

Chapter 2

The Siddha Yoga drum

2.1 The *mridang*

The percussion instrument mainly used in Siddha Yoga chants and music, see [fig. 2.1](#), is a drum whose origins date back thousands of years. This drum is known with various names. One of these is *pakhāwaj*; another one is *mridang*.



(a) The system of bolts



(b) The treble head



(c) The bass head

Figure 2.1: The *mridang* used in Siddha Yoga chants

Strictly speaking the *mridang* is an entire category of barrel shaped, double headed drums. In its classical form, the instrument known as the *Mridang* or *Mridanga*, is referred to in ancient Sanskrit works and is also pictured in the paintings on the walls of the famous

Ajanta caves. Similar drums have been found in Indus Valley excavations dating back 4 millenia. It is thus clearly a very ancient invention, and its acoustical perfection must be considered a remarkable testimony to the inventiveness and musical taste of its progenitors.

The classical *pakhāwaj* is the north Indian version of *mridang*, see fig. 2.2(a). In southern India instead the *mridang* evolved in a drum known as *mridangam*, or *carnatic mridangam*, see fig. 2.2(b).



(a) North indian *pakhāwaj*



(b) South indian *mridangam*

Figure 2.2: Two examples of *mridang*

The classical *pakhāwaj* does not present metal parts but is laced with rawhide. The lacing fixes the drum heads to the wooden shell. Wooden pegs, known as *gatta*, are inserted between the straps and the shell for the purpose of tuning. The sliding of the tuning pegs induces tension variations in both the drum heads.

The drum heads, known as *pūdi*, are the peculiar part of the *pakhāwaj* among the other drums of the *mridang* class. The treble head, fig. 2.3,



Figure 2.3: The treble head of a *pakhāwaj*

has basically three parts: (i) the outer weaving (*gajara* or *pagri*), (ii) the membranes, (iii) the black spot (*syahi*, or *shyai*) in the center. The bass (bigger) head is in principle similar to the treble one except that there is a temporary application of flour and water instead of the black permanent spot. Details on the construction of *pudi* are reported in [appendix B](#).

The Siddha Yoga drum, usually called *mridang* also, is a modern evolution of the original ancient *pakhāwaj*. In this “screw-type” *pakhāwaj* the system of straps is replaced by a system of metal hooks fixed to the shell by bolts, see [fig. 2.1\(a\)](#). This makes possible the tuning of a single head, sometimes without using a hammer for the fine tuning of the treble head, while letting unchanged the tension of the other head. Acting on the screws with a wrench, each of the drum heads can be tuned.

2.2 The drum in the context of indian music

Pakhāwaj is the most common north Indian representative of the class of *mridang*. It was once common throughout north India. In the last few generations this drum has been replaced by *tabla* in performance music forms, [fig. 2.4\(b\)](#).



(a) *Tabla*



(b) A north Indian classical music performance with *tabla* accompaniment

Figure 2.4: *Tabla* is today the preferred percussion instrument for the rhythmic accompaniment of *Hindustani* classical music

A *Tabla* set is formed by a small wooden drum called *danya* and a larger metal one called

banya. It is said that *tabla* was developed by cutting a *pakhāwaj* into two pieces.

2.2.1 *Dhrupad and Dhammar*

There are several styles of *pakhāwaj* playing. The most well known and important is for the accompaniment of *dhrupad* and *dhammar* singers.

Dhrupad is perhaps the oldest style of classical singing in north Indian music today. The heyday of this style was in the time of Tansen (16th century). It is a very heavy, masculine style performed to the accompaniment of the *pakhāwaj*. It is known for its austere quality and strict adherence to the rhythmic structure (*tala*). The moods of *dhrupad* may vary but themes revolving around the victories of great kings and mythological stories are common. Devotional themes are also very common.

Dhammar is a very old style of singing as well. This name is also applied to instrumental renditions of vocal compositions. It has many similarities to *dhrupad*. The major difference is that it is slightly more romantic. Themes of *dhammar* typically revolve around Krishna and the Holi festival. In fact the *dhammar* is often called *hori*, or *holi*.

Pakhāwaj is found in accompaniment of Orissi dancers and occasionally for *kathak* dance. It is also found in a classical form from Rajasthan known as *Haveli Sangeet*. *Pakhāwaj* compositions are passed down from generation to generation. They are taught by a series of mnemonic syllables known as *bols*.

2.2.2 *Bhajan and Kirtan*

Pakhāwaj is very much used for Devotional music forms, like *nāmā saṅkīrtana* and *bhajans* of Siddha Yoga.

The *bhajan* has a special place in India. Most *bhajans* were written between the 14th through 17th centuries. They were songs sung in the praise of God through which spiritual truths were portrayed in the simple language of the farmers, merchants and other common people of the time.

Bhajan is an important part of the *Bhakti* movement born in India during the Mogul period. *Bhajan* is not defined by any musical characteristics; it is simply defined by a sense

of devotion (*bhakti*). *Bhajans* cover a broad spectrum of musical styles from the simple musical chant (*dhun*, or *kirtan*) to highly developed versions comparable to *thumri*. *Thumri* is a common style of light classical music with text of romantic and devotional nature, and usually revolving around a girl's love for Krishna. *Bhajan*, like *thumri* is, can become a style characterized by a greater flexibility with the *raga*.

The poetic content of the *bhajan* also covers a broad spectrum. The more traditional ones are by great poet saint such as Mirabai, Surdas, or Kabir, and are considered to be of the highest literary quality. An important form related to *bhajan* is the *dhun*, which sometimes is actually nothing more than a musical version of a chant.



Figure 2.5: An image of Mirabai

The structure of *bhajan* is very conventional. It contains a single refrain *sthai* and numerous verses *antara*. The last *antara* has special significance because it contains the name of the author.

The *Kirtan* or *Dhun* is related to the *bhajan*. The major difference is that *bhajan* is usually performed by a soloist, while *kirtan* and *dhun* usually involve the audience. The musical quality is consequently much simpler. The term *Kirtan* is used by Hindus and Sikhs, while the term *Dhun* seems to be used only by Hindus, especially Gujaratis.

2.3 Relation between *pakhāwaj*, Siddha Yoga *mridang*, *tabla* and South Indian *mridangam*

Pakhāwaj, *tabla* and *mridangam* form the basis for the classical percussion in India. Questions arise as to the differences and similarities between them.

Differences may fall into four categories: construction, tone, technique, and philosophy. The music of India is one of the oldest systems of music in the world. There is the *Hindusthani sangeet*, the north Indian music system, and the *Carnatic sangeet* in the south. Collectively these two limbs form the body of a musical tradition that is said to extend back several thousand years. Although there are many similarities between the two systems there are also differences. One of the differences is in the choice of rhythmic accompaniment.

The *Carnatic sangeet* of southern India prefers the *mridangam*. This instrument, like the north Indian *pakhāwaj*, is a single piece of wood that is hollowed out and has playing heads on both sides. North Indian music prefers the *pakhāwaj* and *tabla*.

2.3.1 Construction

There are a number of differences between the construction of *mridangam*, *tabla* and *pakhāwaj* (even if some principles of construction of *pakhāwaj* and *tabla* are essentially the same). Some of the differences are obvious and some are more subtle. The most obvious difference in construction is that *mridangam* and *pakhāwaj* use a single resonator while *tabla* uses two. Therefore the tension of the left and right sides of *tabla* are separately controlled (actually this happens also for the Siddha Yoga drum thanks to the system of bolts), while they are inseparably linked in *mridangam* and *pakhāwaj*. *Pakhāwaj*, Siddha Yoga *mridang* and *mridangam*'s single resonator also produces an acoustic coupling between the two heads.

The drumheads show major differences. For instance the *mridangam* is made of extremely heavy hides while the *tabla*, the *pakhāwaj* and the Siddha Yoga *mridang* use thinner ones. The *tabla bayan* has a permanent dry application while the *mridangam* and the classical *pakhāwaj* have a temporary wet application of flour and water. Siddha Yoga *mridang* bass head has instead an inner permanent semi-dry application.



(a) The bass head



(b) Sitting position

Figure 2.6: More details on *mridangam*

All these drums have a skin that does not completely cover the surface. There is a hole in this outer covering which exposes the main membrane below. The outer annular membrane is much more prominent in the *mridangam* than in the *tabla*, *pakhāwaj* and *mridang*. There are items placed between the main membrane and the annular membrane that further accentuate these differences. *Tabla*, *pakhāwaj* and *mridang* often have a string placed between the annular covering and the main skin, while *mridangam* has straw. This may not appear to be a significant difference but the purpose of these insertions is diametrically opposite. String is placed in the north Indian drums to lift the annular membrane and reduce the dampening effect. The *mridangam* instead has pieces of straw placed radially between the two skins. This actually increases the dampening and acts as a snare.

The cumulative effects of these differences in construction create major differences in the tone of the instrument.

2.3.2 Tone

Mridang, *pakhāwaj*, *tabla* and *mridangam* are characterized by a rich and varied tone. Some strokes evoke clear pitched sounds while others evoke unpitched sounds. The pitched strokes clearly show the tonal differences between these drums.

For example the rim stroke on the treble head is a major stroke on both the *mri-*

dang/tabla/pakhāwaj and the *mridangam*. Although the nomenclature varies this stroke is usually called *Nā* in the North and *Nam* in the South. If one looks at the sound frequency spectrum of this stroke, on both instruments a predominant third harmonic is the main characteristic. However, the fundamental may be seen in significant proportion in the *mridangam* while it is essentially absent in the *mridang/tabla/pakhāwaj*. Furthermore the second harmonic tends to be evoked in the north Indian drums while it is suppressed in the *mridangam*.

The open stroke is also a major stroke for both drums. This is called *Tun* in the North and *Deem* in the South. Both strokes are characterized by a very prominent fundamental. However there is a significant difference in the second harmonic of the frequency spectrum.

The open stroke of the left hand is called *Ga* in *tabla*, *Gi* in *mridang* and *pakhāwaj* and *Thom* in the South for *mridangam*. It shows a tremendous difference between these instruments. *Tabla* has a very pronounced fundamental (harmonic) and a long sustain. There are much fewer harmonics in this stroke. Conversely the *pakhāwaj*, the Siddha Yoga *mridang* and south Indian *mridangam* have a much more complex harmonic spectrum and a significantly reduced sustain.

2.3.3 Technique

The fingering technique is a very important consideration in this discussion. *Tabla* has a distinct leaning toward the delicate fingering while *Pakhāwaj*, *mridang* and the *mridangam* have a balance between the powerful and delicate techniques. A brief look at the history of the instruments shows why.

The evolution of both the *pakhāwaj*, Siddha Yoga *mridang*, *tabla*, and *mridangam* may be traced to an archetypical *mridang*. This instrument had a close association to the ancient mythological dramas. This association meant that the drums would sometimes have to support both masculine and feminine characters. The delicate movements of the dance are known as *lasya* while the more powerful masculine movements are known as *tandava*. Powerful techniques were developed to accentuate the masculine roles while delicate techniques were developed to support the feminine roles.

In the last several centuries the drumming technique in north Indian music has bifurcated. The more powerful and aggressive techniques have been relegated to the *pakhāwaj* while the delicate techniques have been relegated to *tabla*. Yet there was no bifurcation of technique in the South. The powerful and aggressive techniques exist alongside the delicate.

In Siddha Yoga *mridang* both delicate and aggressive techniques are retained so that they can properly accompany the various Siddha Yoga chants in all their moods and speeds.

2.3.4 Philosophy

There is another area of difference between the north and south Indian percussion styles. This reflects a basic philosophic difference between North and South Indian music. For example in performance music, *tabla* or *pakhāwaj* provide the rhythmic base for the entire performance. Since the main performer will constantly refer to the drum, it is essential that there be a conventionally established pattern that may be universally understood. This pattern is called *theka*. Too much variation from the established *theka* may lead to a breakdown in communication and thus compromise the entire performance. In the old days, vocalists and instrumentalists would not allow their drummers to play anything except *theka*. Today there is much greater freedom, still the basic responsibility remains.

The role of the *mridangam* in south Indian music is much different. The *mridangam* does not have to provide the rhythmic base for the performance. Such a base is provided by a conventionally established pattern of claps and waves. Half of the audience in a south Indian performance may be clapping along with the performers. With so many people providing the base there is a greater freedom given to the *mridangam* player. The consequence of not having to provide a base means that there is no such thing as a *theka*, therefore different accompanying rhythms may be used according to the artistic discretion of the performers.

2.4 The role of *mridang* in Siddha Yoga chants

There are two types of chanting in Siddha Yoga centers and ashrams: *swadhyaya*, the chanting of sacred texts, and *nāma saṅkīrtana*, or fast chants. The text chants, like the *Guru*

Gīta, *Rudram*, and *Shiva Mahimna* are taken from the ancient scriptures of India and are usually sung in simple melodies at a medium pace, and accompanied by *harmonium* and *tamboura* (see fig. 2.8).



Figure 2.7: Playing for a Siddha Yoga fast chant

Nāma saṅkīrtana, which means “the divine repetition of the name of God”, are the chants that usually use the drum in addition to the *harmonium* and *tamboura*. These chants exclaim one or more of the names of God over and over, usually in a call and response fashion. They most often begin at a slow or moderate tempo and speed up gradually. Many *nāma saṅkīrtana* are based on specific *ragas*, and the melodies are more involved than those in the text chants. The role of the drum in a *nāma saṅkīrtana* is to maintain the tempo so that everyone may sing in time together.

There are also other instruments that are played to provide rhythmic support during a Siddha Yoga fast chant. They include hand *cymbals*, see fig. 2.9(a), and *kartal*, a pair of wooden blocks with small metal jingles mounted on it, see fig. 2.9(b). These instruments are played simply beating them together.



Figure 2.8: *Harmonium* and *Tamboura*



(a) *Cymbals*



(b) *Kartal*

Figure 2.9: Other rhythmic instruments used in Siddha Yoga fast chants

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