

Ajrada gharana Tabla: Ustad Manju Khan's Style and Pedagogy

Vikram¹; Dr. Vandana Sharma²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Performing Arts, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, India.

²Associate Professor, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, India

Abstract

This research paper presents a comprehensive and analytical study of the teaching methodology, performance style, and disciples of Ustad Manju Khan, one of the head most tabla drum exponents of the Ajrada Gharana in Hindustani classical music. The Ajrada Gharana occupies a significant position in the tabla tradition due to its intricate rhythmic structures, unique finger techniques, and emphasis on tonal aesthetics.

This study elaborates on the historical development of the Ajrada Gharana, the stylistic and technical aspects of Ustad Manju Khan's playing, his structured teaching methodology, and the contributions of his major disciples in sustaining and spreading his musical legacy.

In the tradition of Indian classical music, gharanas represent not only stylistic variations but also complete pedagogical systems that shape the transmission of musical knowledge. In this context, the Ajrada Gharana is known for its complexity in layakari, distinctive bols, and the balanced use of both hands, especially the refined role of the bayan(left drum)

Ustad Manju Khan played a crucial role in preserving and propagating this tradition. His teaching methodology was simple, systematic, and student-oriented. While firmly rooted in the traditional Guru-Shishya Parampara, his approach also reflected a modern outlook by providing equal learning opportunities to all students.

His pedagogy emphasized listening (shravan), observation, gradual technical development, clarity of sound production, and consistent practice (riyaz). In addition, he gave importance to stage exposure and practical musical understanding and artistic maturity.

Keywords: Tabla Studies Ajrada Gharana ,Ustad Manju Khan,Music Pedagogy,Hindustani Classical Music Guru–Shishya Parampara, Tabla Performance, Technique, Teaching Methodology in Indian Classical Music

In-depth Explanation

Indian classical music is one of the oldest and highly developed musical traditions in the world, characterized by a rich system of aesthetics, technique, and pedagogy. One of the most important aspects of this tradition is the concept of gharana, which refers to a stylistic lineage that embodies a distinct musical identity.

“Generally, the meaning of the word “Gharana” is — “tradition,” “family,” lineage-tradition, family, class, community, that is, a class-form unit of human society. This very meaning is associated with a particular style of singing-playing of musical compositions. On this basis, in music, gharanas have been established upon a particular distinctive class related to a style or

school. Therefore, gharanas hold great importance in music. Another name for gharana is style or school. The word gharana is so prevalent and influential in the context of music that even common people are not unfamiliar with its usage, because most prominent musicians are associated with one gharana or another.”¹(translated by author)

A gharana is not merely a geographical or familial classification; rather, it represents a comprehensive musical philosophy that includes performance techniques, compositional structures, aesthetic preferences, and methods of teaching. In tabla playing, gharanas play a particularly significant role because they define the structural and technical framework within which the art form is practiced and transmitted.

Among the various tabla gharanas, the Ajrada Gharana holds a prominent position. “If this gharana is considered a branch very close to the Delhi gharana, then it would not be inappropriate. Near Delhi, in Meerut district, there is a village named Ajrada. There lived two real brothers, Kallu Khan and Miru Khan. They came to Delhi and received special education and training in tabla playing from Ustad Siddhar Khan. After completing their education, they returned to their village. Thereafter, those disciples, through their talent and self-created changes in the inherited style of playing received from the guru tradition, created a new style of playing.”²(translated by author)

Over time, the Ajrada Gharana developed distinctive features such as complex rhythmic patterns, intricate bol structures, and a balanced emphasis on both hands. Unlike some other gharanas that focus predominantly on the right hand (dayan), Ajrada places equal importance on the left hand (bayan), contributing to its rich tonal quality.

The development of this gharana was further strengthened by great musicians such as Ustad shammu khan, ustad niyazuddin khan and ustad Ramzan khan but Ustad Habibuddin Khan, who played a crucial role in shaping its modern identity.

“Ustad Habibuddin Khan was born in the year 1899 in the city of Meerut (Uttar Pradesh). You received your initial training in Tabla from your father, Ustad Shammu Khan. Your grandfather Fassu Khan and great-grandfather Kale Khan were renowned artists of the Ajrada Gharana. Later, Habibuddin Khan became a disciple of Ustad Nathu Khan, the Khalifa of the Delhi Gharana, and formally learned the intricacies of the Delhi Gharana from him.

The Ustad, who was proficient in the playing styles of both Delhi and Ajrada, was honored with the title of "Sangat-Samrat" at the All India Music Conference in Lucknow. In 1970, the Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi honored you with the Academy Award. Ustad Habibuddin Khan Sahab's Tabla playing was at its peak from 1940 to 1960. He had created a sensation in music conferences at the national level.

Later, you became badly trapped in the web of vices. His health continued to decline and in 1966 he became a victim of paralysis. Struggling with long illness and financial deprivation, Khan Sahab passed away on July 1, 1972.”³ (translated by author)

One of his well-known compositions, often referred to as “Ghetag Ghetag Dhinena Nagine” (recording available on youtube) exemplifies the hallmark features of the Ajrada style. In this composition, the coordination between the right hand (dayan) and left hand (bayan) is so refined

that the resulting sound resembles natural tonal expressions. This illustrates not only technical mastery but also an aesthetic sensibility that prioritizes sound quality and expression.

Following this lineage, Ustad Manju Khan emerged as one of the main exponents of the Ajrada Gharana. He not only preserved the traditional aspects of this gharana but also contributed significantly to its teaching methodology and dissemination.

Characteristics of Ajrada Gharana (Detailed Explanation) Technical

The distinct identity of the Ajrada Gharana is primarily reflected in its technical characteristics. These features are not limited to the external aspects of performance but extend to the internal structure of compositions, the method of sound production, and the approach to rhythm.

1. Complexity of Layakari (Rhythmic Structure)

“In music, Laya (tempo/rhythm) is the foundation, and when various forms of Laya are demonstrated upon this base, it is called Layakari. A singer, instrumentalist, or dancer first establishes a steady Laya. Subsequently, within that fixed Laya, they occasionally perform one-and-a-half beats (deedh matra), two beats, or sometimes four beats within a single beat. In this manner, playing or reciting different numbers of beats within a single beat demonstrates one's artistic discipline; this is exactly what is called Layakari.”⁴ (translated by Author)

One of the most defining features of the Ajrada Gharana is its intricate layakari. The term layakari refers to the manipulation and variation of rhythm within a given tala. In this gharana, layakari is not treated merely as a decorative element but as a core structural component of performance. The compositions often involve “tisra jati” (playing 3 beats in 2 beats cycle) rhythmic groupings and subdivisions, which require a deep understanding of timing and precision. This complexity makes the style intellectually engaging as well as technically demanding.

2. Distinctive Use of Bols

“Bol—This is an extremely comprehensive term for the Tabla or Pakhawaj. Under this, all those word-groups (phrases) are included which are composed of the "Varnas" (alphabets/strokes) of the Tabla. Therefore, under this, everything such as Gat, Kayada, Tukda, Paran, Rela, etc., is included. This is the reason why we cannot place any specific type of composition as a sole example of "Bol."⁵ (translated by author)

The bols used in the Ajrada Gharana are unique in their structure and execution.

Another important aspect associated with this gharana is the preparation and execution of bols such as “dhatik ginag”, “dhine nada gine”, dhagene dhageti rakite” and “daab gaans”(pressuring and releasing on the left drum with hand) technique in bayan which require both speed and clarity. The ability to maintain clarity at high speeds reflects a high level of technical training and control, which has been a defining characteristic of the tradition.

Thus, the Ajrada Gharana represents a synthesis of tradition and innovation, where foundational elements inherited from the Delhi gharana are further developed into a more complex and nuanced system of tabla playing.

3. Balanced Use of Dayan and Bayan

Unlike certain traditions that emphasize the right hand (dayan), the Ajrada Gharana places equal importance on the left hand (bayan). This balanced approach contributes to a fuller and more resonant sound.

The bayan is used not merely as a supporting element but as an active contributor to the musical texture. Through controlled pressure and movement, it produces variations in pitch and tone, enhancing the expressive quality of the performance.

4. Importance of ‘Nikās’ (Sound Production)

"Which letter (syllable) of the Tabla should be played with which finger, at which spot on the surface of the Tabla, and with how much weight (pressure) it should be played—this is 'Nikaas'."6 (translated by author)

A central concept in the Ajrada tradition is nikās, which refers to the method of sound production. Rather than focusing solely on the mechanical execution of bols, great emphasis is placed on how the sound is produced.

Students are trained to understand the exact point of contact, the angle of the fingers, and the force applied in each stroke. This attention to detail ensures that the resulting sound is clear, resonant, and aesthetically pleasing.

5. Concept of ‘Wazan’ (Weight)

Another important aspect is wazan, or the weight applied in playing a bol. This concept relates to the intensity and depth of each stroke. Proper application of wazan gives the music a sense of stability and richness. It also plays a crucial role in maintaining rhythmic balance, especially in complex compositions.

Biographical Background and Personality of Ustad Manju Khan

The present study aims to explore the various dimensions of his musical contribution, focusing on his performance style, pedagogical approach, and the role of his disciples in continuing his legacy. Ustad Manju Khan was born into a distinguished musical family deeply rooted in the tradition of tabla playing. His grandfather, Ustad Shammu Khan, and his father, Ustad Habibuddin Khan, were renowned tabla players, and thus, he inherited a rich musical legacy from an early age .

Growing up in such an environment, he was naturally exposed to the nuances of tabla playing, including its technical, aesthetic, and philosophical aspects. This early exposure played a crucial role in shaping his musical sensibilities and laid the foundation for his future development as a tabla artist.

However, his life was not without challenges. He faced significant financial and familial difficulties during his early years. Due to his father’s health issues and the responsibilities that arose within the family, he had to confront hardships at a young age. Despite these obstacles, he remained deeply committed to his musical pursuit.

Through consistent practice, dedication, and perseverance, he continued to refine his art. His journey reflects a strong sense of discipline and determination, which later became central to his teaching philosophy as well. In terms of personality, Ustad Manju Khan was known for his simplicity, humility, and disciplined lifestyle. He maintained a calm and composed demeanor and avoided any form of arrogance despite his mastery in the art.

For him, music was not merely a profession but a form of sadhana—a spiritual practice that contributes to inner growth and self-realization. This perspective influenced both his performance and his teaching methods.

He was deeply compassionate towards his students and treated them with patience and understanding. Rather than imposing strict authority, he preferred a nurturing approach, guiding his disciples through encouragement and consistent support. His personality combined the qualities of a dedicated artist, a compassionate teacher, and a disciplined practitioner. This combination made him not only a respected performer but also an inspiring mentor for his students.

Ustad Manju Khan's Contribution

After the era of Ustad Habibuddin Khan, the responsibility of preserving and advancing the Ajrada tradition was carried forward by Ustad Manju Khan. He inherited not only the repertoire but also the technical and aesthetic principles of the gharana.

His contribution lies in his ability to maintain these traditional elements while presenting them in a structured and accessible manner. This is particularly evident in his teaching methodology, which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

- Performance style (VERY deep)
- Solo structure + accompaniment
- Hand technique explanation (detailed)

Performance Style of Ustad Manju Khan : Detailed Analytical Study

Ustad Manju Khan's performance style represents a refined continuation of the Ajrada Gharana tradition, characterized by clarity, balance, depth, and structural discipline. His playing reflects not only technical mastery but also a deep understanding of sound aesthetics and rhythmic organization. His style can be understood through multiple interconnected aspects, including hand technique, sound production, rhythmic control, and compositional presentation.

1. Hand Technique and Physical Approach

One of the most noticeable features of Ustad Manju Khan's playing was his controlled and systematic hand technique.

His right hand (dayan) was maintained in a circular and relaxed position, which allowed him to produce clear and well-defined bols. This circular positioning ensured that each stroke was executed with precision, without unnecessary tension in the fingers or wrist. As a result, even complex compositions could be performed with ease and clarity.

The left hand (bayan) played an equally significant role in his style. He emphasized controlled pressure and subtle movement of the palm and fingers to produce variations in tone. This approach enabled him to create a wide range of sounds, from deep resonant bass to delicate tonal inflections. Unlike many performers who rely heavily on the right hand, Ustad Manju Khan maintained a balanced interaction between both hands, which is a defining feature of the Ajrada Gharana.

A central principle in his performance philosophy was the importance of the bayan. He believed that the true essence of tabla sound lies in the proper use of the left hand.

He often emphasized that if the bayan is not properly developed, the overall quality of playing remains incomplete. According to his teaching, the clarity and strength of the right hand depend significantly on the support provided by the left hand.

This idea reflects a deeper understanding of the structural unity of tabla playing, where both hands are not independent but interdependent.

2. Clarity of Bols (Articulation)

Clarity of bols was one of the strongest aspects of his playing. Each bol was articulated distinctly, ensuring that the listener could clearly identify the structure of the composition.

He practiced compositions at a slow tempo to achieve this clarity. By focusing on each individual stroke, he ensured that the sound produced was clean, precise, and aesthetically pleasing.

Even in fast passages, the clarity of bols was maintained, which is a hallmark of advanced tabla playing.

3. Control over Layakari (Rhythmic Precision)

Layakari, or rhythmic manipulation, was another important aspect of his performance. He demonstrated a strong command over rhythm and maintained precise control over tempo and timing.

He was particularly attentive to the sam (the first beat of the cycle), ensuring that all compositions resolved accurately and effectively.

His approach to layakari was systematic rather than overly decorative. Instead of excessive complexity, he focused on clarity, balance, and logical progression within the rhythmic framework.

4. Structure of Solo Performance

Ustad Manju Khan's solo performances followed a well-defined and traditional structure. This structure ensured a gradual development of musical ideas and provided a coherent framework for presentation.

The sequence typically included:

• **Peshkar**

“Peshkar— ‘Pesh’ is a word from the Persian language, which means present, appearing, or in front of. From this, the word ‘Peshkara’ or ‘Peshkar’ is formed. Peshkars are found in courts, whose work is to present disputes before the judges.” 7 (translated by author)

The performance began with a peshkar, which introduced the tonal and rhythmic framework of the tabla. It was developed gradually, allowing the listener to become familiar with the sound and structure.

• **Kayda and its Variations**

“Kayada: In Urdu, the meaning of the word 'Kayada' is 'rule'. In Tabla playing, this is an extremely important type of performance. The meaning of the word 'Qaid' (bound/restricted) can be related to this. This is an Arabic word. It demonstrates the mastery of playing on the 'Dayan-Bayan' (right and left drums) and the artist's imaginative power.

The Kayada brings rhythm (Laya) to the listeners on the 'Dayan-Bayan'. Variations like the expansion of imagination and diverse sound resonances (Nad-dhwani) produced in the Kayada come primarily from this type of playing. This style of playing is known by the name 'Kayada'. Kayada formed the core of the performance.” 8 (translated by author)

A basic theme was presented, followed by systematic variations. Each variation maintained the original structure while introducing subtle rhythmic changes.

• **Rela**

“Rela— A group of certain bols (strokes/syllables) that can be played in a fast tempo, in quadruple (Chaugun) or octuple (Athgun) speed, and when played, resembles a flowing stream, is called a Rela.” 9

(translated by author)

Phrases of ‘tirkite’, ‘dhinegine’, ‘dhirahir’ Relas were performed with speed and flow, demonstrating technical agility. Despite the increased tempo, clarity of bols was maintained.

• **Gat and Tukda (fixed compositions)**

“Gat— A group of a special type of bols (syllables/strokes) that is completely different from Kayada, Peshkara, Paran, etc., is called Gat. It is played in Thah (single speed), Dugun (double speed), Chaugun (quadruple speed), etc.” 10 (translated by author)

These fixed and traditional compositions added variety and contrast to the performance. They were often shorter and more dynamic in nature. The performance concluded with powerful compositions such as parans and tihais, which emphasized rhythmic resolution and impact.

This structured approach reflects discipline and clarity in presentation, ensuring that the performance remains engaging and coherent.

6. Accompaniment (Sangat) Style

In addition to solo performance, Ustad Manju Khan was highly skilled in accompaniment. His approach to sangat was characterized by sensitivity, adaptability, and balance.

Adaptation to Main Artist

He adjusted his playing according to the style and requirements of the main performer, whether it was vocal music, instrumental music, or dance.

Supportive Role

He maintained a supportive role and never overshadowed the main artist. His playing enhanced the overall performance rather than drawing attention away from it.

Versatility

He was capable of accompanying different musical forms, including classical, semi-classical, and light music such as ghazal and qawwali. He performed with renowned classical artist also and on the other side he performed with ghazal singers like Ghulam ali and with qawalli singers wadali bandhu.

This versatility reflects a deep understanding of musical context and the ability to adapt accordingly.

7. Listening and Observational Learning in Performance

Another important aspect of his musical approach was the emphasis on listening and observation.

He encouraged his students to:

- Attend live performances
- Listen to recordings of great artists
- Analyze different styles

This practice not only improved their understanding but also influenced their performance approach.

He himself engaged in such practices, listening to recordings and discussing them with his students, thereby creating a learning environment based on analysis and reflection.

8. Integration of Tradition and Practical Approach

Ustad Manju Khan's performance style reflects a balance between strict adherence to tradition and practical adaptability.

While he maintained the core principles of the Ajrada Gharana, he also ensured that his presentation remained accessible and meaningful for contemporary audiences.

This balance made his performances both authentic and engaging.

Conclusion of Performance Analysis

The performance style of Ustad Manju Khan can be characterized by:

- Technical precision
- Clarity of bols
- Balanced use of both hands
- Strong rhythmic control
- Structured presentation
- Sensitivity in accompaniment

These qualities collectively establish him as a significant representative of the Ajrada Gharana and a master of tabla performance.

Teaching Methodology of Ustad Manju Khan :Comprehensive Analysis

The teaching methodology of Ustad Manju Khan represents a refined synthesis of traditional Guru–Shishya Parampara and a practical, student-oriented approach. His pedagogy was not limited to the transmission of compositions but extended to the holistic development of the student as a musician. His method was systematic, gradual, inclusive, and deeply rooted in discipline, observation, and continuous practice. Each stage of learning was carefully structured to ensure that the student developed a strong foundation before progressing further.

1. Approach to Shishya Selection

In the traditional system of Indian classical music, it is often observed that a guru carefully evaluates the potential of a student before accepting them as a disciple. This evaluation is based on the assumption that music requires inherent talent, and without it, achieving excellence becomes difficult.

However, Ustad Manju Khan adopted a broader and more inclusive perspective. While he was aware of the importance of natural aptitude, he did not restrict his teaching only to highly talented individuals.

He accepted students from diverse backgrounds and varying levels of ability. His belief was that with proper guidance, discipline, and consistent practice, even a beginner could develop into a skilled artist.

This approach reflects a democratic and inclusive teaching philosophy, where opportunity is not limited by initial capability.

2. Generosity and Openness in Teaching

One of the defining aspects of his pedagogy was his generous nature. He did not treat musical knowledge as something to be guarded or restricted.

Students who were financially unable to provide traditional guru dakshina were not denied the opportunity to learn. He willingly taught them with the same dedication as others.

Moreover, he did not hesitate to share even complex and valuable compositions of the gharana. This openness ensured that the tradition was preserved and transmitted without loss.

This aspect of his teaching stands in contrast to earlier practices where certain compositions were kept within family lineages.

3. Principle of Equality (Samdrishti)

Ustad Manju Khan treated all his students with equal respect and attention. He did not differentiate between them on the basis of social background, financial status, or learning speed.

At the same time, he recognized that each student has a different pace of learning. Therefore, he adapted his teaching according to the individual needs of each disciple.

Students who required more time and attention were given additional guidance, ensuring that no one was left behind.

This balanced approach reflects both fairness and sensitivity in teaching.

4. Importance of Initial Listening (Shravan)

A distinctive feature of his teaching methodology was the emphasis on shravan, or listening, as the first step in learning.

Before allowing students to play the instrument, he asked them to sit in the class and observe other students. During this period, they listened carefully to the sounds produced by the tabla and observed the hand movements of experienced players.

This phase served multiple purposes:

- It familiarized students with the tonal quality of the instrument
- It developed their listening ability
- It helped them understand the relationship between movement and sound

Only after this observational phase were students allowed to begin practical training.

5. Introduction to the Instrument Before starting formal lessons, students were introduced to the basic structure of the tabla. They were taught about different parts such as:

- Bayan (left drum)
- Dayan (right drum)
- Pudi
- Syahi
- Gajra
- Chanti

This knowledge helped them develop a conceptual understanding of the instrument, which supported their practical learning.

6. Step-by-Step Initial Training

The practical training began with the most fundamental bols, such as:

- “Na”
- “Ta”

Students were required to practice these basic sounds repeatedly until they could produce them clearly and consistently.

After this, additional bols such as:

- “Tit”
- “Ghe” were introduced.

Once these were mastered, students moved on to simple compositions such as basic kaydas.

7. Gradual and Sequential Learning Process

Ustad Manju Khan strongly believed that learning should be gradual and systematic.

He did not encourage students to rush into advanced compositions. Instead, he insisted that they master the basics thoroughly before progressing.

For example:

- Students practiced “Na” and “Ta” for extended periods
- Only after achieving clarity were they introduced to the next stage

This approach ensured that the foundation of technique remained strong.

8. Importance of Riyaz (Practice)

Continuous practice (riyaz) was a central element of his teaching.

Students were instructed to:

- Practice regularly at home
- Repeat lessons taught in class
- Focus on correcting mistakes

He emphasized that without consistent practice, progress in tabla is not possible.

This reflects the traditional understanding that mastery in music is achieved through sustained effort over time.

9. Development of Hand Technique (Hasta Sadhan)

Special attention was given to hasta sadhan, or the development of hand technique.

Students were trained to:

- Maintain proper hand position
- Control finger movement
- Produce clear and balanced sound

He believed that without proper hand development, even simple compositions cannot be performed effectively.

Therefore, students were often required to practice the same exercises repeatedly until their hands were fully trained.

10. Ganda Bandhan Tradition : sacred thread ceremony

"Ganda Bandhan" ceremony, a traditional ritual in Indian classical music where a teacher (Guru) formally accepts a student (Shishya). On the occasion of accepting discipleship, the thread that the Guru ties on the right wrist of the disciple is called Ganda or Nada. It is made of several threads dyed in red and yellow colors, which is also called Mauli or Kalai. This ceremony is performed at a certain auspicious time. On this occasion, musicians of the city, other disciples of the Guru, and well-wishers of the prospective disciple are present. Before tying the Ganda, the Guru or Ustad prays silently for the bright future of the future disciple and ties it with devotion on the disciple's wrist."11(Translated by Author)

Ustad manju khan accepted many students as his gandabadh shagird and and and trained them with whole heart. The Ganda Bandhan ceremony was an important part of his teaching system.This

ritual symbolized the formal initiation of the student into the musical tradition. It established a bond of responsibility between the guru and the disciple.

These elements represented effort and its reward, reinforcing the values of discipline and dedication.

11. Training in Accompaniment

Ustad Manju Khan ensured that his students were not limited to solo performance.

They were trained to accompany:

- Vocal music
- Instrumental music
- Dance
- Semi-classical forms

This training helped students become versatile musicians capable of adapting to different performance contexts.

12. Role of Listening and Analysis

Listening was not limited to the initial stage but remained an ongoing part of learning.

Students were encouraged to:

- Attend live concerts
- Listen to recordings of great artists
- Analyze different styles

He also listened to recordings with his students and discussed them in detail, helping them understand subtle aspects of performance.

13. Emphasis on Bayan (Left Hand Training)

A unique aspect of his teaching was the emphasis on the left hand. He often explained that the true sound of tabla emerges from the bayan. If the bayan is not properly developed, the overall quality of playing remains incomplete.

This idea guided his teaching, ensuring that students paid equal attention to both hands.

14. Modern Outlook in Teaching

Despite being deeply rooted in tradition, Ustad Manju Khan had a modern outlook.

He:

- Did not hide knowledge
- Encouraged open learning
- Motivated students to continue formal education

He believed that academic education supports musical understanding and helps students progress in life.

Conclusion of Teaching Methodology

The teaching methodology of Ustad Manju Khan can be summarized as:

- Inclusive and accessible
- Systematic and gradual
- Focused on clarity and discipline
- Rooted in tradition yet open in approach

His pedagogy ensured not only technical proficiency but also the overall development of the student as a musician.

Major Disciples of Ustad Manju Khan (Detailed Study)

The legacy of any great Guru is ultimately reflected in the achievements and contributions of their disciples. In the case of Ustad Manju Khan, his teaching methodology and artistic vision are clearly visible in the work of his students, who have carried forward the traditions of the Ajrada Gharana both in India and internationally.

1. Athar Hussain

Athar Hussain is regarded as one of the most senior and dedicated disciples of Ustad Manju Khan. His inclination towards music developed at a very young age, which led him to begin his training in tabla at the age of approximately seven years.

Initially, he received basic training under his maternal uncle, Ustad Shan-e-Ahmad Khan of the Ajrada Gharana. This early foundation played an important role in shaping his musical understanding. After acquiring the fundamentals, he came under the guidance of Ustad Manju Khan, which marked a significant turning point in his musical journey.

Under the tutelage of Ustad Manju Khan, Athar Hussain received systematic and in-depth training. He remained deeply devoted to his guru's teachings and continued to follow his stylistic approach with sincerity.

According to Athar Hussain, there was a unique spiritual influence (taaseer) in the teaching of Ustad Manju Khan. He believed that once a student received the blessings of such a guru, the path to success became clearer.

His playing reflects clarity, depth, and strong rhythmic control, all of which are characteristic features of the Ajrada Gharana. He has performed extensively not only in India but also at the international level, including countries such as the United States, Australia, Canada, and various parts of Europe and Asia.

He has accompanied renowned artists such as Ghulam Ali and Pandit Jasraj. His accompaniment is marked by stability, sensitivity, and refined layakari, clearly reflecting the influence of his guru.

2. Aman Ali Khan

Aman Ali Khan is another prominent disciple of Ustad Manju Khan. His formal training under the guru began in 1992, when he came under his guidance and started learning in a structured manner. Through consistent practice and disciplined learning, he established himself as a respected tabla

artist. His playing demonstrates technical clarity and a strong grounding in the traditional style of the Ajrada Gharana.

He has performed both in India and abroad, particularly in England and other European countries. His collaborations include performances with well-known artists such as Shubha Mudgal, Abida Parveen, and Pandit Rajendra Prasanna.

His work reflects the systematic training he received and his commitment to preserving the stylistic identity of his gharana.

3. Parvez Hussain

Parvez Hussain, the brother of Athar Hussain, is also an important disciple of Ustad Manju Khan. His musical journey began within the family, where he received initial training from his maternal uncle, Ustad Shan-e-Ahmad Khan. After completing his foundational training, he continued his learning under Ustad Manju Khan, following the path of his elder brother. Under his guidance, he developed a deeper understanding of both technical and aesthetic aspects of tabla playing. He has performed widely in India as well as internationally, including countries such as the United States, Australia, and Canada. His performances reflect the disciplined training and stylistic clarity associated with the Ajrada tradition.

He has shared the stage with well-known artists such as Ghulam Ali, Talat Aziz, Shubha Mudgal, and Pandit Rajendra Prasanna. His ability to adapt to different musical contexts highlights his versatility as an accompanist.

Analytical Discussion

The study of Ustad Manju Khan's teaching methodology and performance style reveals a balanced integration of tradition and practicality.

His approach reflects the following key elements:

1. Preservation of Tradition

He remained deeply rooted in the Ajrada Gharana and maintained its core principles, including clarity of bols, importance of bayan, and structured presentation.

2. Systematic Pedagogy

His step-by-step teaching method ensured that students developed a strong technical foundation before progressing to advanced levels.

3. Inclusivity Unlike many traditional systems, he did not restrict access to knowledge. His inclusive approach allowed students from different backgrounds to learn and grow.

4. Emphasis on Sound and Clarity

He prioritized sound quality over speed, ensuring that students developed a refined sense of musical aesthetics.

5. Practical Orientation

His focus on accompaniment and stage exposure ensured that students were prepared for real performance situations.

Conclusion

Ustad Manju Khan was not only a distinguished tabla artist but also an exceptional teacher whose contribution to the Ajrada Gharana is of great significance.

Through his performance style, he preserved the aesthetic and technical richness of the tradition. Through his teaching methodology, he ensured its continuity by training a wide range of students. His approach combined discipline, clarity, inclusivity, and practicality, making his pedagogy relevant even in contemporary times.

The achievements of his disciples stand as a testament to his effectiveness as a teacher and his role in sustaining the legacy of the Ajrada Gharana.

List of Interviews

1. Mrs. Firdos Khan (Wife of Ustad Manju Khan) – Personal Interview, 2025.
2. Mr. Aamil Khan (Son of Ustad Manju Khan) – Personal Interview, 2025.
3. Mr. Kamil Khan (Son of Ustad Manju Khan) – Personal Interview, 2025.
4. Ms. Sheba (Niece of Ustad Manju Khan) – Personal Interview, 2025.
5. Mr. Sabir Khan (Husband of Sheba, Niece of Ustad Manju Khan) – Personal Interview, 2025.
6. Mr. Saleem Ahmed Khan (Son-in-law of Ustad Manju Khan) – Personal Interview, 2025.
7. Ms. Razia (Sister of Ustad Manju Khan) – Personal Interview, 2025.
8. Mr. Fardeen Khan (Maternal Grandson of Ustad Manju Khan) – Personal Interview, 2025.

Bibilography

1. Tripathi, Dr. Shivendra Pratap. *Tabla Visharad*. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers & Distributors, p. 7.
2. Mistry, Dr. Aban E. *Pakhawaj Aur Tabla Ke Gharane Evam Paramparayein*. Mumbai: Swar Sadhana Samiti, 2000, p. 140.
3. Shrivastava, Girish Chandra. *Taal Parichay, Bhag 3*. Allahabad: Sangeet Sadan Prakashan, 2023, p. 195.
4. Shrivastava, Girish Chandra. *Taal Parichay, Bhag 1*. Allahabad: Ruby Prakashan, 2023, p. 49.
5. Shrivastava, Girish Chandra. *Taal Parichay, Bhag 2*. Allahabad: Ruby Prakashan, p. 36.
6. Shrivastava, Dr. Sunita. *Technical and Aesthetic Aspects of Tabla Playing Art (Tabla Vadan Kala Ki Takneeki Evam Saundarya Paksh)*. Allahabad: Anubhav Publishing House, 2023, p. 117.
7. Shrivastava, Girish Chandra. *Taal Parichay, Bhag 3*. Allahabad: Sangeet Sadan Prakashan, 2023, pp. 34–35.
8. Shrivastava, Girish Chandra. *Taal Parichay, Bhag 3*. Allahabad: Sangeet Sadan Prakashan, 2023, p. 71.
9. Shrivastava, Girish Chandra. *Taal Parichay, Bhag 2*. Allahabad: Sangeet Sadan Prakashan, 2023, p. 39.
10. Tripathi, Shivendra Pratap. *Tabla Visharad*. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers & Distributors, 2022, p. 163.
11. Mulgaonkar, Arvind. *Tabla*. Varanasi: Luminous Books, 2018, p. 126.