

Appreciating Hindustani Music
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Lecture 22
Some Aspects of Tala and a Few Important Talas

As I mentioned earlier, ragas are more or less common across the three genres of khayal, dhrupad and instrumental music, but tala is not so. The very percussive instrument is different. Khayal and instrumental music except for the rudra veena - they use the tabla while dhrupad uses the pakhawaj. But, you know, there are some common features with regard to the idea of tala and some very common aspects of tala in these two genres. So, the basic idea, underlying concept of tala as time, as a time span divided into units repeated cyclically, and the first matra or the sam being the pivot around which the presentation revolves - these are common to both dhrupad khayal and also instrumental music. Now, other common features are that each tala is associated with a theka - a theka, which is a pattern of mnemonic syllables and each tala is also associated with a set of codified hand gestures.

So, every tala then is essentially associated with a theka or a set of strokes on the instrument with corresponding mnemonic syllables that name those strokes. Now, both tabla and pakhawaj have two playing surfaces. In the case of the tabla they are mounted on two separate drums whereas, in the case of the pakhawaj they are two sides of a horizontally held double sided barrel.

Now, in both tabla and pakhawaj some strokes are played on one surface or the other and some are a combination of strokes played on both. And each syllable of the theka of every tala corresponds to a particular stroke of the left or the right or a combination of the two; or in other words the theka is a pattern of specific strokes either on one or both surfaces.

It will get clearer as we demonstrate. So there is a vocabulary, a basic building blocks and that you know these strokes are... these strokes are the basic vocabulary of the tabla and some of these strokes in the case of tabla are ta dhe na tu etcetera [Music]. Na [Music] ta [Music] tun [Music] tet [Music] ghe [Music] ke [Music] dha [Music] dhita [Music].

Now, let us look at a 12 matra tala called Ektaal whose bol or whose theka is dhin dhin dhage tirakita tu na kat ta dhage tirakita dhi na - this is the theka. Let us watch the demonstration of Ektaal and you can see that some strokes are played only on one surface of the tabla - on one or the other - the right or the left, the right or left drum of the tabla set and some are played on both. [Music] [Music].

The way I rendered the ektaal theka, it was in madhya laya. But you can have a vilambit ektaal - it will be dhin dhin dhage thirakita tu and so on and also we can have drut ektaal [Music] Let us watch the demonstration of this tala. [Music] [Music]. [Music].

Now, there is a 12 matra tala in Dhrupad also, which is called Chartaal or Chautaal which has a theka dha dha dhin dha kita dha dhin dha thita kata gadi gana dha. Let us watch the demonstration of the Chartaal and you will see how the strokes on the right and the left side of the pakhawaj combined to create this theka.

[Music]. In the last video we heard the tala Rupak of 7 matras. Let us listen to Rupak tala performed: the theka is thin thin na dhi na dhi na. [Music]. So, each tala is associated with a theka - it is also called bol or a set of syllables that stand for these strokes.

Further the theka or the bol is arranged in "guts" - it is called gut or vibhaag that is basically... to take teentaal, it has 16 matras, but it is arranged in 4 parts or four vibhagas of 4 matras each.

So, when you written it will it will be like this: dha dhin dhin dha that is the first vibhaag; then dha dhin dhin dha that is the second vibhaag; then dha thin thin tha that is the third one and then you have tha dhin dhin dha that is the fourth vibhaag. [Music] [Music].

The vibhagas are all equal in the case of teentaal or even ektal for that matter. So, it is called sam vibhaag or sam gut: these talas are called those which have equal vibhaagas. Now, rupak taal of 7 matras that we saw is divided into 3 unequal parts of 3 plus 2 plus 2. Now, besides being associated with a theka which is, you know, it is both the set of strokes on the tabla or pakhawaj and also the bol or the their syllables - the pattern of syllables that capture or name those strokes. So, besides a theka each tala is also associated with a codified way of being performed on the tala on the hands. There is a pattern of gestures or hand gestures that is associated with each tala.

And really, you know, there are only basically two hand movements: one is thaali that is beating of the palm downwards and then you have a khaali which is an outward movement of the palm. And these hand gestures occur at the beginning of each of the vibhagas.

So, let us look at the theka of teentaal again you have dha dhin dhin dha dha dhin dhin dha dha thin thin tha tha dhin dhin dha. Now, each vibhaaga, the beginning or the first matra of each vibhaaga is marked with a hand gesture which is either thaali or khaal. That isi thaali is this, khaali is this.

So, when we perform teentaal in ah through hand gestures it will be dha dhin dhin dha dha dhin dhin dha dha thin thin tha tha dhin dhin dha. Actually, historically, there is a distinction between sashabda kriya and nisshabda kriya in the context of hand gestures that capture the tala. Sashabda kriya is with noise with sound and nisshabda is without sound.

So, kriya is, of course, action. So, the hand gestures that are involved in representing the tala can either be actions that make a sound or they can be actions that do not make a sound.

So, the thaali is a sashabda kriya and the khaali is nisshabda kriya because it does not make a sound. So, in the case of teentaal you have thaali or beating the hand down with the sound on the 1st, 5th and 13th matras and the khaali or opening the palm outwards which is the nisshabda kriya is on the 9th matra and the matras in between we are quietly counted with the fingers.

So, you have teentaala: dha dhin dhin dha dha dhin dhin dha dha thin thin tha tha dhin dhin dha. And now - and this is an important point - while there are hand gestures to indicate the taal, hand gestures are rarely, if ever, performed during the performance of khayal or instrumental music.

Now, in contrast Carnatic music or even in dhrupad for that matter tala is performed by hand. So, this is something I would like you to bear in mind and we will talk more about this in the next video: why it is this and what what does it mean?

Now, let us look at some other important talas that are used in khayal. We have already seen teentaal, we also saw ektal, and rupak. Now, we have another 16 matra tala called tilwada. It is also as I said has 16 matras and divided into four parts then the bol the theka is different.

So much so that there are some musicians who say that tilwada and teentaal are the same tala only the theka is different. Tilwada is like this, dha thirakita dhin dhin na na thin thin tha thirakita dhin dhin na na dhin dhin.

[Music] [Music]. And then we have another interesting tala called jhoomra or 14 matras. And the theka is like this:

dhin dha tirakita dhin dhin dhage tirakita thin ta tirakita dhin dhin dhage tirakita dhin. [Music] [Music]. We also have a 10 matra cycle taal called jhap taal and the theka is like dhi na dhi dhi na thi na dhi na. If I were to perform in the hand gestures dhi na dhi dhi na thi na dhi dhi na. [Music].

So, it can be an interesting exercise for you to just think about which of these talas has sam vibhaag and which has visham vibhaag. That is, which are talas that are divided into equal parts - that is each part has an equal number of matras.

And which are the talas of which the parts are unequal. As I said, rupak is a visham taal that is, you have thin thin na dhi na dhi na. So, you have two three one two one two. So, it has three parts and they are unequal. So, which are the talas that are like rupak - you know visham vibhaag. So, to sum up then just as we describe ragas in terms of certain parameters, tala also is described in terms of some parameters. First of course, you have the number of matras per avartan; then we mentioned the vibhaagas that is the matras are divided into sections or parts and these may be equal or unequal. The thaali and khaali are also important part of the description of the tala.

So, when we have to describe teentaal it will go something like this the teentaal has 16 matras divided into four vibhagas or parts of four matras each with the thali on the 1st 5th and 13th matras and khaali on the 9th matra and the theka is an integral part of the description of the tala.

There are musicians and musicologists who equate tala with the theka. So, from all these it emerges that in tala not all matras are equal the sum is by far the most important followed by the matras that are marked in thaalis and khaalis that is important in what sense in terms of how they figure in the presentation of the music in the dynamics the building of tension and release of the music the construction of the composition and so on.

We will look in the next video at tabla as an accompaniment for khayal and instrumental music and how it is different from say the pakhawaj or the mridangam of Carnatic music.