

The Untold Aspects of Banaras Baaj of Tabla and Its Hidden Relation with Various other Art Forms

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Abstract

Banaras Gharana occupies a unique position in Indian classical music in which Gāyan (vocal music), Vādan (instrumental music & percussion), and Nritya (dance) are individually rich disciplines but are also closely interconnected through a common artistic philosophy. Further this interrelationship is particularly evident in this tradition because of the remarkable structural and rhythmic similarities between tabla, vocal music, and Kathak dance. For instance, a Banaras tabla solo traditionally begins with Uthān, a form that also marks the opening of a Kathak performance. Likewise, the gradual development found in Ālāp, Jor, and Jhālā in instrumental music such as sitar finds a parallel in the Banaras tabla repertoire through Aouchar, Badhat, and Rela, revealing a shared process of musical expansion and expression. Although these traditions are discussed individually, not much attention has been given to understand the hidden relationship. This study will aim to find and analyse the common principles and practices that connect the three disciplines within this tradition. Further this research will find out the integrated artistic system in which rhythm, melody, and gesticulations are influencing each other while preserving their individual identities. Further by applying qualitative methodology based on historical literature, ethnographic research, performance analysis, and the oral traditions of the Banaras Gharana the deep connections between Gāyan, Vādan, and Nritya in Banaras tradition can be understood in a better way ultimately promoting a more holistic understanding of the Banaras tradition.

Keywords – Banaras Baaj, Interrelation, Gayan, Vadan, Nritya,

Introduction

Indian classical music is traditionally understood through the harmonious integration of Gāyan (vocal music), Vādan (instrumental music & percussion), and Nritya (dance). Although these three disciplines together constitute the concept of Sangeet, each has developed its own identity over centuries. Despite their individual identities, they have always remained deeply interconnected, sharing a close and complementary relationship. Although ancient Indian treatises describe these disciplines as individual art forms but there are traces which proves the influencing of one another in both theory and performance.

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Therefore melody, rhythm, expression, and movement rather being isolated elements work together to create a complete musical experience.

Among the many cultural centres of India, Banaras (Varanasi), a city older than history has occupied a unique position in preserving and nurturing this integrated tradition of music. For centuries, the city has been known not only for its spiritual centre but also for its musical cultural heritage. Banaras being a meeting place of distinguished musicians, dancers, scholars, and composers has encouraged continuous interaction enabling the sharing of musical knowledge and further inspiring each other to work by complementing each others music. As a result, many aesthetic and structural features are shared among them, making Banaras one of the richest centres of music. Within this vibrant musical environment the Banaras Gharana of tabla emerged, founded by pandit Ram Sahay ji in earlier 19th century established its own distinct identity. Pandit Ram Sahai Ji, the founder of the Banaras Gharana, developed a tabla style that embraced every major form of accompaniment in Indian classical music. His bāj was equally suited for accompanying vocal music (gāyan), string instruments (tantra vādya), wind instruments (suṣira vādya), and classical dance (nritya). At the same time, he established a rich and independent tradition of tabla solo performance by composing and preserving a vast repertoire of Uthan, kāyḍās, relās, gat-fard, parāns, chakradārs, and many other intricate compositions. Even the most complex rhythmic ideas were presented with remarkable clarity and artistic beauty in his solo playing. So, the connection of Banaras Baaj of Tabla with various forms of music & dance tells us about their artistic relation amongst each other.

One of the distinctive features of the Banaras Baaj is its unique style of playing the Dagga or Bayan (bass drum) which is to be tuned to a lower pitch than in any other tabla gharanas and kept comparatively loose, producing a deep, resonant, and powerful sound. This distinct quality is popularly known as "Dam-Kham", which gives rich tonal depth and strength.

Further this Dam-Kham can be witnessed in the presentation of Aouchar where the phrase Dhin Dhin Dhinna is played which creates an effect of Gamak widely used in Dhrupad and Khayal Gayaki. Therefore when a vocalist employs the concept of gamak to bring a deep and resonating effect to a melodic phrase, the Banaras tabla player simultaneously uses the bāyā to justify the effect. Thus, the Banaras tabla not only accompanies the vocalist with rhythmic precision but also enhances the aesthetics, depth and expression of the vocalist through its distinctive Dam-Kham and various accompanying techniques with his musical understandings.

The relationship between the Banaras Gharana of Tabla and Kathak is equally significant. A Banaras Baaj tabla solo traditionally begins with Uthān, a fixed composition or bol made up of open, resonating, typical, and miraculous creation which ends on Sam delivers a lasting and impactful impression. Similarly in Kathak dance the dancer starts his performance which impactful resonating typical and a magical composition named as Uthān which ends with a powerful impact.

One of the unique features of the Banaras Baaj is the close coordination between the tabla player and the Kathak dancer during accompaniment. Since Kathak compositions are

performed with tabla accompaniment, both artists often reach the sam together with similar body movements. At the sam, the tabla player usually lifts the right hand while the left hand remains on the baya. In the same way, the Kathak dancer also raises the right hand, while the left hand either stays down or holds the costume. This similarity in gesture is commonly seen in the Banaras tradition and gives the performance a special visual appeal.

Another important feature of Banaras accompaniment is that the tabla player carefully watches the dancer throughout the performance. Banaras has a rich tradition of both Tabla and Kathak, so accompanists naturally understand the dancer's movements and expressions. It does not matter which Kathak gharana the dancer belongs to; the tabla player adjusts the accompaniment according to the dancer's style and presentation. Even during spontaneous performances, the accompanist observes the dancer closely and anticipates how the dancer will arrive at the sam. This helps the tabla player support and complement the performance at the right moment. Such natural coordination, understanding, and crisp accompaniment are among the special characteristics of the Banaras Baaj of Tabla.

Likewise, the gradual progression of laya in Aouchar, Badhat, and Rela which is in the repertoire of Banaras Baaj of Tabla resembles to the concept of Ālāp, Jod and Jhālā prevalent in the tradition of instrumental music. The presentation in solo recital begins with Āuchār in which the rhythmic phrases are executed in a slow and dignified manner that closely parallels the concept of ālāp in instrumental music. As the performance continues, the tempo is gradually increased through Baḍhat, creating a smooth rhythmic development comparable to the Jod section of a string instrument recital. The presentation finally reaches to its extreme level called as Rela, a fast and energetic passage that resembles similar to that of the jhālā of tantra vādya, adding brilliance, excitement, and rhythmic vitality to the performance. This gradual progression from calmness to intensive gives the Banaras tabla solo a distinctive musical architecture and reflects its deep connection with the aesthetics of instrumental music.

Another common feature shared by the Banaras traditions is the use of Bhramak Sam (deceptive or delayed sam). The concept of Bhramak Sam, which creates a rhythmic illusion after reaching the final sam is another artistic feature commonly found in tabla, Kathak and sometimes in vocal music too. In all three disciplines, the performer creates a brief rhythmic illusion after finally arriving at the actual sam, increasing the sense of anticipation and artistic excitement. This effect is often expressed through phrases such as “Dhā-Tā,” where Dhā represents the Actual or the Real Sam whereas Tā symbolises the deceptive or Bhramak Sam. The use of Bhramak Sam reflects a common rhythmic approach shared by tabla players, Kathak dancers as well as vocalists resembling their deep artistic connection within the Banaras tradition.

Although the Banaras Gharana has been widely studied from the perspectives of solo performance, repertoire, and accompaniment, comparatively little attention has been given to the deeper relationship among Gāyan, Vādan, and Nṛtya within the Banaras tradition. This study seeks to examine these interconnections by analysing their common musical structures, rhythmic concepts, and aesthetic principles. It aims to demonstrate that, in the Banaras tradition, vocal music, tabla, and Kathak are not independent artistic forms but

complementary expressions of a single musical philosophy, each enriching and strengthening the other.

Literature Review

Since the Banaras Baaj of Tabla has been discussed by several scholars from different perspectives, including its history, repertoire, aesthetics, and performance practices. However, very few studies have explored its close relationship with other forms of Hindustani music, particularly hindustani vocal music, instrumental music, and Kathak dance. The present study attempts to examine this interrelationship by focusing on the Vadan Shaili (performance style) of the Banaras Baaj.

For understanding the playing style of the Banaras Gharana, important references have been taken from Taal Prabandh by Pt. Chhote Lal Mishra (in 2nd Adhyay), Tabla Puran by Pt. Vijay Shankar Mishra (in Pratham Adhyay Shadaj), Taal Vadya Shastra by Manohar Bhalchandra Rao Marathe, Taal Vadya Parichay by Dr. Jamuna Prasad Patel and Taal Parichay by Pt. Girish Chandra Srivastava. These works provide valuable information about the origin, development, repertoire, playing techniques, aesthetic principles, and distinctive features of the Banaras Baaj. They also help in understanding the stylistic identity of the gharana from a theoretical and historical perspective.

Along with these published sources, the study also relies on the observation of live performances as well as video recordings of renowned tabla maestros of the Banaras Gharana as ethnographic research. Their performances were carefully studied to understand practical aspects of the Vadan Shaili, including accompaniment, improvisation, tonal quality, stage presentation, interaction with other musicians and presence of mind. Interviews and expert opinions of senior tabla maestros, vocalists & instrumentalists were also considered to gain deeper insight into the performance traditions that are often transmitted orally through the guru-shishya parampara.

Based on these literary and practical sources, the present study connects the Vadan Shaili of the Banaras Gharana with Hindustani vocal music, Instrumental music, and Kathak dance. It examines how the aesthetic principles and performance approach of the Banaras Baaj are reflected across different musical forms and how this tradition continues to enrich the broader framework of Indian classical music. Thus, the study combines textual evidence with performance-based observations to present a comprehensive understanding of the Banaras Gharana's unique musical identity.

Methodology

For conducting this research work qualitative research methodology with a strong emphasis on ethnographic approaches and historical method were taken into consideration. This research is done with the objective to find out the relationship between the Banaras Baaj of Tabla playing with the Hindustani Vocal music, Instrumental Music and Kathak Dance. Historical method has been used to trace the tradition and culture of Banaras prevailed in past, defining its musical expansion in all aspects. Ethnographic research is being used here because the study is being based on the observation of Live performance of various

exponents of Banaras. Further video recording of some renowned artists of each discipline such Padma Vibhushan Pt. Kishan Maharaj, Padma Bhushan Pt. Samta Prasad Mishra, Late Pt. Sharda Sahai ji, Padma Bhushan Pt. Rajan & Sajan Mishra, Padma Shri Pt. Gopi Krishna, UP SNA Awardee Pt. Mata Prasad Mishra & Pt. Ravi Shankar Mishra and many more has been analysed for getting a deep understanding of interrelation of all three dimensions of music.

Result

The findings of the present study reveal that the Banaras Baaj functions as a unifying musical framework that connects Gāyan (vocal music), Vādan (instrumental music), and Nritya (Kathak dance) through shared rhythmic principles and performance practices. Although each discipline possesses its own artistic identity, the analysis demonstrates that they are closely interrelated through common rhythmic aesthetics, structural approaches, and performance conventions.

The study found that the Banaras Baaj is distinguished by its remarkable adaptability to different modes of accompaniment. In vocal music, the characteristic use of a loosely tuned *bāyā* produces the well-known *Dam-Kham*, creating a deep and resonant tonal quality that complements the vocalist's use of gamak and other expressive melodic techniques. Rather than merely maintaining the rhythmic cycle, the tabla actively enhances the emotional and musical expression of the performance through carefully controlled tonal variation and rhythmic sensitivity.

A similar relationship was observed in instrumental accompaniment. The traditional sequence of *Āuchār*, *Baḍhat*, and *Relā* in Banaras tabla solo performance closely resembles the progression of *Ālāp*, *Joḍ*, and *Jhālā* in Hindustani instrumental music. This parallel demonstrates that both traditions share a common architectural approach to musical development, moving gradually from a slow and dignified presentation towards rhythmic intensity and virtuosity. The findings indicate that this structural similarity is not coincidental but reflects a shared aesthetic philosophy within the Banaras musical tradition.

The strongest interrelationship was identified between the Banaras Baaj and Kathak dance. The study found several common performance practices, including the presentation of *Uthān*, the coordinated arrival on *Sam*, and the mutual understanding between the tabla accompanist and the dancer during live performances. Observations further revealed that experienced Banaras accompanists continuously respond to the dancer's movements, anticipating rhythmic conclusions and adapting their accompaniment accordingly. This close interaction contributes to the visual and rhythmic coherence of Kathak performances and reflects the deep historical association between the two traditions.

Another important finding is the common use of *Bhramak Sam* across tabla, Kathak, and, in certain contexts, Hindustani vocal music. The deliberate creation of rhythmic illusion before confirming the actual *Sam* was observed as a shared aesthetic device that enhances suspense and artistic impact. The presence of this concept across multiple disciplines indicates the existence of common rhythmic thinking rather than isolated performance practices.

The ethnographic component of the study further confirmed these observations. Analysis of live performances, archival recordings, and interviews with eminent artists consistently demonstrated that Banaras musicians perceive rhythm, melody, and movement as complementary artistic elements. The Guru–Shishya Paramparā has played a significant role in preserving this integrated understanding, enabling performers from different disciplines to develop a common musical vocabulary while maintaining their respective artistic identities.

Overall, the results establish that the Banaras Baaj extends beyond the boundaries of tabla performance. It represents a comprehensive musical approach whose rhythmic language, tonal aesthetics, and performance principles are reflected across vocal music, instrumental music, and Kathak dance. These findings demonstrate that the artistic identity of the Banaras tradition is founded upon continuous interaction among the three dimensions of Indian classical music, thereby reinforcing the concept of Sangeet as an integrated artistic system rather than a collection of independent disciplines.

Discussion

Although the Banaras Gharana has been widely studied in the fields of Hindustani music and dance, most existing scholarship has approached its traditions independently. Research has generally focused on the historical development of the Banaras tabla tradition, the stylistic characteristics of different tabla gharanas, the contributions of eminent gurus, or the individual practices of Hindustani vocal music, instrumental music, and Kathak dance. These studies have significantly enriched our understanding of each discipline; however, they rarely examine the artistic relationships that connect them. As a result, the deeper musical dialogue that exists among Gāyan (vocal music), Vādan (instrumental music), and Nritya (dance) within the Banaras tradition has remained comparatively unexplored.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the concept of Banaras Baaj not merely as a tabla style but as a broader musical philosophy that influences multiple performing arts. Rather than viewing Banaras Baaj only through the lens of percussion technique, this research investigates how its rhythmic aesthetics, structural principles, and expressive qualities are reflected across vocal music, instrumental performance, and Kathak dance. In doing so, it proposes that Banaras Baaj serves as a common musical thread that connects these seemingly independent disciplines.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the interaction among these art forms is neither incidental nor superficial. Instead, it has evolved through centuries of shared performance traditions, collaborative practices, and the Guru–Shishya Paramparā. Vocalists, instrumentalists, dancers, and percussionists have historically performed together, responding to one another in live performance and gradually developing a common artistic vocabulary. The tabla, particularly in the Banaras tradition, functions not merely as an accompanying instrument but as an active participant in musical communication. Its rhythmic language adapts to the melodic and expressive demands of vocal and instrumental music while simultaneously responding to the dynamic movement vocabulary of Kathak.

One of the most significant observations emerging from this research is that Banaras Baaj demonstrates remarkable adaptability. In vocal accompaniment, it supports the unfolding of

melody without disturbing its emotional flow, carefully balancing rhythmic complexity with musical sensitivity. During instrumental performances, it interacts with diverse melodic instruments by modifying its tonal quality, stroke selection, and rhythmic density according to the character of each instrument. In Kathak, however, the same rhythmic language acquires a visual dimension, where tabla syllables are translated into movement, footwork, and expressive choreography. Thus, identical rhythmic concepts assume different artistic forms while preserving a common aesthetic foundation.

This shared foundation suggests that the essence of Banaras Baaj lies not simply in technical virtuosity but in its ability to understand and respond to the musical language of other performing arts. Its strength is found in communication rather than isolation. Rhythm becomes a medium through which melody, movement, and expression interact, creating a balanced dialogue among the three disciplines. Such an approach reflects the broader artistic culture of Banaras, where the boundaries between music and dance have traditionally remained fluid and mutually enriching.

By bringing these interrelationships into focus, the present study contributes a broader perspective to the understanding of the Banaras tradition. Instead of treating Gāyan, Vādan, and Nritya as separate domains of knowledge, it highlights the common artistic principles that unite them through the framework of Banaras Baaj. This interdisciplinary perspective not only expands existing scholarship but also offers practical value for students, performers, and researchers. It encourages a more holistic understanding of performance, where rhythm, melody, and movement are recognised as interconnected dimensions of a single artistic tradition. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the distinctive musical identity of Banaras has been shaped not by isolated practices but by continuous dialogue, collaboration, and shared aesthetic values across its diverse performing arts.

Conclusion

The present study concludes here with a view that the Banaras Baaj of Tabla finds more depth than an independent style of percussion; it represents a musical tradition that has evolved through a continuous long process of artistic evolution shaped by the unique cultural environment of Banaras. Influenced by the language of this city, temperament, and its rich tradition of Gāyan, Vādan, and Nritya. The Banaras Baaj of Tabla became so rich, mature and versatile in all aspects of vadan so that after a long interval of approximately 200 years where no further Gharana was required indicating that the evolution of tabla tradition reaches its culmination. The artistic similarities identified in this study demonstrate that these disciplines are connected through common aesthetic principles, performance practices, and rhythmic thinking. To understand these relationships among various art forms the Banaras tradition helps us to appreciate Indian classical music as an integrated system rather than as separate forms of expression.

The findings of this research may be particularly valuable for students, performers, and researchers. A deeper understanding of these hidden relationships can help tabla accompanists to become more musically sensitive while accompanying vocalists, instrumentalists, and dancers. Likewise, students of vocal music, instrumental music, and Kathak can develop a

greater appreciation of the role of the Banaras Baaj in enhancing the artistic beauty of performance through its rhythmic imagination, responsiveness, and aesthetical understanding.

At the same time, this study doesn't give the complete interrelation or hidden relation amongst various art forms but it is an attempt to draw attention to a field that has received comparatively less scholarly focus. Only a few important artistic connections have been explored in the present research, while many others still remain to be studied. It is hoped that this work will encourage future researchers to investigate further relationships between the Banaras Baaj of Tabla and other forms of Indian classical music and dance thereby contributing to a rich understanding of musical heritage of the Banaras tradition.

Thus, the true significance of the Banaras Baaj lies not only in its rich repertoire or distinctive playing style but also in its remarkable ability to connect, complement, and enrich different artistic traditions. Preserving and expanding this understanding will strengthen both the theoretical study and the practical performance of Indian classical music and dance for future generations.

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