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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TABLA COMPOSITIONS ACROSS MAJOR GHARANAS: TRADITION, STYLE, AND EVOLUTION

Jayotirmay Das

Research Scholar, Jayoti Vidyapeeth Women's University, Jaipur, Rajasthan

Dr. Ritu Sharma

Research Supervisor, Jayoti Vidyapeeth Women's University, Jaipur, Rajasthan

ABSTRACT

Tabla occupies a central position in North Indian classical music as both an accompanying instrument and an independent solo instrument. Its repertoire has developed through distinctive gharanas, each associated with particular techniques, compositional structures, tonal preferences, rhythmic approaches, and systems of oral transmission. The six widely recognized traditions—Delhi, Ajrada, Lucknow, Farrukhabad, Banaras, and Punjab—provide an important framework for understanding the diversity of tabla compositions. This paper comparatively examines the compositional practices of these gharanas with particular attention to peshkar, kayda, rela, gat, tukra, paran, tihai, chakradar, and related forms. It considers how differences in baaj, pakhawaj influence, regional cultural environments, guru–shishya parampara, and performance contexts shaped repertoire. The study also examines the increasing interaction among gharanas and the transformation of traditional repertoire through institutional education, recordings, concert culture, and contemporary performance. The analysis demonstrates that gharana identities remain significant while contemporary tabla practice increasingly incorporates elements from multiple traditions.

Keywords: Tabla, Gharana, Baaj, Kayda, Peshkar, Rela, Gat, Paran, Tihai, Hindustani Classical Music

I. INTRODUCTION

Tabla is one of the most important percussion instruments of North Indian classical music and occupies a distinctive position because of its dual function as an accompaniment instrument and a solo performance instrument. The instrument consists principally of the *dayan* and *bayan*, whose contrasting tonal characteristics permit the performer to create a wide range of rhythmic and sonic patterns. Tabla repertoire is not simply a collection of rhythmic phrases; it represents an organized musical language consisting of *bols*, *talas*, compositional structures, variations, cadences, and improvisational procedures. Contemporary academic curricula recognize six major tabla *gharanas*—Delhi, *Ajrada*, Lucknow, Farrukhabad, Banaras, and Punjab—and identify compositional forms such as *peshkar*, *uthan*, *kayda*, *rela*, *gat*, *tihai*, *chakradar*, and *laggi* as important components of tabla study.

The concept of *gharana* is particularly significant in tabla because repertoire and technique were historically transmitted through hereditary and teacher-disciple lineages. A *gharana* may be understood as an artistic lineage possessing recognizable approaches to hand technique, sound production, rhythmic construction, phraseology, repertoire, and performance aesthetics. Historical accounts indicate that Delhi and Lucknow became important centres from which several later traditions developed. The *Ajrada* lineage emerged in relation to Delhi, while Farrukhabad was strongly connected with Lucknow. Banaras developed a distinctive tradition associated with Pandit Ram Sahai, while Punjab developed a style with substantial *pakhawaj* influence.

Comparison among *gharanas* is useful because similar compositional categories may exhibit different musical characteristics according to lineage. A *kayda*, for example, is not merely a fixed rhythmic formula; its development, *bol* selection, phrase organization, and variation patterns may differ according to stylistic tradition. Similarly, *gat*, *paran*, *tukra*, and *chakradar* may demonstrate different relationships between rhythmic density, open and closed strokes, *pakhawaj*-derived vocabulary, and cadential design. Gottlieb's documentation of major tabla traditions emphasizes the importance of examining actual performance and transcription when studying these differences.

The present paper therefore adopts a comparative approach to examine how major tabla *gharanas* preserve distinctive identities while simultaneously participating in a shared musical

system. The study considers tradition, style, repertoire, pedagogy, and historical transformation as interconnected dimensions. Rather than treating gharanas as completely isolated categories, it recognizes historical interaction and contemporary exchange between them. This is particularly important because modern musicians frequently learn from teachers belonging to different traditions, while recordings, universities, festivals, and digital media have expanded access to previously localized repertoires. The comparative study consequently seeks to understand both diversity and continuity within tabla tradition.

II. HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT OF MAJOR TABLA GHARANAS

The historical development of tabla gharanas cannot be separated from the wider evolution of North Indian rhythmic music. The precise origin of the tabla remains debated, and different narratives have associated the instrument with earlier percussion traditions. Modern historical discussion generally places the development of the recognizable tabla tradition in the early-modern period, while emphasizing that the association of the instrument with particular historical personalities must be treated cautiously. The Indian Express, discussing contemporary scholarship and musicians' accounts, notes that the tabla's widespread development is connected with the changing musical environment of North Indian classical music and the transition from older pakhawaj-centred traditions toward newer performance practices.

Delhi is widely regarded as one of the foundational centres of tabla playing. The Delhi tradition developed a characteristic baaj involving refined finger articulation and a repertoire particularly associated with theme-and-variation structures such as peshkar and kayda. The Delhi approach contributed substantially to the development of an elaborate solo repertoire in which a basic composition is progressively expanded through variations while retaining its structural identity. Historical descriptions also associate Delhi playing with delicate articulation and relatively greater emphasis on the rim of the drum. These features demonstrate how technique and composition became mutually reinforcing components of gharana identity.

Ajrada emerged as another important tradition connected historically with the Delhi lineage. Although related to Delhi in several respects, Ajrada developed distinctive rhythmic and technical characteristics. Historical descriptions point to the greater use of the ring finger and

a particular interest in complex rhythmic organization. Traditional Ajrada compositions are also associated with distinctive rhythmic groupings and sophisticated approaches to variation. Thus, the Ajrada tradition demonstrates that gharana development was not simply a matter of geographical separation but involved reinterpretation of inherited technical and compositional materials.

Lucknow represents a major development in the eastern or Purab-oriented stream of tabla playing. Its musical environment was strongly influenced by the courtly culture of Awadh and by Kathak dance. The development of Lucknow tabla occurred within a wider cultural environment in which music, dance, poetry, and refined courtly aesthetics interacted. Kippen's detailed study of the Lucknow tradition demonstrates that its identity can be understood through social history, hereditary musicianship, technique, repertoire, and changing patterns of musical education. The repertoire includes theme-and-variation compositions as well as fixed compositions such as gat, tukra, uthan, mohra, paran, and chakradar.

Farrukhabad developed from the wider eastern tradition and became particularly influential because of its sophisticated repertoire and major performers. The tradition is often associated with a balanced integration of technical refinement, melodic sensitivity, and compositional variety. Haji Vilayat Ali Khan played an important role in the development and preservation of the Farrukhabad repertoire, while later performers such as Ahmed Jan Thirakwa contributed to its wider dissemination. The existence of compositions attributed to specific lineages illustrates the importance of named repertoire in maintaining gharana identity. A published catalogue of tabla compositions, for example, separately documents compositions associated with Delhi, Ajrada, Lucknow, Farrukhabad, Banaras, and Punjab traditions.

Banaras developed a highly recognizable style under Pandit Ram Sahai. The Banaras tradition has maintained strong associations with pakhawaj-derived techniques, powerful articulation, and compositions suited to energetic solo performance. Its repertoire has also maintained a strong connection with dance and ceremonial performance traditions. Punjab represents another major stream in which pakhawaj influence is particularly important. Punjab playing developed distinctive approaches to rhythm and bol construction, including sophisticated mathematical treatment of rhythmic divisions. The six traditions therefore represent different historical pathways through which tabla technique and composition developed rather than six completely isolated musical systems.

III. COMPARATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF TABLA COMPOSITIONS ACROSS GHARANAS

The comparative study of tabla compositions requires attention to both compositional form and performance language. Peshkar and kayda are strongly associated with the development-oriented repertoire of tabla solo performance. In a typical theme-and-variation approach, the performer establishes a basic rhythmic idea and develops it through successive variations, while maintaining recognizable relationships with the original composition. Delhi is particularly associated with peshkar and kayda, while other gharanas have developed their own approaches to these forms. The existence of shared forms demonstrates common foundations, whereas differences in bols, finger techniques, phrase lengths, rhythmic subdivisions, and methods of development reveal stylistic identity.

Rela is another important compositional category characterized by rapid and flowing rhythmic movement. Its performance requires precision, control, clarity, and coordination between the two drums. Different gharanas may approach rela through different bol combinations and technical preferences. In some traditions, rela emphasizes speed and continuity, whereas in others the composition may incorporate more open resonant sounds or pakhawaj-derived vocabulary. The distinction is therefore not simply quantitative; the same compositional label can represent different aesthetic priorities. Academic tabla curricula place rela alongside peshkar, kayda, gat, tihai, and chakradar as central elements of the repertoire.

Fixed compositions such as gat, tukra, paran, and chakradar illustrate another dimension of gharana identity. Lucknow, Farrukhabad, and Banaras developed particularly rich traditions of such compositions. Lucknow's repertoire is historically connected with Kathak and therefore demonstrates a strong relationship between rhythmic composition and dance aesthetics. Gats and tukras may contain highly articulate phrase patterns, while parans preserve elements of pakhawaj-derived rhythmic vocabulary. Chakradars, with their repeated phrase structures and symmetrical cadential organization, demonstrate the relationship between mathematical construction and musical expression.

Tihai represents a particularly important link between composition and rhythmic closure. A tihai generally involves the repetition of a phrase three times so that the final stroke arrives at an intended structural point, frequently the sam. The form can be simple or highly complex,

depending on phrase length, spacing, rhythmic subdivision, and starting point. Chakradar compositions may expand this principle through larger symmetrical constructions. The ability to calculate these relationships demonstrates the importance of layakari in tabla performance. Contemporary tabla syllabi explicitly include thah, dugun, tigon, chaugun, and more complex proportional relationships as part of advanced rhythmic study.

The distinction between Dilli baaj and Purab baaj provides another useful comparative framework. Historical descriptions associate Delhi and Ajrada with a more finger-oriented approach, while Lucknow, Farrukhabad, and Banaras developed approaches incorporating greater use of open and pakhawaj-influenced techniques. Punjab occupies a somewhat different position because its repertoire contains strong pakhawaj connections while also incorporating characteristics from other traditions. Such categories should not be treated as rigid boundaries. Scholarship on tabla explicitly cautions against reducing complex traditions to simple geographical divisions because individual gharanas contain internal variation and historical interaction.

The comparison ultimately reveals that tabla compositions are simultaneously standardized and flexible. Names such as kayda, rela, gat, tukra, paran, and tihai provide recognizable categories, but their realization depends on the performer, lineage, tal, tempo, and performance context. A composition inherited from a teacher may be preserved substantially, modified through variations, or incorporated into a new sequence. This capacity for continuity through modification is one of the central characteristics of tabla tradition. Rather than being a static archive, the repertoire functions as a living musical language.

IV. TRADITION, TRANSMISSION, AND CONTEMPORARY EVOLUTION OF GHARANA REPERTOIRES

The traditional transmission of tabla repertoire was closely associated with guru–shishya parampara. Knowledge was transmitted through repeated listening, imitation, memorization, recitation of bols, physical demonstration, and extensive riyaz. The student learned not merely the notation or external structure of a composition but also its pronunciation, articulation, sound quality, hand movement, tempo, and appropriate performance context. Kippen's study of Lucknow distinguishes the traditional gharana system of learning from institutionalized forms of music education and demonstrates how changing educational structures influence musical practice.

Oral transmission is particularly significant because many tabla compositions were not historically dependent on written notation. The performer internalized compositions through bol recitation and repeated practice. This method permitted subtle variations and individualized interpretation, but it also meant that certain compositions remained restricted to particular lineages. The cultural documentation of Banaras tabla similarly notes that extensive repertoires have been transmitted across generations and that particular compositions can be associated with founding members of family traditions.

The twentieth century introduced major changes in the transmission of tabla knowledge. Music colleges, universities, radio, recordings, public concerts, and examinations expanded access beyond hereditary families. Kippen identifies institutional education as an important factor in musical change, while contemporary university curricula explicitly organize tabla learning around gharanas, talas, compositional forms, layakari, and notation. This institutionalization has helped preserve terminology and repertoire while also making the material available to students who do not belong to traditional hereditary families.

Recording technology has also changed the relationship between gharana and repertoire. A student can now hear performances by artists from different traditions and study stylistic differences without physically travelling to each musical centre. This accessibility has contributed to cross-gharana learning. At the same time, recordings encourage a more standardized understanding of performance because particular interpretations become widely circulated and imitated. Contemporary tabla artists may therefore possess a repertoire that includes compositions associated with several traditions while maintaining a primary stylistic identity.

The interaction among gharanas has become increasingly visible in contemporary tabla. Historical sources emphasize that the traditions influenced one another, and modern discussions similarly note increased mixing of styles and compositions. This does not necessarily eliminate gharana identity. Instead, it creates a layered musical identity in which a performer may preserve characteristic bols, hand techniques, and aesthetic principles inherited from one lineage while incorporating compositions or approaches learned elsewhere.

The evolution of tabla composition therefore involves both preservation and transformation. Traditional compositions remain important because they embody historical memory and

stylistic identity. At the same time, contemporary performers adapt repertoire to concert duration, accompaniment requirements, collaborative performances, fusion projects, educational settings, and international audiences. The major challenge is to maintain the internal logic of traditional compositions while allowing musicians sufficient creative freedom. The continuing presence of gharana-based repertoire in formal music education suggests that tradition remains relevant, even as the social conditions of its transmission have changed.

V. CONCLUSION

The comparative examination of tabla compositions across the major gharanas demonstrates that the instrument possesses a remarkably diverse yet interconnected musical tradition. Delhi, Ajrada, Lucknow, Farrukhabad, Banaras, and Punjab each developed identifiable approaches to technique, repertoire, sound production, rhythmic organization, and performance. Their differences emerged from historical circumstances, regional cultures, relationships with court and dance traditions, pakhawaj influence, and hereditary systems of musical transmission. At the same time, these traditions share a common language of bols, talas, compositional structures, improvisation, and rhythmic calculation.

The comparison of peshkar, kayda, rela, gat, tukra, paran, tihai, and chakradar demonstrates that compositional names alone cannot fully explain gharana identity. Each form acquires distinctive musical characteristics through phrase construction, stroke selection, articulation, rhythmic subdivision, tonal treatment, and methods of development. Delhi's association with theme-and-variation structures, the eastern traditions' strong fixed-composition repertoire, and the pakhawaj-oriented characteristics of Banaras and Punjab illustrate broad tendencies rather than absolute rules. Individual musicians and lineages have always contributed variation to these categories.

The modern evolution of tabla has significantly changed the mechanisms through which compositions are learned and transmitted. Guru–shishya parampara remains influential, but universities, music schools, recordings, examinations, festivals, and digital resources have expanded access to tabla knowledge. As a result, contemporary performers frequently encounter compositions and techniques beyond their immediate gharana. Cross-gharana interaction has become an important characteristic of present-day practice, allowing

musicians to develop broader repertoires while retaining connections with their primary traditions.

Thus, tabla gharanas should be understood as living musical traditions rather than rigid historical compartments. Their importance lies not only in preserving old compositions but also in providing aesthetic principles through which musicians interpret, develop, and create rhythmic music. The continuing study of traditional repertoire alongside contemporary performance can help preserve the diversity of tabla while acknowledging its natural evolution. Comparative research, systematic documentation, archival recordings, and responsible teaching can further strengthen understanding of this important component of North Indian classical music.

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