

Who Speaks the Punjabi Psalm

Authorship Erasure and Music Authority in the Punjabi Zaboor

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Abstract

The Punjabi Zaboor is one of the most durable bodies of Christian song in Punjab. Its 150 metrical Psalms entered worship through a process that joined biblical translation, Punjabi poetry, raag based composition, oral performance, Western staff notation and mission print culture. That process was collaborative, yet its participants did not receive equal recognition. Imam ud Din Shahbaz is remembered as the poet translator, while Radha Kishan, the Hindu professional singer associated with the musical settings, and the itinerant musicians whose repertoire informed missionary listening practices remain less visible. This paper reads the Zaboor as a case of distributed authorship shaped by unequal archival power. It asks how a melody moves from embodied memory into a printed and citable object, and how that movement determines who can be named as an author. It then considers the Zaboor's continuing authority among Punjabi Christians, particularly where communal singing sustains religious memory beyond the security of buildings and institutions. The paper argues that the Zaboor's authenticity does not depend on a pure origin. It rests in a long history of translation, negotiation and repeated use. Recovering that history does not weaken Christian belonging. It makes the tradition's Punjabi formation more fully audible.

Keywords Punjabi Zaboor, authorship, oral tradition, archive, Music authority, Punjabi Christianity, artistic research

Introduction

On 16 August 2023, a mob attacked the Christian neighbourhoods of Jaranwala in Punjab. Pakistan's National Commission for Human Rights later recorded the destruction of twenty two churches and eighty homes (National Commission for Human Rights 2023). The scale of the attack made the vulnerability of Christian institutions painfully visible. Buildings, books and instruments can be damaged within hours. A melody carried by a congregation is harder to remove.

This difference between institutional possession and embodied memory provides the starting point for this paper. Punjabi Christian communities have sung the Zaboor, the biblical Psalms rendered in Punjabi poetic metre and local musical forms, for more than a century. The repertoire is heard in churches, homes, prayer meetings and gatherings across Pakistan and the diaspora. It is learned through repetition as much as through reading. For many worshippers, its sound is inseparable from Christian life in Punjab (Brink and Sarwar 2015; Sarwar 2021).

The Zaboor also carries a less settled history. Its production depended on a mission committee, a Punjabi poet translator, a Hindu professional singer, local melodic knowledge, transcribers trained in Western notation and the institutional machinery of print. The finished object appears coherent, but the work behind it was distributed across languages, religions, social positions and forms of literacy. Some contributors became visible in the archive. Others survived only in secondary accounts, brief acknowledgements or unnamed categories.

I argue that the Punjabi Zaboor should be understood as distributed authorship shaped by unequal recognition. The question is not only who contributed words or tunes. It is also which forms of labour became legible to the institution that printed and preserved the Psalter. Translation, editorial approval and notation produced durable names. Oral knowledge, performance and melodic memory were easier to absorb without equivalent credit.

The paper draws on published histories of the Punjabi Psalter, scholarship on the harmonium and mission music, and the author's artistic research presented at ADPRex X APARN 2026. It does not claim to reconstruct every

contributor or settle every disputed detail. Instead, it treats gaps in the record as part of the subject. What an archive cannot name may still have been essential to what a community learned to sing.

From Imported Hymnody to Punjabi Psalmody

Protestant mission activity expanded in nineteenth century Punjab within the political order created by British annexation. Mission organisations brought translated scripture, hymn books and European assumptions about congregational song. Instruments also travelled through these networks. The harmonium, portable and mechanically suited to sustained accompaniment, became increasingly common in Christian worship before moving through other devotional settings in North India. Its later presence in Sikh kirtan and other traditions shows that an imported instrument did not retain a single religious identity (Bhokal 2022).

The early problem was therefore not simply whether a European instrument could be used in Punjab. It was whether translated Christian song could inhabit Punjabi speech, poetic rhythm and melodic expectation. Attempts to pair biblical texts with English or Urdu language and Western tunes did not establish the desired connection among congregations whose ordinary language was Punjabi. A text could be doctrinally acceptable and still remain distant in the body. The failure exposed the limits of translation understood as the transfer of words alone.

The United Presbyterian mission responded by seeking writers and musicians able to work within Punjabi language and music. Imam ud Din Shahbaz, a Punjabi evangelist and poet who had converted from Islam, became the central literary figure. He developed the metrical Punjabi rendering of all 150 Psalms. Accounts of the project describe his work as attentive to several textual traditions, including Urdu, Persian and English, with later evaluation against Hebrew sources (Sadiq 2020; Brink and Sarwar 2015).

The surviving history also identifies Radha Kishan, a Hindu professional singer, as the musician who fitted raag based melodies to Shahbaz's verse. Shahbaz and Radha Kishan and Ram worked through repeated singing until verbal metre and melodic line met. A committee member then wrote the tune in Western staff notation, after which the material could be reviewed and printed (Brink and Sarwar 2015; Sarwar 2021). This sequence matters because it shows composition as a social process rather than a solitary act. The poem changed in relation to the tune, and the tune became fixed through performance, listening and transcription.

The complete Psalter was published in 1908 with 405 poetic sections set within an indigenous musical system (Sarwar 2021). Roman Punjabi and Western notation made the collection usable within mission print networks. Those choices also placed the repertoire within a technical system controlled by people who could read the chosen script and notation. The publication preserved the music, but preservation was inseparable from institutional mediation.

The Labour Behind the Printed Page

A title page creates a narrow picture of authorship. It can name a translator, editor or institution, but it rarely shows the repetitions, corrections, performances and acts of listening from which a song emerged. The Punjabi Zaboor makes this problem unusually clear. Shahbaz's literary labour was substantial and deserves its place in the record. The difficulty begins when that visible contribution is allowed to stand for the entire creative process.

Ram and Radha Kishan's role was not the work of a performer added after composition. Published accounts credit him with creating or shaping the raag based musical settings through direct work with Shahbaz (Sarwar 2021). The melody did not simply decorate a finished translation. It participated in the form the words could take when sung. In a metrical Psalter, the relation between syllable, stress, rhythmic cycle and melodic phrase is structural. Musical judgement belongs inside authorship, even when a print institution assigns it a different status.

The record becomes still less stable around the broader sources of musical material. Missionaries listened to professional and itinerant musicians, often described through the broad social category mirasi, and wrote down

local airs for Christian use. Bhogal's study of the harmonium traces missionary dependence on such musicians and quotes historical accounts of tunes collected in markets and other public settings (Bhogal 2022). Mirasi communities carried extensive repertoires as performers, genealogists and custodians of oral memory, while often occupying low social status. Their usefulness to mission music did not ensure that individual musicians would be identified.

This does not mean that every melody in the Zaboor can be assigned to an unnamed mirasi source. The available evidence cannot support that claim. It does show that the musical environment from which the Psalter emerged was larger than the named committee. Local repertoire entered the project through listening, selection, adaptation and recollection. When the source musician remained unnamed, an institution could preserve the tune while detaching it from the person or community that carried it.

Women connected to the mission also took part in transcription and evaluation. Their work translated performed sound into staff notation and prepared it for circulation. This labour was skilled, but it occupied a different institutional position from the musical knowledge being recorded. The contrast is not between valuable notation and authentic orality. Both were necessary. The issue is that notation entered the archive with a traceable hand, while the earlier chain of transmission could disappear behind a general description such as local tune.

Notation and Archival Authority

A melody does not begin to exist when it is written. It already exists in breath, gesture, repetition and memory. Yet notation changes what can be done with it. A notated melody can be printed in multiple copies, carried between congregations, taught by readers who never met its first performers and stored within an institutional collection. It becomes stable enough to cite, compare and claim.

In the production of the Zaboor, Western staff notation therefore worked as more than a neutral recording device. It was a technology of archival authority. The transcribed version became the version that could pass through committee review and print. Variation that belonged naturally to oral performance was narrowed into a reproducible object. The institution gained a durable text, while authorship moved toward the people and practices that the archive could identify.

Script produced a related effect. Punjabi circulates in Gurmukhi, Shahmukhi and, in some contexts, Devanagari, each carrying histories of region, religion and education. The early Psalter's use of Roman Punjabi assisted missionaries who did not read the region's other scripts (Brink and Sarwar 2015; Sadiq 2020). It also created a work that sounded local while entering print through a script associated with the mission. Sound and page did not tell the same story of belonging.

These choices should not be reduced to a simple accusation of cultural theft. The committee was solving practical problems of worship, translation and distribution, and its work helped sustain an enduring repertoire. At the same time, practical systems carry power. A notation system determines what can be fixed. A script determines who can read. A title page determines who can be recalled without further research. The achievement of the Zaboor and the inequality of its record belong to the same history.

Authorship in a Third Space

Homi Bhabha's account of the Third Space helps describe cultural meaning produced through negotiation rather than inherited intact from either side of a colonial encounter (Bhabha 1994). The Punjabi Zaboor did not arise from a complete Western hymn translated into local colour, nor from an untouched Punjabi folk form. Biblical text, mission theology, Punjabi verse, raag, oral repertoire and print practice met within a field of unequal relations.

The concept is useful only if it does not turn inequality into a reassuring story of mixture. Collaboration occurred, but the collaborators did not possess the same authority. Mission committees controlled approval and publication. Shahbaz held literary and theological authority. Radha Kishan brought professional musical knowledge. Unnamed performers contributed to the wider reservoir of melody. Transcribers transformed sound into a printable system. Congregations later decided, through sustained use, which pieces would live.

No single contribution can stand for the whole. The work's authorship is distributed across functions that conventional credit lines separate or ignore. At the same time, distributed authorship does not mean that responsibility and recognition become vague. It demands more precise attribution. Where a name is known, it should be restored. Where only a community or practice can be identified, the limit should be stated rather than filled with certainty.

This approach also changes the meaning of authenticity. The Zaboor is authentically Punjabi because its language and music became meaningful within Punjabi life. That authenticity was made through contact across religious boundaries. A Muslim convert shaped the poetry, a Hindu singer helped shape the melodies, Christian institutions authorised the book, and congregations made it devotional practice. Purity of origin is neither historically available nor necessary.

The Bible of the Ear

Punjabi Psalm singing developed in communities where access to formal literacy was uneven. The repertoire could therefore function as scripture carried through the ear. Worshippers learned words, melodic routes and rhythmic placement by hearing them repeatedly in daily prayer and congregational worship. Sarwar's account of Pakistani Psalm practice describes morning and evening singing, with specific raags associated with particular texts and times of day (Brink and Sarwar 2015).

Calling the Zaboor a Bible of the ear does not romanticise illiteracy. It identifies a different mode of possession. A printed copy may be held by an institution or an individual reader. A memorised Psalm exists across many bodies at once. It can be recalled without access to a page and renewed whenever people sing together. This form of transmission helps explain both the resilience of the repertoire and the difficulty of assigning its life to a single author.

Oral transmission also makes forgetting possible. Congregations can preserve a melody precisely while losing the history of how it entered the book. Repetition keeps the sound alive, but it does not automatically preserve the names attached to its creation. The community remembers the Psalm; the publication remembers the committee; the musician between them may vanish.

This distinction between musical survival and historical memory is central to the paper's argument. The Zaboor's continuing life is not evidence that the archive treated every contributor fairly. Nor does incomplete credit invalidate the devotion of those who inherited it. The task is to hold both truths together: a tradition can be genuinely possessed by a community and still require a fuller account of the labour that made it possible.

Music Authority Under Pressure

The continuing authority of the Zaboor becomes most visible when Christian institutions are threatened. The attacks in Jaranwala destroyed buildings and homes, but the religious identity of a community does not reside only in property. Singing can reassemble a congregation in a street, a damaged sanctuary or a private room. It produces a temporary sacred space through shared breath and remembered text.

Here sonic authority differs from institutional authority. Institutional authority depends on recognised offices, buildings, documents and legal possession. Sonic authority emerges when people sound a tradition together and

recognise one another through it. The claim is modest but consequential: we remain present, and we still know what to sing.

The Zaboor is especially suited to this work because the Psalms hold praise, fear, lament, accusation and hope within the same repertoire. Their vernacular form permits scripture to be voiced in the language of ordinary life. Their melodic familiarity reduces the need for preparation. A known opening phrase can gather dispersed memory quickly.

This does not make singing a substitute for protection, justice or material rebuilding. Nor should violence become an aesthetic backdrop for a discussion of music. The point is narrower. When a building is taken away, a memorised repertoire allows communal religious speech to continue. The authority of that speech lies in use rather than ownership documents.

From Print to Platform

Digital circulation has introduced another technology of legibility. Recordings of Punjabi Psalms now move through YouTube channels, social media clips, studio sessions and diaspora worship. Older melodies may be arranged with guitar, keyboard, tabla and dholak. Singers can reach audiences far beyond a local congregation, and listeners can replay a Psalm without owning a printed Psalter.

The platform expands access, but it also creates a new credit line. A file has an uploader, a channel name, a title and searchable metadata. These fields can make one arranger or performer highly visible while the earlier chain of composition and transmission remains hidden. The technology differs from staff notation, yet the institutional question is familiar: whose name is attached when sound enters a system that can circulate and count it?

Digital practice can also repair historical memory. Descriptions can name Shahbaz and Radha Kishan. Videos can show the source edition, explain the raag and distinguish inherited melody from a new arrangement. Archives can link scans, recordings and commentary. Attribution need not remain limited to a single author field if the platform is used carefully.

The movement from the 1908 book to the contemporary upload therefore does not replace one history with another. It repeats the problem under new conditions. A melody becomes easier to circulate when it enters a recognised technical form. That form can preserve sound, but it can also concentrate visibility around the person who controls the inscription, publication or upload.

Conclusion

The Punjabi Zaboor endures because it became more than a translated book. It became a learned sound. Shahbaz's Punjabi verse, Ram and Radha Kishan's musical work, the wider field of local repertoire, the labour of transcribers, the authority of mission committees and the practice of congregations all contributed to that result.

A single author model cannot describe this process. Authorship was distributed, while recognition was selective. The archive favoured work it could stabilise in text, notation and institutional office. Embodied musical knowledge was essential to the Psalter's Punjabi character but less likely to receive durable credit.

Recovering this history is not an attempt to take the Zaboor away from Punjabi Christians. Its present belonging has been made through generations of worship, memory and use. Historical honesty deepens that belonging by showing that Christian sound in Punjab grew through sustained contact with the region's shared musical life.

The final question is therefore not simply who wrote the Punjabi Zaboor. It is who became visible once the music entered print, and who remained audible without being named. If Radha Kishan's name had stood beside Shahbaz's on the title page, the Psalter might still be heard as Christian scripture in song. It would also be harder to forget that its sacred authority was shaped through Punjabi collaboration across religious and social boundaries.

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