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# **Raag Basant: An Overview**

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### Abstract

This paper gives a comprehensive overview on the aspects of Raag Basant. It covers the origin and history of this Basant, how it developed over time, and eventually how it found importance in the Sikh Faith. Specifically, the role Basant plays in Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, the emotions that are created by it, and the themes that are present in the Bani within this Raag. Additionally, the paper takes a deep dive into the theoretical aspects of Basant and how they influence the emotions that are created by it. It also highlights how the small changes in the raag theory of Basant open a world of variations within this Raag - each with their own different effects on the listener. Overall, this paper is an extensive review of the Basant Raag and its many characteristics.

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The Basant Raag is a raag that is famous all throughout the world, particularly in Gurmat and Hindustani Sangeet. The emotions and feeling of rejuvenation and cleansing that one feels when listening to this Raag is incomparable. However, the focus will be particularly on the use of Raag Basant is profound in the Sikh Faith because of how it is mentioned in Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, the Holy Scripture for the Sikhs. This scripture is unique in how all the Baani, or divine revelation, is organized under the Sirlekh, or heading, of a musical raag. This organization means that usually, the raag that is mentioned in the heading is often the raag in which the Baani is sung. From this understanding, Raag Basant is the 25th Shudh raag that is mentioned in Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji.<sup>7</sup> It can be found from Ang 1168 to 1196. Five of the Sikh Gurus, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Guru Amar Das Ji, Guru Ram Das Ji, Guru Arjan Dev Ji, and Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji all composed hymns in this Raag. While there are many variations of the Basant Raag, in Guru Granth Sahib Ji, there is only one mishrat form, or variation of this Raag, which is known as Basant Hindol.<sup>1</sup>

Raag Basant can be traced back to the 8th century, when this Raag makes its first appearance in the Indian Classical music scene, centuries before the invention of Gurmat Sangeet. During this Vedic time period, the Sama Veda, one of the texts that make up the Vedas, gave the command to chant religious hymns and sing melodies. This singing of melodies is what most likely caused the creation of many Raags like Basant.<sup>16</sup> When talking about the creation, during that time, many raags were created based on the

changing seasons and weather patterns as well as the emotions being felt. In this fashion, Raag Basant was given its name because of how the word "Basant " literally translates to Spring in Punjabi and some other languages.<sup>9</sup> However, it is important to note that the origins of the word Basant are from the Sanskrit word for spring, Vasant.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, because of how the Raag is made in inspiration of the spring season, it evokes emotions of rebirth and cleansing one's inner self. Like flowers and trees who gain their leaves and give off their scents in this time of regrowth, Raag Basant cemented its foundations in nature.

The practical elements of Sangeet in regards to Raag Basant originate from the Sanskrit texts of performing arts. Even its name is based on a Sanskrit word, so it makes sense that most of its practical elements are too. In particular, the Natyashastra, an ancient Sanskrit text containing knowledge of sangeet and other arts, laid out the foundations of the Basant Raag. Thus, while the Basant Raag has a heavy influence on Gurmat Sangeet today, it continues to have a strong connection with Hindustani sangeet as well due to its Sanskrit origins.<sup>21</sup> Raag Basant continued to hold importance in other parts of history, such as throughout the Bhakti movement where religious devotion gained importance. This movement is when lots of religious scholars and devotees began what would become a societal shifted focus towards religion and attaining salvation. Thus, one of the many methods that they adopted along with meditation and chanting of mantras was by adopting the singing of hymns. This adoption is what led to the creation of ragas along with the many characteristics that define raags today besides just notation. The movement began in the seventh to eighth century but began picking up influence in around the 12th century.<sup>6</sup> Within the next few decades, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the first Sikh Guru, began Their travels along with their rababi companion Bhai Mardana Ji. This was the foundation of Gurmat Sangeet, and over time as the Gurus continued to spread Gurbani, they also brought new instruments that they themselves created to sing that Bani. Once the first copy of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji was made by Guru Arjan Dev Ji in the late 16th century to the early 17th century, the singing of kirtan, particularly in Raag, began at a widespread scale. Like this, Raag Basant also gained importance in the Sikh faith as a side effect.

While the Basant Raag is often tied to the Spring season, in Gurmat, the timing of Basant lasts from the festival of Lohri in early January all the way to Holla Mohalla in mid March. Throughout this time, the singing of Basant is profound in Gurudwaras, or places of worship for Sikhs, throughout the world. The Shabads of Basant are intended to rejuvenate and inspire people to connect and reflect on themselves in order to gain spiritual growth, mimicking the actions of nature during the spring season.<sup>17</sup> One characteristic of Basant that makes it unique is how in Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, the vaar, or style of sangeet that is derived from folklore, for Raag Basant is very interesting. The vaar is the shortest vaar in all of Guru Granth Sahib and is known as Basant ki Vaar.

It has 3 small, but compelling sections, or Pauris, highlighting how Basant is a splendid time of year yet it isn't permanent and eventually passes by just like all things. Basant Ki Vaar is widely known for the many different styles in which it's sung in kirtan at the end of every kirtan chaunki, or session.<sup>16</sup>

When we talk about the theoretical aspects of Raag, especially in Raag Basant, we have to look at some basic fundamentals. In Gurmat Sangeet, the 7 natural notes that originated from the Indian Classical music system are used. These are Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni, Sa. These notes are then used to notate composition and give the foundations of raag. These usage of certain notes as well as variations of these notes are what bring the beauty of Raags like Basant, invoking different emotions depending on the notes being used.<sup>8</sup> When we focus on the original Basant, known as Shudh Basant, these are the basic raag components of this raag. This raag has the motive of wanting to preserve the essence of traditional Basant with the usage of the Shudh Ga, which gives off the feeling of inspiration and an uplifting mood. Because of this, it's often sung during the daytime to reflect an uplifting message just as the sun's warmth makes us feel rejuvenated.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the Aroh, or ascending notes of Shudh Basant, are SGMDNS'.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the Avroh, or the descending notes, are S'NDPMGRS.<sup>1</sup> In terms of basic Raag theory, the predominant note, or the Vadi sur in Raag Basant is S and the Samvadi sur, or the second most dominant note, is M.<sup>1</sup> The Varjit surs, or surs that aren't used in the Raag, are R and P in the aroh.<sup>4</sup> The rest of the notes that aren't classified as vivaldi, samvadi, or varjit are known as the Anuvadi Surs. In this case, the anuvadi surs are GPDN. Additionally, the Thaat, or parent of this Raag, is Bilaval.<sup>4</sup> Parent in this case means that this raag influences the notes of other raags. In this case, Bilaval is influencing the notes that make up Shudh Basant. There are 10 thaats that are officially recognized; each of them having distinguished characteristics that separate them all, making it easy for other raags that aren't thaats to fall under one of that categories.<sup>5</sup> The Jaati of the Raag is Audav-Sampooran. This means that there are 5 notes in the Aroh and 7 notes in the Avroh. Also, Basant can be sung in all three saptaks, or scales.<sup>4</sup>

When we take a closer look at Raag Basant and the Gurbani, or writings of the Sikh Gurus, that have been written in that Raag, there are many important themes and analogies being used. If we take a look at the Shabad *Basant Charria Phooli Banrai* from Ang 1176 composed by the 3rd Sikh Guru, Guru Amardas Ji, it talks about how the spring season has risen and what this means in the sense of our devotion to God. The first line, *Basant Charria Phooli Banrai*, translates to "Spring has come, and all the plants are flowering."<sup>19</sup> This means that quite simply, the season of spring has come, so the plants are starting to grow and flowers are starting to open up and blossom. However, the next few lines are where Guru Sahib connects this idea to devotional worship. They say, *Ehe Jee Jant Foolahe Har Chit Lie*. This means that when the animals, plants, and people focus their consciousness on God, they begin to sprout and blossom.<sup>19</sup> This is an example of

how Guru Sahib compares us to flowers who blossom, which shows the significance of Spring time to us. Additionally, later in this same shabad, Guru Sahib says, *Eho Jug Haraa Satgur Bhai*. This means that the entire world becomes green with vegetation, as it does in Spring, but they say the cause of this is having love for the True Guru.<sup>20</sup>

In the last few lines of this same shabad, the translation of those lines says “The mortal blossoms forth in flower and fruit, when the Lord Himself so wills. He is attached to the Lord, the Primal Root of all, when he finds the True Guru. The Lord Himself is the season of spring; the whole world is His Garden. O Nanak, by perfect good fortune, the Lord’s devotional service is performed.”<sup>20</sup>. This is where we truly see the connection between the season of Spring and the worship of God. It says that we people blossom and bring fruit, when God himself allows us to. This means that everything is in God’s control, not ours. Just like how a plant can only blossom if it’s had enough sunlight, water, soil, time, and space, without God, we people will never be able to blossom. Additionally, the shabad talks about how God is the “Primal Root” of all, or the creator of this entire universe. Everything links back to him, just like how a plant is only able to grow because of its roots. Finally, Guru Sahib makes it clear by saying that God is the spring season and the rest of this world is his creation. This again shows that we are all just plants in His Garden, showing how the theme of Basant is to, as said in the last line, to perform devotional worship of God. It emphasizes that we are all separated from Him, but we must connect back to the Primal Root with love in order for us to blossom. Like this, the entire Basant Raag gives comparisons of nature’s behaviors and how those same actions of nature are similar to how we should be connecting with God. Similarly, when we sing in Raag Basant or in any of their variations, the goal is to make us feel separated and that we need to connect to God, because otherwise without him, we can never blossom or grow.

The variations of Basant are also quite interesting to study, as they often take elements of different Raags in order to slightly change but overall keep the general emotional aspect of Basant the same. These are helpful in Gurmat Sangeet as they help the congregation who listens to these Raags connect to God better with the use of these different elements to help give off different meanings and emotions. However, some of these Raags are also not present in Gurmat Sangeet and are found in other types of sangeet as well. It’s also important to note that some of these variations may not have documentation online or in other common places that is widely available due to the Raag having an oral nature, meaning that every musician has a different understanding of what that Raag’s individual features are.

The following variations of Raag Basant hold a strong presence in Gurmat Sangeet. These Raags are often used in Gurbani Kirtan today.

### **Variations: Basant Hindol**

The one and only variation of the Basant Raag that is mentioned in Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji is Basant Hindol. Basant Hindol is variation which, like many other raags, is the result of the fusion of two or more raags over time which eventually creates a distinct product. The fusions of these Raags most likely happened in Ancient India during times of the Bhakti Movement, where the creativity of musicians and scholars led to various raags evolving and mixing with other raags to create new combinations. In this case, Basant Hindol is a mix of Raag Basant and Raag Hindol. The foundation of this raag is mostly Basant. However, the word Hindol, meaning to swing or swinging in Hindi, adds a “swinging” element to the raag, which makes it more lively and exciting. In the context of Gurmat Sangeet, this “swinging” element expresses the spiritual yearning that a Sikh has towards Waheguru.<sup>14</sup> This element is one of the byproducts of the fusion of Hindol with Basant. Because of this, this Raag is often used to uplift the environment and is used by people who do Kirtan to immerse themselves and the congregation with love for Waheguru Ji.<sup>13</sup>

When it comes to Raag theory, Basant Hindol is similar to Raag Basant, but still has its own elements that it most likely gained from Raag Hindol. The Aroh is S G M, D P M, G M D N S' while the Avroh is S' N D, m G, S. The Vadi sur is M while the Samvadi sur is S. The use of Re is varjit in this Raag. The thaat is Puurvi-Marva, while the Jaati is Vakra Sharav - Aurav. It's sung any time in the spring, mostly during the first and second pehar of the day. While there are differences, there are some elements that are similar to those of Basant and Hindol.<sup>13</sup>

### **Variations: Bilaval Form of Basant**

Both raags, Basant and Bilaval, can be traced back to Ancient India. Bilaval is one of the ten fundamental scales of classical sangeet, so it often has a heavy influence on the raag that it combines with. Thus, the Thaats of this Raag is Bilaval. The Aroh is S G M, D N S' while the Avroh is S' N D P M, G R S. The Vadi sur is Sa and the Samvadi Sur is Ma. The Pakar, or a group of notes that describes the essence of that Raag, is Ga Ma Dha Ni Sa', Sa' Ni Dha Pa Ma, Ga Re Sa. The Jaati is Aurav Sampooran, or 5-7. The Varjit surs are Re and Pa in the Aroh. Finally, this Raag is predominantly sung in the daytime hours.<sup>11</sup>

### **Variations: Basant Bahar**

Basant Bahar is a beautiful and evocative raag that combines the elements of two distinct raags - Raag Basant and Raag Bahar. It originated from ancient India during a phase of time when many Raags were being combined together to try and make new ones that gave different emotions while holding elements from Raags that already existed. The fusion of these raags gives rise to a melodious composition that marries the celebratory

attributes of Basant with the romantic and sensual expressions of Bahar.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Basant Bahar is often associated with the spring season, reflecting the joyous celebration of nature's beauty and the blossoming of life. The raag captures the essence of Basant while infusing the romantic expressions of Bahar. This amalgamation of emotions allows kirtanias (performers of devotional hymns) to convey a range of feelings in their devotional performances, from exuberance and celebration to romanticism and love for Waheguru Ji.<sup>12</sup>

When it comes to the Raag theory of Raag Basant Bahar, we see that many of the elements of those raags are still preserved in this Raag. The Aroh is S M, M P gM, n D N S' while the Avroh is S'N d P m, G m G M G r S. The vadi sur is the Sa that's on the Taar saptak, Traditionally, there are three saptaks in Sangeet: Mandar, Madyam, and Taar Saptak. Saptak means scale, so there are commonly three scales for a note to be on. In this case, the first Sa that's shown in the Avroh is in the Madhyam saptak, or middle scale. However, what the Vadi sur is referring to is the Sa that is at the beginning of the Avroh, which is in the Taar saptak, or upper scale. So this means that the only other saptak left is Mandar, which is the lower saptak. Continuing, the Samvadi sur is Ma. The Thaats is Poorvi. The Pakar, or notes that summarize the essence of the Raag, are SM- P M g M, n DN S', NdS' Nd P mGm G mG rS.<sup>12</sup>

The following Raags are not a part of Gurmat Sangeet. However, there are still variations of the Basant Raag that are applied in other types of sangeet or music.

### **Variations: Purvi Basant**

Purvi Basant, also known as Basant Bahar in some musical traditions, is known as one of the other variations of Raag Basant. While this raag is not a part of Gurmat Sangeet and is more commonly found in Indian classical music, it is still used by some keertanias today. It's a captivating fusion of two raags - Raag Purvi and Raag Basant. In Purvi Basant, the celebratory and vibrant attributes of Basant blend with the evocative and soul-stirring expressions of Purvi, creating a melodic masterpiece that resonates with the spirituality and devotion of Sikhism. The origins of the Purvi Raag are again in ancient India. The Purvi Raag is actually one of the Thaats of classical music, which means that the elements of that Raag are often what help other Raags either form from that Raag or help classify those Raags depending on their similarity with each Taat. Specifically, the Purvi Raag expresses emotions of love, longing, and separation. In the Poorvi Taat, the vakrit surs, or surs that are variations of the 7 natural notes, are m, r, and d.<sup>15</sup> The use of these vakrit surs helps create that more negative environment of longing and deep love which is the environment that is created from the singing of this Raag. Thus, by combining this with Raag Basant, where in the Spring the emphasis is on reconnecting and cleansing, these two Raags complement each other quite well which creates Purvi Basant.

### **Variations: Basant Pancham**

Basant Pancham is a captivating and soul-stirring raag that holds a special place in the traditional musical system. While this raag doesn't have any connection to Gurmat Sangeet, it is still used by some keertania's today on occasion. It is a unique fusion of two raags - Raag Basant and Raag Pancham.<sup>10</sup> The combination of these raags gives rise to a melodic masterpiece that blends the celebratory and joyful expressions of Basant with the pensive and meditative elements of Pancham. Additionally, Basant Pancham is often associated with the spring season, symbolizing the vibrant celebration of nature's beauty and the arrival of new beginnings. The raag captures the essence of Basant while infusing the introspective and contemplative expressions of Pancham. The Raag, like many of these variations, was a result of combinations of other Raags being combined in ancient India.<sup>19</sup>

The Aroh of Raag Basant Pancham is SGMDNS' and the Avroh is S'NDPMmGMGrS respectfully. The Vaadi sur is S' and the Samvadi sur is P. The Jaati is Audav Sampooran and the Pehar in which this raag is sung is the third pehar of the day. This Raag is a part of Poorvi thaat. Finally, the Pakad is S'NDPMmg.<sup>19</sup>

### **Variations: Basant Malati**

Raag Malati Basant is an uncommon Raag that is a fusion of many Raags. Many masters of sangeet have described this Raag as a fusion of the Puriya, Basant, Hindol, and Sohini raags.

This Raag was once known as Mandir Basant as well. While this Raag isn't a part of Gurmat Sangeet and is more associated with Indian classical music, it's still used by some keertanias on occasion. Because of the many raags that influence the makeup of this raag, this raag is used by musicians to convey many different emotions at once. The background factor of this raag is that it has some parts from Raag Basant, and so the raag has a theme of being sung in the spring as well. Thus, the emotions of spring like blooming, rejuvenation, and happiness are all conveyed. However, the Raags Puriya, Hindol, and Sohini all add their own flavors as well. Raag Puriya brings elements of peace and tranquility, while Hindol makes the raag more lively and exciting. Adding on, Sohini rounds this out by adding a feeling of separation and desire into this Raag.<sup>18</sup>

In terms of Raag theory, the vadi-samvadi is Dha and Ga respectively. The Aroh of this Raag is SN.rS/SG/mDS'. The Avroh of this raag is S'NrND/mG/SMmMG/mGrS. Finally, this raag belongs to the Marva thaat and is often sung anytime during the spring season.<sup>18</sup>

### **Variations: Basant Mukhari**

Raag Basant Mukhari is a unique and beautiful Raag that again has its roots in Ancient India. It doesn't have any relation to Gurmat Sangeet and is found in Indian classical music more often, yet it is used by some keertania's on occasion. The Aroh Avroh

is S r G M P d n S'- S' n d P m G r S, n. S. Particularly, the Re, Dha, and Ni are all komal, while the rest of the surs are shudh. The Vadi Sur is Pa and the Samvadi sur is Sa. The Jaati is 7-7 or Sampooran. The Thaati is Bhairo. The time for singing this raag is the second pehar of the day from 9am to 12pm. The Mukhang, or facial features of the raag, are Sa re Ga; Ga Ma; Pa Ma; Pa dha ni dha Pa Ma; Pa Ma Ga Ma; Ga re; re Sa; ni, dha ni Sa re; re Ga Ma; Ga re Sa; Ga Ma re. This raag gives a very soothing atmosphere due to its very calm nature.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, Raag Basant is one of the many gems of Gurmat Sangeet that are available to us today. From its history, practical elements, significance given in Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, variations, and the emotions that it gives off, this Raag is very rich with positive virtues that are often used by masters of Gurmat Sangeet to create positive environments of longing, separation (from God), and joy. The history of this raag shows how this raag was created with a focus on nature due to its spring elements as well as why it's so prevalent in Sangeet today. Additionally, every variation adds something new and helps to enhance the emotions felt by Raag Basant by adding elements from other Raags like Malati, Bahar, Hindol, etc.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it's not hard to understand why Raag Basant is a favorite for many due to its unique nature and, in Gurmat Sangeet particularly, ability to create environments and emotions that are often suitable for devotion.

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