

The Vilayatkhani Baaj: A Creative Exploration of Khayal Style in Sitar Baaj

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Abstract: *Vilayatkhani Baaj* is a *Sitar* playing style where the sitar sounds like a singing voice, which seamlessly integrates *Khayal* and *Sitar*, with the *Sitar* artfully replicating the nuances of *Khayal Gayaki*. There are different styles of *Khayal*, and its stylistics is based on the voice, tone, preference and strategies for executing ragas, talas, articulation, patterns, ornamentation, improvisation, expression etc. Khan sahab took several *khayal* elements and implemented in his sitar. He fused *Khayal gayaki* and *Tantrakari ang* in such a way that it could transcend the acoustic, aesthetic, and emotional richness of vocal presentation through it. Thus, he made a progressive development from *dhrupad-ang*-based sitar to a *khayal-ang*-based sitar through numerous structural, technical and stylistic changes. He was primarily influenced by Ustad Faiyaz Khan, Ustad Abdul Kareem Khan, Abdul Waheed Khan and of course, his bosom friend, Ustad Amir Khan.

Keywords: Vilayat Khan, Sitar, Khayal, Agra Gharana, Kirana Gharana, Vilayatkhani Baaj

Vocal and instrumental music share common stylistic perspectives. The fundamental structural framework is quite identical. Both formats execute *Raga*, *Tala*, and compositions according to a particular style. If one can overcome the limitations, one can transcend the fluid borders of both styles. This ensures the exchange of musical elements between different styles. *Vilayatkhani Baaj* is an example of this remarkable conception, seamlessly integrating *Khayal* and *Sitar*, where the *Sitar* artfully replicates the nuances of *Khayal Gayaki*.

“*Baaj*” is translated as “playing style”. In Indian music, a style is defined as a specific mode of musical expression, featuring collective technical and creative specialties, and may be established through lineage or by a musician. Style can be broadly differentiated into two categories: “*Gayaki*” for Vocal and “*Baaj*” for Instrumental representation. There must be two

qualities in every *Baaj* or *Gayaki*, i.e., *Babat* or the matter and *Tariqa* or the manner.¹ *Ustaad* Vilayat Khan's innovative style, known as the “*Vilayatkhani Baaj*”, achieves a harmonious blend of *Khayal Gayaki ang* within the *Tantrakari*¹ style. This approach is essentially a reimagined interpretation of the playing styles of his predecessors, *Ustaad* Imdad Khan and *Ustaad* Enayat Khan, with a pronounced influence on *Khayal* presentation. His groundbreaking research propelled his style beyond the realm of imagination, showcasing flawless vocal and instrumental harmonization. Consequently, the *Vilayatkhani Baaj* can be regarded as a faithful reflection of *Khayal* presentation on the instrument.

The Etawah-Farukhabad or Imdadkhani Gharana stands out for its distinctive playing style. Imdad Khan's dedication and research earned him legendary status, while his son Enayat Khan innovated by combining vocal (especially *Khayal*) and instrumental elements in his sitar music. Enayat Khan's son, “*Aftaab-e-sitar*”, *Ustaad* Vilayat Khan *Sahab's* innovative '*Vilayatkhani baaj*' style transformed the *Sitar*, making it almost similar to *Khayal* performance, and paved the way for a new generation of musicians to build upon his unique style.

When musicians encounter various music forms, they often leave a lasting impact on their musical thoughts. Likewise, musicians whose music resonated with his ideology, Vilayat Khan channeled it into his way—either consciously or unconsciously. Some of these Musicians were - his forefathers, *Ustaad* Faiyaz Khan, *Ustaad* Abdul Kareem Khan, *Ustaad* Waheed Khan, *Ustaad* Amir Khan etc. He consciously followed these artists and incorporated their styles in his *Baaj*.²

- *Vilayatkhani Baaj* - a new approach to *Sitar*: Every musician requires an extensive tutelage that sustains the musician's stylistic legacy. But some

¹ Tantrakari: The idiom of Plucked Instrument.

geniuses take a progressive enhancement of that path with their incredible inventory ideas that lead to an innovative perspective of the previous tradition, which is then acknowledged, followed and established by the successors. *Vilayatkhani Baaj* is a perfect example in this context which started with his father's *Taaleem*. Consequently, it found new avenues with newer music approaches and evolved to a revolutionary outcome. It was a formative process that was refined according to his musical development throughout his life, with an incredible compilation of tradition and rebellion. Despite all the new approaches, his *Baaj* is always justified by the playing style of his ancestors.

In the pre-*Vilayatkhani* era, the *Sitar* was markedly different in structure and artistry. A string instrument with frets could not deliver continuous sound for a longer duration like vocals but executed a staccato sound. The mode of representation followed the *Dhrupad*-based *Baaj* for their rendition, which fully aligned with the style and didn't come up as a barrier. They followed the one-stroke-one-note style with commanding right-hand techniques. *Alaap* was played in *Surbahar* and the *Gatkari* in *Sitar*. As Vilayat Khan quested for *Khayal*-like execution, his *Sitar* encountered significant obstacles to achieve continuity of notes.

- Non-continuous sound: *Sitar* is a plucked and fretted instrument, basically played with two fundamental right-hand strokes - inward (*Da*) and outward (*Ra*), while the left-hand presses over the fret as well as the main string ("Sanlekh" and "Abalekh")³ and a non-continious sound comes out lasting for just 3-4 seconds unlike the vocals.
- Ornamentation: *Khayal* ornamentations (*Meends*, intricate *Murkis*, etc.) were unconventional in *Sitar*.
- Composition: Traditionally, *Sitar* compositions were *Dhrupad*-based, delivering the *Tantrakari*-style improvisations.⁴
- *Tantrakari* stylistic approach: Prevalent right-hand *Bols*, one stroke-one-note patterns, *Gat-Toda*, *Dirdir Bols*, *Zamzama*, etc. contrasted *Khayal* stylistics.

Adopting the *Khayal* style:

As *Sitar* was constrained to sound like *Khayal*, Vilayat Khan added some significant structural and stylistic changes. He envisioned a possible mechanics or engineering format and made the trailblazing *Gandhar-Pancham Sitar*. Hiren Roy and sons, the Kanailal brothers were his *Sitar* makers.

- Structural changes:

Posture and holding style of instrument: The angle of the *Dand* was placed approximately at 45° to have a better hold.⁵

1. *Tumba*: Reduced and rounded.⁶
2. *Dand*: Shortened *Dand* for easy movement
3. Body: Thicker to sustain the sound.⁷
4. *Tabli*: Strengthened to tolerate forceful strokes and thicker strings.⁸
5. *Gulu*: Strengthened with metallic screws.⁹
6. *Taargahan*: Thickness and curvature were increased.¹⁰
7. Frets: Frets were thickened, curved and moulded in specific measurements to pull 5-5.5-6 notes in the desired tone.¹¹
8. Strings: He used 6 strings instead of the conventional 7 string arrangement. He used a thicker *Nayaki Taar*, excluded one *Joda* ¹², added a steel *Gandhar* instead of *Kharaj-Pancham*, a *Pancham*, and two *Chikaris*.



Fig: String arrangement in Vilayatkhani Sitar

Main string was thicker and difficult to pull but gave the desired tone.¹³ This arrangement delivered a melodious sound and the distance created after the exclusion of one *Joda* used for forceful strokes, clear *Bols*, and fast movements of the right hand.¹⁴ Tone of *Tarabs*² were changed¹⁵ to get the continuity of sound.¹⁶

Strings	Name	Tuning notes	Material	Gage No.
1 st	<i>Nayaki/Main Taar</i>	<i>Madhyam</i>	Steel	3 or 4
2 nd	<i>Joda</i>	<i>Shadaj</i>	Brass	26/27 or 28
3 rd	<i>Gandhar</i>	<i>Gandhar</i> (Middle octave)	Steel	3
4 th	<i>Pancham</i>	<i>Pancham</i> (Middle octave)	Steel	3 or 2
5 th	<i>Chikari- I</i>	<i>Shadaj</i> (Higher octave)	Steel	0 or 1
6 th	<i>Chikari- II</i>	<i>Shadaj</i> (Higher octave)	Steel	0 or 1

1. *Manka*: Metallic *Manka* for better grip.¹⁷
2. Pegs: Decreased the height.
3. Bridge: More height was added with two pillars keeping the raised height intact.¹⁸ Additionally, a small hole underneath for better acoustics.¹⁹ etc.



Fig: A Gandhar-Pancham Sitar

This was the new *Gandhar-Pancham Sitar* - experimental but never disconnected from the tradition. The newly produced sound was more continuous, melodious and suitable for a *Khayal*-like presentation.



Fig: Hiren Roy of Kolkata (Sitar maker)



Fig: Kanai Lal Bhowmik of Kolkata (Sitar maker)

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² *Tarabs*: The resonating sympathetic strings are located under the frets in a parallel arrangement.

- Technical changes:

Some technical changes also took place in *Vilayatkhani Baaj*, resulting in a commanding presentation.

1. Right-hand stroking posture and position: The posture, weight, angle, and movement of the right hand produce different kinds of sounds that were extensively used.²¹
2. Commanding right-hand movements: The increased height of the bridge and *Taargahan*, the elimination of one *Joda*, and the increased curvature of frets created more space for faster and commanding right-hand movements.²²
3. Inward right-hand stroke: The accent of lyrics remained alive through his strokes (mirroring the *Gayaki ang*).²³ The inward right-hand stroke is used and the *Mizrab* is placed almost in the opposite direction.²⁴
4. Intricate left-hand movements: Following the preceding tradition, he used two fingers (predominating index finger; middle finger for the highest ascending notes) but executed all *Khayal*-like ornamentations, correctly portraying the flowy *Khayal* textures.²⁵
5. Resonating or complementary tunes: He used to tune his *Sitar* so that the strings should complement the *Raga* to be played. He used to make a canvas or a background with associated notes used in a *Raga*. It seems like using chords.²⁶ He even used some unconventional notes, which were very difficult to control while playing.²⁷ Even the *Taanpura* accompanist had to play *Taanpura* accordingly – just like a *Swaramandal* accompaniment.²⁸ *Tarabs* (mostly the first and second ones) were frequently used throughout the presentation, preferably in *Jod*, *Jhala* and some parts of *Taan-Toda* to highlight the musical frame.
6. Maintaining the tone: The tone of *Sitar* was the ultimate priority.²⁹ He preferred a rounded *Jawari* to get a *Veen*-like tune, much closer to the vocalism.³⁰
7. Tuning: He used different techniques for tuning i.e. hitting the *Tabli* to get the tone.³¹

³ *Aochaar*: An introductory section performed before the slow composition, mostly rendered in *Khayal*.

- Stylistic changes:

The structural and technical changes created a platform for the stylistic changes. His strings reflected the Agra and Kirana *Gayaki* to the fullest.

- ❖ Implementing *Khayal ang*-based structure: Vilayat Khan's predecessors initiated *Khayal ang* in *Sitar Baaj*, but he advanced and refined it, achieving a *Sitar* sound nearly identical to a *Khayal* performance. For the execution, he worked on:

1. *Aalaap*: Khan Sahab used Kirana-style meditative *Vistaar* encompassing the note-by-note *Badhat*, *Merukhand* system and an overall melody-dominant tranquil approach in his *Aalaap*.
 - a) *Sa-Ki-Zameen*: The approach to the very first note or *Shadaj* is the most important part of starting a *Raga*. The Kirana practitioners call it “*Sa Ki Zameen*” or the base of *Shadaj*; where musicians establish the *Sa* with various ways to create a firm base upon which the *Raga* should be built.³² Vilayat Khan rendered this as an “*Aochaar*”³³ with *Tarabs* creating an ambience of the *Raga*.
 - b) *Badhat*: Kirana is special for its note-by-note *Badhat* or exploring the *Raga*. This is performed in a very systematic way where consecutive notes are established one-by-one.³³ Vilayat Khan followed that in *Aalaap* with note-by-note progression maintaining the sequence. Additionally, he was the first one who used to play “*Vistaar*” in *Vilambit Gat*, akin to the *Khayal ang Vistaar* of Kirana.³⁴
 - c) Maintaining phrases: The *Raga* structure is maintained in *Aalaap*, *Jod*, *Vistaar*, and even *Taans*, which shows the Agra essence in *Vilayatkhani Sitar*.
2. *Jod-Jhala*: *Jod-Jhala* is a typical part of *Sitar Baaj*, derived from *Veen* as well as *Dhrupad Gayaki*. Here, *Aalaap* (non-rhythmic part) takes a move ahead to the rhythmic section, where the right hand maintains the rhythm and the left hand maintains the melody.
 - a) Three divisions of *Jod*: *Jod* was a fusion of *Nom-Tom Aalaapchari* of *Ustaad Faiyaz Khan* of Agra

Gharana and *Imdadkhani* style.³⁵ *Jod* is divided in three parts: *Aalaap-Jod*, *Madh Jod* and *Ati-Jod*. *Aalaap-Jod* is played just after *Aalaap* and is started with slow rhythmic strokes, showing a blending of *Aalaap* and *Jod* i.e. Then the *Madh-Jod* comes with speedier patterns. The chain-link patterns of *Kirana* and *Krintan* is vividly used in this part, proving *Khayal* influence. *Tarabs* were used as complementary notes. *Jod* was finished with very fast *Ati-Jod* paired with *Thok Jhala* and speedy *Taans*.

- b) Rhythmic intricacy: The Normal 4-stroke pattern of *Thok-Jhala*³⁶ was fragmented into intricate fashions with small-length electrifying *Taans*, adding more flavour to his performance. He paired this with his trademark *Chikari* usage.³⁷
3. Composition: He used to play the traditional *Maseetkhani* and *Razakhani Gats* compositions and even *Bandishes*.⁴
 - a) Traditional *Gat*: *Maseetkhani Gat* or the *Vilambit Gat*, *Razakhani*, *Sitarkhani Gats*, *Ati Drut* compositions are played traditionally. Each one was set to mostly *Teentaal*.
 - b) *Khayal Bandishes* and *Taranas*: He was very inclined to play *Vilambit Khayal* instead of *Maseetkhani Gats*. Similarly, he often opted for the *Drut Khayal* compositions other than *Razakhani*⁵ *Gats*.³⁸ He used to sing these *Bandishes* during performances.
 - c) Own compositions: He composed many *Khayal Bandishes* under the pen name “*Nathpiya*”.³⁹ They are the clear reflection of *Agra* and *Kirana*-style *Bandishes*.⁴⁰ Moreover, the *5-Matra Mukhda* of these compositions reflects *Faiyaz Khan*’s *Gayaki*.⁴¹ One of his compositions in *Raga Sanjhi Swaravali* is given as follows:

Sthayee: *Sakhi Mori Rum Jhum*
Kar Aaye

Piya Ke Pag Chum Kar Aaye //

⁴ *Maseetkhani Gat* – Slow composition by *Ustaad Maseet Khan* of *Jaipue-Senia* tradition, based on *Teentaal* following the principals of *Veen* or *Dhrupad* having a typical construction of *Bols* i.e. *DIR DA DIR DA RA DA DA RA*.

⁵ *Razakhani Gat* – Fast composition by *Ustaad Raza Khan*, based on *Teentaal* having a typical construction

Antara: Aaye Nachi Kirtak Thun Thun Na Tete Ta Kar
Nath Piya Ko Apane Gaye Rijhaye
Re Ga Ga Ni Ni Ga Re Dha Pa Re – Sa
Ni Sa Dha – Ni Ga Ma Re –Ga //

The last part of the composition is proving the *Kirana* adaptation of the *Vilayatkhani* composition.

4. *Bol-banana*: *Agra* singers are always passionate about deciphering the connection between melody and rhythm to make the presentation livelier. They use the rhythm to highlight the lyrics revolving around a particular phrase i.e. “*Bol-banana*”. *Vilayat Khan* ornamented his compositions in this manner, where the poetic-melodic appeal and rhythmicity express the meaning of the lyrics.
5. *Taan-Toda*: *Vilayat Khan* used different kinds of *Taans* and patterns (“*Taan Ke Fande*”) using special techniques. The *Taans* played by *Khan Sahab* to the most were *Badhat-Ki-Taan*, *Palte-Ka-Taan*, *Sapaat Taan*, *Balpanch*, *Amad-Ki-Taan*, *Waapsi-Ka-Taan* or *Firat-Ka-Taan*, *Chhut-Ka-Taan*, *Gamak-Ka-Taan*, *Merukhand Ka Taan* etc. *Badhat-Ki-Taan* and *Firat-Ka-Taan* are very similar to the *Agra* style. Use of 3-3 or 4-4 divisions, *Chhut*, *Pukar*, *Lehak*, *Halak*, *Phoot*, *Gamak*. *Laag*, *Daant*, *Aans* etc. are followed by both *Agra* and *Vilayatkhani* styles.⁴² Chain-linking *Taan*, *Balpanch Taan* and *Merukhand Taan* (*Kirana*’s speciality) are ubiquitous in his *Baaj*. The pulling technique gives it the typical *Agra* essence of “*Danedaar Taans*”⁴³ (i.e. *GMP/GMP/GMPDPMGRSS*). *Ghaseet*⁶, *Krintan*, *Chikaris* in *Peshkaar-ang-Taan* with the *Bol* ‘*DarDa*’ and labyrinthine rhythmic intricacies paired with long *Tihais* was also a signature *Vilayatkhani* style. He

of *Bols* i.e. ‘*DA RA DIR DIR DAR DAR DA*’. This is executed with faster improvisations like *Taans* and *Laykaris*.

⁶ *Ghaseet*: a special technique used in fretted instruments, where the left hand is glided over the frets encompassing one, two, or three octaves with one stroke at a stretch.

used different techniques to build up these patterns to match a *Khayal*-like texture.

6. *Jhala*: *Jhala* is played twice – once at the end of *Aalaap* (*Thok Jhala*) and secondly while commencing the entire presentation. *Chikaris* are the prime strings played like drone, maintaining a 4-4 division in *Teentaal*. The whole *Raga* is depicted through a short *Aalaap* with *Badhat*. The left hand paints the *Raga* phrases through *Aalaap* and the left hand plays *Chikaris* at a very fast tempo, just like forming a backdrop for the *Aalaap*, satisfying the *Khayal* style.
7. Ornamentation: He ornamented his presentation with various technicalities to match to *Khayal* style i.e. *Meend*, *Murki*, *Murki-Meend*, *Krintan*, *Gamak*, *Zamzama*, *Lehak*, *Ladi*, *Lapet*, *Guthao*, *Jhatka*, *Khatka*, *Gitkiri*, *Chhand*, *Hook*, *Ghaseet*, *Pukaar*, *Layakari*, *Tarabs* and many more to count. *Murki-Meend* was one of his prime improvisations where one can deliver a cent percent vocal intricacies through strings.⁴⁴

❖ Expression:

Endnotes:

- ¹ Seminar on Sitar, Kolkata, ITC Sangeet Research Academy, 1990, pp - 44
- ² Chakraborty, Atanu, *Mukhomukhi Vilayat Khan*, Kolkata, Pratibhas, 2016, pp - 58
- ³³ Roychaudhury, Bimalakanta, *Bharatiya Sangeetkosh*, Kolkata, Sampratam Prakashan, 2009, pp 114
- ⁴ Personal Interview from Ramprapanna Bhattacharyya
- ⁵ Devidayal, Namita, *THE SIXTH STRING OF VILAYAT KHAN*, New Delhi, Context, 2018, pp - 87
- ⁶<https://youtu.be/DWMn3484tQY?si=cpPegQ8WjcQqUNuc>
- ⁷<https://youtu.be/DWMn3484tQY?si=cpPegQ8WjcQqUNuc>
- ⁸<https://youtu.be/DWMn3484tQY?si=cpPegQ8WjcQqUNuc>
- ⁹ Sarkhel, Sabyasachi, *Setarer Bibortane Jaipur Senia O Imdadkhani Gharana*, Kolkata, Jayanti Prakashani, 2019, pp - 129
- ¹⁰ Ibid, pp - 129
- ¹¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gYTFxENqL8>

The expression is the ultimate factor to be presented during rendering a *Raga*. The main challenge was that *Khayal* has lyrics that could leave a clue to the audience about the expression. But just being an instrument, *Vilayatkhani Sitar* exploited its new structural and technical advantages to get a lyrical impact. He mostly followed the following five rules to execute *Khayal Gayaki* in his *Baaj*.⁴⁵ He controlled the Volume, speed, pause etc. throughout the presentation to satisfy the artistic needs.

CONCLUSION

Vilayatkhani Baaj is a journey that went on throughout his whole life - through ages, musical thoughts, experiments and *Saadhana*. It is such a timeless legacy that reflects both *Tantrakari* and *Khayal Gayaki ang* in its unique way. It embodies the perfect blend of tradition and innovation, skilfully woven throughout the overall execution. Its adherence to former musical principles, coupled with an openness to creative experimentation, has yielded a unique and captivating appeal to connoisseurs. As this venerable style continues to evolve, its followers ensure that its everlasting essence remains relevant for future generations.

¹²<https://youtu.be/DWMn3484tQY?si=cpPegQ8WjcQqUNuc>

¹³<https://youtu.be/DWMn3484tQY?si=cpPegQ8WjcQqUNuc>

¹⁴ Sarkhel, Sabyasachi, *Setarer Bibortane Jaipur Senia O Imdadkhani Gharana*, Kolkata, Jayanti Prakashani, 2019, pp - 122

¹⁵<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gYTFxENqL8>

¹⁶<https://youtu.be/DWMn3484tQY?si=cpPegQ8WjcQqUNuc>

¹⁷<https://youtu.be/DWMn3484tQY?si=cpPegQ8WjcQqUNuc>

¹⁸<https://youtu.be/DWMn3484tQY?si=cpPegQ8WjcQqUNuc>

¹⁹<https://youtu.be/DWMn3484tQY?si=cpPegQ8WjcQqUNuc>

²⁰ <https://www.musiciansmallusa.com/kanai-lal-sons/>

²¹ Personal Interview with Dr. Jayanta Kumar Das

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inEINJh6at0>

²³ Personal Interview with Dr. Jayanta Kumar Das

²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inEINJh6at0>

²⁵ Personal Interview with Dr. Jayanta Kumar Das

²⁶ Personal interview with Pandit Harvinder Sharma

²⁷ Personal Interview with Shri Ramprapanna Bhattacharyya

- ²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2Euf8Fh7RQ>
²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2Euf8Fh7RQ>
³⁰ Personal Interview with Shri Ramprapanna Bhattacharyya
³¹ Personal Interview with Dr. Jayanta Kumar Das
³² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CPGLy6CMdk&t=1420s>
³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mRF6eUuDeQ&t=19s>
³⁴ Personal Interview with Dr. Jayanta Kumar Das
³⁵ Personal Interview with Dr. Jayanta Kumar Das
³⁶ Thok-Jhala is an inverted pattern of normal jhala i.e. Da RA RA RA
³⁷ Personal Interview with Dr. Jayanta Kumar Das
³⁸ Sarkhel, Sabyasachi, *Setarer Bibortane Jaipur Senia O Imdadkhani Gharana*, Kolkata, Jayanti Prakashani, 2019, pp - 131
³⁹ Bhattacharyya, Shankarlal, *Komal Gandhar Ustaad Vilayat Khan*, Kolkata, Sahityam, 2003, pp - 30
⁴⁰ <https://youtu.be/5u-SPL6FU9o?si=qwJwjtoJYAQYn75F>
⁴¹ Mukhopadhyay, Kumar Prasad, *Kudrat Rangibirangi*, Kolkata, Ananda Publishers, 2018, pp- 237
⁴² Personal interview with Ustaad Waseem Ahmed Khan
⁴³ <https://youtu.be/DWMn3484tQY?si=BnbO9aqH3rzchilH>
⁴⁴ Personal interview with Dr. Jayanta Kumar Das
⁴⁵ ICMC, Hidayat Khan

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