

# Echoes of Tradition: Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen's Mastery of Tabla of the Punjab Gharana

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## Abstract

Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen, a renowned Tabla artist of Punjab Gharana, has been such an accomplished artist who maintained the authenticity of Punjab Baaj in his Vadan. He contributed to the music of Punjab through Guru-Shishya Parampara, his self-owned compositions, stage performances, etc. As a soloist, Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen's Vadan comprises several qualities reflecting Punjab Gharana's traditional Vadan style.

**Keywords:** Punjab gharana; Tabla playing; Tradition; Ustad Lachhman singh seen.

## Introduction

Indian music has been a forerunner and exponent in the field of fine arts worldwide, and Punjab's contribution to music is ineffable. Punjab's music tradition is very ancient and vast. This land has produced many artists. Suppose the musical history of Punjab has been deemed as having been going on for the past seventy-eight years. In that case, one realizes that many musicians worked to uplift classical music in this region during this period, especially after independence. Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen proved to be one of the most efficient musicians. He played a vital role in improving the musical environment of Punjab along with his contemporaries. In 1940-41, Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen received musical training (Seena-ba-Seena Taleem) from Mian Qadir Baksh, the Khalifa of Punjab Gharana, at Lahore. After that, he moved to Punjab after India's partition of 1947. As a result of his exceptional talent, thorough training, and rigorous practice, Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen's life comes out as a great Guru (teacher), skilled composer, dedicated seeker, and distinguished artist. He has been a musician who is equally a performer, a teacher, and a music literati. However, in this research paper, the qualities of this artist as a performer are highlighted. Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen's Tabla playing comprises all the qualities of Pakhawaj playing. Re-

flections of the characteristics of the Punjab Gharana have been visible in his Vadan from the Peshkaar itself. His way of elaborating on Tabla has been unique and soulful. His Vadan has Pakhawaj-like seriousness and Thumari-like playfulness. Therefore, some of the main characteristics of his Vadan can be classified as follows:

### **Purity of Baaj**

Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen's Tabla Vadan comprises the originality and Punjab Gharana's essence. He laid great emphasis on maintaining the purity of Punjab Gharana. He has kept the influence, spirit, and Nikaas of Punjab Gharana in this Band-Baaj. "His Tabla is unique in the sense of how he has been able to transform Gharana, which belongs to Pakhawaj Baaj, and how he has been able to transform that on Tabla with quite minimal aspects of Delhi, which is difficult. It's very challenging because, in the Band-Baaj, one needs the handling support of Delhi Baaj." He has kept the tradition alive in his Vadan. "He has tried to maintain the purity of the Sabak to the fullest extent which he received from Ustad Mian Qadir Baksh regarding Nikaas, texture, and tonal quality of Punjab Gharana."

### **Clarity**

If there is an equivocalness in the Bol(s), then the speed does not matter to the audience because speed is only notable if the Bol(s) are simultaneously understandable. Therefore, speed could add to the ornamentation of the performance if it is played with clarity but not vice versa. In this regard, there has been a crisp and clear tone of Bol(s) in his playing and a greater inclination to employ phrases like Tirkitt, DhirDhir, and Takadhan. The endeavor put on clarity of the Bol(s) by him shows the amount of hard work he has put into it. "Every Bol of his Tabla appeared clearly."

### **Vadan of Difficult Bol(s)**

Some traditional Punjab Gharana compositions have a characteristic twist in the syncopation and mathematical distribution of syllables across the Matra(s). As the playing techniques of Tabla are complex, it involves extensive use of fingers and palms in various configurations to create multiple sounds and rhythms reflected in mnemonic syllables. Therefore, demonstrating some syllables, like DhirDhirkittak, Dhadheghinnag, etc., is very challenging.

### **Command on Speed**

Having a good command of the Laya is one of the most challenging tasks a Tabla

player executes. In context with the accompaniment, the fluctuations in the Laya of the Tabla have a terrible impact on the overall performance. The player must maintain and play within a specific tempo, whether accompanying or performing solo. "It could be any Tala, be it Rupak, Jhaptala or Pancham Swaari, Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen's efficiency in maintaining the speed has always captivated the listeners." Shri Saqib Razaaq also stated that Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen was not much drawn towards playing Tabla at a very high speed; instead, he has been more focused on the Nikaas of the original Punjab Gharana, i.e., how the Bol(s) such as Titt, Tirkitt, etc. should be produced and also concentrating on the pressure given on the *Bayyan*.

It naturally happens that while leveling up the speed, one has to lighten the hands and, the strength has to be sacrificed in it. So, speed cannot be considered the central element because there will be a lack of clarity as the pace goes high. Hence, Nikaas is the crucial element rather than speed.

### **Tonal Quality of Tabla**

Another essential feature of his Vadan is the sound quality of his Tabla. His distinct musical style certified itself through the compositions and made its presence felt in the tonal quality he brought to his performances. "Making a constant circle of the sound of Tabla is done by a few numbers of artists, and Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen has been one of them." Intonations in the sound of Tabla according to the need of the main composition performed are part of his Vadan characteristics. He has efficiently done the change of timbre of Bayyan. His virtuosity is also evident in the precise balance of Dayyan and Bayyan. These intonations provide an aesthetic influence on the audience as well. Hence, the soulful Tabla playing of Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen would often conquer the concerts.

### **As a Soloist:**

A Tabla player's best opportunity to show his skills is when he is the soloist. "It requires an extremely talented drummer and sensitive musician to build rhythmic and aesthetic climaxes of sufficient artistry to hold audiences' attention." Hence, some of his geniuses as a soloist have been explained as follows:

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\* *In an interview with Shri Talvin Singh (renowned Tabla artist of Punjab Gharana) on 23rd July 2021.*

\*\* *In an interview with Shri Saqib Razaaq (disciple of Ustad Bhulli Khan and Ustad Bashir Khan, and he has been doing research work on the traditional compositions of Punjab Gharana for past 20-25 years) on 24th July 2021*

\*\*\* *In an interview with Smt. Sunanda Sharma (renowned classical vocalist of Banaras Gharana) on 20th July 2021.*

## Systematic

The Vadan of Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen has been very methodical. Whether playing Peshkaar or Kayda, he would play Tihayi(s) respectively of one cycle, two rounds, and then Chakradaar(s). With this, he used to enhance the beauty of his recital. Also, “while playing a Kayda, he would always use the same Bol(s) in the Tihayi as used in the Kayda. As far as Rela is concerned, he would first set the basic speed and then gradually start with small and big Tukda(s). Thus, his recital goes on like a story.” He would start his Vadan at a uniform speed and then play odd Layakari(s) such as Dedhgun, Tigun, etc., and afterward, present other variations like Dugun, Chaugun Layakari(s).

Kayda(s) played by him, has been much lengthier and more challenging than the rest of the Gharana(s). In his solo performances, he usually played Chakradaar Paran(s), Tipalli, Chaupalli, Rela, etc. The most outstanding feature of his Tabla playing is that the Kayda(s) are similar to the pattern of the Tala. In other words, the Bol(s) of the Kayda is maintained according to the Chalan of the particular Tala.

## Complicated Presentations

Layakari’s work, along with the division of Theka, is very sophisticated in his playing. He has been an excellent performer in playing a variety of Tala(s) in the Nagma of a different Tala in his solo performances. It is known that Miyan Kadir Baksh (II) was a master in playing Ektala (12 beats) in the Nagma of Teentala (16 beats). He had mastery over every Tala. Similarly, Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen also accomplished himself in these kinds of complicated presentations. For example, Jhaptala in Rupak Tala, Ektala in Rupak Tala, Jhaptala in Pancham-sawari etc. Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen has had complete authority over different Layakari(s). “He has been a master in playing complex Kayada(s), Palata(s), and Paran(s) on Tabla, such as playing a Palla of  $9 \frac{1}{2}$  Matra(s) in Chakradaar and a Dum of  $2 \frac{1}{4}$  Matra(s), a Palla of  $15 \frac{1}{2}$  Matra(s), and Dum of  $1 \frac{1}{4}$  Matra. He achieved excellence in playing a Palla of  $7 \frac{1}{2}$  Matra(s),  $4 \frac{1}{4}$  Matra(s),  $3 \frac{1}{2}$  Matra(s), and  $5 \frac{1}{2}$  Matra(s) of the Pallata(s) of different Kayda(s) which is a unique characteristic of his Vadan.”

The accuracy and scientism used in his performances are unique attributes of his

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\*\*\*\* *In an interview with Pandit Manu Seen (renowned sitarist of Itawah Gharana) on 02nd July 2021*

\*\*\*\*\* *Shri Saqib Razaaq, opt. cit.*

\*\*\*\*\* *Ibid.*

\*\*\*\*\* *Bonnie C. Wade, Music in India: The Classical Traditions, page no. 288*

Vadan style. Consequently, the demonstration of different Layakari(s) has also been one of the most delightful parts of his playing style. Through various rhythmic patterns and Chand(s), he would enliven the presentation of Peshkaar and Kayda. “The use of Chand(s) and different Layakari(s) are equally visible in his presentation.”

**Vadan of Rare Tala(s)**

Usually, Tabla players present their solo performances in Teentala and Ektala. However, Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen made several successful attempts to explore other Tala(s) in his solos. To name a few- Jaytala, Matt Tala, Punjabi Dhammar, Usool-e-Fakhta, Pancham Swaari, Rupak Tala, and Adachautala are some of the Tala(s) that he performed. Even today, the performances in these Tala(s) are very infrequent, or these are on the brink of dissipation. Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen’s focus from Teentala to other Tala(s) is significant as he is one of the few artists who explored them.

In this context, a piece of information feels appropriate to be mentioned. While discussing Punjabi Dhamar Tala in an interview, Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen said that “in his solo performances, he always played the following Theka of Punjabi Dhamar Tala, which is actually different from the normal Dhamar Tala.” The Theka is as follows:

|    |      |         |      |      |                  |
|----|------|---------|------|------|------------------|
| ×  |      |         |      |      | 2                |
| Ta | Dhin | Tittkat | Dhin | Dhin | Dhage    Tittkat |

|       |      |    |  |    |         |    |         |
|-------|------|----|--|----|---------|----|---------|
| 0     |      |    |  | 3  |         |    |         |
| Dhage | NaTi | -K |  | Ta | Tittkat | Ta | Tittkat |

It is a Tala of Visham Jati, which is very difficult to perform as all the four Vibhag(s) consist of different Matra(s).” Hence, it proves Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen’s exceptional knowledge of rare and traditional Tala(s).

\*\*\*\*\* Pandit Manu Seen, opt. cit.  
\*\*\*\*\* Jaspreet Singh, Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen da Jeewan ate Sangeet Prati Yogdan, page no. 59  
\*\*\*\*\* ibid  
\*\*\*\*\* Pandit Vijayshankar Mishra, Sarvadhik Pracheen aur Sampuran hai Punjab ka Tabla, Sangeet, May 2005, page no. 25-26.

## Sound Intonations

As mentioned, Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen's Tabla feels depth in his Vadan. The work of Meend done on the Bayyan Tabla by him has its own beautification. "He had played a very powerful and intelligible Tabla." "Listeners would never get bored even when much time was spent in playing multiple Palata(s) of a single Kayda."

"His Tabla (Bayyan and Dayyan) has great control of 'Daam-Gaanth', which has never been heard from anyone before." Both the Tabla(s) have been beautifully balanced. It seemed as if the one (Bayyan) answered the other (Dayyan) or vice versa. Many people have stated that his Tabla Vadan has the power to generate emotions. "His Vadan has been such as if the Tabla has itself been singing." The sense of 'Question-Answer' from the sound of Dayyan and Bayyan Tabla would make the audience applaud for his craftsmanship.

## Special Compositions

Punjab Gharana of Tabla includes several unique features of its playing style. The Gat(s) of 'Nar' and 'Madeena' are one of the famous playing styles of this Baaj, the one Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen has been proficient in performing. These Gat(s) are also an exclusive part of his Vadan style. 'Nar' Gat(s) are those compositions in which the Bol(s) are very vigorous, and the Nikaas of these Bol(s) are done with the help of palm. Conversely, the beauty and delicacy are reflected in the Bol(s) of 'Madeena' Gat(s). These compositions consist of soft Bol patterns. The Bol(s) of Madeena Gat(s) originated with the use of half hand, which means that only fingers are used for its Nikaas. Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen has been very skillful in playing both types of Gat(s). "He usually played several traditional compositions in his solo recitals. These include Chaardarje ki Gat, Kayda (Aadh Laya ki Gat), a famous Gat in Jayatala, and many others." Incorporating big Chakradaar Paran(s) and Chandawali of Punjab Baaj would make his performance more fascinating and impressive. One of his favorite compositions was '*Antakshari Paran (Chakradaar)*', which he usually played during his recitals. A single Palla of this composition is given below:

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\*\*\*\*\* In an interview with Ustad Kale Ram (Tabla artist of Punjab Gharana) on 12th June 2019

\*\*\*\*\* In an interview with Shri Harbhajan Singh Dhariwal (disciple of Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen) on 08th June 2019

\*\*\*\*\* In an interview with Dr. Kulwinderdeep Kaur (Former Head of Music Instrument Department of Hans Raj Mahila Maha Vidyalaya) on 01st November 2020

\*\*\*\*\* Shri Saqib Razaq, opt. cit.

|                       |                         |                           |                         |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| <u>Ti Dha</u>         | <u>Kitt Tak</u>         | <u>TaKittDha</u>          | <u>-N Dhage</u>         |
| ×                     |                         |                           |                         |
| <u>Titt Kitt</u>      | <u>Din -</u>            | <u>Din Din</u>            | <u>Dhage</u><br>Titt    |
| 2                     |                         |                           |                         |
| <u>Kitt</u><br>Dhage  | <u>Ghin -</u>           | <u>Ghin, Taraa</u>        | -n <u>Dhage</u>         |
| 0                     |                         |                           |                         |
| <u>Titt Kata</u>      | <u>Kat</u>              | <u>Kat Titt</u>           | <u>Ghe Ghe Titt</u>     |
| 3                     |                         |                           |                         |
| <u>Kata – N</u>       | <u>Dha -</u>            | <u>Dha, - N</u>           | <u>Dhitt</u>            |
| ×                     |                         |                           |                         |
| <u>Kata</u>           | <u>Kat,</u><br>DhirDhir | <u>KidhTaKat-Kadh</u>     | <u>Dha, DhirDhir</u>    |
| 2                     |                         |                           |                         |
| <u>KidhTaKat-Kadh</u> | <u>Dha -</u>            | <u>Dha, - N</u>           | <u>Dhitt</u>            |
| 0                     |                         |                           |                         |
| <u>Kata</u>           | <u>Kat, DhirDhir</u>    | <u>KidhTaKat-</u><br>Kadh | <u>Dha,</u><br>DhirDhir |
| 3                     |                         |                           |                         |
| <u>KidhTaKat-Kadh</u> | <u>Dha -</u>            | <u>Dha, - N</u>           | <u>Dhitt</u>            |
| ×                     |                         |                           |                         |
| <u>Kata</u>           | <u>Kat, DhirDhir</u>    | <u>KidhTaKat-Kadh</u>     | <u>Dha, DhirDhir</u>    |
| 2                     |                         |                           |                         |
| <u>KidhTaKat-Kadh</u> | <u>Dha -</u>            |                           |                         |
| 0                     |                         |                           |                         |

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Shri Nayak Seen, opt. cit.

As already mentioned, Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen has always emphasized the efficiency of hands; hence, the correctness and purity of the Bol(s) have always bloomed his Tabla Vadan. This Baaj of Tabla has the feeling of seriousness. Thereby, Lachhman Singh incorporated the uniqueness of this Gharana in his Vadan with his hard work and rigorous practice. Along with being a traditionalist, he incorporated newness into his music. Another hallmark that can be added to the list is that “there is no showmanship in Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen’s music. He has never commercialized the art for getting fictitious claps. He has spent his entire life maintaining his Gharana’s traditionality.”

For reference, a video link of his performance is being shared here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txnBnGfk4xg>

### **Conclusion:**

Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen was the senior representative of Punjab Gharana of Tabla, who passed to his eternal reward on 13th June 2022 at his residence in Jalandhar, Punjab. Apart from being one of the greatest Tabla artists, he was a multi-instrumentalist, a genius composer, and a visionary teacher. He will be remembered as one of the essential artistic figures who single-handedly preserved and promoted classical music in Punjab when most Muslim artists migrated to Pakistan after 1947’s partition. Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen’s presence in this field for decades has made a massive impact in upgrading the level of classical music in Punjab. He has been one of the pillars on whom the rebuilding of classical music in Punjab is done. It was his conscious decision to stay in Punjab to propagate the classical music tradition here as his Guru-Bhai, Ustad Alla Rakha Khan, insisted he shift to Mumbai permanently. However, he believed one must stay in Punjab to continue teaching and promoting this art here.

It is worth mentioning that Ustad Lachhman Singh Seen has also given marvelous accompaniments to many renowned artists, including which the names of Pandit Omkarnath Thakur, Bade Gulam Ali Khan, Pandit Ravi Shankar, Pandit Dilip Chandra Bedi, Begum Akhtar, Kishori Amonkar, Rasulan Bai and Panna Lal Ghosh are noteworthy.



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