

# ***Table ki Alphabet:*** **A Translation and Interpretation of a Folklore Text** **from the Delhi *Tabla Gharana***

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## **Introduction**

A notable feature of many South Asian classical and folk drumming traditions is the use of spoken onomatopoeic syllables which represent performed drum sounds and combinations of sounds (*bols* or *solkattu*). Syllables such as *dha*, *ta*, *tin*, *tira*, *dhumakita* have corresponding drum strokes whose timbre is of close homophonous relation to the drum syllables. The three main drumming traditions commonly identified with this “drum language” are *mrdangam*, *pakhawaj*, and *tabla*; arguably, it is the *tabla*’s drum language which is given the greatest amount of popular and academic representation. *Tabla* is especially prominent for the variety of *bols* [syllables] which are used in modern performance practice; a result of the syncretic nature of this drum.<sup>1</sup>

Until recently these drum syllables functioned primarily as an “oral notation”<sup>2</sup> for educational transmission of various types of performance genres such as rhythmic compositions and metered cycles. Syllabic recitation is now a common feature of *tabla* and *mrdangam* solos, and has frequently been presented as an independent art form.<sup>3</sup> There are also several “world beat” pop musicians who use either a *tabla* player or have learned *bol* recitation as catchy new material for their music.<sup>4</sup>

South Asian drum syllables have certainly seen no shortage of scholarly attention, especially *tabla* traditions of *bol* recitation, or *parhant* (from the Hindi/Urdu verb *parhna* meaning “to read or recite”). General studies of drum sounds and their performance practice are discussed with varying degrees of detail in the musicological and ethnomusicological literature.<sup>5</sup> Specialized studies of drum language include: Ellingson’s (1980) interpretation of the drum language in Sanskrit texts on Indian Buddhist music; the music cognition and musico-linguistic concepts of *tabla* players by Baily (1988) and Kippen (1992); and the process of oral transmission among *tabla* players by Booth (1986).

With the exception of Kippen and Booth, few studies actually represent and interpret *tabla* player’s conceptions of drum syllables. Baily (1988: 115) also notes that *bols* are a popular topic in many studies of Hindustani music theory, yet acknowledges that “we lack information about how individual musicians represent this knowledge, especially those trained within the traditional *gharana* system, as opposed to those who attend music college”.

What are *tabla* players' concepts relating to the *bols* they speak and play? Evidence from Booth (1986: 286-7) suggests that *tabla* players make comparisons between *bols* and language. He quotes several *tabla* players who described *bols* as an "alphabet" and/or "grammar" of *tabla*, particularly in relation to a type of composition known as *qaida*:

More frequently, however, the music-language analogy is used to describe or emphasize the correct sequence of strokes to be learned. "One must start from the very first, 'This is dha, this is ta,' like that. When they understand this you can go on, because this is just like A B C D; so this must be taught first." (Chamma Khan, personal communication, Delhi, June 13, 1985). Chote Lal Misra also used the A B C D analogy, "these (the basic *qaidas*) are the alphabets of *tabla*, A B C D." (personal communication, Varanasi, March 14, 1985). An almost identical remark was made by Kishan Maharaj, although he directed his concern more towards the function of *qaida* than the order of strokes (personal communication, Varanasi, February 16, 1985)... That these musicians resort to this analogy with such consistency suggests a conceptualization of their music which is not based on literate, analytical modes of thought and learning but on the oral, contextual, and linguistic learning of music.

*Table ki Alphabet* [The Alphabet of *Tabla*] is an example of an oral and written text from a notebook of a *khalifa* [head, authority] of the Delhi *tabla gharana*, Ustad Gameh Khan (1882-1958), whose son was the late Khalifa Ustad Inam Ali Khan (1924-1990) and whose grandson is Ghulam Haidar Khan. The translation of *Table ki Alphabet* was taken from a taped interview with Ghulam Haidar conducted in New Delhi on January 21, 1992 by Emam, a semi-professional musician and *tabla* researcher.<sup>6</sup> Speaking in Hindi/Urdu and limited English, Ghulam Haidar is both narrating and reading a folklore text about the "meanings" of *tabla bols*. This text, however, expands on the common concept of *bols* as an alphabet and grammar of *tabla* by attributing specific meanings, mostly extra-musical, to the *bols* through the use of puns on these drums sounds.

The puns were created by utilizing a Hindi/Urdu word of semi-homonymic relation to the *tabla bol*. Verbs are most often employed in which the first consonant and vowel corresponds to the *tabla* sound. Nouns and adjectives are also used, but the predominant use of verbs seems to reflect a basic didactic function of this text. Yet, surprisingly, this function only occasionally addresses the aesthetics of correct *tabla* sound production and technique. The didactic purpose is instead a series of moral dictums for behavior befitting an artist, and perhaps more specifically a



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Hindustani musical accompanist. The moralistic codes acknowledge Brian Silver's (1984) description of a distinct behavioral pattern, or *adab*, of Hindustani musicians. The question of *adab* as it relates to these puns will be explored in the concluding remarks.

## The translation of *Table ki Alphabet*

*Table ki Alphabet* is both an oral text and written text. During the interview Ghulam Haidar made two renditions. The first was primarily drawn from the oral tradition of the specific musical lineage to which he was born and raised, the Delhi *tabla gharana*. Although he looked at the text, he was essentially involved in an explication of the written material. The second was an exact reading of the text written in Urdu. The orality of the first performance (on the right) becomes quite apparent when compared to the second (on the left). An interpretation of the puns follows the translated text.<sup>7</sup>

Ghulam Haidar prefaced this with an overview of the importance of the *tabla* alphabet:

“The *tabla* alphabet, the sounds of *tabla*, those are very few. And just as there is an alphabet of English, Urdu, and Hindi (A, B, C, D; alif, be, pe; aa, oo, ee) so there is an alphabet assigned to everything. Our elders have created an alphabet for *tabla*. What are the meanings of the alphabet?”

### WRITTEN TEXT

1. *Dha* — *Duhai Khuda se*.  
[Cry out for God's help.]

### ORAL COMMENTARY

For example *dha*. *Dha* means to bring your complaint to God. To beseech God's help. In the word *Khuda* there are three alphabets: *khe*, *dal*, and *alif*. Also in the word *Ram* there are three alphabets: *re*, *alif*, and *mim*. In the same way *dha* has three alphabets: *dal*, *he*, and *alif*. *Dha* is comprised of three alphabets. So what is the meaning of *dha*? To petition, to request, to concentrate on God.

This text begins with the most frequent and fundamental sound of *tabla* performance practice, *dha*, played as a combination of open sounds on both the *bayan* [left] and *dayan* [right] drums of *tabla*. *Dha* begins and ends most *tabla* compositions. Unlike other *bols*, Ghulam Haidar accords it a divine quality, wherein its performance is akin to a prayer of intercession, thus implying a sound of central importance. The pun appears to involve the verbal root *dhya*, “to concentrate, to fix one's mind on something” which is found in the noun *dhyān*, “meditation, concentration”.

An additional interpretation is found in the oral commentary where Ghulam Haidar adds a further dimension of the divine essence of *dha* by comparing its three “alphabets” (i.e. letters) to the three “alphabets” of the common Urdu and Hindi words for God, *Khuda* and *Ram*.

2. *Ta* — *Tako mat*.  
[Do not stare.]

*Ta* means to not stare at anybody. Do not look at somebody's shortcomings.

*Ta* is compared to the first consonant and vowel of the verb *takna*, “to gaze on, to stare at”, here in second-person informal imperative with the appropriate negation marker, *mat*. Ghulam Haidar adds a social meaning in the oral version.

3. *Dhin — Subah.*

[Morning.]

*Dhin* means, for example, morning.

*Dhin* is compared to the noun *din*, “a day, daytime, time, morning”. The pun thus involves the de-aspiration of the initial consonant. Although *din* most commonly means “day”, “morning” is a possible additional meaning. A more common Hindi/Urdu word for morning is *subah*.

4. *Tira — tirtirahat, tir tirapan nahin.*

[Clatter, no flutter (i.e., irregularity).]

*Tira* means *tirtirahat*. One should not speak badly to somebody too much. One should not clash with someone (too often).

*Tirtirahat* is an onomatopoeic noun meaning “snap, crack, report, crackle, clatter, platter, bluster, boast, tingle, ache”. The verb *tarapna* means “to flounder, flounce; to be agitated; to flutter, beat, palpitate”. The sound *tira* comprises part of a series of non-resonating drum rolls better known as *tirakit*, which are usually played at high speeds. A possible interpretation of the written version involves the aesthetic of performing strings of *tirakit* wherein no unevenness of dynamics or timbre should occur, thus no “clatter”. Certain master *tabla* players, such as Ustad Allah Rakha, are especially famous for the clear quality of their *tirakit*. Ghulam Haidar’s oral version of this sound includes an additional social meaning of abstaining from backbiting conversation and avoiding confrontational dialogue.

5. *Ghe aur ke ka matlab hai kaho.*

[The meaning of *ghe* and *ke* is “speak”.]

*Ghe* and *ke* mean speak. Say what is in your heart to God or to somebody.

The pun on *ghe* and *ke* is more obscurely contrived. The first vowel of *kahna* is pronounced with a flat “e” sound when followed by “h”, thus producing a closer relation to the sound of the *bol ke*. A possible distant relation for the *bol ge* is the Persian imperative command *bego*, “to speak”. Both these *bols* are played on the *bayan*, and the resonating *ghe* stroke incorporates extensive pitch modulation which perhaps alludes to the *bayan*’s imitative quality of speech inflection. In the oral version, Ghulam Haidar offers an additional social meaning involving the ideal of honest and forthright dialogue with other people and God.

6. *Ghina — Ghin mat kar bura mat samajh.*

[Do not hate, do not think badly.]

*Ghina* means do not hate somebody. Suppose you are sitting here in dirty clothes and I say to you, “Please, you go”. But you are my brother, thus meaning, you are a human being and I am also a human being, so one should not hate anybody.

The pun on the *bol* combination *ghina* involves the simple elimination of the final vowel to produce the noun *ghin*, “dislike, aversion, hatred, abhorrence”. Both the written and more elaborate oral version of this pun are directed towards a moral ideal of avoiding hateful thoughts and disrespectful behavior towards other people.

7. *Tin* — *tan kar bat mat karo ghurur accha nahin.*  
[Do not be aggressive to someone, conceit is not good.]

*Tin* means do not talk to someone in an aggressive manner. There should be no conceit in you. There is a certain behavior becoming of an artist, that is to say, he meets everybody with politeness and humility.

The pun on *tin* involves an alteration of the second vowel of the verb stem, *tan*, from the verb *tanna*, “to move or act in a pompous or conceited manner, to make a display”. The written version stresses the need for peaceful relations and humility with others, a sentiment reinforced in the oral version.

8. *Kin* — *Kinara buri baton se karo.*  
[Stay away from bad things.]

*Kin* means stay away from bad things. Do not adopt bad things, stay away, escape from bad things.

The pun on *kin* involves the first three letters of the noun *kinar*, “side, margin, edge”, which is employed in an conjunct verb formation *kinara karna*, “to avoid, shun; to abstain from, to refrain from”. The obvious social meaning of both versions stresses the general avoidance of bad habits and vices. Interestingly, no attempt was made at a pun on the *tabla*-specific meaning of *kinar*, a term used in this tradition for the outer edge or rim of the playing surface of the *dayan*.

9. *Na* — *Nahin apne kam par nazan nahin hona kabhi.*  
[One should never be proud of one’s own work.]

*Na* means “No, don’t!”. You should never be proud of what you are doing, your own achievements.

The pun on the *bol na* is taken from the first two letters of the noun *nazan*, “being proud”, which is employed in the conjunct verb form *nazan hona*, “to be conceited (about), to pride oneself (on)”. This pun concerns humility in one’s ability as a musician or perhaps specifically as a *tabla* player.

10. *Dhit* — *Dhith mat bano kabhi.*  
[Never be obstinate.]

*Dhete* means do not be obstinate. Do not talk to somebody with obstinacy. One ought to practice modesty with others.

The pun on *dhith* involves a change in the vowel from short to long “i”, and a change in the final consonant from unaspirated “t” to aspirated “th”. This change creates the adjective *dhith*, “insolent, rude, saucy, pert, stubborn, willful”. An interesting variation is seen between the oral and written *bols*, though there are several ways to pronounce essentially the same stroke.

11. *Kit* — *Kisi ki kat mat karo, table ke bolon ki kat karo; table ke bolon ko kis tariqe se bajate hain.*  
[Do not cut someone off sharply, play the *tabla* sounds with sharpness (i.e., crisply) in this manner the sounds of *tabla* are played]

*Kit* means do not cut somebody off. If something good is going to happen to somebody and if I should go and say, “You don’t take Emam, and you take me. I will play *tabla*. Emam is not good. I am very good.” Understand? This thing! One should not cut off someone else’s benefit.

This pun involves both a social injunction and a performance aesthetic. Several possible routes for the pun on *kit* are available: the verbs *katna*, “to cut, clip, lop, prune”, and *katna karna*, “to make an incision or wound in, to corrode, to destroy”. Ghulam Haidar offers

greater detail in the oral version of “cutting someone off”, which he denotes as taking away someone’s good opportunities. He even contextualizes this particular passage by including the interviewer in the example and by using English.

12. *Dhit* — *dhitkar mat karo kisi se, sacchai ko ne chhoro.* *Dhit* means do not rebuke anybody, do not leave the truth.  
[Do not rebuke anybody, do not abandon the truth.]

The pun on *dhit* involves a change in the vowel to create the conjunct verb construction *dhat/dhut karna*, “to reprove, revile; to drive away”. Except for a variation in the vowel sound, I have observed no difference between this *bol* and #10.

13. *Tit* — *Tao ne khao.* *Tit* means do not become arrogant, do not be angry.  
[Do not be angry.]

The pun on *tit* is comparatively more contrived due to the alteration of both the vowel and final consonant; possibly no pun was intended. The allusion here is to the conjunct verb *tao khana*, “to be heated, to be inflamed, to be enraged”.

14. *Kat* — *Kutte ki tarah ne bhaunko.* *Kat* means do not jabber too much, do not talk too much. A person should talk less.  
[Do not bark like a dog.]

The pun on *kat* involves the noun *kutta*, “a dog”. The obscurity of the pun is resolved in Ghulam Haidar’s comparison of the barking of a dog to excessive talk or “jabber”. The verb *bhaunkna*, “to bark” also means “to talk nonsensically or foolishly”.

15. *Dhira* — *Dhere se bajao.* *Dhira* means play with perseverance, with love.  
[Play with perseverance.]

The pun on *dhira* is similar to other puns (cf. #10 and #12) because of the many variant pronunciations found among *tabla* players. The most probable pun is the noun *dhir*, “steadiness, steadfastness, firmness, endurance”. The pun refers to the infamous difficulty with which *dhira dhira* is practiced and performed; an observation endorsed by many *tabla* players. A second pun is found in the oral version where Ghulam Haidar relates *dhira* to the adverb *dhire-dhire*, “slowly, deliberately; patiently, gently, softly”.

16. *Ghira* — *Ghabrahat mat karo.* *Ghira*, which is from the *bol ghiranak*, means do not play *tabla* in a panic. You must never do anything in a panic; with a calm mind you should play *tabla*.  
[Do not be agitated.]

The pun on *ghira* is related to the noun *ghabrahat*, “confusion, bewilderment, distress, consternation”. The oral version more clearly illustrates the meaning of the pun which is primarily directed towards the performance ideal of avoiding stage-fright when performing *tabla*.

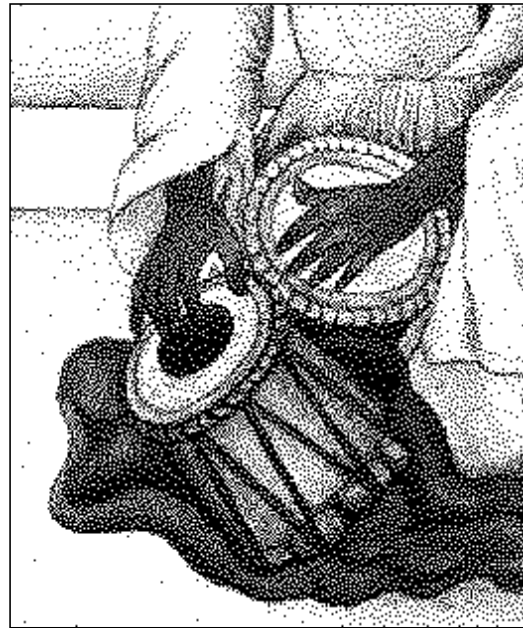
17. *Kira* — *Kirkirahat bol manao.* *Kira* means there should not be any grating noise in the sounds of *tabla*. The sound of *tabla* should not have a grating noise.  
[No grating noise is allowed.]

The pun on *kira* (as in *kiranak*) is the noun *kirkirahat*, “cracking, snapping, creaking,

grating”. As in #15 and #16, the meaning is clarified by the oral version which discusses the aesthetics of clear playing technique and sound production. No specific reference is intended between the *bol kira* and the desired quality of clear playing technique; instead this *bol* is utilized in making a generalized statement about *tabla* aesthetics due to the close homophonous relationship between the *bol* and the noun *kirkirahat*.

## Conclusion

The puns of *Table ki Alphabet* involve two main didactic functions: 1) to teach an aesthetic for *tabla bols*; and 2) to impart a model of appropriate behavior for a professional musician. A majority of the puns dwell on the latter function, and it is therefore this social dimension which is of interest. Ghulam Haidar offers two versions of this moral code, oral and literary, and it is the more extensive oral version which contains additional knowledge reflecting his musical training and heritage of the Delhi *tabla gharana*.



Several scholars involved in the study of Hindustani musical accompanist traditions have observed the subordinate status of accompanists within the hierarchy of Hindustani musical performance, in addition to their generally low social status within the larger spectrum of Indian society (see, e.g., Silver 1984, Kippen 1988 and 1989, and Neuman 1990). The studies by Neuman and Kippen offer the most detailed analysis of this socio-musical dynamic but are too extensive for the purposes of review in this paper. A more convenient summary is offered in an article by Silver (1984) which specifically addresses the issue of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Silver discusses the behavioral patterns of musicians using the Urdu word *adab*, “good breeding, good manners, politeness... elegance of manners, address or speech”. Silver (1984: 324) comments on the behavior of *tabla* players in the context of musical accompaniment:

In addition to the *adab* of behavior between solo performer and audience, there will be varying codes of conduct between the soloist and his accompanists. Traditionally the accompanists were to follow the preferences of the soloists in every respect, unless the accompanist were senior in age or status to the soloist, in

which case the accompanist would be given much more latitude, the soloist often expressing publicly his sense of honor and privilege at being accompanied by such an august musician. Occasionally, however, rancor and rivalry will erupt between the two, with the result that the soloist may chastise the accompanist publicly, regardless of the justice of such chastisement. In the present age, however, the status and privileges of the *tabla* player have been somewhat elevated, so that he is permitted more opportunities to demonstrate his skill in the course of a performance; ideally, however, he should never disturb the development of the solo performance, and should take his solos only on a clear signal from the main performer.

This subordinate social and musical status suggests a possible correlation with the moral dictums of several puns contained in *Table ki Alphabet*. Many of the puns appear to reflect a respectful demeanor broadly applicable to a given social scenario, yet several puns seem to serve as both a descriptive and prescriptive model for a subordinate social and musical status of *tabla* players: e.g., pun #4, “One should not speak badly to somebody too much. One should not clash with someone (too often)”. Other puns which imply subordinate social and musical status include numbers 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 14. Although these puns do not expressly imply subservience, neither do they advocate an individualistic or independent mode of social or musical behavior – a pervasive dimension for being a soloist musician in Hindustani music.

A final speculation concerns the originality of this text. It has already been noted that many *tabla* players make linguistic analogies for the sounds of *tabla*, but how far do they extend this analogy beyond a few sentences described to an ethnomusicologist? Is this oral text exclusively a Delhi *gharana* tradition, or is it found among *tabla* players of other traditions? My conversations and research with several professional *tabla* players suggest that this text is peculiar to the oral literature of Ghulam Haidar and his forefathers of the Delhi *gharana*. Only further research among professional *tabla* players will yield definitive information about this recently “discovered” emic (i.e., insider’s) model of *tabla* drum language.

## Notes

- 1 For a definitive study of the development of *tabla* and the drumming traditions from which it borrows, see Stewart (1974).
- 2 A term used by Ellingson (1980) and Baily (1988).
- 3 I have made this observation from comparing early and late recordings of solo *tabla* performances; my current *tabla* teacher, Akram Khan, thinks this is not a new feature of *tabla* solos (personal communication, March 1, 1994).
- 4 Many recordings of world-beat *bol*-fusion are available by musicians such as Sheila Chandra, The Erik Marchand Trio, and John McLaughlin.
- 5 For *mrdangam* see Brown (1965); and for *tabla* see Stewart (1974), Gottlieb (1977) and Kippen (1988).
- 6 The author wishes to thank Ghulam Haidar, Emam, and the AIIS for making these interviews available for ethnomusicological analysis; also, the author would like to thank his language instructor Naseem A. Hines, lecturer of Hindi and Urdu at the University of Washington.
- 7 All definitions of Hindi/Urdu words are from Platts Hindi/Urdu/English dictionary, 1988.

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