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"HINDUSTANI RHYTHM" (1)

RHYTHMIC SYSTEMS: THE LAWS OF TALA

INDIAN MUSIC STUDY GROUP

While there are many ways to approach Hindustani rhythmic systems, the most important for a listener is a simple "crash course" in recognizing some of the most common rhythmic cycles, or **talas**, used in the music.

When I began studying, I had no context within which I could understand these cycles. I could tell where the "sum" was — some of the time (*ha ha ha, pun intentional*). In slow cycles it was impossible for me to locate beats. It took a lot of study and practice before I finally recognized the obvious.

Hindustani rhythmic systems, like other ways of structuring time, rely for their effect on the accumulation and release of tension or energy. In contemporary vocal and instrumental music, rhythmic form is indicated by the **tabla** drums. These paired hand drums play a variety of sounds which, producing sequences with different tension/release characteristics. These sequences are repeated as accompaniment for melodic lines, and can be recognized by the listener.

For the beginning listener, there is one absolutely crucial distinction: **IS THE BASS DRUM PLAYING OR NOT?** The presence or absence of the left hand drum of the tabla pair is a primary indicator of different parts in any rhythmic cycle. When bass drum (also called **bayan** or **dugga**) strokes occur, the tension is usually building; the forward motion of the music is enhanced. When there are no sounds from the **bayan**, the level of tension is less; the musical environment is more static. As we listen to performances in a variety of **talas**, we will hear the ways in which different rhythmic cycles create varied environments of tension/release/tension/release.

First let's learn a few syllables corresponding to drum strokes:

SYLLABLE		RIGHT HAND		LEFT HAND
DHA	=	ringing	+	boom;
NA, TA	=	ringing	+	silence;
DHIN	=	half-ringing	+	boom;
TIN	=	half-ringing	+	silence;
GE	=	silence	+	boom;
KAT	=	silence	+	dry slap;
TUN	=	open ringing	+	silence;
DHUM	=	open ringing	+	boom.
TEREKETE	=	four "dry" strokes (r,r,l,r);		

The Tabla



Right-hand
drum -
called "Tabla"



left-hand
drum -
called "bayan"
or "dugga"

These are some of the most commonly used syllables. A particular rhythmic pattern is described by reciting the syllables which correspond to that set of drum strokes. If I say " | Dha Ge Dha Ge | Na Na TeRe KeTe | " that is a set of "finger instructions," hence a set of drum sounds. Each *tala* has a set of syllables which outline its basic pattern, and *tabla* players are taught these as part of their basic training. This basic set of strokes is referred to as the *Theka* (pronounced Tay-ka). When musicians work together, they say things like "in this song please play only the basic *theka*," or "in the *theka*, instead of 'TeReKeTe,' please play only 'Te Te.'" *Tabla* players may complain "so and so doesn't allow any *layakari*, only straight *theka* for hours. It's very boring." One complete cycle of the *tala* (or of any variation) is called an *avartan*. Musicians may say "for the first six or seven *avartan*-s, play only basic *theka*."

In our exploration of Hindustani rhythm, we will listen to excerpts from performances in eight different *talas*. Each of these has its own *theka*. The situation is complicated, however, by the fact that the first two *talas* come in three tempi — slow tempo (known as "*vilambit laya*"), medium ("*madhya laya*") and fast ("*drut laya*"). We'll learn to recognize each of these in vocal and instrumental contexts.

Each *tala* has a specific number of beats, and is further subdivided into smaller groups. Thus **Rupak Tala**, for example, has seven beats, subdivided 3 + 2 + 2. The first three beats have no bass drum and hence represent an energy release; the following four beats have bass drum sounds and thus contain an energy build-up (released on "sum"). **Jhap Tala** (also called simply **Jhaptaal**) has ten beats, divided 2 + 3 + 2 + 3. The first beat has a bass stroke; energy is built for five beats, then released on beats 6 + 7 (third subdivision). Beats 8, 9, and 10 (fourth subdivision) build energy back to "sum."

By far the most important rhythmic cycle is **Teental**, which has sixteen beats and is absolutely the most common rhythm in Hindustani music. The *theka* of *teental* is:

| Dha Dhin Dhin Dha | Dha Dhin Dhin Dha | Dha Tin Tin Ta | Ta Dhin Dhin Dha |

We won't gain all that much by simply reciting the *theka*, though. It's necessary to feel the particular swing of *teental* for these syllables to make sense. Let's start with the right hand alone:

| Ta Tin Tin Ta | Ta Tin Tin Ta | Ta Tin Tin Ta | Ta Tin Tin Ta |

Notice that there are only two sounds. The powerful ringing stroke is on the first and last beats of each subdivision; the semi-ringing stroke is in the middle. Sometimes musicians will give the effect of a *teental* accompaniment by clapping:

| Ta — — Ta | Ta — — Ta | Ta — — Ta | Ta — — Ta |

Now let's listen to the bass alone:

| Ge Ge Ge Ge | Ge Ge Ge Ge | Ge — — — | — Ge Ge Ge |
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

Feel the release of energy on beat nine? Feel it build up again to "sum," from beat thirteen? These are characteristics of *teental*. Note, however, that the subdivisions are groups of four, because of the accenting "Ta" strokes. When we combine the characteristic *bayan* pattern with the equally recognizable *tabla* pattern, we get the basic *theka*:

| Dha Dhin Dhin Dha | Dha Dhin Dhin Dha | Dha Tin Tin Ta | Ta Dhin Dhin Dha |

This rhythmic flavor, this GROOVE, is easy to recognize in its **drut** (fast) incarnation. First, we'll hear a few seconds of tabla by itself, playing the basic **theka** [*tabla: Todd Nardin*] (1). Then vocalists, Veena Sahasrabuddhe [*tabla: Vinayak Phatak*] (2) and Prabha Atre [*tabla: Narayanrao Indorkar*] (3), followed by sitarist Ravi Shankar [*tabla: Allah Rakha*] (4), and flute player Pannalal Ghosh [*tabla: unknown*] (5). Each excerpt presents a different flavor of **drut teental**.

When **teental** is presented in medium tempo, it remains recognizable, but has a more relaxed and spacious feeling. Here are four versions of **madhya teental**: solo tabla [*tabla: Todd Nardin*] (6). Then vocalists Mallikarjan Mansur [*tabla: Balakrishna Iyer*] (7) and Veena Sahasrabuddhe [*tabla: Vinayak Phatak*] (8), and sitarist Ravi Shankar [*tabla: Allah Rakha*] (9). Many artists like to work consistently with a single tabla player — drummers and melodists develop a mutual musical aesthetic; after a long time they become almost telepathically connected. The best example of this is Ravi Shankar's relationship with the genius of contemporary tabla, Allah Rakha.

Vilambit Teental takes a bit of getting used to. Here each "beat" is further subdivided, either by two or four. We wind up with a **theka** like this:

Dha	-	-	-	Dhin	-	-	-	Dhin	-	-	-	Dha	-	-	-
Dha	-	-	-	Dhin	-	-	-	Dhin	-	-	-	Dha	-	-	-
Dha	-	-	-	Tin	-	-	-	Tin	-	-	-	Ta	-	-	-
Ta	-	-	-	Dhin	-	-	-	Dhin	-	-	-	Dha	-	-	-

The tabla player fills in the smaller subdivisions with "ornaments" and variations. This makes the **theka's** basic outline harder to recognize, until you have a clear sense of the basic tempo — which is often very slow indeed. For example, let's hear a tabla solo version of **vilambit teental** [*tabla: Mayuresh Godse*] (10), then vocalist Shruti Sadolikar [*tabla: Mangesh Mulye*] (11), and sarangi maestro Ram Narayan [*tabla: Subhash Chandra*] (12). The way to navigate in these very slow cycles is to listen for the **DISAPPEARANCE AND RE-ENTRY OF THE BASS DRUM**. In the case of **teental**, the return of the **bayan** means that there are three beats to go before "sum." Once you know this, you can get lost with impunity, for those familiar beats will always return, letting you know where you are, and when to expect "sum."

Another popular tala is the 12-beat ek-tal. This cycle, divided 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2, is also found in slow, medium and fast incarnations. At the fast tempo it actually feels like a 6-beat rhythm — but the slow version can be counted as 48! The theka of ektal is:

Dhin	Dhin	DhaGe	TRKT	Tun	Na	Kat	Ta	DhaGe	TRKT	Dhin	Na	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	

This cycle in fast tempo has a very strong groove, and many of the compositions set to drut ektal are extremely catchy. First, we'll hear a solo tabla rendition [*tabla: Todd Nardin*] (13), followed by sarod maestro Ali Akbar Khan [*note the "stripped-down" theka played by Mahapurush Mishra*] (14), sitarist Ravi Shankar [*tabla: Allah Rakha*] (15), sarangiya Ram Narayan [*tabla: Shiva Narayan*] (16) and our old friend, singer Veena Sahasrabudde [*tabla: Vinayak Phatak*] (17).

Ektal in medium tempo is harder to pin down. There are few compositions in this middle-level tempo. First we hear solo theka [*tabla: Todd Nardin*] (18), then by Vichitra Veena player Lalmani Misra [*tabla: Ishwar Lal Mishra*] (19), and vocalist Amir Khan [*tabla: Afaque Hossein*] (20). Note that of the two actual performances, the first seems rather like a "slowed-down fast ektal," while the second seems like a "speeded-up slow ektal." Madhya laya ektal is a very attractive rhythm; it's a pity there aren't more pieces available.

Vilambit Ektal is one of vocal music's generic cycles. If a singer doesn't say anything to the tabla accompanist, the default rhythm will be slow ektal. In this cycle, listening for the eventual return of the bass drum is crucial. There is a sort of "desert" in the middle of the cycle, where no bass sounds for what seems an eternity. The bayan stroke on beat nine (and the following TeReKeTe) put the musician on notice that "sum" is approaching. There are many ornaments available; one musician gave me the following theka:

1 —	DHIN - ki ta	Dhin - - -	Dhin - - -	Dhin - Na -
2 —	DHIN - - -	+ - - -	+ - - -	Te Re Ke Te
3 —	DHA - - -	Dha Ge - -	Ge - - -	Dha Ge Dha Ge
4 —	TE - - -	RE - - -	KE - - -	TE - - -
5 —	TUN - - -	+ - - -	Ti - - -	Ti - Ti Ti
6 —	NA - - -	+ - - -	Na - - -	Na - Na -
7 —	KAT - - -	+ - - -	+ - - -	+ - - -
8 —	TA - - -	+ - - -	+ - - -	+ - - -
9 —	Dha - TeTe	Dha GeTeTe	Dha - TeTe	Te Te Dha Dha
10 ..	TE - - -	RE - - -	KE - - -	TE - - -
11..	Dhin - - -	+ - - -	Dhin - - -	Dhin - Dhin -
12..	Dha - - -	+ - - -	Dha - - -	Na - Na -

Our selection begins with solo theka [*tabla: Mayuresh Godse*] (21), then vocalists Rajan & Sajan Misra [*tabla: Ramzan Khan*] (22). We next hear a performance of a vocal composition, on the unusual bowed instrument called bela bahar, by its creator Babulal Gandharva [*tabla: Shridhar Padhye*] (23). In keeping with vilambit ektal's place as a "Vocal tala," we have three more performances by singers: Bhimsen Joshi [*tabla: Shripad Nageshkar*] (24), Manik Varma [*tabla: Trimbek Jadhav*] (25) and Prabha Atre [*tabla: Narayanrao Indorkar*] (26). It is extremely rare to hear instruments playing in vilambit ektal. Bowed string players do it, flutes & shehnais do it — and it is these instruments which come closest to the sustaining qualities of the human voice.

Another vocal cycle is the 14-beat Jhumra tala. This cycle, divided 3 + 4 + 3 + 4, is only played in slow tempo. There are no performances of medium or fast jhumra — at least none that I've ever heard in 15 years of listening to the music. In its original version, jhumra had a two 1/2 beat "empty spaces" in its theka, at beats two and nine:

Dhin	-Dha	TRKT	Dhin	Dhin	DhaGe	TRKT	Tin	-Ta	TRKT	Dhin	Dhin	DhaGe	TRKT	14
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	

As musicians began singing in slower and slower versions of this tala, however, that 1/2 beat of silence began to seem like the musical equivalent of falling into a manhole. The currently popular version of jhumra is:

Dhin	Dha	TRKT	Dhin	Dhin	DhaGe	TRKT	Tin	Ta	TRKT	Dhin	Dhin	DhaGe	TRKT	14
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	

We'll hear two vocal performances, the first by Amir Khan [*tabla: Afaque Hossein*] (26), then the young Shubadha Paradkar [*tabla: Yogesh Kaikini Samsi*] (27); finally we hear bansuri player Pannalal Ghosh [*tabla: Nikhil Ghosh*] (28) in a rare instrumental performance of jhumra. Jhumra is a curiously static tala, with long periods of tension and relaxation. The TeReKeTe on beats 3, 7, 10 and 14 provides a set of recognizable landmarks — but Heaven help you if you forget where you are! Beats 8-14 are almost identical to beats 1-7, and singers sometimes get distracted, landing with an accent on beat 8, then trying to pretend it was all a joke and they really knew what was going on. For all that, jhumra is an enjoyable cycle for vocal improvisation (although tabla players aren't all that fond of it for some reason). Although this recording is not an example, Amir Khan was fond of singing in V - E - R - Y S - L - O - W J - H - U - M - R - A . Accompanying drummers didn't get much chance to shine!

Another very popular tala is jhaptaal, which has ten beats, divided 2 + 3 + 2 + 3. This cycle is occasionally heard in vilambit and drut, but usually in a relaxed medium tempo. It's a favorite with vocalists, and instrumentalists as well. The release of tension comes on beats 6 & 7; the theka is:

Dhin	Na	Dhin	Dhin	Na	Tin	Na	Dhin	Dhin	Na	10
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

We first hear solo theka [*tabla: Todd Nardin*] (29), then singer Rasiklal Andharja [*tabla: Shashikant Mulye*] (30); sitarist Ravi Shankar [*tabla: Allah Rakha*] (31), vocalist D.V. Paluskar [*tabla: unknown*] (32) and Babulal Gandharva on the bela bahar [*tabla: Shridhar Padhye*] (33). Jhaptaal has an easy swaying lilt; although working in ten beats is at first difficult, it rapidly becomes a very user-friendly cycle.

Of the other "serious" cycles, the 7-beat **rupak tala** (divided 3 + 2 + 2) is by far the most common. It's relatively short for a slow or medium-tempo **tala**, but is still frequently heard. It's unusual for a Hindustani **tala** in that its release of tension comes on the first beat — usually the "sum" is a place of intensifying rhythmic energy. The **theka** is:

Tin	Tin	Na	Dhin	Na	Dhin	Na	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

The examples are by vocalist Arati Ankalikar [*tabla: Omkar Gulwady - one of the best accompanists in the business*] (34), Ali Akbar Khan [*tabla: Chatur Lal*] (35), and Babulal Gandharva [*tabla: Shridhar Padhye*] (36). **Rupak** has a somewhat austere quality, but in the right hands it can evoke surprisingly romantic effects as well. Along with **Jhaptal**, it is one of the few **talas** that is commonly played on **pakhawaj** as well as the **tabla**.

The next three cycles are all used in so-called "light classical music;" song styles like **Thumri**, **Ghazal**, **Dadra** and **Bhajan**. In fact the first "light" **tala** we'll investigate is called **Dadra**. This is a bouncy six-beat rhythm; some songs set to this **tala** are called **dadras**, but remember that not all songs in **dadra** are **dadras**. Occasionally a musician will announce "a **dadra**" which will turn out to be in another **tala** entirely — the term in this context means simply that it's a light song with a particular lilt originally characteristic of **dadra tala**, but now expressed in other rhythms as well.

The **theka** of **dadra** is:

Dha	Dhin	Na	Dha	Tin	Na	
1	2	3	4	5	6	

but in the case of such short cycles, there are many popular ways to play it. The accenting is 3 + 3, but the potential cross rhythm of 2 + 2 + 2 is also often exploited. We'll hear examples in **dadra** by vocalist Govindprasad Jaipurwale [*tabla: unknown*] (37), bansuri player Pannalal Ghosh [*tabla: unknown*] (38), vocalist Arati Ankalikar [*tabla: Omkar Gulwady*] (39), and the marvelous duet of Ali Akbar Khan and Ravi Shankar [*tabla: Allah Rakha*] (40).

An equally common light rhythm is the 8-beat **Keherwa**, which is heard in many varieties. Although subdivided 4 + 4, the characteristic pulse of the rhythm seems to be 3 + 3 + 2. The **theka** is:

Dha	Ge	Na	Ti	Na	ka	Dhin	Na
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

Note the bass drum accents, on 1 & 2, then again on 7. It really sounds like:

Dha	Ge	Na	Ti	Na	ka	Dhin	Na
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

Keep in mind, though, that there are lots of ways to play this rhythm. Every melody player has a slightly different preferred version, and different compositions demand different accents and phrasings. We'll hear versions by: vocalist Meenakshi Pandey (a young and skillful singer of **thumri**) [*tabla: Aftab Ahmed Khan*] (41), sitarist Pramod Kumar [*tabla: Unknown*] (42) and sarangiya Ram Narayan [*tabla: Subhash Chandra*] (43).

The last **tala** in today's survey of Hindustani rhythm is the 14-beat **Dipchandi**. This **tala** is used only in renditions of **thumri**, and is sung only in medium tempo. It has a spacious and uncluttered feel, due in large part to a basic **theka** which has several 1-beat gaps:

Dha	Dhin	—	Dha	Dha		Tin	—		Ta	Tin	—		Dha	Dha		Tin	—	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14					

In performance that last beat is often filled with an embellishment of some sort, and in several of the examples that follow the "empty" beats are filled with a very light stroke. Nevertheless, the curious asymmetrical lilt of **dipchandi** is immediately recognizable. We hear first solo **theka** [*tabla: Mayuresh Godse*] (44), then an excerpt from a **thumri** by Prabha Atre (who's contributed a lot to this group) [*tabla: Narayanrao Indorkar*] (45), and then a virtually complete performance (we deserve to hear at least one for longer than 45 seconds) by Dipali Nag, who sings a **thumri** in the traditional closing raga, **Bhairavi** [*tabla: Zamir Ahmed Khan*] (46).

There are other **talas** in use in contemporary Hindustani music, but a working knowledge of these cycles will prepare you to cope with 99 percent of the music encountered in performances and recordings.

The last thing we need to investigate is the method of counting. When you go to a concert of Indian music, you may see people in the audience purposefully clapping their thighs, or waving their hands in the air. These motions correspond to the subdivisions of the **tala** being performed. In Hindustani tradition, points of **energy focus** are indicated by **claps**, and points of **energy release** are indicated by **waves**. Thus, the cycle of **teental**, which has an energy release on the third subdivision (beats 9 - 12), would work like:

| Dha Dhin Dhin Dha | Dha Dhin Dhin Dha | Dha Tin Tin Ta | Ta Dhin Dhin Dha |
 Clap Clap Wave Clap

Hindustani rhythmic notation uses the symbol "0" to describe a wave. The sum is notated as "X" and any other claps in the cycle are given numbers. Thus **teental** is traditionally notated:

| Dha Dhin Dhin Dha | Dha Dhin Dhin Dha | Dha Tin Tin Ta | Ta Dhin Dhin Dha |
 X 2 0 3

In this notation, the other talas come out:

EKTAL:

| Dhin Dhin | DhaGe TRKT | Tun Na | Kat Ta | DhaGe TRKT | Dhin Na |
 X 0 2 0 3 4

JHUMRA:

| Dhin Dha TRKT | Dhin Dhin DhaGe TRKT | Tin Ta TRKT | Dhin Dhin DhaGe TRKT |
 X 2 0 3

JHAPTAL:

| Dhin Na | Dhin Dhin Na | Tin Na | Dhin Dhin Na |
 X 2 0 3

RUPAK:

| Tin Tin Na | Dhin Na | Dhin Na |
 X(0) 2 3

DADRA:

| Dha Dhin Na | Dha Tin Na |
 X 0

KEHERWA:

| Dha Ge Na Ti | Na ka Dhin Na |
 X 0

DIPCHANDI

| Dha Dhin — | Dha Dha | Tin — | Ta Tin — | Dha Dha | Tin — |
 X 2 3 0 4 5

RECORDING CREDITS

CYCLE (SPEED)
TEENTAL

- (1) Private Recording, Somerville, MA — 1983
- (2) ✓ Rhythm House Cassette 240 378 "The Pancharatnamala."
- (3) ✓ EMI lp ECSD 2490.
- (4) ✓ World-Pacific Lp WP-1431 "Ragas & Talas."
- (5) ✓ EMI Lp, No. 1354.
- (6) Private Recording, Somerville, MA — 1983.
- (7) ✓ HMV Cassette STCS 04B 7351
- (8) ✓ Rhythm House Cassette 240 378 "The Pancharatnamala."
- (9) ✓ World-Pacific Lp WP-1431.
- (10) Private Recording, Pune, India, 1987.
- (11) ✓ Magnasound Cassette C4H 0242.
- (12) ✓ Music Today Cassette A 91009 "Maestro's Choice."
- (13) Private Recording, Somerville, MA — 1983.
- (14) ✓ Connoisseur Society Lp, CS 2012 "The Eighty-Minute Raga."
- (15) ✓ Deutsche Grammophon lp 2531 280.
- (16) ✓ Harmonia Mundi Lp, 558624/25.
- (17) ✓ Rhythm House Cassette 240 378 "The Pancharatnamala."
- (18) Private Recording, Somerville, MA — 1983.
- (19) Nonesuch Explorer Lp, H-72086 "Nectar of the Moon."
- (20) HMV Lp, Privately retaped, Number unknown.
- (21) Private Recording, Pune, India, 1987.
- (22) Music Today Cassette A 90008 "Afternoon Ragas, Vol. 4."
- (23) CBS Cassette 4CX 01221.
- (24) EMI Lp, SMOAE-5010.
- (25) INRECO Lp, 2411-5038 "A Delectable Treat in Night Melodies"
- (26) EMI lp ECSD 2490.
- (27) HMV Lp, Privately retaped, Number unknown.
- (28) Rhythm House Cassette 240 377 "The Romantic & The Heroic."
- (29) EMI LP No. 1252.
- (30) Private Recording, Somerville, MA — 1983.
- (31) EMI Lp, ECSD 2991.
- (32) Deutsche Grammophon Lp No. 2531 280.
- (33) HMV Cassette No. STC 3836.
- (34) CBS Cassette 4CX 01221.
- (35) Rhythm House Cassette 240 376 "An Aesthete Prepares."
- (36) Capitol Lp, DT 2721.
- (37) CBS Cassette 4CX 01221.
- (38) HMV Lp No. PMLP 3066.
- (39) EMI Lp, No. 1354.
- (40) Rhythm House Cassette 240 376 "An Aesthete Prepares."
- (41) CBS Cassette 4CX 11027 "Gems of Purab Gayaki"
- (42) Peters International Lp, No. FARN 91006, "The Language of Raga."
- (43) Music Today Cassette A-91009, "Maestro's Choice."
- (44) Private Recording, Pune, 1987.
- (45) EMI LP, ECSD 2490.
- (46) Barenreiter Musicaphon Lp, No. BM 305L 2051.

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DRUT

MADHAC

VILAMBIT TEENTAL

EK-TAL DRUT

VILAMBIT