo or 'laya' are neglectable in this manner.
- 20) Taal sign is expressed by a small '|' Sign.
- 21) Kirtananga Tal is divided into three jatis
  - a) Tishra B) Chaturashra C) Mishra
- 22) In this rhythm method half-dimension, quarter-dimension, one and half-dimension, etc. does not apply. Signs positioned on above the word.
- 23) Vowels like A, E, U etc. are used to prolong the words.
- 24) Angalakshana:
  - a) Symbol of sam +
  - b) koshi or gap marks - 0
  - c) Time mark - 0
  - d) other beat marks - 2, 3, 4 ... etc
  - e) Division sign - |
  - f) Rotation mark - ||
- 25) Kirtanangataal method only expressed with the help of the loyal-perfect anadhabadya or drum instrument the Srikhol.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Anadha badyer bolalipid bhavna, p. 22-24.

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The 'Madhyamdashkoshi'/ 14 matras

+ 00 0 20 0 0 3 0 4 0 0 0 0

JhinaKajhi NakaJhina | Jha Kajhi Nakajhina | Jha Guru GuruGuru | Jakhi gala

0 0 +

Tete tete | jhina

chhotadashkoshi/ 10 matras

+ 0 0 2 0 3 0 4 0 +

Jha jhi nak jhini | jha-jhinakjhinihaguruguru | tetetete jha-jhi

Gurulaowa

+ 0 2 0 3 4 0 +

Ta-thi nakthini | ta-thi nakthini | ta guruguru | tat-ta khikhi | ta

Different styles of kirtan:

*“Ājubipineāyatakālmuritimuraticusumbān |*  
*Janu jaladharruchirangavanginatabara Mohini ||” -Gobinda Das*

a) Garanhati - Narottam Tagore is the inventor of Garanhati style. Verses composed freely according to Gaurchandrika, uses of Mridanga in taal rhythm composition, in delayed rhythm, uses of 108 taala in 'Birchhanda' is the main feature of the Garanhati style. The solemn and sattvic being of Garanhati is comparable to the dhrupads.

b) Manoharshahi—with the initiatives of Gyandas Manohar, Badan Tagore, Nrishing Tagore the Manoharshahi branch was formed in the Kandara region of Birbhum. Manoharshahi style is sang in the medium tempo. This trend can be compared to Hindustani Kheyal.

c) Renetti - Bipradas Ghosh, a resident of Ranihati or Reneti in Burdwan district, is the promoter of Reneti style<sup>8</sup>. This genre is more emphasised towards melody. The Reneti section is comparable to Thumri.

d) Mandarin - The method introduced by Kirtaniya called Sarkar Mandaran is known as Mandarin. Only nine rhythms are used in this section. The imitation of *mangal geeti* melody is used in the Mandarin branch.

e) Jharkhandi - The genre of Leela Kirtan developed in the Jharkhand region known as Jharkhandi<sup>9</sup>. The blending of folk tune with Mangalkavya is the main feature of the Jharkhandi style.

<sup>8</sup> Goswami, K. B. 2019. "Kirtan, rennet kirtan o baghnepara sampraday" in *Kirtan katha*. Edited by Jayanta Ray, 71.

<sup>9</sup> Mahato, B. 2019. "Kirtan sankirtan- pala kirtan o jharkhandidhara" in *Kirtan katha*. Edited by Jayanta Ray, 90.

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f) Mainadal - Maharaja Manindrachandra Nandi established kirtan education school in the village of Mainadal in Birbhum with the help of Rasraj Mitra Tagore and introduced the Mainadal gharana.<sup>10</sup>

*“Sishyaganbalen Kemon sankirtan |  
 Āponeshikhaypravusrisachinandan ||  
 Hari harayenama Krishna jadabaynamah |  
 Gopal gobindo ram srimadhusudana ||  
 Disha dekhaiyaprawuhaattalidia |  
 Apone kirtan karesishyaganloiaa ||”*

-Chaitanya Bhagavata - Madhya Khand<sup>11</sup>

The main basis of kirtan is the verses. In case of composition of verses, tune, and taal, Jaydev was the first to introduce a formal tradition. Later, the verses further nurtured the style of kirtan with compositions by Vidyapati and Chandidas. The advent of Sri Gauranga gave an extraordinary momentum to the Kirtan. Kirtan was the main part of Gauranga's worship. He was the one who spread the practice of chanting the kirtan. The style of Leela Kirtan is also enriched by his hands. He gave the padabalia classical status. After the demise of Gauranga, a new Vaishnava movement was formed under the leadership of Nityananda's son Birchandra. However, under the leadership of his associate Narottam Tagore (1531-1587) a well-established tradition of kirtan singing was introduced. Gradually various kirtan streams originated from this. Apart from radhakrishna's Lilagatha, Gauranga's life lila also became a subject of kirtan and the field of pada composition expanded.

Charyagiti, Nath Geetika, Gitagovinda, Sri krishna kirtan, Vaishnavpadabali, Mangalkavya, Bharatchandra's Shaktagiti, akhrai, halfakhrai, dhrupad, Brahma Sangeet, Preetigiti, Drama songs, the music of Pancha Pradeep has enriched the different genres of Bengali music through the ages.

**Result:**

The development of kirtan is one of the significant issues. The introduction of kirtan is recognized as the best gift of Bengal in the history of Indian music. From the above discussion we can see that Kirtan has extracted the essence from Hindustani raga and taal structures but evolved as a unique form by the time. The main components of this song are devotion and emotions. Also, it has another strength of togetherness which lead kirtan as a tool of any social movement especially in bhakti movement an emotional way. Bengali society has less importance with caste. The contribution of kirtan is also recognized in the background of that as endless stream.

<sup>10</sup> Mitra, K. 1904. *Kirtan*. Visva Bharati, Calcutta: Visva Bharati, 30

<sup>11</sup> Mitra, K. 1904. *Kirtan*. Visva Bharati, Calcutta: Visva Bharati. p. 20

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