Contrasting Rhythmic Aesthetics in *Tabla* Accompaniment: A Comparative Study of *Khyal* and *Thumri*

Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
Volume 6 Issue 2, August 2026: 23-31
ISSN: 2773 692X (Online), 2773 6911 (Print)
Copyright: © 2026 The Author(s)
Published by the Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka
Website: https://www.sab.ac.lk/sljssh
DOI: https://doi.org/10.4038/sljssh.v6i2.145

Ranga Perera K.A.D.[1*]

[1*]Department of North Indian Music, University of the Visual & Performing Arts, Sri Lanka

Received: 04 February 2026, **Revised:** 19 April 2026, **Accepted:** 17 August 2026.
How to Cite this Article: Ranga Perera, K. A. D. (2026). Contrasting rhythmic aesthetics in *Tabla* accompaniment: a comparative study of *Khyal* and *Thumri*. *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 6*(2), 23-31.

Abstract

The rhythmic elements of *Tabla* accompaniment play a vital role in both musical traditions. Yet researchers have devoted most of their studies to the melodic and lyrical elements of *Khyal* and *Thumri* while ignoring the rhythmic aspects. The research investigates how *Tabla* accompaniment functions in *Khyal* and *Thumri*, which represent two essential Hindustani vocal music genres, while showing their different artistic approaches and teaching methods. The research collected data through active musical components as recorded data, interviews with practitioners, and institutional curriculum assessment, which were analyzed through comparative transcription analysis and thematic coding, revealing their impact on musician identity formation. The *Tabla* accompaniment in *Khyal* music maintains rhythmic order while following a structured pattern, which enables the vocalist to discover raga through controlled improvisation. The musical style of *Thumri* enables musicians to express themselves through their delivery of sensitive lyrics and their creative rhythmic exchanges, which they accomplish through *laggi* and modification techniques. The research shows *Khyal* achieves intellectual complexity through its organised stage performance structure, yet *Thumri* demonstrates complete musical freedom because of its natural playing approach, although both musical styles need performers to collaborate during their improvisational segments. The research reveals two main institutional pedagogical weaknesses because educational programs lack proper accompaniment training, yet experts confirm that this content should exist to maintain teamwork competencies. The research establishes a better comprehension of Hindustani music through its analysis of accompaniment within cultural, pedagogical, and theoretical frameworks, which reveals its dual nature between structured and expressive elements.

Keywords: Hindustani Music, Improvisation, *Khyal*, *Tabla* Accompaniment, *Thumri*

INTRODUCTION

Khyal and *Thumri* are two of the principal genres or musical traditions within the two traditions of Indian art music; together, these two make up the genre known as Hindustani classical music (Manuel, 1989). The *Khyal* is the more 'intellectual' of the two genres of music, the artist making use of complex pieces from a particular raga to create his own unique improvisations. The artist sustains a consistent rhythm throughout his music within a set cycle of time, known as a cycle or *tarana* (Wade, 1984). Music is essentially of great feelings expressed with the help of musical modes and ragas, and not by sticking to the rules of any style of music (Manuel, 1989). In both genres, the main percussion used is the *Tabla*. The *Tabla* forms the backbone of any music in the form of a rhythmic cycle, which gets synchronized with the vocals (Stewart, 1990). The *Tabla* enables the creation of Hindustani music aesthetic through its ability to link musical structure with artistic freedom and precise playing techniques with musical expression (Manuel, 1989). The instrument determines how musicians create their music and how audience members perceive musical elements (Stewart, 1990).

The historical development of *Tabla* accompaniment has been shaped by the broader cultural and artistic transformations of the Indian subcontinent (Wade, 1984). Mughal-era innovations to rhythmic practice were brought about by *Khyal* music that utilised the *Tabla* instead of the traditional Pakhawaj found in other parts of the Indian subcontinent (Wade, 1984). The *Tabla* produced a wide variety of different sounds, many more than were available from other percussion instruments of the time. The *Tabla* was highly adaptable and thus became the perfect accompaniment for the *Khyal* vocalist. The vocalist would be able to engage in long periods of improvisation, while the *Tabla* player maintained the *tala* of the piece and provided the vocalist with a framework within which he could create his own unique composition within the given rhythm. The *Thumri* of the 18th and 19th centuries developed under the influence of several *Tabla* players in the courts of Lucknow and Banaras. Often enough, they worked in teams with the *Kathak* dancers and the courtesans of the time, and the musical interactions on the stage provided the *Thumri* with its emotional content. The *laggi* and other forms that evolved in interaction with

* **Corresponding author:** Tel.: +94 (77) 383 9309; Email: ranga.p@vpa.ac.lk
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3830-0896

This article is published under the Creative Commons CC-BY-ND License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/). This license permits use, distribution, and reproduction, commercial and non-commercial, provided that the original work is properly cited and is not changed in anyway.

Khyal and *Thumri*, respectively, went beyond the basic function of a timekeeper and brought out the inherent syncopated character of the *Tabla* (Manuel, 1989). Subsequently, the role of the *Tabla* changed as it came to terms with the opposing demands of *Khyal* and *Thumri* music and, in the process, evolved its own distinct musical approaches (Stewart, 1990).

Though the *Tabla* is the main instrument used to render both *Khyal* and *Thumri*, the two genres have very different musical concepts, but there is, yet no study on the aspects of accompaniment and rhythmic feel peculiar to each. To address this lack, papers that investigate accompaniment from differing styles are brought together to encourage cross-generic understanding. In addition, contributions that present computational models of rhythm are encouraged, particularly those that acknowledge the cultural complexity of the phenomenon as perceived by musicians and listeners. Finally, papers that deal with methods for encouraging students to develop skills as accompanists are treated within a single genre, rather than in genre-specific isolation. Currently, no research approaches all these areas. This study investigates *Tabla* accompaniment in *Khyal* and *Thumri* within the parameters of performance practice, pedagogy, and the traditional music system of the Hindustani classical tradition.

The principal goals of this work are fivefold: after providing a historical account of the development of *Tabla* accompaniment in *Khyal* and *Thumri*, a comparison and contrast of the roles that *Tabla* accompaniment plays in terms of structure, improvisation, and aesthetics in both genres will be presented and discussed. This research presents a comparative structural analysis of the surface and deep structures of *Tabla* accompaniment in *Dhrupad*, *Khyal*, and *Thumri*. A second objective is to make a detailed comparative study of the expressive potential of the *Tabla* in different micro-sections of these genres. The third aim is to describe and discuss specific improvisatory techniques of the *Tabla* player and their effect on the rhythmic content. The fourth aspect of the research aims to explore the methods of passing on accompaniment techniques through the traditional *guru-shishya parampara* as well as through formal music education systems of India and the West. This study is relevant to issues of performance practice, cultural identity, and the pedagogy of the Indian classical tradition of music, particularly the *Tabla* part. The objectives of this study are to focus mainly on the study of *Tabla* accompaniment and to compare the rhythmic aspects and accompaniments of *Khyal* and *Thumri* songs from a cultural as well as pedagogical point of view.

This study will produce positive results for multiple fields, including ethnomusicology, performance studies, and pedagogy. The research compares *Khyal* and *Thumri* to show how different musical genres handle rhythm and improvisation, which expands our knowledge of Hindustani music. Furthermore, the study carries cultural significance by demonstrating how rhythmic accompaniment practices embody the contrasting aesthetic values of discipline and emotional expression that define Hindustani music as a living tradition (Stewart, 1990). The research study expands academic knowledge and proves that *Tabla* accompaniment continues to play a vital role in defining Hindustani classical music identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the accompaniment of *Tabla* in Hindustani classical music has been done through historical research, analytical studies, and pedagogical approaches. However, most of the research already conducted focuses on the melodic aspect of music or vocal music rather than researching the rhythmic aspect of music and techniques of accompaniment. There is a considerable amount of research that already exists on *Khyal*, one of the major genres of vocal music in the system. Research within this genre focuses on the intricate system of improvisation and adoption of the elements of raga music in *Khyal* compositions. Wade (1984) explains the fundamental rules of *Khyal* performance practice through his research, which shows musicians generate new musical content by following predefined musical structures. The *Tabla* functions as an essential musical element that sustains the *tala* pattern and creates musical patterns that enable the vocalist to create spontaneous musical lines. Upadhye (2015) examines the core elements of *Tabla* support in *Khyal* music performances, which shows that the singer leads the performance, yet the quality of accompaniment determines the success of the performance. The author describes that accompaniment to the singer cannot be learned, as the singer follows written rules, because traditionally, accompaniment to song follows the age-old *guru-shishya parampara* of oral transmission. Upadhye (2015) carried out research into the pedagogy of *Khyal* accompaniment, but the research did not proceed to a systematic analytical comparison of the various techniques employed for the rhythmic support of the vocals. In investigating further into *Khyal* music aesthetics, in his paper, Vishwaroop (2019) particularly explores Agra gharana *laya* and *taal*. However, interesting observations from one gharana viewpoint are mainly restricted to that tradition, and there is a paucity of comparison with other musical traditions within *Khyal* or even a comparative perspective with other semi-classical genres like *Thumri*. Although the present study may confirm the pivotal role of the *Tabla* in *Khyal* performances, there is a considerable lack in current research in terms of comparative study of various traditions of accompaniment that have not yet been explored in musicological research. This study seeks to address this gap in the field by presenting an in-depth examination and analysis of accompaniment in *Khyal*.

Unlike other semi-classical melodies, much thought and discussion have gone into the singing melody and emotions of *Thumri* as opposed to the association of *Thumri* with the Tatleem (Courtesan) and *Kathak* Dance. *Thumri* needs poets to create lyrics for it and singers/ musicians to express and encompass the total range of emotions while rendering it. This very quality of *Thumri*, perhaps, is the reason for much thought and study of the genre. Though *Tabla* has been discussed at places where *Thumri* documentation is concerned, especially with reference to its expressive elements, the subject has not been fully explored. In this study, we shall focus on Purab ang *Thumri* and discuss the musical stylisations of various maestros in incorporating flexible elements of *Tabla* playing, such as *laggi* and even light-hearted exchange of material in their *Thumri* renditions. In his paper, Manuel (1993) examines the contemporary *Thumri* from two different perspectives, namely the musical changes that have taken place in *Thumri* over the last 150 years or so and the performance practices of various accompanists in respect of supporting the vocalist. Although Manuel (1989, 1993) brings a wealth of information concerning the very lyrical

and cultural bases of *Thumri*, a detailed study of the specific rhythmic techniques that a *Tabla* player employs in accompanying a vocalist performing in the *Thumri* style has not been undertaken. Though Roy and Ghosh (2019) offered some insight into the dynamics of *laggi* and rhythmic exchanges in a specific regional tradition of *Thumri* known as Purab ang *Thumri*, their study was confined to that tradition, and no comparisons were drawn with *Khyal* music. This research aims to discuss how *Tabla* performs in creating musical freedom in *Thumri* performances, and this analysis is not compared with *Khyal* music. In addition to analysis of recorded audio, there is a growing body of research applying computational and corpus-based methods to the study of aspects of Hindustani music, including rhythm and the structure of musical improvisation. In this talk, we present some initial findings from a study of expressiveness in live *Tabla* accompaniment, focusing particularly on how individual strokes are conveyed through variations in amplitude and timing.

While Rohit and Rao (2021) and Srinivasamurthy et al. (2017) conducted computational analyses of aspects of *Tabla* performance, including tempo and rhythmic elaboration based on a corpus analyses of stress patterns within a metrical cycle, their approaches ignore patterns outside of the cycle and fail to address aesthetics and culture-specific aspects influencing different forms of accompaniment in *Khyal* and *Thumri*. A quantitative approach to the aesthetics of rhythm has been developed and applied to the study of *Khyal* and *Thumri* accompaniments. McNeil (2017). This research examines how Hindustani raga music utilises improvisation through a detailed and insightful analysis of *badhat* (development) and *upaj* (spontaneous creation). McNeil (2017) treated structured improvisation and spontaneous improvisation as contrasting categories, applying them to a comparison of the structured accompaniment of *Khyal* singing with the spontaneous accompaniment found in *Thumri*. However, he did not explore the rhythmic dimension of the *Tabla* in relation to either genre. Research on rhythm as a category has grown in recent years, yet comparative analysis of the rhythms of *Khyal* and *Thumri* has so far not been undertaken.

The research includes a descriptive and thematic study of the music from the pedagogical standpoint of the student. The thesis outlines that this music is best learned by students through demonstration and imitation, within a traditional teaching studio environment, utilising the studio pedagogy model prevalent in South Asia and strictly within the *Tabla* tradition. The study investigates contemporary methods of training within formal music institutions of South Asia, focusing on the aspect of accompaniment and attempting to formulate a systematic approach to the teaching and performance of this aspect of music. Although such an approach can yield consistent results, it cannot account for the variation and spontaneity inherent in the creative expression of the *Thumri* performer. Rajveer Singh (2018) explores the *Tabla* as both an independent musical composition and a musical companion, drawing upon diverse musical genres and creating performances appropriate to each style. In contrast, the author's earlier research (2010, 2012, 2014, 2015 & 2016) addressed specific aspects of *Tabla* as a musical accompaniment in particular vocal traditions of *Khyal* and *Thumri*. However, there is an absence of comparative analysis between the two differing pedagogies of *Tabla* training and their relative institutional outcomes.

Research into teaching methods is prevalent, and the accompaniment of *Tabla* in *Khyal* and *Thumri* compositions presents its own set of difficulties. A notable gap in the existing pedagogical discourse is the absence of methods by which to foster these aspects as opposed to *layakari* and *dhrupad* accompaniments, which currently dominate music teaching institutions. This ethnomusicological study of the realms of rhythm and improvisation examines their origins and aesthetics within particular cultures and contexts. Stewart's study of North Indian music rhythmic patterns culminated in the development of several theoretical models that elucidate both the methods and techniques that musicians use in solo improvisation and within the context of a particular *tala* cycle. This work is currently being furthered in Stewart's ongoing research. The study of rhythm, as these studies have shown, is one of the most basic cultural elements that shape a nation's concept of self.

Although Stewart (1990) provided a theoretical framework in which to 'think' rhythm as culture, and although he linked general ideas about rhythm with observations on South Asian music, his model is not of much use in distinguishing the very different rhythmic 'aesthetics' that are characterised by *Khyal* and *Thumri* respectively, nor in explaining differing accompaniment strategies. The study of rhythm has relevance to many disciplines because rhythm affects mental processes as well as evokes emotion. Music studies require live music with *Tabla* accompaniment so that the understanding and experience of rhythm can be fully appreciated. While Stewart (1990) presented the complexities of Hindustani rhythm as a single entity, this study aims to separate and describe individual aspects within different musical contexts. This research is related to the role of *Tabla* in the performance of *Khyal* and *Thumri* songs, dealing with their music as well as the scientific aspects of rhythm and methods of improvisation.

There are two gaps in the existing literature-one theoretical and the other empirical. The theoretical gap pertains to the two possible ways of perceiving the rhythmic aesthetics of *Khyal* and *Thumri* as either structured musicality or expressive musicality. The empirical gap pertains to genres and/or broad rhythmic categories, as opposed to comparing specific *Tabla* accompaniments within both traditions. Although the literature on accompaniment techniques of *Tabla* deals with various aspects, there is a third gap in the existing literature, i.e., a comprehensive study which incorporates performance transcription, practitioners' interviews, and pedagogical approach in one framework. This study explores the techniques of *Tabla* accompaniment for two genres of classical music in South Asia, namely *Khyal* and *Thumri*. These two genres have not been dealt with in a scientific manner to an adequate extent. A comparative study approach has been utilized for this purpose.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research study applies a qualitative and comparative ethnomusicological perspective to an examination and analysis of the various strategies of *Tabla* accompaniment as found in performances of *Khyal* and *Thumri*. A qualitative approach to the study of the aesthetic and improvisational

aspects of *Tabla* accompaniment is most appropriate since these aspects cannot be fully quantified, and an interpretive analysis grounded in the music's cultural and musical context is therefore required (Stewart, 1990). In order to compare the design of more dominant rhythms between genres, their patterns, differences, and relationships are examined and contrasted in order to gain a greater understanding of two genres of human movement.

The study is based upon primary data, recorded performances of *Khyal* and *Thumri* sung by the most prominent vocalists and accompanists belonging to various famous *gharanas* of the country. There are fifty recorded performances; 25 of them are of *Khyal*, and 25 are of *Thumri*. These performances have been recorded and analyzed through a purposive sampling plan. Recordings of the most prominent vocalists and accompanists belonging to various famous *gharanas* have been included in the study. Recordings of performances of various musical forms from the beginning of the 20th century up to the present have been studied. The *Khyal* recordings feature four prominent vocalists representing distinct gharana traditions: Pandit Bhimsen Joshi (Kirana gharana), Ustad Rashid Khan (Rampur-Sahaswan gharana), Kishori Amonkar (Jaipur-Atrauli gharana), and Veena Sahasrabuddhe (Gwalior gharana). This new *Thumri* recording features four of India's most celebrated vocalists today, including *Girija Devi* (*Benares gharana*) and two others singing from the traditions of Banaras and Lucknow: Siddheshwari Devi and Begum Akhtar/Shobha Gurtu, respectively. In addition, six of India's most noted *Tabla* accompanists participate in the recording, including Zakir Hussain, Alla Rakha, Anindo Chatterjee, Swapan Chaudhuri, Kumar Bose, and Yogesh Samsi. All are highly respected in the field of *Khyal* and *Thumri* accompaniment.

These files were sourced from YouTube as archived performance material for the research. The research used both All India Radio recordings and commercially released recordings as archival material to explore the development of accompaniment techniques amongst the musicians studied, including the students. These archival materials were analysed by creating transcription files of the *Tabla* patterns. These files enabled comparison between a range of musical elements, including *bol* variations/*thihai* structures and *laggi* sequences/syncopated improvisations. The research gathered data through recordings and interviews with musical practitioners, including *Tabla* players, vocalists, and teaching professionals, which were significant. A total of fifteen participants were carefully interviewed for this study, comprising four *Tabla* players, four vocal artists, and seven highly experienced vocal educators. The participants for this research study were approached via purposive snowball sampling. Initially, the researcher's contacts from his music background referred more participants with relevant expertise from their professional circle of music teaching, learning, and performing. The researcher's connections from Indirakala Sangeet University (India) and also from Bhatkhande University of Music, Lucknow (India), and the University of Visual and Performing Arts (Sri Lanka) were approached for this research. All the participants had experiential knowledge of either *Khyal* singing practices or *Thumri* accompaniment practices or both. The interviews offered further proof of the opposition between the musicians' attitudes to accompaniment as an aspect of improvisation that does not lend itself to fixed rules, and the views of the analysts as expressed through their frameworks of analysis. The interviews with the practitioners were especially important, for it was through their views on these matters that it was possible to find a connection between the analytical findings and the musicians' practical experiences as professionals.

The research uses ethnomusicological theory together with performance analysis as its analytical framework. The research studied rhythmic methods because they serve two purposes in music composition: they organise musical structure, and they express emotional content according to Stewart's (1990) theoretical framework of *tala* and improvisation. The present research coded and organized improvisational methods, which included *bol* variations, *tihai*, *laggi* and syncopation to study their distribution between *Khyal* and *Thumri* performances. The research investigated how *Khyal* music composers used rhythmic elements to show their musical discipline, and *Thumri* musicians used their musical compositions to express their emotional sensitivity. The research compared different elements to show their similarities and differences while placing musical accompaniment practices in their social and temporal environments.

This research work studied pedagogical tools and current methods of teaching accompaniment through the material provided by institutions and books. The curricula of three universities were studied: Indira Kala Sangeet University of India, Lucknow Bhatkhande University of India, and the University of Visual and Performing Arts of Sri Lanka. As pointed out by Upadhye (2015), the accompaniment of *Khyal* musicians is learnt through musical experience. In *Thumri*, accompaniment is based on the style of the song and the musician's ability to react to the words of the song (2019). In the previous section, we discussed human perspectives on evaluating performance skills that music students need to learn to play well. Here, we explore the potential of computational methods to analyze and study such performance skills. While previous work analyzed tempo and rhythmic elaboration for this purpose (Srinivasamurthy et al. 2017; Rohit and Rao 2021), we utilize their findings to structure an analysis of the skills involved in playing in rhythm and in improvisation.

The research analysis needed multiple playback sessions of recorded material and complete documentation of *Tabla* musical support and systematic identification of free playing elements. The data analysis followed a three-stage process, commencing with a transcription analysis of the *Tabla* patterns from the 50 audio recordings of *Tabla* lessons, identifying and analysing the rhythmic material within the *bol* variations, *thihai* structures, *laggi* sequences, and the syncopated sections. The second stage of the analysis involved deductive thematic coding of the large amounts of transcription data and interview data. Several primary categories were derived from a wealth of literature and contemporary practice, which highlighted aspects of the structured accompaniment and expressive freedom in improvisation, and the various *Tabla* improvisation techniques and methods of pedagogical transmission were utilized within the coding process. The third method used for this analysis is comparative. This method was applied between two genres of North Indian classical music-*Khyal* and *Thumri*-identifying some of the patterns, contrasts, and relationships that emerge be-

tween the two genres when comparing the practices of accompaniment within them. These will be presented in the form of tables in the results section.

To establish the trustworthiness of this qualitative study, strategies were addressed to ensure the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was addressed through two methods of prolonged engagement and member checking. Prolonged engagement involved both multiple playback sessions over time and the researcher's analytical focus being on specific aspects of individual teaching performances. Member checking involved sharing the key findings and analytical interpretations with some of the practitioner participants in the study and gaining their agreement about the accuracy of the interpretation. Credibility is increased by data source triangulation, i.e., using more than one source of data (e.g., performance recordings, expert interviews, and institutional pedagogical materials) and verifying findings from each source. Transferability is increased by providing thick descriptions of the different musical environments and of the specific *gharana* traditions and performance settings that have been studied. An analysis of 50 recordings and transcripts of interviews was conducted using the same method for reliability. The confirmability was ensured by continually referring to the data, recordings, and statements of actual practitioners. The interpretations were grounded in the observations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study examines the modes by which accompanists structure their performances of *Khyal* and *Thumri* songs. The findings from the study are presented under the four deductive coding categories drawn from the analytical framework: structured accompaniment, expressive freedom, improvisational techniques, and pedagogical transmission. The findings are organized under two headings: the findings from the study of *Khyal* accompaniment and the findings from the study of *Thumri* accompaniment. A comparative discussion between the two genres is also included. The four categories provide an organizational framework that outlines the different approaches to accompaniment evident within the studied performances.

Khyal Accompaniment: An attempt has been made in this work to analyze and study the accompaniment of *Tabla* in *Khyal* performances. The various elements of rhythmic discipline and structure have been studied to understand how they contribute to the aesthetic features of *Khyal*. The highly improvisatory nature of *Khyal* requires the vocalist and the *Tabla* player to display at the same time the highest degree of creativity and strict adherence to structure. The current research shows that *Khyal* reaches its deep improvisational potential because it needs *tala* cycles, which the accompanist uses to keep the vocalist's musical extensions within rhythmic structure. The research results confirm this observation because *Tabla* musicians maintain the *tala* structure through their precise *bol* pattern execution and their strategic improvisational methods, which enable them to create musical dialogues with the singer.

This paper draws upon recorded material from the author's fieldwork. It explores the way accompaniment to *Khyal* is rendered in performance and reveals that it is largely determined by the *theka*, or basic rhythm of a cycle of *tala*. The *theka* is here shown to be repeated exactly by all performing musicians throughout a piece, thus providing the basic rhythm for the strokes of the accompanying *Tabla* player and allowing the vocalist to deliver freely improvised melodic passages whilst remaining on track. The *Tabla* plays an essential part in *vilambit* (slow tempo) *Khyal* performances because the accompanist needs to maintain the *tala* cycle throughout the long improvisational sections. The research of vocal recordings from Agra and Gwalior *gharanas* demonstrates that accompanists use small adjustments in *bol* placement to indicate *tala* progression, which helps vocalists during their improvisational performances. The results show how *gharana*-based musical approaches to rhythm and time create unique musical rhythms, and this research verifies that accompanists modify their performance to match the musical tastes of their *gharana*.

Tihai - accompanists use this musical technique in the last sections of *Khyal* improvisations. The *tihai* section forms a complete musical cycle. This is repeated three times in total, and the third time ends on the same, i.e., the first beat of the cycle. The *tihai* provides strong rhythmic closure and brings the most intense emotions of the musical cycle to the surface. It signals a change of sections to the vocalist. The bold variations of the accompaniment create interest in the transcription analysis. The accompaniment plays a major role in musical development, while the open and closed strokes of the accompanist's drumming create different musical effects and therefore stay within the discipline of the genre.

The research proved that tempo stands as a core musical element that plays an essential part in *Khyal* accompaniment. The *Tabla* player needs to control his or her play during *vilambit Khyal* because the slow tempo demands that he or she play the *theka* with precision while keeping their improvisations minimal to let the vocalist discover the raga. While the accompanist has little scope for elaboration in the slow sections of *Khyal*, the situation is entirely reversed in the fast sections. Within the framework of the *drut* provided by the main singer, the *Tabla* player can, and indeed does, introduce much syncopation and may even elaborate a *bol* in considerable detail. A study of the various patterns of *Tabla* used as accompaniment to examples of *Khyal* performances confirms the point made earlier that musicians make use of tempo and of rhythmic elaboration to create their performance techniques. In addition, the function of the accompanist is to provide stability to the main singer, and at the same time to introduce many of the dynamic elements that are a feature of so many *Khyal* performances.

Musicians who practice *Khyal* accompaniment show their performance methods by directly observing musical performances. *Tabla* musicians emphasized that musicians should concentrate on the vocalist's sounds while they attempt to forecast the vocalist's improvisational notes. The accompanist explained that the *Tabla* player needs to match their breathing with the singer instead of fighting against their rhythm during performance. If the instrumentalists are playing a steady rhythm, the singer has complete freedom in the rest of his or her creative thinking.

The lack of training for *Khyal* accompaniment through real-life experience was also noted by the practitioner interviews. Even highly established pedagogical programs within established music and dance institutions primarily train students to play the *Tabla* as a solo instrument and do not supply sufficient experience within the program framework for *Khyal* accompaniment. The practitioners worried that students who learn in institutional environments would not gain sufficient practical experience to perform effective accompaniment.

Thumri Accompaniment: This research investigates the other pole of *Khyal* music on the opposite side of structured musicality, in the light of its application in the accompaniment of *Thumri*. *Thumri* is one of the semi-classical genres of Indian music and is characterized by improvisation, yet with retention of fine musical details and playfulness. This study explores the role of *Tabla* accompaniment in the creation of such a unique musical aesthetic and reveals the essence of *Thumri* music and poetry through it. The *Tabla* in *Thumri* performs two functions: keeping the *tala* cycle active and using its musical components to create stronger emotional effects through its reactions to vocal content and the singer's physical movements.

A more in-depth exploration of expressive freedom in *Thumri* through the study of recorded performances by musicians using the principal accompaniment technique of *laggi*. This will examine the complex and fast rhythms that the performer uses to heighten the emotional response of the listener in a live performance.

In the research study, the recorded performances of *Thumri* have been analyzed. The major accompaniment technique that musicians of *Thumri* use is *laggi*. With *laggi*, the musician generates fast-moving patterns and depth of emotion in the performance. The study further elucidates how a *Tabla* player creates a complex musical line, a *laggi* sequence within the confines of a piece of music set to a *drut* tempo to create a powerful dialogue with the fundamental component of *laggi* of a singer's rendition of a Purab ang *Thumri*. The present investigation, therefore, confirms the earlier findings of Ghosh (2019).

Unlike the more regular *bol* variations typical of *Khyal*, in this instance, the accompaniment to the *Thumri* is used as an improvisation, and the *bol* variations are played differently by all the musicians at various points in the song. Roy and Ghosh (2019) observe that in *Thumri* accompaniment, the musicians follow the vocalist's interpretation of the lyrics of the song being sung. Here, the rhythms of the song correlate with the musical content of the lyrics.

While in *Khyal*, *thihai* is a structural marker marking the ends of songs or structural sections within a composition, the *Thumri* accompanist uses the same unit for greater expressive purposes at almost any point in the song. This paper examines the role of and use of *thihai* in performances of *Thumri* from the perspectives of composers and accompanists. Examples from recordings by leading exponents are discussed. The *thihai* at cadences, as well as at what could be called the 'song sections' of *Thumri*, creates more expressive music than the same unit would in *Khyal*. The composer uses the *tihai* for playful expression, generating a highly lyrical feeling.

The theme of pedagogical transmission from the practitioner interviews suggested that *Thumri* accompaniment is transmitted almost entirely through oral tradition, ie, through live encounters with a teacher or through less formal tutorial situations, etc. Although there is as yet no established methodology towards the teaching of *Thumri* accompaniment, this is in marked contrast with the increasing formalization evident within the pedagogy of *Khyal*.

Comparative Overview - Usage of Rhythmic Elements: Table 1 presents a systematic comparison of the rhythmic elements identified across the 50 recordings, organized according to the deductive coding categories applied in this study.

Table 1: Usage of Rhythmic Elements

Major Element	Use in *Khayal*	Use in *Thumri*	Method of analysis
Taal Theka	Repetition in *Taal* for stability and support improvisation in *Vilambit* Khayal	Minimum use of *Theka*	Play back multiple times and use the transcriptions
***Thihai* phrase**	Used for ending or for the closure of a section.	Used to stress the lyrics and emotion	Documentation of the patterns
Variations and compositions	Used in *Kula* (open) and Bandh(close) textures while maintaining the discipline	Likely but less highlighted	Thematic coding from recordings
***Laggi* variety**	Rare; limited to the end part of *Chota Khayal* (Medium tempo) sections	Core and compulsory at the end of the *Thumri*	Identification of free-playing elements
Syncopation or Modification	Only minor tempo-based short variation or ornamentation elaboration	Stroke displacement for tension and lyrics	Ethnographic archival comparison

Source: Author's own analysis (2024-2025) of 50 recorded performances, drawn from Air India archival recordings, commercial releases, and YouTube-hosted archival material

Discussion

Interpretation of Khyal Findings: In *Khyal* music, the *Tabla* accompaniment serves to realize musical aspects like physical control, a format, and musical intelligence. This paper highlights how *Tabla* accompaniment is used to realize these aspects in *Khyal* music. It further supports Wade's (1984) observation that *Khyal* reaches its highest point of improvisation using *tala* cycles and outlines the ways in which accompanists realise this through accurate *theka* playing and *bol* variations. From the singer's point of view, *tala* offers enormous freedom in terms of setting up a melody line, while at the same time keeping the singer locked on the *tala*'s rhythm. Looking at *tala* this way means that we are looking at music in terms of structures and rules that the musician must follow.

These musicians are not only skilled practitioners of musical compositions that include organised artistic improvisation in the context of *Khyal*, but they can also apply further aspects of controlled improvisation at the end of a musical piece. *Thihai* is a musical structure that gives a finality and accent to a song and is frequently performed by musicians. The accompanist typically employs *tihai* as a cue for musical transitions and coordinates the coincident musical development of the vocalist. The performer may utilize controlled improvisation in collaboration with the vocalist to support the vocalist's creative ideas within the framework of the performance.

Tempo is another important aspect of an effective *Khyal* accompaniment. The *Tabla* player tries to keep the *theka* in the correct places with minimal improvisations so that the vocalist can render the raga as he desired in a *vilambit Khyal*. In contrast, the *drut Khyal* has further enhanced greater excitement through patterns and *bol* variations that uplift the tempo of the composition. This study deals with how a *Tabla* accompanist strikes a balance between holding on to the form and being flexible in both the tempos, and seeks to delve into the same.

The findings from the practitioner interviews supported these analyses. The musicians spoke about the interactive nature of *Tabla* performance for this type of music. They described how they must match the breath of the singer and respond by creating organized musical exchanges with other performers. The vocalists spoke about the importance of having a good rhythmic foundation so that they could then develop and embellish their improvisations. The findings also support the traditional methods of pedagogy in Indian music that stem from demonstration and imitation by the teacher. However, the need for the accompanist to enter into musical exchanges with the singer requires more than just technical facility.

Interpretation of Thumri Findings: The research results show that *Tabla* accompaniment in *Thumri* music expresses three essential musical values: expressive freedom, lyrical sensitivity, and playful rhythmic dialogue - values which stand in contrast to the structured aesthetic of *Khyal*. Manuel (1989) established *Thumri* as a semi-classical musical style that emphasises poetic and emotional elements, and the current research shows that the *Tabla* instrument serves as the primary vehicle to achieve this musical style. The *Tabla* player is also actively involved in expressing emotions during the performance of *Thumri* by following the physical expression of the vocalist in relation to the expressive aspects of the performance. The main characteristic of the *Thumri* accompaniment, i.e. *laggi*, forms a fast-moving cycle of the core element, and thus it is Purab ang *Thumri*. Parts of *Thumri* sung in fast tempo (*drut*), the *Tabla* player performs *laggi* for sequences. These sequences of rhythmic cycles are in dynamic dialogue with elaborations created by the vocalist. The method of performance of accompanists at these places is a model of performance by *Thumri* musicians. A musician (vocalist or accompanist) performs according to the feelings of other musicians, and as such, no fixed rhythm can be played by the singer and accompanist together.

When appealingly played, *Thihai* forms part of the *Thumri* structure. *Thihai* in *Khyal* refers to the end of a song, but a *Thumri* performer can highlight a verse or emphasize a poem through *Thihai*. The above-stated research findings are further supported by the comments of practitioners. *Tabla* players comment that they respond to word-oriented songs, whereas vocalists require musical accompaniment that can follow their expression.

Pedagogical Implications: The research results have important consequences for how teachers should teach *Tabla* accompaniment for *Khyal* and *Thumri* performances. The educational programs at institutions fail to provide sufficient training for students who need to learn accompaniment skills. Studio pedagogy in the traditional *guru-shishya parampara*, as Singh (2010) states, teaches students accompaniment skills through demonstration, imitation, and hands-on experience while practicing with vocalists.

The educational system of *Khyal* focuses on teaching students to play *Tabla* alone because they learn to play accompaniment only after mastering solo *Tabla* performance. Upadhye (2015), in his qualitative research with *Khyal* musicians, developed an approach to teaching *Khyal* that would go beyond the common educational models. The principal objective of the approach is to help the musician learn to anticipate and react in an appropriate manner to the singer's improvisations in real time during a public performance.

Some of the biggest challenges facing the education of the accompaniment to free-form emotive music, such as *Thumri*, within Indian musical traditions are the lack of documentation of the accompaniment for many forms of Indian music as they are passed down verbally from generation to generation. For *Thumri*, however, learning the accompaniment is mostly done by the observation of the musicians in informal settings, such as the sangeet sansad or the home of a senior musician. Thus, the apprenticeship model of learning is one of the most characteristic features of the performance practice of *Thumri*. Therefore, any program of education for the performance of *Thumri* would require the student to learn to make appropriate sounds and to be a competent musician, able to function in a collaborative situation, and to be studied as a core part of the curriculum of such a program. This aspect of learning would enable the student to play music with others as well as to learn to sing *Thumri* on his/her own.

Cultural and Theoretical Significance: The cultural and theoretical values expressed through rhythmic forms of musical identity, aesthetics, and improvisation. Studies on Hindustani music rhythms from an ethnomusicological perspective reveal that three main musical values are embedded in them: discipline, emotional expression, and teamwork (Stewart, 1990). This research examines the practices of accompaniment to *Khyal* and *Thumri* pieces through two different artistic strategies. While *Khyal* pieces are explored through complex intellectual structures, *Thumri* pieces are explored through structures that allow for deeper emotional expression.

Thumri is often employed by musicians to create the most unstructured of improvisations to heighten the emotion of a song. Thus, two approaches to improvisation in Hindustani music provide the reader with an understanding of the improvisational philosophy as well as how the same ideas can be utilized to create vastly different artistic values.

Each of the major musical traditions, whether *gharanas* or regional in character, uses accompaniment in performance in characteristic ways. Methods of playing *laya* and *taal* within *Khyal* songs, as illustrated by Vishwaroop (2019), or Manuel's (1993) tracing of the development of the instrumental support for *Thumri*. The current research confirms that musical accompaniment traditions exist as cultural elements that stem from historical development and local traditions of different areas.

CONCLUSION

The research investigates how *Tabla* accompaniment affects *Khyal* and *Thumri* performances through its analysis of their opposing musical values within cultural, educational, and theoretical contexts. The research shows that accompaniment functions as an active musical element that determines the musical identity of Hindustani music. The research analyzed recordings together with practitioner interviews and pedagogical settings to show that *Tabla* accompaniment contains both disciplinary and expressive aspects - structured and unstructured components which represent the dual nature of Hindustani musical tradition.

Khyal music performers need to play their instruments with exact rhythm while following set musical arrangements. And calculated changes in the *bol* section, and precise placement of the *tihai*. As previously noted, research findings from the current study reveal that *Khyal* singers utilize fixed methods for improvisation within the genre and require the highest level of musical ability within the structure of the accompaniment. From the practitioner's point of view, the music of *Khyal* vocal pieces requires total collaboration between the singer and accompanists to create music. A *Tabla* player must coordinate his breath with that of the singer. The vocalist requires his/her accompaniment to create space for his/her improvisation. Thus, the *Khyal* accompaniment demands extreme self-control, mental focus, and musical knowledge from the musicians practicing this genre of music.

The performer demonstrates controlled self-expression, while at the same time, he can respond to the musical words in his rendition. *Thumri* accompaniment is generally so simple that it provides a background to the performer's uniqueness. The accompanist, by using various musical techniques like *laggi*, syncopation, and *tihai* based on musical discovery, related to the emotional and musical values of this genre. Based on the perceptions of practitioners, a *Tabla* player has to produce musical sounds while uttering words of accompaniment, and a vocalist has to guide the musical accompaniment with their feelings and emotions. Thus, the practices related to *Thumri* accompaniment are based on principles of spontaneity, sensitivity, and complete musical freedom as opposed to *Khyal*.

A study of two main forms of Indian music, *Khyal* and *Thumri*, played with accompaniment, has revealed that they have their roots in common. *Khyal* is characterized by disciplined improvisation within set limits, whereas *Thumri* is played with completely free improvisation. Research into the *Tabla* accompaniment to these two forms has yielded a large amount of structured material as well as a vast amount of completely free music, and it is this which is at the core of the full beauty of the Hindustani classical musical traditions. The dual nature of Indian classical music becomes evident through the analysis of *gharana* and regional musical traditions, which influence *Khyal* through *gharana*-based *laya* and *taal* methods and *Thumri* through its connection to Banaras and Lucknow musical traditions.

The research results reveal multiple educational consequences. The research shows that educational institutions do not provide enough training for accompaniment because their students mainly learn to play alone. The practitioners expressed concern that insufficient focus would block the development of collaborative sensibility, which accompanies success. The research findings show that educational institutions should make accompaniment training part of their regular curriculum to teach students who have musical talent and natural performance abilities. The recommendation holds special importance for Sri Lanka because the country has growing institutional music education systems, which need accompaniment training to enhance their Hindustani music education programs.

This study develops knowledge in three principal areas. First, a conceptual framework to outline the contrastive structures of accompaniment for *Khyal* and *Thumri*, between structure (discipline) and freedom, 50 performances from a wide variety of musicians are presented. This contrasts greatly with current research, which is elaborated. Secondly, an empirical comparative study of accompaniment on the *Tabla* in while extremely wide, is largely non-systematic and confined to within genres, rather than across genres.

Third is *Tabla* accompaniment and the pedagogical investigation of the demands of such accompaniment for teaching students how to accompany songs sung with *Tabla*. So far, the issue of the accompaniment of songs sung with *Tabla* has not yet been addressed by research, and the paper sets up a comparison of the two genres in terms of teaching and learning. What is required for the institutional music education system is *Tabla* accompaniment, as a rich site for future interdisciplinary research in ethnomusicology, music pedagogy, and other fields.

Limitations and Future Directions: However, the study cannot possibly cover all the ways a musician might accompany a song. Research into people's perceptions, using practitioner interviews as data here, provides a solid foundation for the multiple methods of verification of data that are not available for teaching accompaniment to songs.

The research method unites historical context studies with performance evaluation and recording techniques, expert opinions, and educational research to study *Tabla* musical support in *Khyal* and *Thumri* performances. The research study uses ethnomusicological theoretical models to analyse practical data, which shows how different rhythmic methods express conflicting musical and improvisational perspectives to improve our knowledge of Hindustani music and educational approaches.[SP1.1]

In future studies on rhythm, a more systematic analysis could be provided by means of a computational analysis. For future studies on curriculum development in Sri Lanka and India, it will be important to set up an institutional framework for the accompaniment training of musicians. This should enable the musician not only to develop his technical skills to perfection, but also to develop into a good performer in an accompanying function. A comparative analysis of more *gharanas* and semi-classical genres can further develop and refine the framework of analysis established so far.

REFERENCES

Ghosh, T. (2019). Evolution of *Tabla* accompaniment in Purab ang *Thumri* according to different maestros: A critical analysis. Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary, 4(5), 19–25.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. Sage Publications.

Manuel, P. (1989). Ṭhumri in historical and stylistic perspectives. Motilal Banarsidass.

Manuel, P. (1993). *Thumri* in a cultural context. Motilal Banarsidass.

McNeil, A. (2017). Seed ideas and creativity in Hindustani raga music: Beyond the composition–improvisation dialectic. Ethnomusicology Forum, 26(1), 116–132. https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2017.1304230

Rohit, M. A., & Rao, P. (2021). Automatic stroke classification of *Tabla* accompaniment in Hindustani vocal concert audio. arXiv preprint. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2104.09064

Roy, S., & Ghosh, T. (2019). Application of abstract music in the *Tabla* accompaniment in Purab ang *Thumri* gayaki with special reference to Farukhabad gharana. Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary, 4(5), 12–18.

Singh, B. (2010). Curriculum and pedagogic approaches in Indian music education. Indian Journal of Education Policy, 5(1), 33–47.

Singh, R. (2018). *Tabla* as a solo and accompaniment instrument: Aesthetic and pedagogical dimensions. Sangeet Natak Akademi Press.

Srinivasamurthy, A., Holzapfel, A., Ganguli, K. K., & Serra, X. (2017). Aspects of tempo and rhythmic elaboration in Hindustani music: A corpus study. Frontiers in Digital Humanities, 4, 20. https://doi.org/10.3389/fdigh.2017.00020

Stewart, D. (1990). Improvisation in Hindustani music. Yearbook for Traditional Music, 22, 87–101.

Upadhye, A. (2015). Pedagogy of *Tabla* accompaniment in *Khyal*. Journal of Indian Musicology, 12(2), 45–62.

Vishwaroop, M. (2019). The layataal aspect of *Khyal*: In the perspective of Agra gharana. NMIMS Journal of Performing Arts, 3(1), 55–70.

Wade, B. C. (1984). *Khyal*: Creativity within North India's classical music tradition. Cambridge University Press.