

**Appreciating Hindustani Music**  
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**Lecture 21**  
**Principles of Time in Hindustani Music - Tala and Laya**

Music unfolds in time and so all music has an integral relation with time and it is structured or every kind of music is structured in time in a certain manner. Now, in Indian classical music, the two fundamental Principles of Time are Laya and Tala. Now, laya can be roughly and superficially translated as tempo or speed.

So, I can talk to you at a slow pace or I can talk to you at a fast pace. So, laya is you know one aspect of how music unfolds in time. Simply we have slow music and fast music, but this principle, laya it is a very general and loose principle, it is critical, it is all pervasive.

But it is not rigorous, it is not very precise and very specific, that is something that tala does. Tala brings music together in time with more rigor, that is to be more specific tala organizes the music in cycles of a specific measure of time divided into a certain number of units. And so, we can speak of the music as unfolding in cycles of a time measure.

Now, right away I am we can make the observation here that my laya is more or less a universal principle of all music, tala is not so. Tala is quite is not found in all music certainly, it is definitely a very important principle in Indian classical music. Now, let me demonstrate a bit [Music].

Now, this is the first line of a very well known composition in khayal and this composition is brought together in a taal called Teentaal which has 16 units. So, it is like this in [Music], 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8; [Music] 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8; 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16. So, this is the tala cycle in which this composition is set.

Let us the composition is brought together structured in Teentaal of 16 units, is a cycle time cycle of 16 units. There is a certain time span in this case, maybe 6 to 8 seconds- it can be more or less, but you know it has to be steady for some time at least. And this time span is divided into 16 units and it is repeated cyclically.

So, these are very fundamental to any tala at all whether it is Carnatic music or Hindustani music or Dhrupad or Khayal or instrumental music or thumri for that matter. That is there is a time span divided into a certain number of units and this is repeated cyclically. Now, before we talk more about tala, let us listen to a Khayal rendition and I would urge you to try to follow the time.

The tala here, the time cycle, is divided into 7 units and the tala is called Rupak, the rendition, the performance is in the raag Bhimpalasi. Let us listen and try to follow the taal. [Music]. So, you would have noticed that the singer was interacting with the tabla player on his right and the harmonium player on the left and besides of course, we have two tanpuras providing a a tonal canvas.

Now, this is a typical ensemble for a Khayal concert. That is it is small, it has a lead vocalist a melodic accompaniment which is in this case it is harmonium, it could also be sarangi another instrument um. And then you have a tabla accompaniment providing the percussive accompaniment and you have the tanpuras.

Now quickly, I will just quickly go over the raag that you heard since we have extensively looked at ragas and their lakshanas, I will just quickly go over Bhimpalās, which is the raag that you heard, for you.

Now, this is an early evening or late afternoon raga, let us say its time period could, its time could be something between 2 and 5, that is when it is ideally performed and it is a this is an audava sampurna raga. What does that mean? Audava means it has 5 swaras in the aroha and sampurna therefore, all the 7 notes occur in the Avaroha or the descent.

And it belongs to the it is classified into the Kafi thaat which has Ga and Ni komal, the rest are shuddha. So, the Aroha Avaroha is something like this of Bhimpalās [Music] you know this is the Aroha Avaroha Ma is a very important swara, Ma and Sa are the vadi samvadi.

Um Now, you to the composition that you heard had the words “Ayo Ranga Faaga”. So, it is obviously, a description of Holi, it is on the occasion of Holi, the the the the the composition is set in the context of Holi which is the festival of colors. And you would have also noticed that Bhuvanesh Komkali who performed this piece, he improvised around the bandish, around the composition.

And so the elements of a typical performance of Khayal are the Bandish of course, which is the composition which is always in a particular raga and in a particular tala. Then you have improvisation around that Bandish, which is called vistaar and badhat or upaj and you have sangat or accompaniment. I mean this all too neat- a kind of categorization of the elements, but and there is a lot of overlap, but for the purposes of conveying what happens in a Khayal performance this will work.

Now, appreciating a a Khayal performance is about saying how these come together. So, while raga bandish and improvisation can be seen as the content of the music. Laya and tala are critical in bringing the performance together into a a a coherent hole, give to give it some structure, they bring structure to the presentation um.

But you really cannot speak of the Bandish as separate from the taal, because the Bandish brings structure because of its being set in taal or rather the tala enters a picture through the Bandish or composition. Now, how about laya? Laya as I mentioned before is indispensable to all music, tala is not.

Even in Indian class or Hindustani music much of Dhrupad presentation does not involve tala, that is, we have an extensive alap or improvisation before a composition in any rendition of dhrupad and even in instrumental music for that matter. And this improvisation alap as it is called is performed without tala, but laya is very much a critical presence.

Contemporary Khayal performance however, unfolds for most part in tala. So, let us look at laya and tala in some detail now. So, as I said laya can be superficially translated as tempo and it is that really, we do talk of tempo as laya we do that is a word used. So, now, one can render the same tala for instance slowly or in a medium speed or fast and we use the words Vilambit, Madhya and Druta to indicate these three layas.

Vilambit means slow, Madhya means mediums tempo and Druta means fast tempo. Now this these speeds or a the laya itself is not determined or controlled by any automated device or any

objective criteria, it is grounded in musical subjectivity and really the laya, laya faculty it is one, that one that the musician has to hone and develop.

So, just as we work on sur, or tunefulness musicians have to work on honing their laya sense, that is equally important. Now, another important thing to bear in mind here is that when we speak of Vilambit, Madhya, Drut that is slow, medium, fast; what is slow? What is medium?

There is no objective range that is agreed upon in the community as being Vilambit or Madhya or Drut.

There is a broad understanding and in fact one gharana or one school of music they may, there Vilambit may not be the Vilambit of another school. So, it is in the sense relative- differentiating the laya as Vilambit, Madhya, and Druta is not quite there is no nothing absolute about it, it is relative, though there is a broad consensus.

Now, laya then means tempo or the speed of the tala, there is a space between two units of the tala that is the description of laya in the textual tradition. So, we have say Teentaal that we saw earlier. So, it has 1, 2, 3, 4 and so on 16. So, it can be at that speed or it can be 1, 2, 3 and so on or it can be 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and so on.

So, laya in the context of tala makes sense, that is, it is just the tempo or the speed of the tala and we have these broad broad ranges which we call as Vilambit, Madhya and Drut. But you see laya is subtler too, that is even where we do not have tala in laya is very critical is very important. There is an internal spacing in phrases for instance even when there is no taal.

That is an aspect of laya and when phrases are linked and brought together in improvisation, there too laya is a critical factor. In fact, laya is one of the subtlest aspects of, this this laya you know the subtlest aspects of music and when laya is right then conditions are right for soaring to heights in music making, but it is an elusive thing and it is a matter for experience. And, so in what follows when I speak of laya its mostly in the sense of tempo.

Now, tala what is tala? Tala is the more rigorous time principle, that is it organizes the music more precisely in music, in time. We have about half a dozen widely used talas and each of them can be in different layas. So, we saw Teentaal earlier, 1, 2, 3, 4, as I demonstrated earlier it can be faster or it can be slower. And so we can have vilambit Teentaal, Madhya laya Teentaal and Drut Teentaal.

And there are even ranges that overlap between two of these ranges that is we may say Madhya Vilambit or you know Madhya Drut and so on. So, neither here nor there, that is that kind of descriptions also we do encounter. So, what is tala then? Tala is a cyclical time measure divided into a certain number of units and these units are called matras; each unit is called 1 matra.

So, when I said Teentaal is divided into 16 units, we say Teentaal has 16 matras. Now, tala is not happily translated as rhythm- rhythmic variation etcetera happens within tala. So, the core idea of tala is that it is a certain span of time; it is grounded in subjective experience, but yet shared by all performers on stage and that time span is divided into units and is repeated cyclically.

Now, when I say tala is a time span it does not mean that for every tala there is one time span, as we saw it can be Vilambit, it can be Madhya, it can be Drut. And in fact, in Hindustani music we have a very wide range from very long time spans to very short ones.

So, every tala is then divided into a certain number of units, each of which is called a matra. Now, what is a matra? Is again often, you know, translated as beats ah. So, when we say Teentaal has 16 matras it is sometimes translated as Teentaal has 16 beats.

But, again a beat is typically a pulse, it marks an emphasis and this is not true of all matras, you know we may not often experience foot tapping rhythm in a Hindustani concept that is not what is sought um. So, you know the music, the song or even the tabla does not mark each of these matras with uniform emphasis.

So, it is misleading to call the matra a beat. In fact, we will soon see that just like in a raga not all swaras are equal. So, also in a tala not all matras are equal. Now, each cycle of the tala of any tala is called an avartana. And the idea of returning to the 1st matra of the tala cycle is critical to the presentation of Hindustani music and the 1st matra of every tala is called the sam.

So, now we have some basic terminology in the context of tala. We have laya tempo and we have brought 3 broad tempos; tala which is a cyclic time measure divided into a certain number of units; we have about half a dozen widely used talas in Khayal and dhrupad each.

And then we have matra which is the unit of every tala is called a matra. So, then we say Teentaal has 16 matras or some other taal has 12 matras and so on, and as I said there are about 6 or 7 popularly widely performed talas. Now, avartana is every cycle of tala is called 1 avartana. So, we can say Teentaal has an avartana of 16 matras. And then we have sam, which is the 1st matra of every taal and it is particularly important in the presentation of Khayal or dhrupad or instrumental music for that matter.

Now, to return to the performance that we watched in the beginning of this video, the tala that the Bandish was set in is Rupak as I said and it has its a cycle of 7 matras. So, each avartana of the taal Rupak has 7 matras, the sam is of course, the 1st matra. Perhaps you could go back to the rendition of Bhimpalas and try to follow the music through tala armed with whatever we have covered in this lesson and try to listen again.

Let us you see this is the crux of appreciating Khayal you to follow the tala of course, you if you understand raga that is a great thing, but knowing ragas is only half the joy of appreciating Khayal, you have to be able to follow the taal and we will look at this later. Now, here in this rendition the Bandish starts on the 4th matra.

So, you have 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 right. So, the Bandish starts on the 4th matra and the first matra or the sam is where we hear the word faaga, I will demonstrate it for you and then you have to do go back and listen to Bhuvanesh Komkalis rendition. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7; 1, 2, 3 [Music]. So, that is the 1st line of the Bandish and most of the improvisation happens around this line. So, do go back and listen to the rendition and try to follow the tala.