

Gharanas of Tabla

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INTRODUCTION

Two western scholars have done great service to the study of gharanas of tabla. Robert S. Gottlieb has analyzed recordings of six masters of tabla belonging to six gharanas.¹ The great tabla players are Inam Ali Khan (Delhi), Karamatullah Khan (Farukhabad), Wazid Hussain (Lucknow), Kishan Maharaj (Banaras), Habibuddin Khan (Ajrara) and Alla Rakha (Punjab). He has not only recorded these performances but also transcribed them in Indian and Western notation. On the other hand, James Kippen has made special study of the tabla of Lucknow.² His teacher was Afaq Hussain, and Kippen has written not only on the technique of Lucknow gharana but also its repertoire. He has transcribed about thirty important examples of Lucknow repertoire.

Robert S. Gottlieb has divided six gharanas into three styles according to Pakhawaj influence. "These three styles will be referred to as the Delhi style, the Purab style and the Pakhawaj style."³ Ajrara pursues Delhi style since it is an off-shoot of the Delhi gharana. Lucknow and Farukhabad pursue the Purab style (east of Delhi) since they are stylistically similar. The third one, Pakhawaj style, includes both Banaras and Punjab gharanas since Pakhawaj is a dominating influence in these gharanas. Banaras and Punjab are geographically apart but Pakhawaj influence is the common factor of these two gharanas.

Gharanas in tabla run parallel to gharanas of Khayal in Hindustani music. Just as Gwalior is the oldest gharana in vocal music, so Delhi is the oldest gharana in tabla. Delhi gave birth to the Lucknow gharana whose founder, Miyan Bikshu Khan, originally came from Delhi. Farukhabad and Banaras are off-shoot of the Lucknow gharana, just as Ajrara is an off-shoot of the Delhi gharana. Only the Punjab gharana in tabla, like the Patiala gharana in vocal music had independent existence.

Amir Khusro may have discovered tabla but the real father of modern tabla is Sudhar Khan, founder of the Delhi gharana. Every subsequent tabla Player owes something to him. He was the pioneer of present-day tabla. He was the discoverer of the main repertoire of tabla.

I. THE DELHI GHARANA

The best contribution of the Delhi gharana was that it standardized the repertoire of tabla. Because of Delhi, every gharana plays mohra, peshkar, qaida, rela, tukra, gat and chakardar. Delhi's most outstanding contribution was in the realm of qaida. Delhi players had

great gift for improvising variations on the basic theme of qaida. In this respect, Delhi gharana was a pioneer, because other gharanas merely elaborated the basic structure of Delhi qaidas.

The Delhi gharana leads all other gharanas in the brilliance of its sonority. This is caused by the fact that the Delhi gharana uses the first and the second finger of the right and left hand. It is the ideal gharana for accompaniment of vocal and instrumental music. According to Gottlieb, "The Delhi style is the purest style as Pakhawaj bols are not used. Characteristic bol patterns of the Delhi gharana are: *Dhi, na, Gena, tete, tkt, Dhage, Dhati*.... Thus some clarity is also a prominent feature of Ajrara style, although the fingering patterns of this gharana tend to be more complex: *ge ta ke, dha tri ke, Dhina gena take*."⁴

Sudhar Khan was founder of the Delhi gharana in the eighteenth century. According to Ebon E Mistry, Sudhar Khan "moulded the tabla in such a way that its form and shape appeared totally different from Pakhawaj. He made the *Khulla* (open) words of Pakhawaj appropriately playable on tabla, brought welcome changes in the finger placement and striking style on tabla, and took a bold, revolutionary step by creating new innovations on *Chaanti*."⁵ For this reason, the Delhi gharana came to be known as Kinar-ka-baaj.

Miyan Bikshu Khan, grandson of Sudhar Khan, was founder of the Lucknow gharana. Another grandson of Sudhar Khan, Sitaab Khan, was teacher of Kalu Khan and Meru Khan, who became founders of the Ajrara gharana. In this way, the Delhi gharana became the source of all other gharanas. One Delhi qaida of Nathu Khan became famous: *Dha Ti Te, Dha Ti te, Dha Dha ...* Shafat Ahmad is a leading exponent of Delhi gharana at present. He accompanies many leading players. Delhi baaj has following chief characteristics:

Firstly, it is mild and mellifluous. It makes use of two fingers and maximum use of the fore-finger (Index) and the middle finger. These two fingers are used alternatively.

Secondly, this is Kinar-ka-baaj. Since they play mostly on *Chaanti*, there are no lingering vibrations. Hence it is known as *Bandh* baaj or close baaj.

Thirdly, there are no longer Parans or forceful Chakradar Parans as they are found in Purab baaj.

Fourthly, in the *Daga* or *Baya* baaj, the wrist is never lifted from the instrument and the first two fingers are extensively used.

Ebon E. Mistry has this to say about this baaj: "Melodious, soft and pleasing to the ear with conscious control over sound, this Baaj leaves a lasting impression on scholars and audience."⁶

II. THE AJRARA GHARANA

The Ajrara gharana follows a different style. It is usually in Ar or oblique rhythm. The phrases are usually subdivided into patterns of three, six and twelve, which are performed to

the time interval of an even number of matras. This can be seen in Goetleib's recording of Habibuddin Khan. Goetleib describes the peculiar grace of Ajrara gharana in the following words: "The charm and beauty of the Ajrara style is also due to the fact that chhand ('metrical pattern') is performed in a very flexible way. Chhand is an important characteristic of gharana style as it pertains to the distinctive manner in which the rhythmic patterns are varied slightly in performance from their strictly measured division of timing."⁷

The reason why the Ajrara gharana came into existence lies in the fact that Kalu Khan and Meru Khan created new bandishes in Ajrara after getting thorough training in tabla in Delhi. The second reason was that it had different chhand of varied patterns which differed from the one prevalent in Delhi. The greatest tabla player of the Ajrara gharana was Habibuddin Khan. I had the privilege to hear him in Alwar and he cast a hypnotic spell on me.

The chief characteristic of Ajrara gharana are as follows:

Firstly, the qaidas are composed in *Tryasha Jaati*. This specialisation in *laya* gave them the status of a new gharana.

Secondly, Ajrara tabla-players were fond of creating vibrations and meend on *Daga*: These matched with the *bols* on *dahina*.

Thirdly, they started the use of the third and the fourth finger.

Fourthly, Ajrara qaidas had unusual symmetry and balance. Ebon E Mistry considers Ajrara baaj as 'pure tabla'.⁸ This is the reason why learned musicians still cherish this difficult baaj.

III. THE LUCKNOW GHARANA

James Kippen has written a useful book, *The Tabla of Lucknow*, recalls all the art he inherited from Khalifa Afaq Hussain. The best chapter is on the repertoire of the Lucknow gharana. Here, he has noted all qaidas and gats that he learnt from his masters.

The Lucknow gharana produced three outstanding tabla players twentieth century. The greatest tabla player was Khalifa Abid Hussain.⁹ James Kippen rightly says, "with reference to the history of the Lucknow tabla gharana it will be remembered that the untimely death of Munne Khan in 1890 left Abid Hussain unprepared to assume the mantle of Khalifa. Only by the means of a supreme effort was he able to salvage something of the gharana's knowledge and so propagated the musical tradition."¹⁰

The next leading player was Khalifa Wajid Hussain. In our times, the Khalifa was Afaq Hussain, who was James Kippen's teacher. Kippen has said about Afaq Hussain that so great was his skill to improvise that he could play fifty variations on one qaida.

Rang is the speciality of the Lucknow gharana. It is different from Rela because it uses *ta* (Sur) and *tena dhene*. Rang corresponds to tone colour in western music. Just as in western music, every instrument has its own tone colour, similarly the Lucknow tabla has its own

peculiar sonority or rang. According to Kippen, rang was invented by Salari Khan, a disciple of Miyan Bikshu Khan. Rang-rela makes aesthetic use of Rang. This is the special contribution of the Lucknow gharana.

Kippen makes a useful point about differences between the Lucknow and the Delhi style of playing, "Indeed, so important is *Sur ta* to the Lucknow style that the term *sur ka baaj* (Sur Style) has often been used to distinguish this from *kinar-ka-baaj*, as prevalent in the Delhi style of playing."¹¹ This is a crucial difference between the two leading gharanas of tabla. Also, the Lucknow style was evolved to suit the requirements of Thumri and Kathak even as the Delhi style was meant for Khayal and instrumental music.

The tabla tradition can be fluid within the same gharana and in the same family. This can be seen from the example of Wajid Hussain and Afaq Hussain. Wajid Hussain had preference for rela and gat while Afaq Hussain had preference for qaida and *chhand*.¹² This shows how tabla repertoire keeps changing from generation to generation.

New forms need new styles. Kathak and Thumri brought in new changes in the Lucknow gharana. Bandh baaj of Delhi was replaced by khulla baaj of Lucknow. Instead of using two fingers like in the Delhi gharana, they used all five fingers in Lucknow gharana. They made use of gat, paran, tukda, chakardar and laggi. The Lucknow gharana is important because it gave birth to the Banaras and Farukhabad gharanas. Ram Sahai was the disciple of Mandu Khan and his wife, who was a daughter of Tabla-nawaz from Punjab. So Ram Sahai learnt not only Lucknow gats but also Punjab gats. Secondly, Haji Vilayat Ali who founded the Farukhabad gharana, was son-in-law of Miyan Bikshu Khan.

Just as the Punjab gharana had few paramparas, so the Lucknow gharana had few paramparas. Pandit Bichram Chattopadhyay, disciple of Bikshu Khan, established the Vishnupur parampara. Ustad Atta Hussain Khan, who was trained in Lucknow, established the Dhaka parampara. Babu Khan, grandson of Bikshu Khan, established the Calcutta parampara.

The chief characteristics of the Lucknow gharana are as follows:

Firstly, due to the influence of Pakhawaj and dance, Delhi's bandh tabla turned into the forceful and vigorous khulla baaj of Lucknow.

Secondly, all five fingers are used in this baaj and Lucknow players can produce meend and ghasit by creating vibrations of daga.

Thirdly, the Lucknow gharana has beautiful bandishes. It also uses pran, gat-paran, and various types of chakardar, gat and farad. These are prominent in Lucknow gharana.

Fourthly, padhant is popular in this gharana. Because of the influence of dance, bols are verbalised first and then played on tabla.

Fifthly, as Lucknow is the mother of Thumri, use of laggi-ladi is common in tabla. This is the influence of folk style on the Lucknow gharana.

IV. THE FARUKHABAD GHARANA

Farukhabad is an off-shoot of the Lucknow gharana. The pioneer of the Farukhabad gharana was Haji Vilayat Ali, so called because he had been to Haj seven times. Every time, he went to Haj, he prayed that he should do something new in tabla. The heavens granted his prayer. He became founder of the Farukhabad gharana. He was the son-in-law of Miyan Bikshu Khan. It is for this reason that there is an intimate relationship between the Lucknow and the Farukhabad gharana.

The *Purab* style cultivates a more blending and solemn sonority. Ahmad Jan Thirakwa retained the purity of Farukhabad style and also "retained the traditional mannerisms of the Farukhabad style of fingering. In matters of repertoire, however, Ahmad Jan Thirakwa is very knowledgeable; he performs much of the repertoire from Delhi, Banaras and Lucknow gharanas in addition to that of his own gharana."¹³ Thirakwa also extended the domain of peshkar and chalan. He used bols in variations other than those in the set composition. These features can be seen in his record (JEPE 1254), wherein he plays ek tal and jhaptal with his characteristic efficiency.

The Farukhabad gharana is a creation of the individual genius of Haji Vilayat Ali Khan. Ebon E Mistry has rightly said, "Vilayat Ali balanced his vaadan with equilibrium and subdued control of giving equal importance to chaanti and siyahi. Relevant to his new style, he gave gat a different twist in his composition..."¹⁴ His gat bandishes became very popular with subsequent tabla players.

There are some typical characteristics of the Farukhabad gharana. Firstly, *rela* is given great importance in this gharana. Another speciality of this gharana is *chaal* of *chalan*, which is unique to Farukhabad gharana. Secondly, this *baaj* is ideal for solo performance. Thirdly, the Farukhabad tabla is melodious with balanced equilibrium and restraint. It is pure tabla because it does not borrow words from *nakkara*, *dhol* or *khanjira*.

V. THE BANARAS GHARANA

The Banaras gharana was the meeting point between the *purab* and Punjab *baaj*. Ram Sahai, the pioneer of the Banaras gharana, cultivated *puraj baaj* because he learnt his tabla in Lucknow. On the other hand, Baldeo Sahai cultivated the Punjab *baaj*, because he learnt in Amritsar. Thus, Banaras gharana became a curious confluence of *Purab* and the Punjab gharanas. This can be seen from the examples of Shamta Prasad and Kishan Maharaj. Shamta Prasad with his solemn sonority shows the influence of the *Purab baaj*. Kishan Maharaj plays tabla in *Pakhawaj* style. He even went to the extent of saying that the Banaras gharana derives from the Punjab gharana, though this is an overstatement. Yet the fact remains that next to Delhi, Banaras has been subject of a lot of critical comment. This is a paradox because Banaras

is the youngest of all the gharanas.

Just as Abid Hussain was the greatest tabla player of Lucknow, so Kanthe Maharaj was the greatest tabla player of Banaras. Sushila Misra has high praise for Kanthe Maharaj;

Producing sonorous modulations on the bayan by varying pressures was one of the special features of his style. The Uthans with which he got off with a flying and impressive start during his solo recital, immediately captured the full attention of his listeners. He was perfectly at ease even when playing rare and complicated talas like the Brahmatal, Pancam-sawari, Lakshmi tal etc. Kanthe Maharaj had a rich stock of gats, chhands and parans. Pandit Kishan Maharaj, his adopted son, has imbibed the entire art of repertoire of the late maestro.¹⁵

This is one reason why Kishan Maharaj can play tabla solo for one hour. I have heard Kishan Maharaj play tabla solo for one hour in Raj Bhawan when Dr. Sampurnanand was the Governor of Rajasthan. He has in his repertoire all the chhands, gats and parans that he learnt from Kanthe Maharaj. Gottlieb has high praise for the performance of Kishan Maharaj.

The Banaras gharana uses bant in place of qaida and barhant in place of peshkar. Kishan Maharaj plays barhant of sixteen avartas with phrases borrowed not only from theka but also from laggi. Gottlieb makes a crucial difference between qaida and bant in the following words:

Bant differs from the qaida in that the phrases are patterned after a companionment figurations which are played on the tabla when performing Thumri or Gazal.¹⁶

In the Banaras gharana, Shamta Prasad has a fine aesthetic sense. He has played the most euphonious version of teental in his record (JEPE-1244). In his lahra set to rag kirwani which begins on the fifth matra of time cycle, he has good melodic background for his brilliant rhythm. His jhaptal on the other side is equally brilliant. Daga was Shamta Prasad's speciality. He could create modulation and fluctuation of pitch brilliantly. Shamta Prasad also made one technical innovation by changing the position of siyahi in daga.

Ram Sahai was as talented as Haji Vilayat Ali. His new compositions and innovative technique won for Banaras the name of a gharana. His disciple, Baij Maharaj, was a specialist in farad, a kind of bandish.

The Chief characteristics of the Banaras gharana are as follows:

Firstly, according to tabla-players of Banaras, the vibrational sound is produced in this baaj by slightly bending the third finger and beating it on dahina (daga).

Secondly, instead of qaida, more stress is laid on the words of uthan, bant, laggi and Farad.

Thirdly, in Banaras, some feminine and masculine gats are quite famous. Feminine gats show influence of the Purab while masculine gats show influence of Punjab gharana.

Fourthly, in place of peshkar, Banaras tabla players start with uthan. Banaras tabla play-

ers show their skill in improvisation with *uthan*.

Fifthly, in Banaras, *teental* is called *Na-Dhin-Dhin-Na* instead of *Dha-Dhin-Dhin-Dha*.

Sixthly, unlike Farukhabad, Banaras *tabla* allows the influence of *Nakkara*, *Hudouk*, *Dukkad* and *Tadha*.

Seventhly, speed and clarity became specialities of Banaras *gharana*.

Eighthly, Banaras *tabla* is proficient not only in solo but also in accompaniment of vocal, instrumental and dance music.

Ninthly, the custom of dragging the hand on *baya* thus producing a prolonged *mind* is characteristic of the Banaras *gharana*.

In *tabla*, *gharana* and *baaj* are interchangeable term, "Ye hamare *gharane* ke *baaj* hai." Goetleib uses neither *gharana* nor *baaj* but the term 'major tradition.'

VI. THE PUNJAB GHARANA

In vocal music, Punjab produced *gharanas* like *Patiala* (Ali Bux), *Shyam Chaurasia* (Nazakat Ali and Salamat Ali) and *Kapurthala* (Naina Devi). Similarly, in *tabla*, the Punjab *gharana* was a major tradition with centres in *Amritsar* and *Lahore*. Punjab also had minor traditions like *Naiyon-ka-gharana* and *Kasaur gharana*. *Kasaur* incidentally was also the birth place of *Bade Ghulam Ali Khan*.

Dipchandi ang is an important part of Punjab *gharana*, because they gave *Thumri* the same status as *Khayal*. *Girija Devi* and *Siddeshwari Devi* used to sing *Khayal* to warm up for *Thumri*, but *Patiala* musicians did not need warming up. They straight away gave a whole concert of *Thumri*. Likewise, they used *Punjabi tal* in *tappa* imitating the movement of a camel.

Pakhawaj has heavy influence on Punjab *gharana*. The founder of the Punjab *gharana*, *Lala Dina Nath*, was a good *Pakhawaj* player.

Another important *tabla* player of Punjab *gharana*, *Bhai Mehtab Singh*, learnt *Pakhawaj* in *Nathdwara*. *Purshotam Das* has written about this in his book *Pakhawaj Ki Nathdwara Shaili*.

Shamta Prasad once told me, "*Roopak Alla Rakha bajata hai*." The fact that *Alla Rakha* is master of *roopak*, a time cycle of seven beats, can be seen from his record, (JEPE 1252). In *teental*, *Alla Rakha* has brilliant euphony and fine discreteness of constituent *bols*. This made *Alla Rakha* a great player of Punjab *gharana* of our times. He also had unusual love of intricacy. In *Gottlieb's* recording, he plays *sawai* in 20 *avartans*. Like other Punjab *tabla* players, *Alla Rakha* made divisions of 5, 7 and 9 popular.

Zakir Hussain has inherited his father's clarity of *bols* and love of intricacy. Besides, he has played in many ensembles. He has combined tradition with change. He is also a brilliant accompanist. *Shiv Kumar Sharma* says, "More than any one else *Zakir* understands my

needs, my personal temperament and well, me. It is truly inspiring to play with him. Our combination became so popular that we were invited to perform the world over and when we did, the encores went and on."¹⁷

Tabla has now become a matter of intricate calculations. The reason why Kishan Maharaj and Alla Rakha are able to create thrilling effects is because of their ability to play cross-rhythms and create unusual tihai patterns. They have made kura and vyar popular.

The Punjab gharana has independent existence because it derives inspiration from Pakhawaj. This can be seen from the custom of sticking flour-dough on baya. Bhai Baldeep Singh, a leading exponent of the Punjab gharana, still applies flour-dough to his daga, which is higher than dagas in other gharanas.

Lala Bhawani Das tried to give dukkad the same status as tabla. So both Pakhawaj and Dukkad provided the inspiration for the Punjab tabla.

Ebon E Mistry has said, "Pakhawaj's immensely distinct influence on tabla's Vaadan-shaili was clearly evident. And that is the reason why in Punjab, in place of using only one finger, the whole palm is implemented; also in the style of emitting words, in calculations of layakari (rhythmic beats) and compositions of bandishes, Punjab gharana's tabla, unlike that of other gharanas, sounds immediately closer to Pakhawaj."¹⁸

The Chief characteristics of the Punjab gharana are as follows:

Firstly, because of Pakhawaj's influence, this is a vigorously forceful and open baaj. Not only four fingers are used but even thaap on tabla is excessively employed.

Secondly, the calculations of layakari in this gharana are very intricate.

Thirdly, the Punjab gharana is famous for gat and rela.

Fourthly, the Punjab gharana tabla-players specialized in meend on baya.

Fifthly, Punjab players play tabla with force and speed.

In our time, African polyrhythms are justly celebrated. American Jazz is liked for its complex rhythms and syncopation. There is great interest in the Samba of Brazil and the Ramba of Mexico. West Indies have contributed two popular rhythms—calypso and reggie. One hopes that Robert S. Gottlieb, James Kippen and Ebon E Mistry with their fine books, will put Indian rhythms on world map.

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4. *Major Traditions*, Vol. I, p. 70.
5. *Pakhawaj and Tabla: History Schools and Traditions*, 1999, p. 182 (abbreviated as *Pakhawaj and Tabla*).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
7. *Major Traditions*, Vol. I, p. 81.
8. *Pakhawaj and Tabla*, p. 182
9. Susheela Misra has written two useful essays on Abid Hussain, one in *Musical Heritage of Lucknow*, another in *Music Makers of Bhatkande College*.
10. *The Tabla of Lucknow*, p. 108
11. *Ibid.*, p. 145
12. This point is ably elaborated by James Kippen in *The Tabla of Lucknow*, p. 160-61.
13. *The Major Traditions*, Vol. I, p. 80.
14. *Pakhawaj and Tabla*, p. 229.
15. *Some Immortals of Hindustani Music*, P. 126.
16. *The Major Traditions*, Vol. I, 80.
17. *Journey with Hundred Strings*, p. 79
18. *Pakhawaj and Tabla*, p. 259