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Kayda: The Most Important Practice for Tabla Players and Its Pedagogical Application

Swarup Hossain*

Abstract: *This article examines Kayda as a fundamental compositional and pedagogical framework in tabla practice, with particular emphasis on its role in technical development and musical creativity. While existing scholarship has extensively discussed the structural rules, historical evolution, and gharana-based variations of Kayda, limited attention has been given to its pedagogical efficacy in shaping hand technique and physiological control. Drawing on theoretical analysis, historical sources, and performance practice, this study explores how the systematic and repetitive structure of Kayda contributes to the development of finger strength, coordination, and rhythmic precision. It further argues that the practice of paltas (variations) functions as a cognitive and creative mechanism, enabling learners to move from imitation to improvisation. By integrating perspectives from musicology and performance pedagogy, the article proposes a more comprehensive understanding of Kayda as both a technical training system and a creative discipline. This study contributes to tabla scholarship by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and embodied practice, particularly in relation to motor skill development and artistic expression.*

Keywords: *Kayda, Tabla Pedagogy, Gharana, Bol, Hand Technique, Rhythm*

Introduction

Tabla is a very popular instrument in the Indian subcontinent. It is usually played as the main instrument of accompaniment, which means "Sath-Sangat". However, with the passage of time, this instrument has also gained considerable publicity as a solo instrument. Generally, the tabla is an Avanaddha instrument divided into two parts covered by leather: one part is called *Dayan* (right) and the other is called *Bayan* (left**)**. To play the instrument one needs intricate hand movements, and sound variations are produced through different strokes made by fingers and hands. The sound patterning or rhythmic structures of the tabla have a special language composed of specific rhythmic strokes the *bols* (syllables). The Kayda is one of the basic rhythm patterns used extensively in tabla playing. There is also considerable variation in the Kayda based on the different schools of tabla or of

* Assistant Professor, Department of Music, University of Dhaka

gharana. Kayda plays a pivotal role in helping students to learn and play the tabla. In fact, it is possible to achieve perfection in tabla education by practicing Kayda, which is the combined form of different *bols* and *banis* of different schools.

On the basis of historical context and theoretical foundations, the Kaydas are based on the Ti Ta syllable, then the two *bols* in that Kaydas help increase the strength of the middle and index fingers. Focused on the following sequence, after that the next Kaydas are combined with the *bols* like *Tirkit*, *Kredhatit*, *Gheghetita Dhenegene*, etc. For example, if a tabla student plays or rehearses the Kayda based on the *Ti Ta* syllable, then the two bols in that Kayda help increase the strength of the middle and index fingers. The researcher thinks that by practicing Kayda with different combination, it can help improve one's ability to execute various grips of the hand, paving the way for mastery of the instrument. In solo tabla performances, presenting Kayda uniquely is of great importance. Besides, it significantly enhances hand dexterity. First, the Kayda is played at a slow tempo or at vilambit laya. Then the tempo is gradually doubled, tripled, or even quadrupled, depending on the artist's proficiency. There is also a custom of playing the variations, known as Upaj, to elaborate the Kaydas.

In solo tabla performances, presenting Kayda uniquely is of great importance. First, the Kayda is played at a slow tempo or at vilambit laya. Then the tempo is gradually doubled, tripled, or even quadrupled, depending on the artist's proficiency. There is also a custom of playing the variations, known as *Upaj*, to elaborate the Kayda. While the structural rules and historical lineages of Kayda are well-documented, there is a lack of research focusing on its pedagogical efficacy regarding finger physiology. Current literature has not analyzed the impact of repetitive, symmetrical nature of Kayda practice in shaping the muscular structure of the fingers. This study, therefore, tries to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and embodied practice, particularly in relation to motor skill development and artistic expression by focusing the role of Kayda in technical development and musical creativity

Literature Review

In discussions of Tabla, the concept of Kayda has been widely discussed by both scholars and practitioners of tabla, primarily emphasizing its structural, compositional, and performance-oriented dimensions. However, relatively limited attention has been given to its pedagogical implications, particularly in relation to physical and technical development. Kayda plays a crucial role in establishing the foundational hand framework necessary for diverse gharana-based playing styles. Existing research suggests that Kayda functions not only as a compositional form but also as a structured system that shapes technical proficiency, rhythmic understanding, and artistic identity.

Saxena (2018) has provided one of the most detailed theoretical discussions on Tabla rhythm, where he highlights the structural discipline of Kayda. According to Saxena, Kayda follows strict compositional rules where the expansions or 'revolutions' must logically evolve from the main theme and maintain the integrity of the rhythm. This view establishes Kayda as a rule-bound system, which is directly related to its etymological meaning of "law" or "principle". Furthermore, Saxena emphasizes the importance of bol as the linguistic basis of tabla and argues that mastery of these elements is essential for any advanced rhythmic development. He has also highlighted the connection between *bol* and *palta* in his remark as follows:

> Further, the paltas have to follow a particular sequence. The first permutation has to build upon the opening alphabet of the composition; the next variation, on the second *aksara*; and so on. What is more, the terminal syllables of the two segments have to rhyme, without being identical. Thus, if the last word of the first line is *tina kina*, the terminal bol of the second line has to *dhina gina*. (Saxena, 2018, p. 47)

Paltas are produced by various combinations of bols and contributes to diversification of the much or theme of the Kayda.

Nayempalli (2007), too, has analyzed kayda from both theoretical and practical perspectives. He defines Kayda as a structured composition based on a specific bol, which cannot be changed, but can be creatively rearranged. Nayempalli's work is particularly significant in linking Kayda practice to the tradition of performance. He points out that historically certain gharanas preferred other forms such as Peshkar and Rela over Kayda. His contribution helps in understanding the evolution of Kayda in the overall repertoire of tabla.

The role of gharanas in Kayda formation has been discussed in detail by Aban E. Mistry (1956) where she gives a thorough account of the artistic differences between the major tabla gharanas. Mistry notes that the Delhi, Azrada and Farrukhabad gharanas have played crucial roles in the development and refinement of the Kayda. Her analysis shows how each gharana introduced different technical methods such as finger configurations, bow pattern and rhythmic variations. This is in line with the consensus among scholars that Kayda is not a static or unchanging concept but rather develops through hereditary traditions.

In addition, Srivastava has contributed to the teaching of Kayda through detailed writing and examples in his book *Taal Parichay* (2013, 2018). His work is particularly valuable for students, as it provides practical examples of Kayda in different rhythms, especially the three rhythms. Srivastava's approach bridges theory and practice, showing how Kayda serves as a training tool for developing rhythmic precision and hand balance or coordination. The aesthetic aspect of tabla performance meanwhile has been explored by Mainkar, who has emphasized the

artistic and expressive aspects of the Kayda. Mainkar argues that beyond technical proficiency, Kayda contributes to the refinement of an artist's aesthetic sense, enabling creativity within a disciplined framework. This perspective complements technical analysis by highlighting the balance of discipline and artistic expression.

Contributions by scholars such as Barthakur (2010) have broadened the discussion by placing tabla in a broader scientific and musicological context. Barthakur examines rhythmic structures and their theoretical underpinnings, establishing Kayda as a highly structured rhythmic system. Similarly, the works of Maiti and Majumdar provide additional insight into the theory, terminology, and compositional methods of tabla, supporting the idea of understanding Kayda as a distinct discipline.

Despite this extensive contribution, there is a research gap as the current scholarship does not provide any coherent analytical framework that links Kayda practice to physical development such as hand technique and muscle control. Although several authors have acknowledged its importance in developing such skills, the discussion available is limited. Furthermore, comparative studies of different genres often remain descriptive rather than critical. Furthermore, while the traditional focus of Kayda is on discipline and repetition, there is a lack of scholarly attention to its role in fostering spontaneous creativity. This article argues that the systematic practice of *paltas* (variations) acts as a cognitive bridge, allowing students to eventually move beyond imitation and generate original rhythmic phrases and personal stylistic nuances. In summary, the existing literature consistently identifies Kayda as a cornerstone of tabla education and performance. Scholars agree on its dual role as a means of technical practice on the one hand, and as a specific compositional form rooted in tradition on the other. However, there is scope for further research in areas such as genre-based comparative style analysis, performance psychology, and integration of Kayda with modern teaching methods.

History of Kayda

The precise history of Kayda in tabla cannot be clearly identified. However, it is generally assumed that the practice and development of Kayda began after the invention of tabla bols and banis. According to available information, Ustad Siddhar Khan was the first to introduce tabla in Delhi. It is believed that the tradition of Kayda also originated during that period.

Many people believe that Ustad Alauddin Khilji created the tabla by splitting the pakhawaj into two parts. However, according to the information available so far, the tabla originated through the efforts of Ustad Siddhar Khan. Some say he invented the tabla during the reign of Emperor Akbar, while others believe that Siddhar Khan established the foundation of the tabla in the 18th century. Therefore, Ustad Siddhar Khan is considered a pioneer of the tabla. (Barthakur, 2010, p. 59)

Definition of Kayda

The term Kayda means the presentation of a *bandish* or a combination of the alphabets of tabla according to certain rules. The word Kayda originates from the Arabic "kaid/qaid", and now in Urdu it refers to rules or systems of study. A Kayda is a particular type of composition consisting of *bols* that are composed of selected sets of phrases in one or more rotations, while maintaining the appearance and characteristics of a rhythm without altering its magnitude and division. A very important feature of the Kayda is that these specific sets of phrases can be played in different ways. However, no new bol or technique can be added to this group.

As noted by Induvusan Roy (2023), a Kayda is defined as a structured composition of mnemonic syllables (bols) that, while preserving the fixed framework of a rhythmic cycle (tala) namely its beats (matra), clapped divisions (tali), and waved divisions (khali) can be systematically developed and performed across one, two, or three cycles (avartan), including in reversed or otherwise varied permutations. (Roy, 2023, p. 22)

For example, the researcher used a famous Kayda of the Delhi Gharana:

Dha Dha Tira Kita | *Dha Dha Ti Na* |

Ta Ta Tira Kita | *Dha Dha Dhi Na* | *Dha* (Srivastava, 2018, p. 115) (Translated by Author)

This Kayda is based on *Teen Taal*, a 16-beat Taal. It includes some basic and mixed Tabla alphabets, such as *Dha*, *Ti Ta*, *Ta*, *Tirakita*, *Dhi*, and *Na*.

Alphabets of Tabla

Tabla has always been a subject of discourse among music scholars. This is due to the differences in syllables used in compositions that make up the repertoire of different gharanas. Part of the reason for this is that traditional ustads were often resistant to views outside their own schools of thought. They have always been an object of controversy. This itself has been due to differences between the syllables used in compositions which make the repertoire of different gharanas. (Saxena, 2018, p. 14) However, the language or syllables of the tabla are commonly referred to as *varna*, *bol*, or *bani*. Just as a knowledge of letters is essential in literacy, it is also important to have adequate knowledge of *bols* or *varnas* in tabla education. Usually, the tabla features certain alphabets for the right and left hand.

According to one view, there are as many as ten basic alphabets of tabla rhythm and another school of thought holds that there are only seven rhythms, like the seven basic notes of music. In my humble but considered opinion**,** the second view is preferable when applied to each of the two drums that make a tabla set, and this is based on extensive observations in actual practice. I ascribe the following

seven alphabets (*ta, tin, na, ra, ta, da, tra*) to the dayan (or the right-hand drum); and the following seven (*gha, ghey, ghee, ka, ke, kee, kat*) to the bayan (or the left-hand drum). (Saxena, 14)

The Letters of Tabla

The letters of the right hand are:

(1) Ta or Na, (2) Ti or Tin, (3) Din or Thun, (4) Tu or Tun, (5) Te or Ti, (6) Re or Te, (7) Tang, (8) Ding, (9) Teth, (10) Tta.

The letters of the left hand are:

(11) Ke, Ki or Kat, (12) Ge, Ga, Gaa, Gi, Gha, Ghee, (13) Kat.

The letters formed by the combination of both hands are respectively:

(14) Dha, (15) Dhin or Dhi, (16) Dheth, (17) Teen, (18) Dhing, (19) Dheth, (20) Dhe.

Each of these *bols* requires systematic practice to master. Since it is baseless to play or teach a single *bol* or letter in isolation**,** the technique is taught only after the foundational hand-shaping *bols* are practiced on the tabla. This is because most bols are combined in the Kayda.

For example, consider a very popular style of the Delhi Gharana:

Dha Dha Ti Ta | Dha Dha Ti Na | Ta Ta Ti Ta | Dha Dha Dhi Na | Dha (Saxena, 2018, p. 32) (Translated by Author).

Each word of this Kayda is a single *bol*. Again, to illustrate this in more detail**,** another popular Kayda of the Delhi Gharana can be used as an example:

Dhati Dhage Nadha Tirakita | Dhati Dhage Tina Kina |

Tati Take Nata Tirakita | Dhati Dhage Dhina Gina | Dha (Srivastava, 2018, p. 33) (Translated by Author).

In the above two examples of Kayda, all the *bols* of tabla have been used. Considering the context of the Gharana, the researcher thinks that the concept will be clearer.

Kayda in Different Gharanas

Indian classical music is marked by different styles or traditions, and table music has different schools or gharanas. These are Delhi Gharana, Ajrara Gharana, Lucknow Gharana, Banaras Gharana, Punjab Gharana, and Farrukkhabad Gharana respectively. Gharanas are distinguished by the unique style, technique and composition of each tradition or school. As Saxena explains,

Many different kinds of quayedas [kayda] have been created by our past masters. Some are set to *chatusra* and *tisra jatis* and others, to the misra jati. Some are short, but quite a few others are longer in range. (p. 48)

Generally, there are two types of playing methods which are also known as *baaj*, the *purab baaj* (Eastern) and the *paschim baaj* (Western). The Eastern *baaj* is open in nature, while the type of Western *baaj* is closed in nature. The kayda is most popular in Western *baaj* of Tabla. The gharanas of the western style are Delhi, Ajrada, and Farukkhabad.

Kayda & Delhi Gharana

Delhi Gharana is the main gharana of tabla. Ustad Siddhar Khan Dhaadi is famous as the founder of this Gharana. Delhi Gharana was the first to invent the application of practicing and playing Kayda. In this gharana, the Kaydas are played based on the type of theka.

> Siddhar Khan studied the changing tastes of the era in depth and gave such a form to the tabla, based on the Pakhavaj, that its form appeared completely different from the Pakhwaj. He made the open bols of the Pakhwaj playable on the Tabla, made changes in the placement of fingers, and took a revolutionary step by composing some new extended compositions based on Chanti, like Peshkar, Qaida, Rele, and non-extended compositions like Gat Tukde, Mukhde-Mohre, etc. (Mistry, 1956, p. 132) (Translated by Author).

The Kaydas of this school are mainly made or played in the form of vertical or parallel bols like Ti Ta, Tirkita, Kridhatita, etc. Most of the *bols* or Kaydas in this school are played in the Chatusra Jati, Thay, and Dun Laya or Madhyalay. It is not possible to ignore this gharana when it comes to shaping the hands of any Tabla learners. The application of two fingers and the use of edge or Kinar/Chanti-based bols are emphasized.

A popular Kayda of this gharana is

Dhage Tira Kita Ghe Ghe Tira Kita Dhina Gina Dhage Tira Kita Ghe Ghe Nana Gene Tina Kina

Take Tira Kita Ke Ke Tira Kita Tina Kina Dhage Tira Kita Ghe Ghe Nana Gene Dhina Gina (Mistry, n.d., p. 135) (Translated by Author).

In this gharana, the maximum *bols* of kaydas are played using the index and middle fingers, keeping the ring finger steady, both in Baya and Tabla, which is one of the main characteristics of this gharana.

Kayda & Ajrada Gharana

This gharana is a close branch of the Delhi Gharana. There is a village in Meerut district near Delhi, named Ajrada where two brothers, Kallu Khan and Miru

Khan, established this gharana. Over time, their descendants and disciple tradition continuously refined that style and did a commendable job in gaining recognition as a separate gharana. Although Ajrada Gharana falls in the category of western gharanas, whose specialty is in the *baaj* of Band and Kinar, due to the use of original compositions and different meters, contemporary maestros recognized it as a separate gharana. (Mistry, 1956, p.140)

There is no rule to play the Kaydas of Delhi Gharana in a fast tempo, so, in that case, the learned tabla experts started using the ring finger along with the index and middle fingers in the application of the knowledge provided by their riyaz.

A popular Kayda of this gharana is

Dha Skra Dha Tita Dha Ge Ti Rakita | Dha Dha Ghe Ghetak Dhinadhi Na Gena | Ta Skra Ta Tita Ta Ge Ti Rakita | Dha Dha Ghe Ghetak Dhinadhi Na Gena | Dha (Mistry, n.d., p. 141)

It was in this gharana that the Adi Laya or Tisra Jati Kayda was first introduced. Basically, this school of tabla started using different types of syllables of Tabla like *Dhin Dhina Gena*, *Teen Tina Kena*, *Katatak Ghetak*, etc. Many people have also considered the Kayda of this gharana as a Sulava Laya (to play the Kayda at a minimum speed with an easiest technique) or rhythm.

Kayda & Farukkhabad Gharana

Generally, in this gharana, both Western and Eastern *baaj* are seen in the circulation of lightning. In this gharana, there is also a different type of Kayda which is called Gat Kayda. The great maestro U. Haji Vilayat Ali Khan was an excellent tabla player, scholar, composer, and skilled teacher of this gharana. "He succeeded in giving the status of a gharana to Farrukhabad by making fundamental changes in the style of playing Lucknow and by creating many compositions in a new style" (Mistry, 1956., p. 155) (Translated by Author).This gharana uses the Kayda of both Delhi and Ajrada styles. There is no such restriction on the application of fingers in this gharana. Nowadays, this gharana is very popular.

A popular style of this gharana is:

Dha Skita TakdhaS Gheranag TetS | Dha Dha Gheranag Tina Kiranaga |
Ta Skita TaktaS Keranag TetS | Dha Dha Gheranag Dhina Gheranag | Dha (Mistry, n.d., 160) (Translated by Author)

The *baaj* of this gharana is mainly influenced by dance, like Lucknow, neither too open like Punjab and Banaras, nor too closed like Delhi and Ajrada. This gharana represents the gats differently, which gave birth to a new gharana, now famous everywhere as Farrukhabad Gharana.

Applied Aspects of Kayda

There are several important aspects to practicing Kayda in tabla learning. To begin with, it helps develop proper hand dexterity and rhythm texture. When a student regularly practices different types of techniques, the shape of their hands becomes more refined, and greater clarity develops in tabla playing. Additionally, consistent practice of these techniques increases the number of strokes in the student's hands and builds special skill in understanding where and when to strike the tabla to produce specific sounds. It improves rhythmic discipline and helps the student to enhance the art of accompaniment. There is no substitute for practicing Kayda when it comes to tabla accompaniment. Regular practice makes a student's hands well-suited to accompany music. Additionally, using various bols from Kaydas during accompaniment greatly refine the musicality and sweetness of the performance.

On the basis of history context and theoretical foundations, the Kaydas are based on the *Ti Ta* syllable, then the two *bols* in that Kaydas help increase the strength of the middle and index fingers. Focused on the following sequence, after that the next Kaydas are combined with the *bols* like *Tirkit*, *Kredhatit*, *Gheghetita Dhenegene*, etc. For example, if a tabla student plays or rehearses the Kayda based on the Ti Ta syllable, then the two bols in that Kayda help increase the strength of the middle and index fingers. The researcher thinks that by practicing Kayda with different combination, it can help improve one's ability to execute various grips of the hand, paving the way for mastery of the instrument. In solo tabla performances, presenting Kayda uniquely is of great importance. Besides, it significantly enhances hand dexterity.

In addition, Kayda advances a tabla player's ability to create new compositions. When a student practices different types of Kayda on the tabla, it gradually develops their ability to create original compositions. For example, by practicing a Kayda that includes teet, the student begins to understand how this phrase can be used in various ways to build new Kaydas or compositions, and can effectively apply it in their playing. For instance, after practicing Kaydas of the *tishra* and *khanda* rhythms, incorporating their *bols* into accompaniment creates highly melodious effects. Moreover, parts of Kaydas can be shortened and transformed into *laggis*, which are particularly used at the end of a song. Example: From the sequence *Dhaterikit dhi teet Gina Dhati Gina Tina Gina*, it can be rearranged as *Dhaterikit dhi teet gi na Dhati Gina* and applied creatively in accompaniment.

Conclusion

Kayda is a cornerstone of tabla education. A tabla player or student can stabilize the original grips of their hands through proper training along with the techniques of Kaydas. Generally, there is no alternative of Kayda in tabla education. If a tabla student wants to get proper training in tabla or to be established as an artist, it is essential to have a *riyaz* of Kayda in a very large amount. As the main topic of the above discussion, Kayda is a very important topic in the field of tabla education.

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