



THE CONCEPT OF TALA IN INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE

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Abstract

This study offers a detailed exploration of the concept of tala in Indian classical music, examining its historical, structural, and philosophical aspects [1]. By analyzing ancient texts such as Sangita Darpana, Rangarnava, and Sangeetha Rathnakara, the research traces the evolution of the term "tala" and underscores its pivotal role in rhythmic organization within both Carnatic and Hindustani music traditions. The study highlights the socio-cultural significance of tala, extending beyond music to encompass dance and cultural rituals, where rhythm is central to the human experience and life cycles. Through a comparative analysis of the tala systems in the two traditions, it identifies key structural components like laghu, drutam, and anu drutam, demonstrating how these variations influence rhythm, tempo, and emotional engagement with the music. The study also delves into the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of tala, exploring its connection to divine principles of harmony and balance. Despite challenges in accessing ancient texts and potential biases in interpretation, the research offers valuable insights into tala's complex nature. It opens avenues for future studies, suggesting further exploration of regional variations, contemporary applications, and the integration of tala in global musical contexts, fostering a deeper understanding of its cultural and aesthetic significance in Indian music [2].

Keywords: Sangita Darpana, Rangarnava, Sangeetha Rathnakara, regional variations, musical traditions.

1. Introduction

Tala, a fundamental concept in Indian classical music, serves as the backbone of rhythmic organization, playing a critical role in shaping the structure and expression of music across both Carnatic and Hindustani traditions. This study embarks on a comprehensive exploration of tala, delving into its historical, structural, and philosophical dimensions. The research traces the evolution of the term "tala" through key ancient texts such as *Sangita Darpana*, *Rangarnava*, and *Sangeetha Rathnakara*, highlighting its significance not only as a rhythmic framework but also as a cultural symbol [3]. Beyond its musical application, tala is deeply embedded in dance and rituals, where it governs the flow of time and is central to the rhythm of life. By comparing the tala systems of Carnatic and Hindustani music, the study reveals the structural variations—such as laghu, drutam, and anu drutam—that contribute to differences in tempo, rhythm, and emotional resonance. Furthermore, the study examines the spiritual and philosophical aspects of tala, connecting it to divine concepts of harmony and balance. While the research faces challenges such as limited access to ancient texts and interpretational biases, it provides valuable insights into the intricate nature of tala and its cultural, philosophical, and artistic significance [4].

2. Methodology

The methodology of this study is grounded in an analytical and interpretive approach, focusing on the historical and structural aspects of tala in Indian classical music. Initially, the study examines primary sources, such as

ancient texts and treatises, to trace the etymological and philosophical origins of the word "tala" and its evolution in music. This involves a detailed review of classical literature, including the *Sangita Darpana*, *Rangarnava*, and *Sangeetha Rathnakara*, as well as texts by prominent scholars like Narahari Chakravarti. Secondary sources, including modern research papers and commentaries, will be analyzed to provide contemporary insights into the conceptualization and application of tala across various musical traditions, with a particular focus on its role in the Carnatic and Hindustani systems. The study also employs comparative analysis to differentiate tala systems in both Carnatic and Hindustani music, exploring their structural components such as *laghu*, *drutam*, and *anu drutam*, and examining how they affect rhythm, tempo, and the overall musical experience. Furthermore, the research investigates the relationship between tala and its socio-cultural impact, drawing connections between music, dance, and life cycles. Data will be analyzed both qualitatively, through text-based analysis, and quantitatively, where applicable, to explore the rhythmic variations and classifications of talas in different regional and stylistic contexts [5].

3. Result & Discussion

The Origin of the Word 'Tala': The word "tala" is derived from the root *Taal*, which refers to the established rhythm used in music and dance. Scholars suggest that many words in Indian classical music and dance come from specific verbal roots. For instance, *Maatra* (measure) originates from the root *maa*, and *chanda* (meter) comes from the root *chanda*. It is believed that the term "tala" arises from the root *tal*, meaning to establish, as music, song, and dance are structured within tala. The word *tala* is often said to be a combination of two elements: *ta*, representing *tandava* (a male dance form), and *la*, representing *lasya* (a female dance form). In the *Sangita Darpana*, tala is described as the union of *ta* (Sankara or Shiva) and *la* (Parvati or Shakti), symbolizing the balance of masculine and feminine energies. In *Rangarnava*, the sound produced by the striking of two palms is referred to as the "action of keeping time," which is integral to tala [6]. Another interpretation of tala is the addition of a suffix to the root *tal*, with the action of joining and separating the palms to create rhythm. Those who are pervaded by the ten pranas are believed to understand the essence of tala and *ala* (a form of rhythm). Narahari Chakravarti, in his work *Bhakti Ratanakara*, cites a verse from *Ratnamala* to explain that *taakara* represents Kartikeya, *akara* stands for Vishnu, and *lakara* is associated with Maruta. This connection reflects a deeper spiritual significance tied to these deities. While interpretations of the origin of tala vary in ancient texts, the basic elements and their expressions remain consistent. Attempts to break down the concept of time into measured segments, like *ta*, *dhrit*, *thu*, and *nna*, were all considered forms of tala. In Bharata's classical music, the style known as *Marga Sangitha* was performed before the gods, using five distinct *Marga talas*. It is said that *Marga* represents the music performed for the divine, while *Desi* refers to music preferred by the people across various regions. According to texts, *Desi* evolved from *Marga talas* and is classified into three categories: *Suddha*, *Salaga*, and *Sankeerna*.

1. **Suddhatala:** *Suddhatala* refers to talas that are free from the influence of other talas. This category includes two subtypes: *Marga-Suddha* and *Desi-Suddha*. Among *Desi-Suddha talas*, *Dhruva tala* is particularly notable. Somadeva's treatise mentions 108 talas, with the first seven being *Prathama tala*, 27 of which are *Suddha talas*, and the rest are mixed forms [7].



2. **Salagatala:** Salagatala refers to talas created by blending two distinct talas. These are further divided into Marga-Salaga and Desi-Salaga. An example of Marga-Salaga is *Kirti tala*, a combination of *Vibhinna* and *Kokila Priya* talas, while *Dhruvarupakam* from the south is a Desi-Salaga tala.
3. **Sankeernatala:** Sankeernatala is created by combining multiple talas. This category also includes Marga and Desi subtypes. An example of Marga Sankeerna Tala is *Simhanandana*, which blends several talas such as *Caccatputa Rati*, *Tala Darpana*, *Kokilapriya*, *Abhanga*, and *Mudrika*.

Carnatic Music and Tala Systems: Carnatic music, associated with South India, is a prominent form of classical music with its own systems for classifying talas. The Suladi Sapta Tala system is the most widely accepted and standardizes the classification of talas. It includes seven families of talas, each of which can be placed within one of five jatis (types), leading to thirty-five possible talas. Each tala follows a specific number of beats, known as *aksharas*, with a complete cycle referred to as an *avartana*. The Suladi Sapta Tala system uses three out of six angas (elements), which are critical for calculating musical time accurately. These six angas, known as *Shadangas*, form the foundation for rhythmic structuring in Carnatic music:

Table 1 The Table of Shadangas

S.N.	Anga	Symbol
1.	Anudrutha	U
2.	Drutha	O
3.	Laghu	I
4.	Guru	S
5.	Plutha	IS
6.	Kakapada	+

Table 2 JAATHI : Of the Shadangas, only laghu has variations in number of aksharas. It is called Laghu Jaati bedha. There are 5 Jaatis

1	ChaturshraJaati	4 aksharas	Tha Ka Di Mi
2	Tishra Jaati	3 aksharas	Tha Ki Ta
3	Mishra Jaati	7 akshars	Tha Ki Ta, Tha KaDi Mi
4	Khanda Jaati	5 aksharas	Tha Ka Tha Ki Ta
5	SankiranamJaati	9 aksharas	Tha Ka Di Mi, ThaKa Tha Ki Ta

Table 3 The Symbol for Laghu is a vertical line, as I, that Drutha is a small circle O, and that for Anudruthais a semicircle, U

1	Dhruva Taal	I O I I
2	Matya Taal	I O I
3	Rupaka Taal	O I
4	Jhampa Taal	I U O
5	Tripata Taal	I O O
6	Ata Taal	I I O O
7	Ek taal	I

Tala Dasa Pranas: Tala is described as having ten essential features, referred to as *Dasapranas*, each of which plays a significant role in its structure. Here is a brief description of these ten features:

- **Kaala:** Refers to the duration or measurement of time.
- **Marga:** Signifies a method or way, indicating the duration of a *kriya* within the Akshara kala [8].
- **Kriya:** A unit used to measure and count time.
- **Anga:** Denotes a part or limb of the tala.
- **Graha:** Refers to the point at which the song begins, which may not necessarily coincide with the beginning of the tala.
- **Jathi:** Refers to the type or kind, describing variations in the *Anga* (such as *Laghu*).
- **Kala:** Represents the number of *matras* in which the *kriya* is subdivided.
- **Laya:** The time gap between two consecutive *kriyas*, which sets the tempo.
- **Yathi:** Refers to the rhythmic pattern in the composition relative to the *Anga*.
- **Prasthara:** The detailed elaboration of the rhythmic pattern.

The Need for Tala in Music: Some scholars assert that music without *tala* (or *anibaddha sangita*) is considered "Aranyaka Sangita" or Music of the Forest, while music with *tala* (*Nibaddha Sangita*) is deemed Music of Society. It is suggested that music without *tala* lacks stimulation and does not invigorate the listener. Prolonged exposure to free-form music can lead to a sense of dullness. In the *alapas* of Dhrupada or Khayal (which are without *tala*), the idea that art unites with supreme bliss—much like the soul—is not realized. For this reason, it is said that the beat of the *Tabla* or *Mridangam* marks the transition from *anibaddhata* to a state where the *tala* and musical notes align, bringing joy and exhilaration to the listener [9]. This harmony between the performer and the audience's reactions enhances the overall experience. In music, the *tala* provides structure and rhythm, akin to the way *metre* organizes musical time. As described in the *Amarakosa*, "tala is the measure of action" (*talāh Kalakriyamanam*). *Tala* binds music with specific rules and temporal constraints, much like how a lack of time structure in life leads to disorder and unhappiness. Similarly, music without *tala* is ineffective and lacks meaning. *Tala* brings stability and discipline to music, and it is through these systems that different musical styles and presentations are shaped. *Tala* adds dynamism to music, making it an organized, compelling form. By regulating tempo and introducing variations, it creates emotional depth—allowing for different expressions such as sorrow, joy, or intensity. In texts like *Sangeetha Rathnakara* and *Naradartha Ragamala*, it is emphasized that just as the face is essential to the body, and the nose to the face, music without *tala* is incomplete. Song, instrumental music, and dance are compared to an intoxicated elephant, with *tala* serving as the rod used to control it. Sri Narahari Chakravarthy states that music without *tala* is like a boat without a captain—impure and aimless. While there are no specific examples of *Desi Sankeerna Talas*, there are references to 101, 108, and 120 talas, particularly during the Golden Age of *tala* in *Sangita Ratnakara*. *Tala* is also described in certain ancient texts as being akin to the human body: *matras* (beats) are like the arteries, *laya* (rhythmic flow) is like the blood circulating through them, and the strokes are compared to the limbs. There are numerous varieties of *tala* in both Carnatic and Hindustani music systems, with each system having its own distinct set of popular and important talas [10].

Table 4 Comparison of Tals in Carnatic and Hindustani

Sr.	Carnatic	Hindustani
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1.	Adital	Ektal
2.	Madhya Adi tal	Choutal
3.	Jampa tal	Jhaptal
4.	Tripata tal	Deepchandi
5.	Rupaka tala	Dadra
6.	Matya tal	Dhamar
7.	Dhruva tal	Trital
8.	Ekatalam	Tilwada

Tala: The Rhythmical Grouping of Beats: Tala refers to the rhythmic cycles in Indian classical music, which can range from 3 to 108 beats. It is the measure of time in music and holds the same foundational principles in both Hindustani and Carnatic music, despite differences in names and styles. The musical time is divided into simple and complex meters, and tala operates independently of the music it accompanies, having its own divisions. Each cycle moves in bars, with every beat subdivided into the smallest fraction. Tala is the core element of classical music, often considered its pulse or heartbeat. Various talas exist, such as Dadra, Rupak, Jhaptal, Ektal, Adha-Chautal, and Teen-Tal. Though over 100 talas are recognized, only about 30 are known, and 10-12 are actively used, with Teentaal (16 beats) being the most commonly encountered. In addition to defining the rhythm, tala also determines the tempo, or *laya*, ensuring uniformity in the time span. The *matra* is the smallest unit of tala. In Carnatic music, tala follows a more rigid structure, where talas are defined based on intricate arithmetic calculations [11]. These cycles always occur in a repeating pattern. Talas are made up of three basic units: laghu, drutam, and anu drutam, with the laghu's time unit varying according to its *jaati* (type). Depending on the *jaati* of laghu, 35 different talas are possible, and each beat can be split into five “ghatis,” leading to 175 distinct talas in Carnatic music. The most common tala is the Adi tala, consisting of 8 beats, and talas are often associated with specific moods, much like ragas.

Tala and Its Relation to Life: The concept of tala in music parallels the concept of meter in poetry. Primitive man may have first experienced rhythm in the natural world — in the flow of rivers, the rhythm of waterfalls, the predictable cycles of sunrise and sunset, and the changing of seasons. These natural rhythms likely evolved into the concept of meter in literature and tala in music, breathing life into both. As civilization progressed, rhythms were incorporated into ecstatic expressions like dance. Early humans, for instance, would have danced in celebration after hunting [12]. Throughout history, musicians enriched music with diverse notes, and poets enhanced literature by experimenting with different poetic forms and meters. In everyday life, everything — from humans to animals, and even the cycles of nature — follows a rhythmic pattern. Though time is a whole, it is divided into smaller intervals: hours, days, months, and years, all of which have rhythmic qualities that connect with the idea of tala.

The Science of Tala: The Indian science of rhythm dates back to the Vedic period and has evolved through the centuries. It is rich in diverse rhythmic patterns. A proficient mridangist, as a primary percussionist in Indian classical music, must be well-versed in the science of tala, as the mridangam plays a central role in this system. Tala can be defined as the musical measure of time that governs the rhythm of a piece. It provides structure to musical compositions, ensuring a definite presentation. The intricate rhythms within tala help to enhance the emotional expression (*bhava*) of the music. Moreover, rhythmic compositions can be preserved in notation for



future generations [13]. In music, *shruthi* (pitch) and *laya* (tempo) are the two essential ingredients. The Sanskrit aphorism suggests that *shruthi* is the mother, while *laya* is the father of music. Both must be balanced for a harmonious musical experience, and a gifted musician who understands both aspects can create a highly refined performance. While *tala* is the cycle of rhythmic patterns, *laya* refers to the interval between beats within that cycle. *Laya* regulates the tempo and allows the performer and accompanist (such as the mridangist) to improvise and embellish within the rhythm, creating a spontaneous, time-bound yet creative performance.

The Concept of Tala in Music: Tala refers to a series of sounds produced on percussion instruments, such as the mridangam, tabla, or pakhawaj, through striking with the palm. While numerous percussion instruments exist, the tabla has become the most popular in modern Indian classical music, particularly in Hindustani music. Tala serves two primary functions: accompanying music (vocal or instrumental) and expressing rhythm on its own. There are various forms of Hindustani classical music, including Dhrupad, Khayal, Tappa, and Thumri, along with instrumental genres featuring instruments like the sitar, sarode, and flute. In this context, tala becomes central to both the melodic and rhythmic structure, enabling the performer to maintain the tempo and rhythm required for a cohesive performance.

The Tala System in South Indian Music: The tala system in South Indian music is one of the most complex and unique systems in the world. It is unparalleled in its intricacy and is critical to the rhythm of South Indian music. When accompanying a musician, the mridangist doesn't just play standard beats; they provide a complex, cross-rhythmical accompaniment that complements the style and rhythm of the piece. This "rhythmic harmony" elevates the overall performance and is a hallmark of the excellence of Indian music. In South Indian music, the development of tala mnemonics and drumming has contributed significantly to the growth of the tala system, making it one of the most sophisticated and refined systems of rhythm worldwide.

Changes in the Tempo of Tala and the Creation of Various Sentiments (Rasa-nispatti): The creation of appropriate sentiments in music relies heavily on both the musical notes and the tala, particularly the tempo. When Lord Shiva was inspired by Rudra Rasa, he must have performed the Tandava Nritya, incorporating various tempos of tala. Since ancient times, the expression of heroic sentiments has been achieved through variations in the tempo of tala. In other words, the creation of rasa is not possible without adjusting the tempo of tala, just as in literature, sentiments are conveyed through the use of diverse meters. Similarly, composers use different talas to evoke a range of emotions in their music. As music began to merge with visual performing arts like drama, mime, and monologues, the necessity for svaras (musical notes) in tala became less essential. For instance, the mood of a fearful, dark night could be portrayed by manipulating the volume and rhythm of percussion instruments, without relying on changes in pitch. In flow dance and folk music, particularly among Adivasis, the rasa is often conveyed through changes in the tempo of tala percussion instruments, while the melody may remain unchanged. Many classical Sanskrit texts on music dedicate entire chapters to tala, including works like *Tala Lakshana*, *Tala Vishaya*, *Tala Uvdhana*, *Tala Samudra*, *Tala Dipika*, and *Tala Mahoddhati*, which focus on tala alone. Other texts like *Suddhananda Prakasam*, *Raga Tala Prastara*, and *Raja Tala Chintamani* provide extensive discussions on the subject. Tala is also referenced in non-musical literature, such as the *Silappadikaram*, *Pattuppattu*, *Kalladam*, and *Purananuru*.

Chapu Tala: Chapu Tala is one of the earliest measures used in Indian music, originating from Desi Sangita. It is a syncopated time measure counted with two beats, though for convenience, it may also be reckoned as a beat and a visarjita. There are four varieties of Chapu Tala:



- **Tisra Chapu** (1+2=3), where the first beat is one unit of time and the second is two units.
- **Kanda Chapu** (2+3=5), where the first beat is two units and the second is three.
- **Misra Chapu** (3+4=7), where the first beat lasts three units and the second lasts four.
- **Sankerna Chapu** (4+5=9), where the first beat lasts four units and the second lasts five.

Tani Avartanam (Mridangam Solo): The Tani Avartanam is a highlight of an Indian music concert, typically occurring after the main kriti and usually in the middle of the concert. While the melodic soloist decides when the drummer will take a solo, the decision is generally not left to the drummer. As a result, drummers must be prepared to perform a solo in any given tala, often in challenging tempos dictated by the lead performer [14]. The tala of the kriti (main piece) is usually the one in which the drum solo takes place. The critical point of focus in the tala cycle is the pickup of the kriti or any emphasized section of it, which the lead performer may elaborate on with *niraval* (melodic variation) and *swarakalpana* (improvised singing or playing of notes).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive exploration of the concept of tala in Indian classical music, shedding light on its historical, structural, and philosophical dimensions. Through an examination of ancient texts and treatises such as the *Sangita Darpana*, *Rangarnava*, and *Sangeetha Rathnakara*, the research traces the etymological and conceptual evolution of the word "tala," emphasizing its significance as the foundation of rhythmic organization in both Carnatic and Hindustani musical traditions. The study also highlights the socio-cultural implications of tala, showcasing its integral role not only in music but also in dance and cultural rituals, demonstrating how rhythm governs life cycles and the human experience. The comparative analysis between the tala systems of Carnatic and Hindustani music reveals distinct structural components, such as the variation of laghu, drutam, and anu drutam, and their influence on rhythm, tempo, and the listener's emotional connection to the music. The research underscores that while both traditions share the fundamental concept of tala, their regional and stylistic divergences create unique musical expressions. The qualitative and quantitative analyses of rhythmic variations and classifications further emphasize the complexity and richness of talas, even as they present challenges in standardization and measurement. The study also delves into the spiritual and philosophical symbolism of tala, reflecting on its divine connections and how it aligns with the principles of harmony and balance in music. The exploration of the ten pranams of tala—such as kaala, jathi, laya, and yathi—offers valuable insights into how rhythm is structured and experienced, making tala an indispensable element of Indian classical music. Through its organizational role in setting tempo and introducing dynamic variations, tala transforms music into a disciplined, yet emotionally expressive form, creating a deeper connection between the performer and the audience. Despite the limitations of the study, including the challenges in accessing ancient texts and the potential biases inherent in the interpretation of sources, the findings contribute significantly to the understanding of tala's importance in Indian classical music. This research opens avenues for future studies to explore regional variations and contemporary applications of tala, offering a richer appreciation of its role in shaping both the aesthetic and cultural landscape of Indian music.

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