

# DRUM NATION

## PART I

Peter Lockett presents an

indispensable guide to what they're hitting in India these days.

**H**aving previously looked at various of the most popular drumming styles of North and South India, I feel it's about time to go into detail on the drums themselves. We'll start this month by looking at the North and conclude next month with the South.

The drumming of North India can be split into two main categories, folk and classical. The percussion instruments are also of two distinct sorts. Firstly we have *ghana vadya* (idiophones), and secondly *vrunddha vadya* (membranophones). We will be mainly concerned with membranophones, or, more to the point, drums with skins.

Certainly the ancient mother of all North Indian drums is the *phakawaj*. This is a thin, barrel-shaped drum with a head on each end. It's very similar to the *mridangam* of South India and is even sometimes called the *mrdang* in the North. The drum comes in various sizes, ranging from 60 to 75cm in length. The wooden shell is hollow all the way through, with one head slightly bigger than the other. It's the bigger of these two heads that creates the bass tone and is usually on the performer's left. The shell is 18 to 32cm in diameter at the widest point on the shell, which is usually slightly closer to the bass end (*byha*) than the treble end (*dynha*) of the drum.

The heads are usually made of goat skin and are constructed in a similar way to tabla heads. This entails weaving a hoop which is sewn around three layers of skin that form the head itself. The top and bottom layers of these three skins are cut away to form a 1/2" rim around the edge, leaving the middle layer as the main drum skin. This has the effect of warming the sound of the skin as well as protecting the outer edge.

The smaller treble head of the drum has a permanent paste patch applied, which is made from iron filings, flour and ground hill stone. Patches such as these are very common as resonating devices on Indian drum skins, the purpose being to create a warmth of harmonics from the drum head once it's pulled to tension. But there are three other ways of doing this.

The first is to apply a patch of dough to the outside of the skin. This is not permanent and needs to be kept wet during a performance and removed

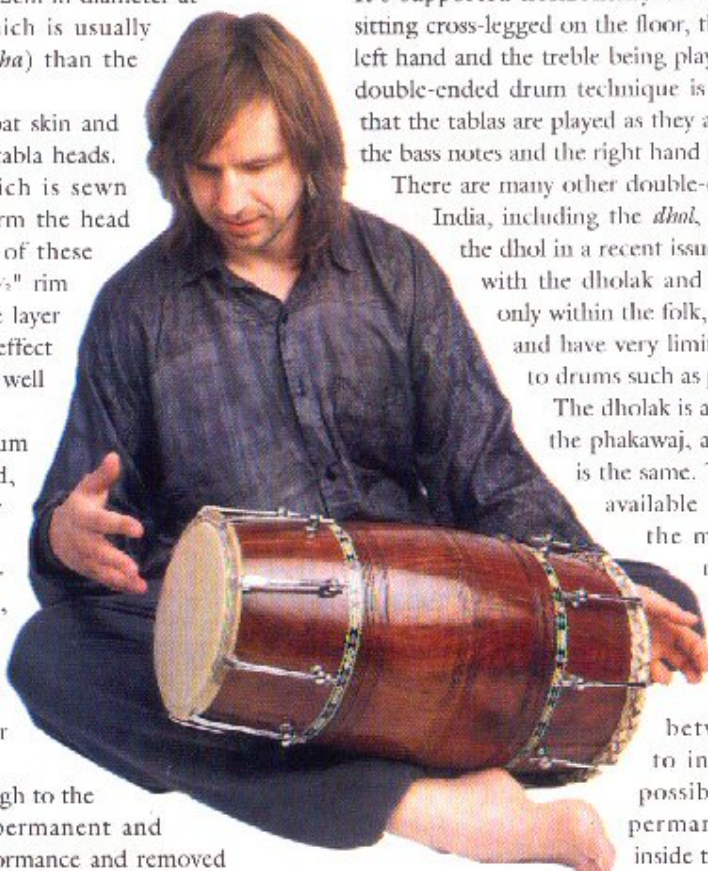
afterwards. The second alternative method is to have an oil and spice massala applied to the inside of the skin permanently. The last method is to simply keep the head wet with water to such a degree as to keep it lower and warmer in tone. These three methods are used exclusively for the creation of bass tones.

The bass end of the *phakawaj* uses the second of these methods, the big lump of soggy dough, about enough for a crusty roll. It's common for lumps to fly off during a performance. The bass head is usually between 24 to 29cm, while the treble head is between 16 and 20cm. Both heads are sewn together over the shell with one continuous leather strap which is then pulled tight and stretched to tension by the insertion of small cylindrical wooden blocks between the shell and the strap. These can then be moved to adjust the tuning. The drum is quite low in pitch and very warm and resonant. It's generally found in strictly North Indian classical concerts, quite often accompanying an old singing style known as *dhrupad*.

The drum is played with the fingers and palms of both hands. It's supported horizontally on the legs with the performer sitting cross-legged on the floor, the bass being played with the left hand and the treble being played with the right hand. This double-ended drum technique is very likely to be the reason that the tablas are played as they are, with the left hand playing the bass notes and the right hand playing the treble.

There are many other double-ended drums found in North India, including the *dhol*, *dholak* and *nall*. We covered the *dhol* in a recent issue of *Rhythm*, so that leaves us with the *dholak* and *nall*. Both drums are found only within the folk, film and light classical genres and have very limited techniques in comparison to drums such as *phakawaj* and *tabla*.

The *dholak* is a lot shorter and stubbier than the *phakawaj*, although the general principle is the same. There are two sorts of *dholak* available nowadays – bolt tension or the more traditional tensioning method which entails the head being sewn together over the shell by a piece of rope. Unlike the *phakawaj* there are no wooden blocks between the shell and rope to increase tension and tuning possibilities. The bass end has a permanent oil and spice massala inside the skin, whilst the treble head



has no patches or resonating devices at all. This makes the possible tones on the dholak a lot more limited. All in all the



skins are a lot simpler in construction, without any complicated woven hoops. They are usually lapped over a simple ring and have holes pierced for the acceptance of the rope tensioners.

The nall is of similar proportions and aspirations to the dholak. The heads are usually slightly smaller, the treble nall head being around 5" in diameter – the dholak treble head could be between 6 and 7". The bass heads are proportionately just less than twice that size. The shell of the nall is slightly longer than the dholak and does not bulge as much in the middle; its shape is far more conical. The bass end has the permanent oil and spice massala, although in my experience there is usually a lot more of the mixture used in the dholak. I actually use a bass tabla head on the nall.

The treble head is of similar construction to that of the dholak, apart from the inclusion of a permanent thin paste spot. It is this along with the shape of the drum and the head sizes that gives the nall its distinct sound. Rope and bolt tension systems are used on nall drums, although with the rope tensioned ones there are wooden toggles intertwined with the



rope. These are twisted round and round to bring the skins to tension. The toggles are then held in place by the tension of the ropes twisted against the shell.

Finally we move on to the most well known drum of North India, the *tabla*.

Tabla is a set of two drums – treble and bass – which are distinct from most other drums in the world in as much as each drum is played with a different hand. Very seldom do you see both hands playing on one drum.

The performer sits on the floor with the drums in front of him, nestled in two supporting rings called *adharas*. The high

pitched drum is cylindrical in shape and stands about 10" high. It's made from wood, usually shisam or nim, and is hollowed out from the top like a big cup, remaining sealed at the bottom. The drum has only one skin, generally about 5" in diameter, and the shell is wider at the bottom than the top by about 1 1/2".

The bass tabla is basically a small single-headed kettle drum made from nickel alloy. (It's sometimes possible to find them made from clay.)

Both drum heads (*puri*) are made from goat skin with a complicated hoop (*pagri*) woven around its edge. The skins are fixed to the drum with a long leather strap called *chat*. This strap is threaded through the hoop and, underneath the drum, a small leather ring.

A thin rim about 1/2" wide runs round the edge of the skin, both inside and out. This is called the *kinar* or *kani* and is also made of goat skin.

The long leather strap is pulled tight, bringing the drum skin to tension. The treble drum is pulled a lot tighter than the bass and needs small wooden blocks (*gaitba*) inserted between the



shell and straps to get it up to the pitch required. Sometimes you see smaller wooden blocks used for the bass tabla. (In Benares, a completely different method is used for the bass tabla: they use rope and metal rings to get the tension.) The skins then have paste patches applied to give them the resonance required. These patches (*shyahi*) are made from a

paste of iron filings, ground hill stone and in India there is also a chemical added to stop the ants eating the patches.

The treble drum is tuned by knocking the wooden blocks with a small hammer. Finer tuning is then carried out by hitting the leather hoop of the skin either up or down, depending on the pitch required.



Bolt tension  
dholak

The drum is tuned to the tonic or dominant note in the scale of the piece of music to be played. It is important to bear in mind that Indian music does not change key, so if you play music that does, you'll need more than one high-pitched tabla to hand. The bass tabla is generally not tuned to a particular pitch, largely because of the glissando technique that is used on that drum.

Tabla is the one percussion instrument in North India that is found in both classical and non-classical idioms, although it must be pointed out that the playing styles differ greatly. Even styles of classical tabla differ greatly from region to region. India is a huge and rich continent for drums and drumming, and there are many other instruments to be found all over the country.



Tabla