



A critical study of the various opinions regarding the origin of the Tabla

Vimasen Parida

Department of Tabla, Utkal University of Culture, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

Abstract

The Tabla, as the most prominent percussion instrument of North Indian classical music, occupies a central position in both performance and pedagogy. Despite its widespread use and cultural importance, its origin remains a subject of considerable debate, shaped by historical assumptions, mythological narratives, and inconsistent scholarly interpretations. This study undertakes a critical examination of the major theories concerning the origin and development of the Tabla, including its proposed derivation from ancient Indian instruments such as the Tripushkar, its alleged connection with West Asian membranophones, and the widely circulated claim attributing its invention to Amir Khusro. By drawing upon textual references, sculptural evidence, linguistic analysis, and historical context, this paper challenges simplistic origin theories and argues for a more nuanced understanding of the Tabla as an outcome of gradual evolution rather than sudden invention. Particular attention is given to the transformation of percussion practices in medieval India, the role of folk traditions, and the functional demands of emerging musical forms such as Khyal. The study concludes that the Tabla represents a complex synthesis of indigenous continuity and external influence, shaped over several centuries through cultural interaction, practical necessity, and artistic innovation.

Keywords: Tabla, origin of tabla, indian percussion instruments, hindustani classical music, avanaddha vadya

Introduction

Among the wide range of percussion instruments employed in North Indian classical music—whether in vocal, instrumental, or dance traditions—the Tabla stands out as the most versatile, refined, and widely performed instrument. Its tonal clarity, dynamic range, and intricate system of bols have made it indispensable not only as an accompanying instrument but also as a powerful solo medium. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, the historical origins of such a central instrument remain deeply contested. Scholars, performers, and historians have long debated its beginnings, often arriving at sharply divergent conclusions that range from ancient indigenous roots to medieval innovation, and even to foreign importation.

A closer examination of these viewpoints reveals that many of them are shaped as much by cultural imagination and inherited narratives as by verifiable historical evidence. Some scholars trace the Tabla back to ancient Indian instruments described in Bharata's *Natyashastra*, particularly the Tripushkar, suggesting a line of continuity that extends from early classical traditions to the modern instrument^[1]. Others propose that the Tabla emerged through interaction with West Asian musical cultures, citing linguistic parallels between the terms *Tabl*, *Tabal*, and *Tabla*, and pointing to the presence of similar membranophones in regions such as Arabia, Persia, and Turkey^[2]. Alongside these theories are popular yet historically weak claims that attribute the invention of the Tabla to the celebrated Persian poet and musician Amir Khusro, a narrative that continues to circulate widely despite the absence of concrete supporting evidence^[3].

The persistence of such conflicting accounts highlights a fundamental issue: the tendency to search for a single point of origin or a singular inventor for what is, in all likelihood, a product of gradual and layered development. Musical instruments, particularly those embedded within long-standing cultural traditions, rarely emerge fully formed.

Instead, they evolve over time through processes of adaptation, modification, and synthesis, influenced by shifting aesthetic needs, performance contexts, and intercultural exchanges.

This study seeks to move beyond reductive explanations by critically analyzing the principal theories surrounding the origin of the Tabla. Rather than privileging any one narrative, it examines the available evidence across multiple domains—textual, visual, linguistic, and practical—to construct a more comprehensive and historically grounded understanding. Special attention is given to the transformation of percussion instruments in medieval India, the role of folk traditions in shaping instrumental forms, and the impact of emerging musical genres such as Khyal, which demanded new approaches to rhythmic accompaniment^[4].

By situating the Tabla within this broader historical and cultural framework, the paper argues that its origin cannot be attributed to a single individual, region, or moment in time. Instead, the Tabla should be understood as the result of a long evolutionary process, in which diverse influences—both indigenous and external—converged to produce the instrument in its present form. This perspective not only resolves many of the contradictions found in earlier accounts but also allows for a more meaningful appreciation of the Tabla as a dynamic and adaptive instrument, shaped by centuries of musical practice and innovation.

Historical Foundations: Ancient Indian Percussion Lineage

Any serious inquiry into the origin of the Tabla must begin with an examination of the ancient Indian percussion tradition, particularly as codified in early musicological treatises. Among these, Bharata's *Natyashastra* holds a foundational position, offering one of the earliest systematic classifications of musical instruments in the Indian context. Within its framework, the category of *Avanaddha*

Vadya (membranophones) includes the instrument known as Tripushkar, which is described as comprising three distinct components: Ankik, Urdhvak, and Alingya^[5]. This tripartite structure is of particular importance, as it provides a conceptual and structural basis for understanding the later evolution of Indian percussion instruments.

Over time, especially between the eighth and ninth centuries, the Tripushkar appears to have undergone a process of transformation. The Urdhvak and Alingya components gradually diminished in prominence, while the Ankik element continued to develop, eventually giving rise to instruments such as the Mridang and, later, the Pakhawaj^[6]. These barrel-shaped instruments became central to the classical music traditions of medieval India, particularly in the context of Dhrupad performance. Their design, tonal depth, and playing technique reflect a continuity of principles that can be traced back to earlier forms described in the *Natyashastra*.

However, the disappearance of the Urdhvak and Alingya components from mainstream classical usage does not necessarily imply their complete extinction. On the contrary, a closer examination of visual and textual sources suggests that these elements may have continued to exist within regional and folk traditions, albeit in modified forms. Sculptural evidence from various historical sites, as well as references in later musicological texts, indicate the presence of smaller, upward-facing paired drums that bear a conceptual resemblance to the modern Tabla^[7]. These instruments, often depicted as being played while standing or tied to the waist, suggest an alternative line of development that runs parallel to the more formal evolution of the Mridang and Pakhawaj.

This dual trajectory—where one branch evolves into established classical instruments while another survives and transforms within folk contexts—is crucial for understanding the eventual emergence of the Tabla. Rather than viewing the Tabla as a direct derivative of the Pakhawaj alone, it becomes more plausible to consider it as the result of a convergence between these two streams: the structural sophistication of classical percussion and the adaptability of folk instruments. In this sense, the Tabla can be seen not as a rupture from tradition, but as a continuation of older ideas reconfigured to meet new musical demands.

Further support for this perspective can be found in medieval texts such as Sharangadeva's *Sangeet Ratnakar*, which documents the prevalence of various percussion instruments derived from earlier prototypes^[8]. While the text does not explicitly mention the Tabla in its modern form, it provides valuable insight into the diversity and dynamism of percussion practices during that period. The absence of the Tabla in such texts should not be interpreted as evidence of its non-existence, but rather as an indication that the instrument had not yet attained a standardized or widely recognized form.

In addition to textual sources, visual representations from temple sculptures and cave carvings offer compelling evidence of early membranophones resembling paired drums. For instance, certain sculptures from sites such as Badami (6th century CE) depict musicians playing two separate drums of differing sizes, positioned in a manner that is strikingly similar to the modern Tabla-Dagga configuration^[9]. While it would be anachronistic to identify these instruments directly as Tabla, their structural

resemblance suggests that the conceptual foundation for such an instrument was already present in the Indian subcontinent centuries before its formal emergence.

Taken together, these strands of evidence point toward a long and complex process of evolution, rather than a sudden act of invention. The lineage that connects the Tripushkar to later instruments like the Pakhawaj, and ultimately to the Tabla, is neither linear nor uniform. It is marked by periods of transformation, adaptation, and even partial disappearance, reflecting the broader cultural and musical shifts occurring across different historical phases.

What becomes increasingly clear is that the roots of the Tabla are deeply embedded within the indigenous percussion tradition of India. While external influences may have contributed to its later refinement, the fundamental concepts underlying its structure and playing technique can be traced back to much earlier forms. To ignore this continuity in favor of more simplistic origin narratives is to overlook the rich and layered history that has shaped one of the most distinctive instruments of Indian music.

Medieval Transformations and Folk Adaptations

Following the gradual transformation of ancient percussion instruments described in earlier texts, the medieval period in India presents a particularly dynamic phase in the evolution of rhythmic instruments. This era, roughly spanning from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, was marked not only by political and cultural shifts but also by significant changes in musical practices. The decline of certain ancient forms, alongside the rise of new performance contexts, created conditions that encouraged experimentation, adaptation, and hybridization within the domain of percussion.

One of the most notable developments during this period was the consolidation of the Mridang and Pakhawaj as dominant instruments in classical music, particularly in Dhrupad traditions. These instruments, derived primarily from the Ankik component of the earlier Tripushkar, were well-suited to the aesthetic demands of the time—producing deep, resonant tones that complemented the grandeur and solemnity of Dhrupad performance^[1, 0]. However, while these instruments flourished within courtly and formal settings, other forms of percussion continued to evolve outside these spaces, particularly within folk and regional traditions.

It is within this parallel sphere of musical activity that one begins to observe the persistence—and transformation—of paired, upward-facing drums resembling the earlier Urdhvak and Alingya components. Visual evidence from medieval paintings, especially those belonging to Mughal, Rajput, and Pahari schools, frequently depicts musicians playing small, paired drums tied to their waists while accompanying dancers^[1, 1]. These instruments are typically shown in a vertical orientation, struck with the hands, and used in mobile performance contexts. Their size, positioning, and method of playing bear a striking resemblance to certain aspects of the modern Tabla, suggesting that the conceptual groundwork for such an instrument was already present in these traditions.

What makes this evidence particularly compelling is not merely the visual similarity, but the context in which these instruments appear. Unlike the Pakhawaj, which was largely confined to formal and often static performance settings, these paired drums were associated with movement, dance,

and popular entertainment. This distinction is crucial, as it highlights the role of folk practices in shaping the evolution of musical instruments. Far from being peripheral or secondary, these traditions often serve as spaces of innovation, where practical needs and creative experimentation drive the development of new forms.

The medieval period also witnessed increasing cultural interaction between India and regions of West and Central Asia, particularly under the influence of successive Islamic dynasties. This interaction extended beyond politics and architecture into the realm of music, where elements of Persian, Arabic, and Turkic traditions began to intermingle with existing Indian practices^[1, 2]. While it would be an oversimplification to attribute the origin of the Tabla directly to these influences, it is reasonable to assume that such cultural exchanges contributed to the modification and refinement of existing instruments.

For instance, the use of kettledrums such as *Tabl-Turki* in West Asian contexts—often mounted on animals or played in pairs—introduces an interesting point of comparison^[1, 2]. Although structurally different from the modern Tabla, these instruments share certain conceptual features, particularly the idea of paired drums producing contrasting pitches. When viewed alongside the indigenous tradition of paired membranophones in India, it becomes plausible that such external influences may have reinforced or reshaped pre-existing tendencies, rather than initiating them entirely.

Another important aspect of this period is the emergence of the term “Tabla” itself in certain regional and administrative records. References to instruments identified as “Tabla” appear in the accounts of the *Gunijankhana* during the reign of Maharaja Sawai Ishwari Singh of Jaipur (18th century), where mention is made of repairing *Tablas* alongside other instruments such as the *Mridang*^[1, 3]. This indicates that by this time, the instrument had not only acquired a recognizable identity but had also entered the sphere of formal patronage and documentation.

At the same time, literary works composed under royal patronage, such as *Shri Radha Govind Sangeet Saar*, provide more detailed descriptions of paired drums resembling the Tabla, further suggesting that the instrument was undergoing a process of stabilization and standardization^[1, 3]. These references mark a transition point, where what may have previously existed in diverse and fluid forms began to coalesce into a more defined and widely recognized instrument.

What emerges from this examination of the medieval period is a picture of gradual convergence. On one hand, there is the continuity of indigenous percussion traditions rooted in ancient frameworks such as the *Tripushkar*. On the other, there is the adaptive and experimental energy of folk practices, interacting with new cultural influences and evolving performance needs. The Tabla, in this context, appears not as a sudden innovation, but as the outcome of these intersecting processes.

This perspective challenges the tendency to locate the origin of the Tabla within a single event or individual. Instead, it invites us to consider the instrument as a product of historical layering, shaped by multiple forces operating over extended periods of time. By recognizing the contributions of both classical and folk traditions, as well as the impact of intercultural exchange, we arrive at a more balanced and historically grounded understanding of how the Tabla came into being.

West Asian Influence: Linguistic vs Structural Reality

One of the most frequently cited arguments in discussions surrounding the origin of the Tabla is its supposed connection to West Asian musical traditions. This theory is largely based on linguistic similarities between the terms *Tabl*, *Tabal*, *Tablah*, and *Tabla*, which are found across Arabic, Persian, and related languages. In these contexts, the word *Tabl* generally denotes a drum or membranophone, often of the kettledrum variety, used in both musical and military settings^[1, 4]. The apparent resemblance between these terms and the modern name “Tabla” has led some scholars to propose that the instrument itself may have been introduced into India from West Asia, particularly during the medieval period of Islamic rule.

At first glance, this argument appears plausible. The medieval era was indeed a time of intense cultural exchange between India and regions such as Persia, Arabia, and Central Asia. Musical ideas, instruments, and terminologies frequently crossed geographical boundaries, resulting in hybrid forms and shared vocabularies. However, a closer and more critical examination reveals that the linguistic similarity between *Tabl* and *Tabla* does not necessarily imply a direct organological or structural lineage.

In West Asian contexts, instruments referred to as *Tabl* or *Tabal* were typically large kettledrums or war drums, often mounted on animals such as camels or horses and played in pairs during military processions or ceremonial occasions^[1, 4]. These instruments, while sometimes arranged in pairs, differ significantly from the modern Tabla in terms of construction, playing technique, tonal production, and musical function. They lack features that are central to the identity of the Tabla, such as the application of *Syahi* (the black tuning paste), the precise tonal tuning of the right drum (*Dayan*), and the intricate system of bols that enables nuanced rhythmic articulation.

This distinction is crucial. While both the Tabla and the West Asian *Tabl* belong to the broader category of membranophones, their structural and functional differences are substantial enough to challenge the notion of direct derivation. The Tabla is a highly specialized instrument, designed for tonal precision and rhythmic complexity within a sophisticated musical system. In contrast, the *Tabl* of West Asia was primarily associated with volume, projection, and rhythmic signaling, particularly in outdoor or martial contexts.

It is therefore more accurate to interpret the relationship between these instruments in terms of linguistic borrowing rather than structural inheritance. The adoption of the term “Tabla” in the Indian context may well have been influenced by the widespread use of the word *Tabl* in Persian and Arabic during the medieval period^[1, 5]. As cultural and administrative interactions increased, particularly under the patronage of Indo-Islamic courts, it is likely that existing instruments were renamed or reinterpreted using terminology that was familiar within those linguistic frameworks.

This process of naming does not, however, equate to the introduction of a new instrument. It is a common phenomenon in the history of music for instruments to acquire new names as they move across cultural and linguistic boundaries, even when their structural characteristics remain largely unchanged. In the case of the Tabla, it appears that an indigenous instrument—already in the process of evolution—was eventually designated by a

term of foreign origin, reflecting broader patterns of cultural assimilation rather than replacement.

Further complicating the matter are attempts by some scholars to derive the word “Tabla” from sources beyond Arabic and Persian, including Sanskrit and even Latin. For instance, it has been suggested that the term may be related to the Latin word *Tabula*, meaning a flat surface or board, or that it may have roots in ancient Sanskrit terminology referring to upward-facing instruments^[1, 6]. While such theories are intellectually intriguing, they remain speculative and do not provide conclusive evidence regarding the instrument’s origin.

What becomes evident through this analysis is that the debate over the Tabla’s origin has often been clouded by an overemphasis on etymology at the expense of structural and functional considerations. Language can offer valuable clues, but it cannot, on its own, establish the lineage of a musical instrument. To do so requires a careful examination of material evidence, performance practice, and historical continuity.

In this light, the West Asian influence on the Tabla is best understood as indirect and contributory rather than foundational. It may have played a role in shaping certain aspects of terminology, and perhaps even in reinforcing the concept of paired drums, but it does not account for the distinctive features that define the Tabla as an instrument within the Indian musical tradition.

By disentangling linguistic similarity from organological reality, we move closer to a more balanced understanding of the Tabla’s development—one that acknowledges the impact of intercultural exchange without overstating its role. This approach not only clarifies the limitations of the West Asian origin theory but also reinforces the broader argument that the Tabla is the product of a complex and multi-layered process of evolution.

Myth, Legend, and Misattribution

The history of the Tabla is not only shaped by scholarly inquiry but also heavily influenced by popular narratives, legends, and long-standing assumptions that have often been repeated without sufficient critical examination. Among these, the most persistent and widely circulated claim is that the Tabla was invented by the celebrated Persian poet and musician Amir Khusro in the thirteenth century. Despite its popularity, this assertion remains one of the least substantiated theories regarding the origin of the instrument. A careful review of historical sources reveals a striking absence of evidence supporting this claim. Amir Khusro, who lived between 1253 and 1325 CE, was undoubtedly a significant cultural figure, often associated with developments in poetry, language, and music. However, none of his known writings make any reference to an instrument resembling the modern Tabla^[1, 7]. Moreover, contemporary and near-contemporary historical records fail to mention the Tabla as part of the musical practices of his time. If such a distinctive and sophisticated instrument had indeed been invented during his lifetime, it would be reasonable to expect at least some trace of its existence in the extensive literary and musical documentation of the period.

Further complicating the issue is the frequent confusion between the terms *Tabl* or *Tabal*, which do appear in historical texts, and the modern Tabla. In the context of medieval Indo-Persian literature, these terms typically refer

to large war drums or kettledrums (such as the *Nakkara*), rather than to a paired hand-played instrument used in art music^[1, 8]. Even several centuries after the time of Amir Khusro, the word *Tabal* continued to be used in this broader sense, as evidenced in texts such as the *Guru Granth Sahib* and Malik Muhammad Jayasi’s *Padmavat*^[1, 8]. This indicates that the semantic field of the term had not yet narrowed to denote the specific instrument now known as the Tabla.

Another important argument against the Khusro theory lies in the absence of any mention of Tabla players in the courts of later Mughal rulers, particularly during the reign of Emperor Akbar (16th century), a period well documented for its rich musical culture^[1, 7]. If the Tabla had indeed been invented in the thirteenth century and had gained acceptance, it is difficult to explain why it does not appear in the detailed accounts of court musicians from this era. This gap suggests that the instrument, in its recognizable form, had not yet emerged or had not achieved prominence within classical music circles.

In addition to the Amir Khusro narrative, several other theories attempt to attribute the invention of the Tabla to specific individuals, often based on anecdotal or regionally transmitted accounts. One such figure is Sidhar Khan, who is frequently credited by practitioners and scholars as a key figure in the development of the Tabla. According to some accounts, Sudhar Khan created the instrument in response to a competitive rivalry with a *Pakhawaj* player, Bhavanidas, and introduced new bols suited to its playing technique^[1, 9]. While these narratives are more grounded in the practical evolution of the instrument, they still lack direct historical documentation from the period in which Sudhar Khan is said to have lived.

Nevertheless, unlike the claim regarding Amir Khusro, the association of Sidhar Khan with the Tabla is not entirely without merit. Rather than viewing him as the inventor of the instrument, it is more reasonable to consider him as a significant contributor to its development and standardization. His role in refining the bols, adapting techniques from the *Pakhawaj*, and possibly influencing the structural features of the instrument suggests that he played a formative role in shaping the Tabla into its modern form. This distinction between invention and development is crucial, as it allows for the recognition of individual contributions without resorting to oversimplified origin stories.

Another narrative attributes the invention of the Tabla to Khabbe Hussain Khan Dholakiya, often in the context of a musical contest with a *Pakhawaj* player^[2, 0]. Similar to the Sudhar Khan accounts, this theory is rooted in oral tradition and lacks substantial corroboration from historical texts. While such stories may reflect genuine episodes of musical innovation or rivalry, they do not provide sufficient evidence to support definitive claims about the origin of the instrument.

Equally problematic are theories that attempt to explain the origin of the Tabla through symbolic or metaphorical interpretations. One such claim suggests that the Tabla was created by splitting the *Pakhawaj* into two parts, an idea often presented in a simplified and literal manner. While this narrative may metaphorically capture the transition from a single-barrel drum to a pair of smaller drums, it fails to account for the technical and structural complexities involved in the design of the Tabla. The instrument’s unique

features—such as the use of Syahi, the differentiation of tonal functions between the two drums, and the development of a distinct repertoire—cannot be adequately explained through such reductive explanations.

What emerges from this examination is a pattern of attribution driven more by the desire for clear and identifiable origins than by verifiable historical evidence. The tendency to associate the Tabla with well-known figures like Amir Khusro reflects a broader cultural inclination to anchor artistic developments to iconic personalities, even when such connections are tenuous or unfounded.

In contrast, a more critical and historically grounded approach recognizes that the Tabla, like many other musical instruments, is the product of cumulative development. Its emergence cannot be traced to a single moment or individual, but rather to a series of gradual transformations shaped by changing musical needs, performance practices, and cultural interactions.

By disentangling myth from evidence, this section reinforces the central argument of the paper: that the history of the Tabla is best understood not through singular narratives of invention, but through a broader perspective that acknowledges complexity, continuity, and evolution. In doing so, it also highlights the importance of critical scholarship in challenging long-held assumptions and bringing greater clarity to the study of musical traditions.

Functional Evolution: Role of Khyal and Musical Necessity

While historical, linguistic, and organological analyses provide valuable insights into the possible origins of the Tabla, they do not fully explain why such an instrument emerged and gained prominence within North Indian classical music. To address this question, it is essential to consider the functional and aesthetic demands of evolving musical forms, particularly the transition from Dhrupad to Khyal.

The Dhrupad tradition, which dominated North Indian classical music until the late medieval period, was characterized by its gravity, expansiveness, and emphasis on devotional and philosophical expression. The Pakhawaj, with its deep, resonant tone and powerful rhythmic articulation, was ideally suited to this style. Its broad tonal spectrum and capacity for sustained rhythmic patterns complemented the structured and stately nature of Dhrupad performance^[2, 1]. However, as musical tastes and performance practices began to shift, particularly from the seventeenth century onward, the limitations of the Pakhawaj in certain contexts became increasingly apparent.

The emergence of Khyal as a dominant vocal form marked a significant turning point in this regard. Unlike Dhrupad, Khyal is inherently more fluid, expressive, and ornamented, allowing for greater improvisation, subtlety, and emotional nuance. Its aesthetic demands include lighter tonal textures, faster rhythmic interplay, and a more responsive form of accompaniment that can closely follow the singer's improvisational movements^[2, 2]. In this new musical environment, the Pakhawaj—despite its strengths—proved somewhat rigid and overpowering.

It is within this context of changing musical requirements that the evolution of the Tabla can be most effectively understood. The Tabla, with its distinct division into two drums—the higher-pitched Dayan and the lower-

pitched Bayan—offered a level of tonal clarity and flexibility that was better aligned with the needs of Khyal performance. Its capacity to produce both precise, articulated strokes and delicate, nuanced sounds allowed it to function not merely as a time-keeping device, but as an interactive and expressive partner in the musical dialogue.

Moreover, the development of a sophisticated system of bols (mnemonic syllables) further enhanced the Tabla's adaptability. These bols, many of which were adapted and transformed from Pakhawaj traditions, were reconfigured into a more compact and articulated form suitable for the smaller drums of the Tabla^[2, 3]. This transformation enabled greater speed, clarity, and rhythmic variation, qualities that were essential for accompanying the intricate improvisations characteristic of Khyal and later forms such as Thumri.

Another significant innovation associated with the evolution of the Tabla is the refinement of its structural components, particularly the introduction and standardization of the Syahi (black tuning paste). Unlike the temporary application of wheat dough used on the Pakhawaj, the permanent Syahi allowed for more precise tuning and a wider range of tonal possibilities^[2, 3]. This development not only enhanced the instrument's acoustic capabilities but also contributed to its distinct sonic identity, setting it apart from earlier membranophones.

It is also worth noting that the rise of the Tabla coincided with changes in performance settings and audience expectations. As music moved from temple and courtly environments to more intimate and diverse spaces, there was a growing demand for instruments that could accommodate a wider range of expressive and dynamic possibilities. The Tabla, with its compact size, portability, and versatility, was well-suited to these changing conditions.

From this perspective, the emergence of the Tabla can be seen not merely as a historical accident or the result of individual innovation, but as a response to specific musical needs. The oft-cited phrase “necessity is the mother of invention” finds particular relevance here^[2, 4]. The Tabla did not arise in isolation; it evolved because existing instruments were no longer sufficient to meet the demands of a changing musical landscape.

This functional approach also helps to clarify why the Tabla eventually supplanted the Pakhawaj in many contexts, particularly in Khyal and light classical genres. It was not simply a matter of preference or fashion, but of suitability. The Tabla's design and playing technique allowed it to engage more effectively with the evolving aesthetics of North Indian music, making it an indispensable component of modern performance practice.

In bringing together historical continuity, structural innovation, and functional necessity, this section reinforces the broader argument of the paper: that the Tabla is best understood as the outcome of a gradual and context-driven process of evolution. Its development reflects not only changes in instrument design, but also deeper shifts in musical thought, performance practice, and cultural expression.

Organological and Linguistic Analysis

In addition to historical and functional considerations, a deeper understanding of the Tabla's origin and development requires attention to its organological structure and the linguistic frameworks through which it has been identified

and interpreted. These two aspects—material construction and nomenclature—offer important insights, but they must be approached with caution, as they are often the source of confusion and overgeneralization in origin theories.

From an organological perspective, the Tabla represents a highly refined form of paired membranophones, consisting of two distinct yet complementary drums: the Dayan (right drum) and the Bayan (left drum). The Dayan, typically made of wood, is tuned to a specific pitch corresponding to the tonal center of the performance, while the Bayan, usually constructed from metal or clay, produces a deeper, modulating bass sound. This division of tonal function is one of the defining characteristics of the Tabla and distinguishes it from earlier instruments such as the Pakhawaj, which, although capable of tonal variation, does not exhibit the same degree of pitch specificity and independence between its two heads.

A particularly significant feature of the Tabla is the use of Syahi, the black tuning paste applied to the drumheads. This element is not merely decorative but serves a crucial acoustic function, enabling the production of harmonically rich and sustained tones. Unlike earlier practices—such as the application of temporary wheat dough on the Pakhawaj—the Syahi of the Tabla is a permanent structural component, reflecting a higher level of acoustic understanding and craftsmanship^[2, 5]. This innovation plays a central role in the instrument's ability to produce a wide range of distinct and controlled sounds, which are essential for its complex repertoire.

The development of the Tabla's repertoire itself further underscores its organological uniqueness. The system of bols, which functions as both a mnemonic and a performative language, is intricately linked to the physical possibilities of the instrument. While many bols have their origins in Pakhawaj traditions, their adaptation to the Tabla involved significant modification, resulting in a more articulated and compact system suited to the instrument's smaller size and tonal precision^[2, 5]. This relationship between structure and language highlights the co-evolution of the instrument and its playing technique.

Turning to the linguistic dimension, the term "Tabla" has been the subject of considerable debate. As noted earlier, the word is widely believed to be derived from the Arabic *Tabal*, meaning a drum or kettledrum^[2, 6]. In Persian and related languages, similar terms—such as *Tabl* and *Tablah*—are used to denote various types of membranophones. These linguistic parallels have often been used to support the theory of a foreign origin for the Tabla. However, as previously discussed, such conclusions rely heavily on etymological similarity without consideration of structural and functional differences.

It is also important to recognize that the adoption of a foreign term does not necessarily imply the foreign origin of the object it denotes. In multilingual and culturally dynamic societies, it is common for indigenous objects to be renamed or reinterpreted through the lens of dominant or prestigious languages. In the context of medieval India, where Persian served as an administrative and cultural *lingua franca*, it is plausible that the term "Tabla" was applied to an already existing instrument as part of a broader process of linguistic assimilation.

Further evidence of this can be found in the variety of regional names historically associated with the components of the Tabla. Terms such as *Nar* and *Mada*, used in certain

regions to denote the left and right drums respectively, reflect indigenous naming practices rooted in symbolic or functional distinctions^[2, 7]. Similarly, the use of the term *Jodi* (pair) to describe the instrument emphasizes its dual structure rather than its individual components. These variations suggest that the identity of the Tabla was not fixed from the outset, but emerged gradually through a process of standardization influenced by both local traditions and external linguistic frameworks.

Additional theories regarding the origin of the word "Tabla" further illustrate the complexity of the issue. Some scholars have proposed connections to Sanskrit terminology, while others have suggested a link to the Latin word *Tabula*, meaning a flat surface^[2, 8]. Although these interpretations are speculative, they point to a broader pattern of attempting to anchor the instrument's identity within a specific linguistic lineage. However, such efforts often overlook the possibility that the term "Tabla" may have acquired its current meaning through a process of semantic narrowing, evolving over time to denote a specific type of instrument within a broader category of drums.

Ultimately, the organological and linguistic analysis reinforces a key theme that runs throughout this study: the need to distinguish between naming and origin, and between structural similarity and historical continuity. The Tabla, in its present form, is the result of a sophisticated interplay between design, technique, and terminology. Its name may reflect layers of linguistic influence, but its structure and function are deeply rooted in the Indian musical tradition.

By integrating these perspectives, we arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the Tabla—not as an isolated invention or a borrowed artifact, but as a culturally embedded instrument shaped by both material innovation and linguistic adaptation. This holistic view not only clarifies many of the misconceptions surrounding its origin but also highlights the richness and complexity of its historical development.

Conclusion

The question of the Tabla's origin has long been surrounded by speculation, competing theories, and widely accepted yet weakly substantiated claims. From its supposed invention by Amir Khusro to its alleged importation from West Asia, many narratives have attempted to explain its emergence through singular events or identifiable individuals. However, a critical examination of historical, textual, organological, and musical evidence reveals that such explanations are insufficient to account for the complexity of the instrument's development.

The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that the Tabla cannot be traced to a single point of origin, nor can its creation be attributed conclusively to any one individual. Instead, its evolution appears to be deeply rooted in the indigenous percussion traditions of India, particularly those associated with early instruments such as the *Tripushkar* described in the *Natyashastra*^[1]. The transformation of these early forms into instruments like the *Mridang* and *Pakhawaj*, and the parallel survival of paired, upward-facing drums within folk traditions, provided a structural and conceptual foundation upon which the Tabla could eventually emerge.

At the same time, the medieval period introduced new cultural dynamics that influenced the refinement and recontextualization of existing instruments. Interactions

with Persian, Arabic, and Central Asian musical cultures contributed to shifts in terminology and possibly reinforced certain conceptual features, such as the use of paired drums. However, these influences, while significant, do not constitute the origin of the Tabla. Rather, they represent one layer within a broader process of cultural exchange and adaptation.

Equally important is the recognition that the development of the Tabla was closely tied to changing musical needs. The transition from Dhrupad to more flexible and expressive forms such as Khyal created a demand for an instrument capable of greater tonal precision, responsiveness, and rhythmic subtlety^[2]. It is within this context that the Tabla's distinctive features—its divided structure, refined bols, and the use of Syahi—can be understood as functional innovations, designed to meet the evolving requirements of performance practice.

The examination of mythological and anecdotal accounts further reinforces the need for caution in attributing the instrument's origin to specific figures. While individuals such as Sidhar (Sudhar) Khan may have played a crucial role in the development, standardization, and popularization of the Tabla, particularly in shaping its modern form and repertoire, the available evidence does not support the claim that they were its sole inventors^[3]. Similarly, the widely circulated association with Amir Khusro lacks historical substantiation and appears to be the result of retrospective attribution rather than documented fact.

From an organological and linguistic standpoint, the Tabla represents a synthesis of structural innovation and semantic evolution. Its name may derive from the Arabic *Tabal*, but this linguistic connection does not imply a corresponding structural lineage. The instrument's defining characteristics—its tonal system, construction, and playing technique—are firmly situated within the Indian musical tradition, reflecting a long process of experimentation and refinement.

In light of these considerations, it becomes evident that the Tabla should be understood not as an isolated invention, but as the product of a gradual and multi-layered evolutionary process. Its emergence was shaped by the interplay of historical continuity, regional practices, intercultural interaction, and functional necessity. This perspective not only resolves many of the contradictions found in earlier theories but also offers a more nuanced and historically grounded understanding of the instrument.

Ultimately, the significance of the Tabla lies not only in its origin but in its ability to adapt, evolve, and respond to the changing demands of musical expression. Its journey from early percussion forms to its present status as a central instrument in North Indian classical music reflects the dynamic and integrative nature of the tradition itself. Recognizing this complexity allows for a more meaningful appreciation of the Tabla—not merely as an object of historical inquiry, but as a living instrument shaped by centuries of artistic practice and cultural exchange.

References

1. Mistry AE. *Pakhawaj aur Tabla ke Gharane evam Paramparayein*. Swar Sadhna Samiti, 1984, 105.
2. Shukla Y. *Tabla ka Udgam Vikas aur Vadan Shailiyan*. Hindi Madhyam Karyanvay Nirdeshalaya, 2001, 122.
3. Sen AK. *Bharatiya Taalon ka Shastriya Vivechan*. Madhya Pradesh Hindi Granth Academy, 1973, 145.

4. Mistry AE. *Pakhawaj evam Tabla ke Gharane evam Paramparayein*. Swar Sadhna Samiti, 1984, 102.
5. Bharata. *Natyashastra*. Chaukhamba Surbharati Prakashan.
6. Saxena V. *Taal ke Lakshya Lakshan Swarop mein Ekroopta*. Kanishka Publishers, 2006, 13.
7. Sen AK. *Bharatiya Taalon ka Shastriya Vivechan*. Madhya Pradesh Hindi Granth Academy, 1973, 144.
8. Sharangadeva. *Sangeet Ratnakar*. Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1943.
9. Garg LN. *Sangeet Tabla Ank*. Sangeet Karyalaya Hathras, 1981, 13.
10. Saxena V. *Taal ke Lakshya Lakshan Swarop mein Ekroopta*. Kanishka Publishers, 2006, 13.
11. Shukla Y. *Tabla ka Udgam Vikas aur Vadan Shailiyan*. Hindi Madhyam Karyanvay Nirdeshalaya, 2001, 122.
12. Shukla Y. *Tabla ka Udgam Vikas aur Vadan Shailiyan*. Hindi Madhyam Karyanvay Nirdeshalaya, 2001, 122.
13. Kudesia S. *Prachin Kaal ke Pariprekshya mein Vartaman Tabla Vadan*. Sanjay Prakashan, 2011, 193.
14. Shukla Y. *Tabla ka Udgam Vikas aur Vadan Shailiyan*. Hindi Madhyam Karyanvay Nirdeshalaya, 2001, 122.
15. Garg LN. *Sangeet Tabla Ank*. Sangeet Karyalaya Hathras, 1981, 58.
16. Mishra VS. *Tabla Puran*. Kanishka Publishers, 2004, 6-7.
17. Sen AK. *Bharatiya Taalon ka Shastriya Vivechan*. Madhya Pradesh Hindi Granth Academy, 1973, 145-147.
18. Shukla Y. *Tabla ka Udgam Vikas aur Vadan Shailiyan*. Hindi Madhyam Karyanvay Nirdeshalaya, 2001, 60.
19. Shukla Y. *Tabla ka Udgam Vikas aur Vadan Shailiyan*. Hindi Madhyam Karyanvay Nirdeshalaya, 2001, 65-66.
20. Shukla Y. *Tabla ka Udgam Vikas aur Vadan Shailiyan*. Hindi Madhyam Karyanvay Nirdeshalaya, 2001, 74.
21. Mistry AE. *Pakhawaj evam Tabla ke Gharane evam Paramparayein*. Swar Sadhna Samiti, 1984, 102.
22. Johari S. Pt. Ramshankar Das Swami Pagaldas Ji ka *Vyaktitva evam Krititva: Ek Adhyayan*. BR Rhythms, 2013, 151.
23. Mishra VS. *Tabla Puran*. Kanishka Publishers, 2004, 7.
24. Mistry AE. *Pakhawaj evam Tabla ke Gharane evam Paramparayein*. Swar Sadhna Samiti, 1984, 102.
25. Mishra VS. *Tabla Puran*. Kanishka Publishers, 2004, 6-7.
26. Garg LN. *Sangeet Tabla Ank*. Sangeet Karyalaya Hathras, 1981, 58.
27. Bhavsar G. *Sangeet Patrika*. Sangeet Karyalaya Hathras, 2005, (May), 24.
28. Mishra VS. *Tabla Puran*. Kanishka Publishers, 2004, 6-7.