

CARVED RHYTHMS OR CARVED MISCONCEPTIONS? REASSESSING THE TABLA-LIKE DEPICTIONS IN INDIAN CAVE ICONOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

This article critically analyses the long-standing claim that an early form of Tabla was sculpturally depicted in a relief from Cave 1 of the Badami Cave Temple. Based on the interpretation suggested by G. H. Tarlekar and Nalini Tarlekar, the research examines whether this paired drum arrangement in the relief panel can be associated with the Tabla's origin. Therefore, the study will use a comparative iconographic method of research by analysing similar depictions of percussion instruments, emphasizing the shape, positioning, and playing technique, in ancient murals and sculptures at the Ajanta Caves and the reliefs from Borobudur Temple in Java. These comparisons reveal similar arrangements of vertically and horizontally positioned drums, suggesting the existence of a wider paired or triple-drum tradition rather than a prototype of the Tabla. To develop the visual evidence further, living traditions such as Therukoothu from Tamil Nadu and the Southeast Asian drums like Kendang point towards an ongoing practice of various hand-played drum layouts across cultures. Lastly, the study concludes that the sculptural relief at Badami lacks iconographic and historical evidence to be considered an ancient form of the Tabla.

Keywords: *Tabla, Badami, Ajanta, Borobudur, Iconography*

Introduction

The origin of the Tabla, including when, where, and by whom it was invented, remains a topic of discussion among both performers and scholars. Due to the lack of historical documentation, several theories have arisen, representing differing points of view and hence, leaving the early development of the instruments unclear.

Due to the lack of a clear written record or inscription about the early history of the Tabla, other sources such as cave murals and sculptural reliefs offer valuable insight. Historical sites such as Ajanta, Badami, and Bhaja Caves, originating between around 2nd century B.C.E. and the 8th century C.E., feature visual depictions of percussion instruments that some scholars claim bear resemblance to the modern Tabla in form and playing technique.

One of the known examples of such a claim is the 'Dancing Shiva' (*Nataraja*) panel found outside Cave 1 of the Badami Cave Temple, depicting a figure playing a pair of asymmetrical drums. Similar representations are found in the Ajanta Caves, particularly on the *Mahajanaka-Jataka* mural in Cave 1 and the 'Temptation of Buddha by Mara' relief in Cave 26, as well as in the Borobudur Temple of Java, Indonesia.

This article analyses these visuals depicted to determine whether the drums portrayed represent an early form of the Tabla or reflect a separate drumming tradition with no association with the Tabla's origin.

Statement of the Problem

Nevertheless, among the limited sources to explore the early origin of the Tabla, illustrations and carvings in ancient sculpture have gained huge attention. One such example has been highlighted in the book 'Musical Instruments in Indian Sculpture' by G. H. Tarlekar and Nalini Tarlekar. The author describes a sculpture at the Badami Caves, where a figure has been depicted playing a pair of drums while sitting on a raised platform. In the sculpture, the right-hand drum appears taller, while the left-hand drum is approximately half its height. According to the authors, this pair of drums could be identified with the modern Tabla (*dayan-bayan*). However, the identity and interpretation of these drums remain

debatable. The asymmetric drum sizes and positioning of the hands raise a question: Could this sculpture at the Badami Cave 1 be viewed as proof of the Tabla's origin, or is it better understood as part of a separate drumming tradition found in Buddhist and Hindu cultures?

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the depiction of paired drums in ancient sculptures and murals, assessing their importance to the historical evolution of the Tabla. The main objectives are:

- To examine whether the sculptural depiction of the figure playing a pair of drums in the Badami caves, as described by G. H. Tarlekar and Nalini Tarlekar in the book 'Musical Instruments in Indian Sculpture', truly represents an ancient version of the Tabla.
- To analyse the positioning of the drums, the posture of the figure, and the way of handling/playing technique shown in the sculpture.
- To investigate whether similar depictions of this pair of drums or figures handling similar instruments can be found in other caves in India and outside India, particularly in Southeast Asia.
- To understand whether these depiction sources support the theory of the Tabla's origin or indicate the existence of a parallel percussion tradition.

Hypotheses

This research is based on the hypotheses that the paired drums depicted in the Badami sculpture, through often associated with the Tabla by certain scholars, are more likely to represent a different type of traditional percussion instrument. The remarkable differences in the size of the drums, the positioning of the drums, and the playing technique shown by the figure do not match the structural and performance characteristics of the Tabla. Furthermore, comparable depictions in the Ajanta murals, sculptures, and the Borobudur relief suggest the existence of different drumming traditions within the Buddhist and Hindu cultures in India and beyond. However, these examples do not necessarily support the claim of being the origins of the Tabla.

Significance of the Study

Although no strong historical record of the Tabla exists before the 17th century, this lack of evidence does not rule out the possibility that similar percussion instruments may have been present in ancient times. Murals, sculptures, and carvings throughout India depict drum-like instruments that bear similarities in shape and playing techniques to the modern Tabla.

Some researchers have proposed that ancient depictions represent early forms of the Tabla. For example, Dr. Aban E. Mistry pointed to a Tabla-like figure in the Bhaja Caves (2nd century B.C.E.), while Swami Prajnanananda referenced the carving of the Tripushkara in the Mukteshwar Temple (ca. 6th-7th century C.E.). G. H. Tarlekar and Nalini Tarlekar similarly suggested that a sculpture from the Badami caves shows a pair of drums resembling the modern Tabla. However, such interpretations are often based on visual similarity rather than critical analysis of form, posture, playing technique, and cultural context.

This study reassesses these claims through a more analytical and evidence-based approach. It focuses especially on the interpretation by Ganesh Hari and Nalini Tarlekar and offers a reconsideration of how percussion instruments are shown in Indian art.

Additionally, this research contributes to the field of music iconography by comparing the depiction of drumming across historical sites like Ajanta and Borobudur. It also sheds light on the living tradition that continues to use similar drum configurations.

Research Methodology

This study opts for an iconographic approach, focusing on the visual analysis of ancient sculptures and murals that depict paired drums. The research is based on reviewing high-quality images from online sources such as virtual museums, photo-sharing platforms, and published archaeological books and journals. Sculptures and murals from sites such as Badami Caves, Ajanta Caves, and the Borobudur temple form the primary illustrations. These depictions are closely examined for their shape, size, instruments and hand positioning, and posture of the performing figure. A comparative analysis is conducted across the selected sites to view visual similarities and cultural differences in which percussion instruments are demonstrated. This depiction is analysed within its religious and historical context to determine whether it reflects an early stage in the origins of Tabla or belongs to a different drumming tradition.

Limitations of the Study

While this research offers information about the illustrations of percussion instruments in ancient sculptures, certain limitations need to be acknowledged. The research is primarily based on analysing digital images sourced from online archives, virtual museums, websites, etc., rather than direct field observation. As a result, the details on the sculptures might not be fully captured and interpreted. Moreover, many of the murals and sculptures examined have undergone deterioration over time, making it difficult to identify specific features of the instruments depicted.

Discussion and Analysis

“The story of the rise and development of percussion instruments is closely linked with the history of mankind and may justly claim to have exercised a tremendous influence on the human race”. The Tabla is the most common percussion instrument in North Indian Classical Music and has spread its presence in the Deccan and beyond. Structurally, it is a set of hand-played kettle drums: the dayan, which produces high-pitch (tenor) sounds, and the bayan, which creates deeper (bass) sounds. Both drums are played together simultaneously as one instrument. Nowadays, the Tabla has become the main rhythmic accompaniment in vocal music and is equally important in performance involving string instruments and classical dance. Additionally, apart from being an accompaniment instrument, the tabla has also developed into a leading solo instrument, where it can be performed independently in concerts for hours.

Although the Tabla has had a drastic growth over the last three centuries, there is a lack of historical documentation before the mid-20th century. This absence of early historical references has led to differing views among scholars regarding its origin and evolution. In such cases, researchers have turned to iconographic evidence in ancient Indian visual art, such as sculptural relief, cave murals, and temple carving, to trace the earlier versions of the Tabla.

Representations of vertically oriented paired drums appear in Indian art as early as the pre-Common Era and continue through the 13th century C.E. Some scholars have suggested that these earlier instruments were referred to as *Dwimukhi Pushkara*, a term indicating a dual-face drum layout composed of two components described in the *Natyasastra* as *Urdhvaka* and *Alingya*.

Murals and carvings found in ancient caves such as Ajanta, Badami, and Bhaja caves illustrated detailed representations of percussion instruments. According to certain scholars' theories, these instruments strongly resemble the modern Tabla in structure and playing technique. Dating back to 200 B.C.E. to the 8th century C.E., these caves are a historical witness to the artistic and cultural expression of that period.

Among the theories regarding the Tabla's historical presence, one of the most frequently cited is by Dr. Aban E. Mistry, who identifies a 2nd century B.C.E. relief in the Bhaja Cave No. 14 as depicting a Tabla-

like instrument. The relief titled *Indra Shilpa* shows Lord Indra on an elephant, accompanied by attendants and musicians, including a female drummer on the left playing a pair of small drums with her hands. Based on this depiction, Dr. Aban E. suggests that a Tabla-like instrument may have existed in India as early as the 2nd century B.C.E.

Accordingly, sculptured paired drum across India indicates an ancient, independent tradition of dual-drum use, though it may not be directly connected to the Tabla.

Furthermore, one of the earlier referenced claims regarding early visual representation of the Tabla appears in the book 'Musical Instruments in Indian Sculpture' by Ganesh Hari Tarlekar and Nalini Tarlekar. The authors describe a sculpture from the Badami Cave-Temples, dated approximately to the 6th century C.E., depicting a figure playing a percussion instrument that, according to them, somewhat resembles a dayan-bayan pair. In this sculpture, the right-hand drum appears taller, while the left-hand drum is half its height. The authors believe that due to the practical playing difficulties involved in such different drum levels, both ended up being standardized at the same height in the contemporary Tabla layout.

Commenting on the subject, the authors write:

“In one Badami sculpture, two drums are seen played by a man sitting on a raised seat. The drum to the left has broad face and is about half of the other drum in height. (Fig. 83). This pair would correspond to modern Daya (the drum usually placed to the right) and Baya (the drum with broader face usually placed to the left side and played by the left hand), with the difference that the Daya and Baya are almost similar in height.”

The Badami Cave Temple is a complex of rock-cut religious monuments that represent Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain cultures, situated in the town of Badami in the Bagalkot district, Karnataka, India. The sculpture in question is situated outside Cave 1, on the large relief panel depicting Lord Shiva as Nataraja, as demonstrated in Figure 1. Lord Shiva is shown in this scene with his eighteen arms performing the Tandava. To the right stands Lord Ganesha, while Lord Nandi, the sacred bull, appears behind Shiva. To the right of Ganesha is the sculptured figure in question, which appears to be playing the paired drums. According to James Fergusson and James Burgess, in their book 'The Cave Temples of India', this figure is identified as Narada. However, local tradition suggests that the figure may represent Lord Kartikeya, the son of Shiva. Because of no inscriptions or clear visual signs, it is difficult to determine the exact identity of the figure.

Swami Prajnanananda points out that the drum sculpture found in the Badami Caves in Karnataka, dated approximately between the 6th and 8th centuries C.E.

However, upon closely examining the illustration referenced by G. H. Tarlekar and Nalini Tarlekar in Cave 1 of the Badami Cave Temples, several visual details raise questions about the claimed resemblance to the Tabla. The taller drum, identified as the right-hand drum, appears to be placed vertically with the drumhead facing upward. On the other hand, the smaller drum, described as the left-hand drum and approximately half the size of the taller one, is positioned horizontally on the ground level, with its drumhead facing outward. Also, the figure is shown playing the horizontal drum with both hands, indicating a playing posture and technique that remarkably differ from that used in Tabla performance.

Nevertheless, after considering these visual and structural differences, the question arises whether this sculpture represents an early form of Tabla or reflects a different kind of drumming tradition.

Moreover, similar depictions of percussion instruments can be traced on the murals and sculptures of the Ajanta Caves, located in Maharashtra, dating from the 2nd century B.C.E. to the 6th century C.E., and are associated with the Theravada (Hinayana) and Mahayana sects of Buddhism.

Firstly, one of the examples appears in the murals in Cave 1 at Ajanta, entitled *Mahajanaka-Jataka*, a woman is depicted playing a pair of vertically positioned drums. These instruments may represent an early form of hand-played drums, which, according to some scholarly theories, could have contributed to the evolution of the modern Tabla. The *Mahajanaka-Jataka* mural is made up of several acts. Act 1, titled 'King in Dilemma', comprises two scenes: 'Queen Captivating' (scene 1) and 'Dancer with Musicians' (scene 2). In scene 2, several women are illustrated, such as musicians playing flute, cymbal (*Manjira/Kartal*), and a pair of drums. However, due to the considerable age of the murals, sections of the painting have deteriorated over time, making certain visual details difficult to interpret with validity. A clearer understanding is offered in the publication, 'Ajanta Murals: An Album of Eighty-Five Reproductions in Colour', edited by A. Ghosh, which includes a detailed line drawing of the mural, as illustrated in Figure 2. This drawing reveals the woman playing a set of three drums: two vertically oriented drums with their drumheads facing upward, and a third drum placed horizontally in front of her. In the line drawing, the woman is depicted seated on an elevated surface with her left hand resting on the drumhead of the horizontally positioned drum.

In addition to Cave 1, Cave 26 of the Ajanta Caves, known as the *Chaitya-Griha* or prayer hall, features elaborate sculptural reliefs focused on the life of Buddha. One among the sculptural reliefs, titled 'Temptation of Buddha by Mara', illustrates a clear visual similarity to the scene from the *Mahajanaka-Jataka* mural. In this relief, Buddha is depicted seated cross-legged on an elevated platform, while Mara, depicted lower in the panel, posing in a coquettish gesture, is surrounded by female musicians. On the right of Mara, a female figure is shown in a squatting position, accompanied by a set of drums: two placed vertically and one positioned horizontally. This arrangement closely resembles the layout seen in the Cave 1 mural. As this is a rock-cut sculpture, the details are more clearly defined, as shown in Figure 3. The woman's left-hand rests on the horizontally placed drum, while her right hand is positioned on one of the vertical drums, suggesting a similar playing technique and a continued tradition of representing mixed drum orientation in musical scenes, comparable not only to Cave 1 but also to the sculptural relief in Badami.

Furthermore, similar types of drums are seen depicted outside India, especially in the Borobudur Temple in Java, Indonesia, which dates to the 8th century C.E. and is associated with the Mahayana Buddhism. The reliefs at Borobudur include a variety of instruments, including percussion instruments. Among these, the drum arrangements shown in Ajanta Caves 1 and 26, featuring two vertical drums and one horizontal drum, find a close parallel in several sculptural panels at the Borobudur Temple. These carvings often portray a male musician playing a horizontally positioned drum with both hands. The layout of the drums and playing techniques closely resemble those of the questioned sculptured figure in the Badami Cave 1 relief.

The resemblance in drum arrangement and playing posture suggests a bigger musical or cultural tradition involving paired or sets of three drum layouts in early South and Southeast Asian art. However, if such drum configurations existed in ancient performance traditions, examining the traditional name of those drums in ancient texts can help with better interpretation.

Nevertheless, art historian Benoy K. Behl, in his book 'The Ajanta Caves', refers to the drum setup in Cave 1 as a form of 'Dhol'. The term 'Dhol' is commonly used across India for various double-sided

drums; this raises doubts about whether the instrument's original name is accurately recorded, or simply assigned later without historical basis.

Furthermore, at the Borobudur Temple in Java, a wide variety of drums appear in the sculptural reliefs, and numerous names of drums have been preserved in manuscripts and inscriptions. Unfortunately, in most cases, it is difficult to correlate names and specific drum types correctly. Some of the names of the drums retrieved from literary sources are Padahi, Mrdangga, Bheri, Dundubhi, Kendang/Gendang, Kahal, Pataha, Panava, Redep, among others. The drums depicted on the reliefs of the Borobudur temple can be classified based on their shapes into six basic categories: 1. Cylindrical, 2. Waisted, 3. Damaru type, 4. Symmetrical barrel-shape, 5. Asymmetric barrel-shape, and 6. Truncated-conical. The specific drum arrangement relevant to this research, featuring an asymmetrical barrel shape, corresponds most closely to what is identified in Southeast Asia as the Kendang drum.

The Kendang (or Gendang) is a double-sided drum primarily used in Gamelan ensembles of Javanese, Sundanese, and Balinese music. Various types of Kendang are played in sets of two, three, or more drums, depending on the ensemble type and regional style. Although the Kendang is native to the islands of Java and Bali, it traces its origins to the Indian Mrdanga, indicating the influence of Indian musical traditions on the development of Indonesian instruments.

Interestingly, a similar drum arrangement can still be observed in the folk performance tradition of Tamil Nadu in India, known as Therukoothu. This traditional street theatre often features a pair of drums, typically with one drum positioned vertically to serve as the treble (characterized by the central black patch) and another placed horizontally near the performer, functioning as the bass drum. Both drums are played simultaneously with the hands. In some instances, two vertical treble drums are used alongside a single horizontal bass drum, forming a setup that closely resembles the drum configuration depicted in the Ajanta murals and Borobudur sculpture. These drum configurations are referred to as Mridangam or Dhol in the Therukoothu traditions. This resemblance invites further questions: Might this folk tradition preserve an ancient drumming tradition? Is it possible that these drum configurations have been preserved in regional traditions while also influencing the evolution of classical percussion instruments like the Tabla or Mridangam?

Despite these visual and cultural parallels, the central questions remain pending: Does the sculptural depiction in the Badami Cave 1 genuinely represent an early form of the Tabla and contribute to its origin in ancient times, or does it reflect a distinct drumming tradition with no direct connection with Tabla?

Nevertheless, after a thorough analysis of the visual representations of the paired and triple drum layout observed in the Ajanta Caves (Cave 1 and Cave 26) and the Borobudur Temple in Java, as well as parallels in other traditions like Therukoothu, it can be concluded that these visual similarities provide valuable insights but do not definitively identify the instruments as early forms of the Tabla. Hence, regarding the claim made by G. H. Tarlekar and Nalini Tarlekar in their book 'Musical Instruments in Indian Sculpture' that the sculpture figure in Badami Cave-Temple (Cave 1) is playing two drums resembling the dayan-bayan pair, lacks both iconographic credibility and historical support. Hence, given the inconsistencies in instrument structure, positioning, and playing technique, connecting this sculpture to the origin of the Tabla lacks sufficient iconographic and historical support to validate the claim.

Suppose the paired or triplet drums seen in ancient visual depictions in these Caves in India do not support the hypothesis of the Tabla's origin. In that case, a fundamental question arises: Are they an independent drumming tradition that evolved under the influence of early religious ritual context, or do

they reflect an older drumming practice that existed in India for a long time in Indian performance culture?

An examination of visual depictions, particularly those from the Ajanta Caves and Borobudur Temple, reveals a consistent layout involving three drums, which supports resemblance to the *Tripushkara* described by Bharata in the *Natyasastra*. The *Tripushkara* is described as three drums or having three components: 1. *Ankya/Ankika*, 2. *Alingya*, and 3. *Urdhva/Urdhvaka*. According to scholars, the *Ankya* is a drum that is positioned horizontally, the *Alingya* is an embraced or suspended drum, and the *Urdhvaka* is placed vertically facing upward, while other theories from different researchers claim that the *Alingya* and *Urdhvaka* are both vertically positioned. Hence, based on visual analysis, it might be reasonable to interpret these depictions as artistic reflections of the *Tripushkara* arrangement. However, in the absence of explicit inscriptions or textual references linking these images directly to Bharata's classification, such identification must be suggestive rather than conclusive.

Conclusion

This study examines the claim that the sculptural relief in the Badami Cave 1 represents an early form of the *Tabla*. Through visual comparison with the mural and sculpture depictions from Ajanta and Borobudur, along with additional references to still existing traditions such as *Therukoothu*, it has become clear that while similar drum configurations were prevalent in ancient South and Southeast Asian art, they cannot be directly linked to the *Tabla* as it is known today. While iconographically valuable, the visual evidence lacks the accuracy and textual attestation required to prove the interpretation put forward by G. H. Tarlekar and Nalini Tarlekar. Instead, the instruments depicted in these reliefs more likely reflect an older drumming tradition. The sculpture at Badami, therefore, should not be cited as evidence of the *Tabla*'s ancient origin but rather as a part of a diverse background of hand-played percussion instruments that evolved through different cultural and regional surroundings in the Indian subcontinent.



Figure 1 - Badami Temple Cave, Cave 1, Dancing Shiva Panel.
Adapted source: Wikimedia Commons. Badami cave temples, cave 1. Photo by Vinayaraj, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. <https://rb.gy/nih8z3>



Figure 2 - Ajanta Caves, Cave 1, Mahajanaka-Jataka Mural, Dancers with Musicians Scene. Adapted Photo Source: Melinda Fodor, "The Tradition of Sattaka Literature", Jaina Studies: Newsletter of the Centre of Jaina Studies, Issue 13, March 20218, p.44. Photo By Melinda Fodor. Adapted Line-Drawing Source: A. Ghosh et al., Ajanta Murals: An album of eighty-five reproductions in colour, Archaeological Survey of Indian, 1996, Fig.4

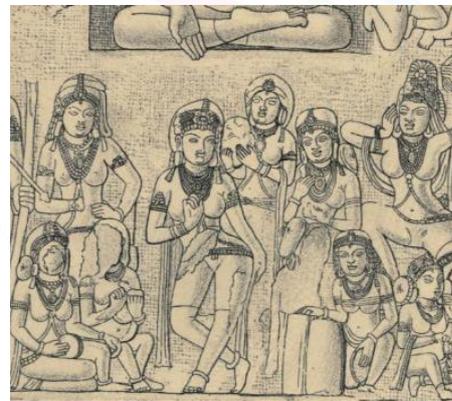


Figure 3 - Ajanta Caves, Cave 26, Temptation of Buddha by Mara Relief Panel. Adapted Photo Source: Virtual Museum Image & Sound. A.I.I.S. Centre for Art and Archaeology. Photo by Carmel Berkson. Used for educational and research purposes. <https://rb.gy/ffehfe> Adapted Line-Drawing Source: James Fergusson & James Burgess. The Cave Temple of India. Oriental Books Reprint Corporation. 1969. Plate LI



Figure 4 – Borobudur Temple, Reliefs Panel of Musicians. Adapted Source (right): Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Anandajoti Bhikkhu, licensed under CC-BY-SA 3.0. <https://rb.gy/k2ng12> Adapted Source (left): Jaap Kunst, Hindu-Javanese Musical Instruments. Martinus Nijhoff. 1968. Fig.15



Figure 5 – Borobudur Temple, Reliefs Panel of Musicians & Dancers. Adapted Source (right): Virtual Museum Image & Sound. A.I.I.S. Centre for Art and Archaeology. Used for educational and research purposes. <https://rb.gy/b4x8uf>
 Adapted Source (left): Virtual Museum Image & Sound. A.I.I.S. Centre for Art and Archaeology. Used for educational and research purposes. <https://rb.gy/fac1sh>

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