

Design Resource

Making of Tabla - Ahmednagar, Maharashtra

Musical Instrument Making

by

Prof. Bibhudutta Baral and Srikanth Bellamkonda

NID Campus, Bengaluru

Source:

<https://www.dsource.in/resource/making-tabla-ahmednagar-maharashtra>



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Introduction

The word 'Tabla' is derived from the Arabic word 'drum' and the Indian version of it is made up of a pair of drums, one tuned to a bivalent bell-like tone and the other to a low bass tone. Tracing back to history, the human discovery of musical instruments started with rattles, scrapers, and bone flutes, followed by slit drums, shell trumpets, and musical bows in the neolithic period. While the paleolithic period came up with yield basket rattles, xylophones, friction sticks, and an early form of the present-day flute. But as these materials were perishable by nature, the evidence of their existence was studied mainly through depictions in sculptures, paintings, and manuscripts. The seals found from the sites of Indus valley civilization bear depictions of people playing long Tabla as drums hung around their necks which resembles modern Khol of Assam and Dhole of Andhra Pradesh. Legends have noted that Tabla is inspired by the Mridanga instrument, and it is an Indo Persian musician named Amir Khusraw who in an attempt to fuse Persian art with Indian music in the early 13th century divided Mridangam into two halves for sharper and sweeter sound quality, thus inventing Tabla. Slowly, it was accepted by musicians to be later highly regarded in North India especially in Delhi Gharanas. Scriptures like Nardiya Shiksha and Natyasastra have also contributed largely to the prevailing knowledge on instrument makings and playing bestowed with a scientific approach. Om Nadbrahma Tabla makers based in the Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra, is one known musical instrument manufacturers in the country. The proprietor Mr. Dinesh Balaji Shirsagar is a third-generation artisan at the center who has been running the business for more than 20 years. Now let us see how a tabla is being made.

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The Tabla and Mridangam manufacturing unit.



The workspace of the artisans at Om Nadbrahma.

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Wooden drums are stored for the future production of Tabla and Mridangam.



Barrel-shaped wooden drums are used in the production of Tabla.

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The head part of the Tabla is made up of sections like Gajara, Maidan, Keenar, and Syahi.



Leather straps are interwoven to attain tight tension.

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Gajaras are stored in a warehouse for production purposes.



Dinesh Balaji Shirsagar, artisan cum proprietor of the store.



Employees who are experts in Tabla making.

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Tools and Raw Materials

The tools and raw materials that are used for making Tabla are as follows:

- **Hollow Wood:** It is one of the main raw materials which forms the major body of the Tabla.
- **Animal Hide:** It is used to cover the opening area of the hollow wooden body.
- **Scissors:** It is used to cut the hide to the intended size and shape.
- **Knife/blade:** It is used to scrape and cut the animal hide as per requirement.
- **Hammer:** It is used to deliver blows or for tapping on any objects during the making.
- **Hide Strips:** It is used to tie the wooden body and animal hide together.
- **Needle:** It is used to sew the strips through the animal hide holes.
- **Pliers:** It is used to hold and pull the strips while tying them around the Tabla.
- **Chisel:** It is also used to scrap the extra wood out of the block and cut the animal hide perfectly.
- **File:** It is used to smoothen the rough surfaces of wood.
- **Twine:** It is temporarily tied around the wooden body during the making of tabla.
- **Charcoal Powder:** It is applied at the center portion of the animal hide as a tuning paste, which covers the head area of the Tabla. It is this powder that produces the unique sound of the instrument.
- **Rice Paste:** It is mixed with charcoal powder to make a dough.
- **Wooden Rollers:** It is used to tighten the strips around the Tabla to get better sound quality.
- **Natural Resin:** It is used as glue to hold the Syahi, i.e., the tuning paste applied on the head.
- **Neem Wood:** It is used to make the body of the Tabla.

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- Pen / Pencil: It is used for markings.



Stone used to rub the Syahi on the black circular area.



The wooden blocks called Gatta, used for the fine-tuning of Tabla.



Cotton rope of 0.5 mm tied around the circular animal hide over.

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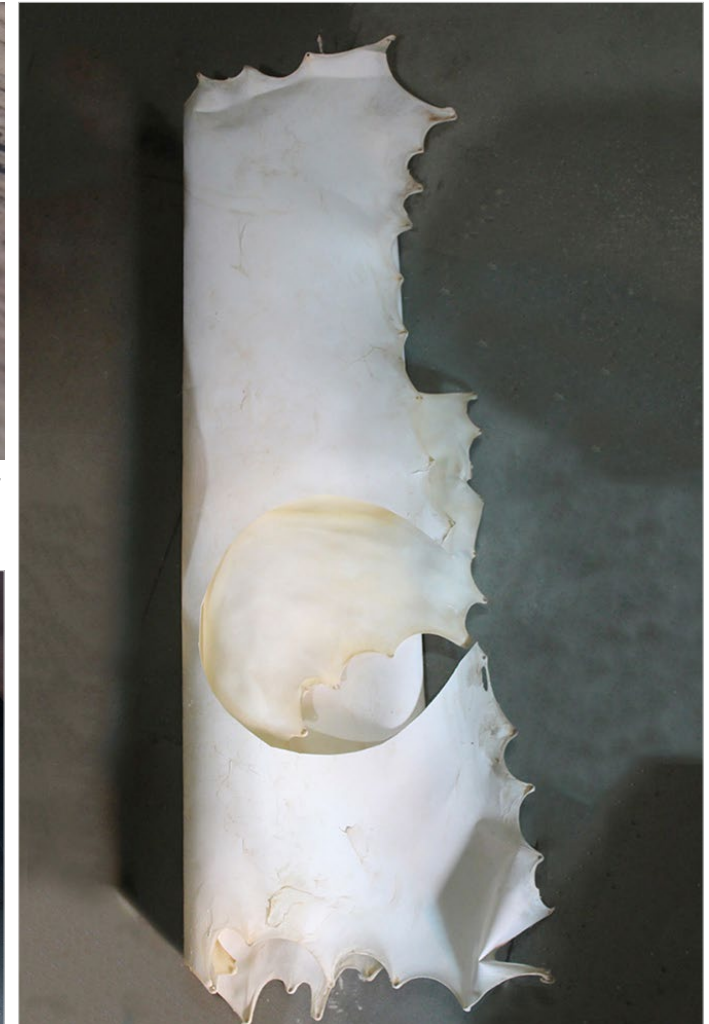
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Another type of Gatta, used for the fine-tuning of larger Tabla.



Flat rubber sheet, used for mixing wheat paste and the iron filings.



Seasoned goatskin, used for making the head of the Tabla.

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Leather straps were used for firm holding of the Gajra in its place.



Chisel was used for making small slits for leather straps to pass.



Scissor for cutting the leather into required shapes and sizes.

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A ball-peen hammer is used for tapping and delivering blows for fine-tuning of the instrument.



Plug insertion needles used for making rope and leather straps through the slits made.

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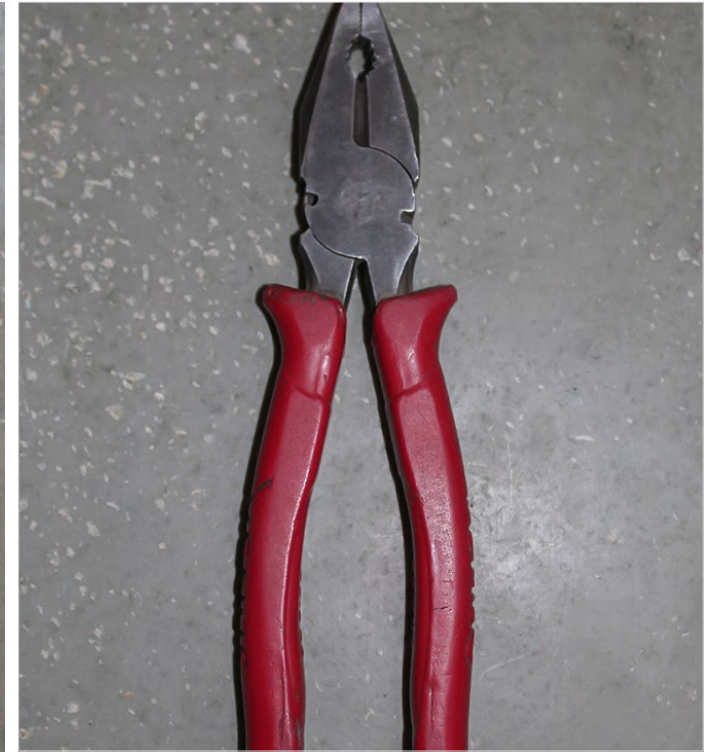
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A couple of blades used for cutting leather in a round shape.



Pliers used for holding the straps while straightening.



Animal/Plant fat used as a lubricant while weaving the straps.

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Making Process

The Tabla consists of two drums, the bayan or the left drum, and the Dayan, the right drum. These two heads of the instrument are primarily made of goatskin cut in a circular shape from a large sheet of hiding using a template. The cut skin is then soaked in water for a softer texture and easy cleaning to remove dirt and animal hair sticking on it. The size of the skin is always kept two inches larger than that of the drum's diameter. Once rightly measured and cut, the circular piece is folded to make holes at the periphery, and twine is passed through it.

The Tabla body is made out of neem, balsa, or rosewood. Once the wooden log is selected, it is shaped into a container form with openings at both ends, using a wood lathe machine. At these openings, small pieces of goatskin are arranged, followed by the placement of the pre-cut circular skin with the twine over it. Then the entire setup is turned upside down and at the bottom of the Tabla, a ring made out of a thick hide strip is placed and it is tied with the skin on the top, using a rope. This is a temporary setup until the rim for the Tabla is created. Now another circular piece of skin with a center opening is tied around the top of the Tabla and stretched by hand. The skin sides are also marked with a pencil to make holes with a chisel, which accommodates the hide strips. The formation makes a rim for the top of the Tabla, locally called 'Gajara'. The same goes for the other end of the drum. Using the top and bottom strips, the side harness of the Tabla is tied around the instrument, which is called 'Baddhi'. After the rim is ready, it is separated from the body and trimmed to remove extra layers of skin underneath and set back to the instrument body. They are then tied tightly using a rope, followed by hiding strips that pass through small holes made on the rims. The top skin is made wet and stretched to tighten as tightening gives better sound quality. The existing circular hole in the skin center is now turned bigger with a blade and a bamboo strip to make space for 'Syahi', the center black area. The layer on which the syahi is applied is locally called 'Maidan'. The area drawn for Syahi is scrubbed for a rougher surface and chalk powder is applied over it. The chalk layer is smoothed with sandpaper to make the instrument look neat and clean. By this, the artisan proceeds to the important part of Syahi making. Here Syahi is made by mixing iron filing powder and wheat flour with water. It is applied in multiple layers and each time a layer is produced it is rubbed with a stone to create cracks on it. This procedure continues until the intended thickness is obtained. The shape of the application is also taken care of, as it is hugely responsible for obtaining the defined pitch and harmonic nature. Hence the center portion is often kept thicker than the edge. After that small circular pieces of wooden rollers are placed between the hide strips to alter the tone of the sound when needed. Thus, a magnificent piece of Queen of instruments, Tabla, is formed.

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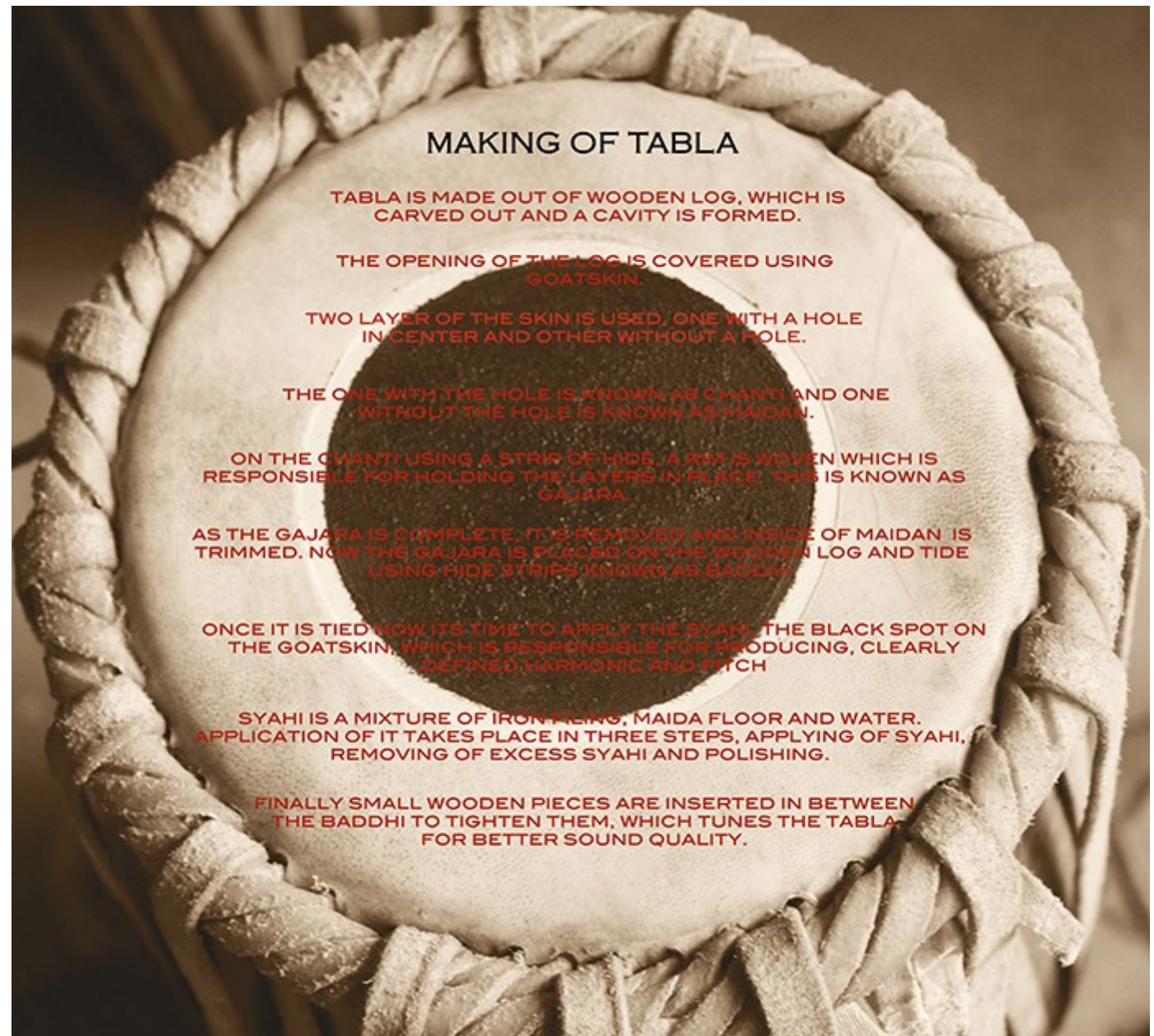
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Flowchart:



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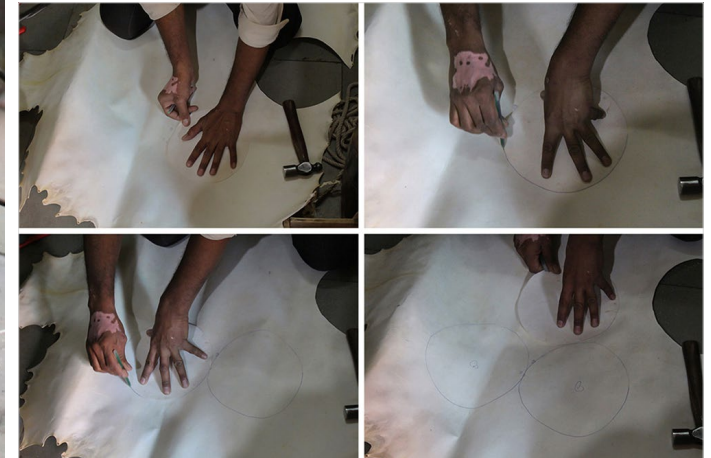
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The wooden drum being leveled manually with a chisel.



One side of the wooden drum being leveled using an angle grinder.



Markings being made on the hide according to the diameter of the Tabla drum.

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Artisan cutting random shapes to make Gajara for the Tabla.



The animal hide is cut as per the required size using a scissor.



The leather soaked in water for flexibility purposes.

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Soaked leather is placed on a board and scored with a metal ruler.



The hide/leather stretched from all the directions for uniform expansion.



The hide left at room temperature for drying.

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After the leather dries, it is folded into quarters.



A series of holes being made with a chisel and hammer.



The rope is passed through each hole using a plug insertion needle.



The rope rightly surrounds the circumference of the hidden piece.

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A knot tied at the ends of the rope.



Previously made random leather shapes being folded and placed over the head of the drum.



The circular leather being placed on top of the drum.

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The leather is held tightly with hands.



The Wooden drum is then flipped upside down.



A rope is passed through the leather sheet and the leather belt.

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For the second layer, another circular piece of leather is folded into half.



The rope is pulled to create tension and make its place tight.



A series of holes are made on it with a chisel and hammer.

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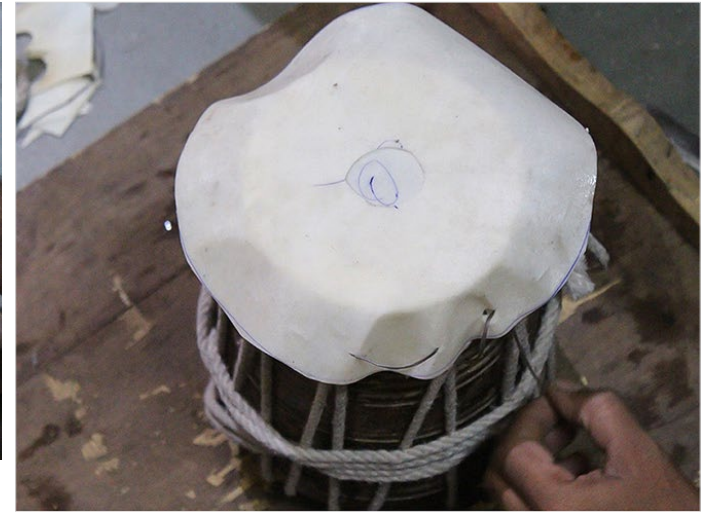
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A small circular shape is cut in the center of the leather.



A string is passed through each hole manually with fingers and tied with rope.



Here the first layer of leather is lifted with a couple of fingers.

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Water is poured into the cavity of leather.



Markings being done on the rim of the drum with a pencil.



Small slits being made on the marked areas with a chisel and hammer.



The leather strap is cut diagonally with a pair of scissors for easy insertion.

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A plug insertion needle is greased with animal fats for smooth working.



The needle is passed horizontally through the leather.

Leather straps are interwoven through the ready Gajra.

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Extra straps being trimmed using a plier.



These strap ends are then hammered to avoid unknotting.



The semi-finished instrument is then left for drying and shrinking of leather.

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Once dried well, the rope is untied.



Leather straps being measured to suit the size of the drum.



With a pair of scissors, the extra leather is trimmed off.

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Straps being soaked in water.



A strap of leather is tied under the drum as a belt.

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The leather Strap is then passed through the slits and the belt.



A piece of bamboo stick is passed through the first and second layers of leather.



The bamboo stick is used as a compass to cut the leather in a perfect circular shape.

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The leather is again allowed to dry.



The surface of the leather is then scrubbed with a chalk piece.



Using fine sandpaper, the areas applied with chalk are rubbed.

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Wheat flour is mixed with cold water in a bowl to make a paste.



The paste is heated with a stove to make it firm and thick.

This wheat paste is then rolled into a round shape and attached to a screwdriver.

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Then it is roasted on a gas burner to make the outer layer hard and prevent cooling of the inner paste.



Wheat paste is mixed with iron filings powder to make a black paste that forms the 'Syahi' of the tabla.

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Glue being prepared in a teapot using water, flour, and other substances.



A pinch of wheat paste and glue is added to the top of the 'maidan' layer of the tabla.

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Using a thumb finger, the paste is smeared in a circular shape.



Smearing continues until the paste is widely spread at the center.



Using a metallic ruler, the extra wheat paste is rightly removed.



Once the first layer dries, the rest of the paste is reused to make the second and third layers.

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Small wooden blocks known as 'Gatta' are inserted in-between leather braces for fine-tuning.

Tuning is perfected by adjusting the wooden blocks and hammering on the surfaces.



As the last step, the finished Tabla is inspected for its quality and packing.

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Products

Tabla is one of a kind instrument that is well known for its rhythmic potential, hence considered Queen among all drums and percussion instruments. A single piece of Tabla making takes approximately six days and its cost varies according to the finish, quality of wood and hide used. The standard price of a Tabla starts at INR 6000.



Types of Tabla made of different materials like wood, clay, copper, brass, and other metals, are arranged in the workspace.

Tabla types like Dayan Tabla and Baya Tabla being displayed in the shop.



Tabla comes in different qualities like premium, standard, and student, hence its price differs accordingly.

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Video



Making of Tabla - Ahmednagar - Part 1



Making of Tabla - Ahmednagar - Part 2

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Contact Details

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You can get in touch with Prof. Bibhudutta Baral at [bibhudutta\[at\]nid.edu](mailto:bibhudutta[at]nid.edu)

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