

Voices of children and sounds of their drums do not resound any more in the Anad Conservatory in the Sultanpur Lodhi qila due to the apathetic attitude of the local authorities

# Notes of intolerance



PHOTOS COURTESY: ANAD FOUNDATION

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**A**S ANTHROPOLOGIST Alan Merriam wrote in 1964, "Music is interrelated with the rest of the culture: it can and does shape, strengthen and channel social, political, economic, linguistic, religious and other kinds of behaviour".

Traditional songs not only consist of melody and rhythm but also carry cultural and ethical values peculiar to a given social group. With this idea of keeping 'music' as an integral part of the Sikh history and culture in 2007, Bhai Baldeep Singh founded the Anad Conservatory, which is not simply a music school but a centre of education with a traditional holistic approach to pedagogy.

The Anad Conservatory could be somehow compared to Tagore's Shantiniketan, a pioneering educational project in which music finds its bonds with oral and written literature, visual arts, architecture and ecology.

But what distinguishes the Anad Conservatory is the idea of preserving the medieval tradition within the native environment that has generated it.

The conservatory is located in the ancient archeological site of Sultanpur Lodhi, where Guru Nanak lived for about 14 years, and where he recited the mool-mantra for the first time.

At the centre of the Sultanpur Lodhi fortress, there is the mosque that Guru Nanak had visited after granting consent to offer the namaz, a famous episode that itself reminds us of the principles of tolerance and equality that have always distinguished the Sikh faith since its beginning.

According to Unesco, traditional music repertoires are part of the cultural identity of a community and, thus, are an intangible heritage of humanity. Seen from this standpoint, the Anad Conservatory's aim is to revive and maintain the intangible treasure of the medieval Gurbani Sangeet within the tangible heritage of the historical qila.

In the Anad Foundation website, its founder affirms:

"This will inspire a sense of history, pride and cultural dignity among students and faculty members. The fortress of Sultanpur Lodhi, thus, would become the new source of cultural renaissance of the historical and the geographical Punjab. [...] activate teaching programmes and training facilities in the fields of conservation and restoration:



Clockwise from top: The mosque in the Sultanpur Lodhi qila; Varinder Kumar, Dean of Ustad Bhai Batan Singh Faculty of Musical Strings, with students of Anad Conservatory; a class in progress; and with a guest faculty member

architecture and landscape conservation, restoration of musical instruments, ancient crafts, and other antiquities."

One of the two rooms hosts also a laboratory in which traditional instruments like *taus*, *saranda* and *rabab* are handcrafted according to the original Sikh Gurus' models.

To fulfil the initial desire to hear Gurbani Sangeet played with the instruments of the proper era, Bhai Baldeep Singh has started a huge project on traditional percussion and string instruments to revive their playing and handcrafting techniques (and repertoires) as practiced by the Sikh Gurus. According to his research, 1949 was the last time when a musical instrument used in the Gurbani Sangeet tradition was made by Giani Harbhajan Singh Mistri of Hoshiarpur. In 1991, after an extensive research of three years for luthiers with the know-how of making instruments originally used in the practice of Gurbani, Sufi and Bhakti Marga Sangeet, Bhai Baldeep Singh traced Giani and learnt from him the art of carving *taus*, *saranda*, *rabab* and *dilruba*. Now he teaches the art of instrument making to the new generation of Gur Sikhs.

During an official visit to the Anad Conservatory in 2013, I had the opportunity to see the musical instrument laboratory, and I also attended a few vocal and instrumental classes that were given by Bhai Baldeep Singh and by Parminder Singh Bhamra to unprivileged children from the nearest villages. It was a meaningful experience, witnessing how children enjoyed learning through the traditional pedagogy, and how fast they were able to perform intricacies with their voices and with their drums.

I have seen flowers blooming among the ruins of the medieval site.

I remember that we were surrounded by cops, walking in and around the qila, as the site is also the seat of the local police station. Having a cultural centre side by side with a police station seemed a weird combination but I hoped that children would learn traditional ethical values through music rather than violence. But unfortunately, it seems that violence has recently prevailed over harmonious living. Some time back, I came across a few articles published in local newspapers in which it was reported that the policemen of the Sultanpur Lodhi station interrupted a music class, and emptied the two music rooms, offices and residences assigned to Anad Conservatory, throwing out all the musical instruments into the garden.

Policemen claimed that Anad Conservatory illegally stations inside the

fortress, whereas — according to Bhai Baldeep Singh — the premises were granted to the Anad Conservatory in 2011 by the Kapurthala district authorities concerned. Rare instruments and archival material collected in many years of research were thrown outside on August 4 and left under the inclement heat and humidity of the monsoon season. After such brutal action that caused much distress to students and teachers, the qila is silent now. The voices of children and the sound of their drums do not resound any more in the fortress.

Anad Conservatory has replied with a legal action to clear the issue. Meanwhile, children have lost their opportunity to sing the *shabds*, in the original mode, studying original genres of Gurbani *kirtan* with the accompaniment of the instruments revived at the qila on the models of the original instruments of the Sikh Gurus.



Ashutosh Upadhaya, son of late Panna Lal Upadhaya, teaching pakhawaj and tabla to the students

India is going through a period of deep socio-economical transformation, growth and globalisation. In this context, Anad Conservatory represents a unique institution whose aim is reconnecting with the purity of the medieval tradition, with the root of Sikhism, and with music not as a profession but as part of the spiritual and daily life. There is much to reconstruct about the Sikh intangible musical heritage, since the Sikh culture has undergone a "slow and systematic cultural violence" (to quote Zi ek, 2008) that has evened out the peculiar features of its medieval tradition.

In about three decades, with the efforts of the members of the Conservatory various possible links with the older generations doing an extensive fieldwork have been researched and documented. In the long chain of the *maryada*, each master is a fundamental link that connects the Sikh Gurus' time to the present. Like a weaver interlacing the past with the present, Anad Conservatory played an essential role in the revival movement of Gurbani Sangeet tradition, reconnecting and transmitting the knowledge of ancient masters with the contemporary generation, restoring the fragile canvas of the oral tradition.

After witnessing the violence perpetrated by the police, I hope that Sultanpur Lodhi's children will not learn that the final lesson is all about intolerance. It's ironic and tragic that this is happening in the very place where Guru Nanak started spreading his message of justice, tolerance and peace.

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## BROAD BRUSH A SPECTRUM SELECTION



### THE BLUE OF THE EYE

A creation by French visual artist Claude Leveque, at the Soulages museum in Rodez, southwestern France, as part of Leveque's exhibition "The blue of the eye". The exhibition reopened recently after being closed for two weeks following unexplained deterioration. PHOTO: AFP / REMY GABALDA



### RAIN ROOM

A visitor, dressed in traditional Chinese clothing, poses for a picture in the Rain Room exhibition by the artists of Random International, at the Yuz Museum in Shanghai. The large-scale artwork created by the British-German artist collective shows "perpetually falling water that ceases to pour wherever a person walks". PHOTO: AFP / JOHANNES EISELE