

The Tale of Tabla

The Mystery of Tabla's Origin

The origin of the Tabla is one of the most controversial aspects of Indian classical music. So much so, that nothing can be said with any degree of certainty. Let us, therefore, begin our discussion by taking a brief look at the various opinions regarding the origin of Tabla.

a) According to *Sarva-e-Ishrat* written by Sadiq Ali Sitaab Khan and *Risal-e-Tablanawazi*, written by Mohammad Ishaak, and the works of Chiranjeet, a medieval musicologist, a musical competition was once held between Pakhawaj maestros Bhagwan Das (Bhawani Das) and Sudhar Khan Dadhi, in which the latter was defeated.

Enraged by this humiliating defeat, Sudhar Khan is said to have severed his instrument — the Pakhawaj — into two. On regaining his calm, Sudhar Khan placed the two severed pieces of the Pakhawaj with their faces (drumheads) up, much like today's Tabla and began playing on them. As the Pakhawaj could still produce sounds in spite of being sliced into two, the people exclaimed: "*Tab bhi bola!* (It still speaks!)". Over a period of time, 'tab-bhi-bola' turned into 'tabbola' and finally, 'Tabla,' hold the proponents of this view.

This hypothesis, however, does not hold much water, when considered rationally. A Pakhawaj becomes incapable of producing sounds properly if the baddhi (cord, usually made of animal hide, which fastens the membranes to the drumheads) is snapped. One

can well imagine the kind of sounds a Pakhawaj would make if it was split into two. Such sounds cannot be termed as musical by any stretch of imagination.

The second objection to this hypothesis is that of shape. If a Pakhawaj is cut into two, and the two resulting pieces are kept face up, it follows that the lower ends of both the drums would be open, much like the Bongo. This is not the case with the Tabla. Also, no text on music mentions any instrument by the name of tab-bhi-bola or tab-bola.

Third, there seems to be no consensus regarding the historical period that the hypothesis relates to. According to Sadiq Ali Khan and Chiranjeet, Sudhar Khan lived in the 16th century. While musicologists like Dr. Lalmani Mishra and Acharya Brihaspati hold that Sudhar Khan belonged to the 19th century. Research on Sudhar Khan leads us to believe that he belonged to the first half of the 18th century.

b) A large section of contemporary musical thinkers credit Amir Khusrau (1253-1325) for inventing the Tabla. Khusrau was a disciple of the sufi saint, Nizamuddin Aulia, and was a poet-noble in the court of Allauddin Khilji, the emperor of Delhi. Khusrau, however, has never claimed to have invented the Tabla in any of his books, though he mentions an instrument called 'Tabl' in his book *Ejaz-e-Khusharavi*, written in Persian.

c) According to some scholars, a person named Khusrau Khan — and not Amir Khusrau, the poet-noble — had invented the Tabla. In his book '*Khusrau, Taansen Tatha Anya Kalakaar*', Acharya Brihaspati refers to one Khusrau Khan, who belonged to the 'Parivar' tribe of Gujarat. He was arrested and brought to Delhi in 1297. He had embraced Islam and later, assumed the title of 'Naseeruddin'. He had even reigned over Delhi for a brief period of four months, but there is no concrete evidence of him having invented the Tabla.

d) We find mention of another Khusrau in Subodh Kanta Nandi's book in Bangla, *Tablar Katha*. Nandi cites a reply from Gopeshwar Bandopadhyay to his query on the origins of the Tabla to support his views. According to Bandopadhyay, Muralidhar Chakravarty, who was the brother of renowned vocalist Gadadhar Chakravarty of Bishnupur (now West Bengal) had gone to Delhi to learn Khayal gayaki from Sadarang and his disciple Achpal. Bandopadhyay writes: "Upon his (Muralidhar's) return, he told my father, Ananta Lal Bandopadhyay, that initially, the Pakhawaj was used to accompany Khayal singing. As the style of vocal music gained popularity and uniqueness as a separate genre, the Pakhawaj was found to be unsuitable for its accompaniment. Amir Khusrau, who was Sadarang's disciple and the son of the Pakhawaj player Rahman Khan, invented the Tabla around 1738 to provide suitable accompaniment to the Khayal genre of vocal music.

It is worth mentioning here that in his treatise, *Murakk-e-Dehli*, which dates back to 1739, Nawab Dargah Quli Khan notes that one of the brothers of Niyamat Khan Sadarang — a renowned musician who lived during the reign of Mohammad Shah Rangeelay — was adept in playing several instruments. The book also mentions that Sadarang's nephew was an expert in playing the Sehtar (present-day Sitar). The Tabla, however, does not find any mention in this book.

Dargah Quli Khan was not only a contemporary of Sadarang; he was also close to him. In his treatise *Murakk-e-Dehli*, the Nawab has mentioned an unnamed vessel instrument that could not only produce sounds similar to the Dholak and the Pakhawaj, but also produce a drone similar to the Tamboora.

Some musicologists believe that the Tabla was invented around this time in light of the above-mentioned facts. This hypothesis, however, is contested by a painting now housed in the Indian Museum, Calcutta (now Kolkata), which depicts a woman musician playing the Tabla, tied to her waist. Notably, the Tabla used to be

tied to the waist and played while standing till the first half of the 20th century. This painting confirms the fact that the Tabla was in existence well before Mohd. Shah Rangeelay, even though it did not occupy a position of prominence or command in any respect. It is possible that Khusrau Khan developed the instrument and contributed to its popularity. Since Amir Khusrau's father Rehman Khan was an accomplished Pakhawaj player, one cannot entirely dismiss this possibility.

e) Some scholars believe Khabbe Hussain Dholakiya invented the Tabla. Khabbe Hussain, however, was always known for his prowess on the Dhol and there is no evidence to connect him to the Tabla.

f) According to some historians, the Tabla is a foreign instrument that owes its origin to the Arabic, Sumerian, Mesopotamian or Persian cultures. Dr. Kedar Nath Bhaumik claims that Tubal, the son of an Arab musician named Jubal, had invented the Tabla in ancient times. Later, it became popular and was played by women, and arrived in India along with the Muslims.

Shri Bhagvat Sharan Sharma quotes a western scholar named Strabo in his book *Taal Prakash* to claim that a percussion instrument named 'Nabla' was popular among the aboriginal inhabitants of Asia, and the name 'Tabla' has originated from 'Nabla'.

Dr. Lakshmi Narayan Garg writes in his editorial for the *Tabla Visheshank* of *Sangeet* magazine that the Tabla arrived in India from the Arab world in around the year 1800. The instrument was then known in West Asia as 'Atbal'. The Persians called the instrument Tablaha, while the Egyptians called it Tabl and the Indians referred to it as Tabla, Tabley or Tabli (in Hindustani).

The instrument, when played on the battlefield, was called 'Tabl-e-jung' and when it accompanied a royal procession, it was called the 'Tabl-o-alam'. According to Dr. Garg, the Tabla came