



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Evolution of Sitar in India : Understanding the structural modifications and creative adaptations with reference to changing playing styles and documentary evidences

Kabir Lakhmapure¹, Ameya Taranekar², Puneet Sawant³

¹ Student (Dept. of Sound Engineering, Ajeenkya DY Patil University, Pune) Email : kabirlakhmapure12@gmail.com

² Student (Dept. of Sound Engineering, Ajeenkya DY Patil University, Pune) Email : amevataranekar@gmail.com

³ Student (Dept. of Sound Engineering, Ajeenkya DY Patil University, Pune) Email : phs20048@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Sitar has been one of the most significant instruments in the history of the Indian classical Music as it is the symbol of the rich musical heritage. From its ancient origins to its modern-day adaptations, the Sitar has captivated audiences with its mesmerising sound and expressive capabilities. In recent times, this instrument has come into the spotlight, capturing attention both within India and across the global music landscape. Sitar has been through many structural modifications from the beginning, which also led to changing techniques of playing it. Originally believed to have had only three strings at the time of its invention, the instrument gradually evolved through innovations and changing sonic requirements. Today, modern Sitar typically feature 17 or 18 strings, depending on the style. In addition to structural evolution, the Sitar has embraced modern adaptations, including electrification leading to the creation of the Zitar. Such innovations have increased its appeal among younger audiences and expanded its use in fusion genres and contemporary music scenes. This research paper aims to explore the evolution of the Sitar, both structurally and creatively, from the 18th century to the present day. It will examine how changes in the instrument's construction have paralleled transformations in playing techniques. The study draws upon a range of information sources, including scholarly articles and interviews of Sitar maestros, and the books having documented evidences to trace this dynamic journey. Ultimately, this research seeks to highlight how continuous innovation and creative adaptation have sustained the Sitar's relevance, making it one of the most celebrated plucked string instruments. The broader goal is to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of this instrument, especially among music lovers, while honouring its vital role in India's musical legacy.

Keywords – Sitarist, Playing techniques, Structure, Gat, Strings, Gayaki Ang, Raag, Gharana, Electrification, Zitar

Introduction

Sitar is a prominent plucked string instrument of the Hindustani Classical Music, originated in the Indian subcontinent. It is popular for solo recitals and creating melodies that has captivated audiences worldwide with its mesmerising sound and intricate playing techniques. Although its origins can be traced back to the 13th century, the instrument evolved into its modern form during the 18th and 19th centuries. What makes the Sitar unique is both its tonal quality and structural design. Often crafted from seasoned toon wood or teak, the Sitar features a long wooden neck attached to a pumpkin-shaped gourd that serves as the resonator. The hollow body allows the main strings to resonate with the sympathetic strings to create a rich and distinct sound. One of its defining features is the curved metal frets tied to the neck which can be positioned according to the Raag's requirement. Since the Sitar works on the principle of resonance, the instrument comprises several types of strings of varying gauges : Main strings (*Baaj* and *Kharaj taar*), on which the main melody is played, Drone strings (*Chikari*), which are usually tuned to a constant pitch played throughout a performance and sympathetic strings (*Tarab taar*) that are tuned to the notes of the *Raag* being played and are re-tuned for each *Raag*. Each string is attached to a tuning peg that can be tightened to raise the pitch or loosened to lower it. The melody strings can be further fine-tuned by sliding a bead on each string near the bridge. The Sitar is typically 4-feet in length and is played sitting down with the instrument while balancing it between the sitarist's foot and knee and held at a 45-degree angle. Because the instrument is quite large, this allows the player's hands to move freely without having to support the weight of it. The Sitar is played with a metallic plectrum called *Mizraab*. With a rich history that spans over 700 years, Sitar has undergone many structural modifications often introduced by legendary maestros or developed to meet evolving sonic requirements. Different styles of Sitar have emerged, corresponding to the playing traditions of various *gharanas* (musical lineages), each with its own nuances and techniques. Today, the Sitar stands as a significant symbol of Indian musical heritage and continues to influence musicians across the globe.

Origin and History

The Sitar, one of the most iconic instruments of Indian classical music, has a complex and contested history. Based on its close etymological relation with the Persian word “*Sehtar*” meaning three-strings, many argue that the Sitar was first brought to India during the Persian invasion starting in the 12th century while others believe that the Sitar evolved from the local instrument “*Tritantri Veena*” which means three-string lute in Sanskrit. The invention of the Sitar is often mistakenly attributed to Amir Khusrau, the celebrated 13th-century poet and Sufi musician of the Delhi Sultanate. This has led to confusion, as the actual figure associated with the development of the Sitar is “Khusrau Khan”, a different historical personality who lived much later and was active in the 18th century Mughal court in Delhi. Most modern scholars have discredited the claim that the 13th-century Amir Khusrau invented the Sitar, recognising it as a historical misattribution. The first written reference to the Sitar dates to 1739, reinforcing the view that it originated in 18th-century. In fact all the material evidences point to 18th century - Delhi as Sitar’s time and place of origin. Khusrau Khan, along with his family members like Namad Khan, Feroz Khan and Masit Khan are all known to have been leading figures in Sitar’s early historical developments. The Sitar’s evolution took place within a rich musical milieu. Between the 16th and 17th centuries, during the Mughal reign, Indian classical music experienced significant transformation. The *Dhrupad* style emerged as a dominant vocal form, deeply rooted in Vedic chants and hymns. Spearheaded by legendary musicians like Tansen and his descendants, *Dhrupad* emphasised the purity of *Raag* and featured a long, meditative *Aalap* - an unmetered, improvised introduction that explores the essence of the rag. *Dhrupad* laid the foundational aesthetics of Hindustani classical music, and it was in this fertile environment that the Sitar eventually found its place as a prominent melodic instrument.

Developments in the 18th and 19th centuries

The 18th and 19th centuries were pivotal in the development of the Sitar, with several influential musicians contributing to both its physical design and its playing techniques. During this period, significant changes emerged in the musical styles associated with the instrument. The introduction of more complex Raagas and innovative playing methods expanded the expressive potential of the Sitar, allowing it to convey a broader range of emotions and musical ideas. These advancements solidified the Sitar’s place as a central instrument in Indian classical music. During the reign of Mohammed Shah in the 18th century, Sitar gradually evolved from relatively simple instrument used predominantly for accompaniment to a leading instrument in its own right. This transformation was accompanied by several structural innovations that significantly expanded its musical range. One of the most important developments was the introduction of a metallic plectrum known as the “Mizraab”, a term derived from the Arabic word zabab, meaning “to strike”. This allowed for clearer and more intricate right-hand strokes, marking a crucial step in the instrument’s evolution. Other significant changes included the addition of more strings, such as the chikari (rhythmic drone strings) and tarab (sympathetic resonating strings), which enriched the instrument’s tonal complexity. The Sitar also began to incorporate features from the Veena, a plucked string instrument from Carnatic (South Indian) music, most notably the ability to bend strings laterally (meend), enabling expressive pitch modulation and a vocal-like quality. These innovations collectively transformed the Sitar into a versatile and expressive lead instrument, laying the foundation for its prominent role in Hindustani classical music.

By 1875, Sitar had all main characteristics of the present form. Following these developments, a style of composition called “*Gat*” was discovered. *Gat* is a fixed melodic composition, performed in a specific *Raag* with rhythmic accompaniment by a Tabla or Pakhawaj, a steady drone called Tanpura, and melodic accompaniment by a Sarangi, Violin, or Harmonium. In the realm of Hindustani classical instrumental music, particularly in the Sitar tradition, two primary forms of *gat* have evolved - *Masitkhani Gat* and *Razakhani Gat*. These forms differ in their stylistic elements, tempo, and execution, and each holds a distinct historical and musical significance. Considering the historical evidences, among the leading historical figures mentioned earlier, Masit Khan (grandson of Khusrau Khan) is the best known for the creation of “*Masitkhani Gat*”, a style of composition which is characterised by its slow-tempo and fixed rhythmic patterns within the “*Teentaal*” time cycle. It is typically performed in *Vilambit laya* (slow) or sometimes *Madhya laya* (medium) tempo, setting a specific *Mizraab bols* (Sitar strokes) for the instrument. *Masitkhani gats* are rooted in the principles of *Dhrupad*. In contrast to *Masitkhani Gat*, a “*Razakhani Gat*” is characterised by its fast tempo, often starting in *Madhya laya* and progressing to *Ati Drut laya* (very fast tempo), set to the *Teentaal* or other rhythmic cycles like *Ektaal* and *Rupak*. Its creation is attributed to Ghulam Raza Khan, who was a descendant of Tansen. It features a variety of Sitar strokes woven into rhythmic and melodic patterns. The *Razakhani Gat* often concludes with a “*Jhaala*”, a quick and rapid sequence of strokes on main string and the drone strings, that provides a dynamic and energetic ending. The compositions are often spread across all three octaves, creating a wider and richer soundscape. The performance also include several other combined elements like *Jod-aalap*, *Jod-jhaala* and most importantly the *Taans* which are fast paced phrases of notes of a Raag. Though these styles of composition were commonly played by artists and musicians, there were still differences in strokes and musical expressions. This resulted in laying of foundations or schools, known as “*Gharanas*” for distinguishing the Sitar playing techniques.

The establishment of Gharanas

Gharanas are distinct schools or lineages in Indian classical music that developed over centuries, particularly flourishing during the 18th and 19th centuries. Each *gharana* is typically named after the region or family in which it originated, and it represents a unique style, technique, and philosophical approach to musical expression. While all *Gharanas* share a foundational adherence to the core principles of *Raag* (melody) and *Taal* (rhythm), they differ in the nuances of technique, ornamentation, and presentation. In the realm of Sitar playing, two of the most prominent and influential *gharanas* are the “*Imdadkhani*”, also known as the “*Etawah Gharana*” and the “*Maihar Gharana*”. These schools have shaped the evolution of Sitar music, each contributing its own distinctive voice to the rich tapestry of Indian classical Music.

Imdadkhani or Etawah Gharana - The Imdadkhani Gharana, also known as the Etawah Gharana, is a prominent school of Indian classical music, particularly associated with stringed instruments like the Sitar and Surbahar. Founded by Ustad Imdad Khan in the late 19th century, the *gharana* derives its name from the town of *Etawah*, where he resided and developed the distinctive musical style that defines this lineage. Renowned for its lyrical and expressive playing, the Imdadkhani Gharana is celebrated for its emphasis on meends (glides between notes) and *taans*. One of the hallmark features of this *gharana* is its deep commitment to “*Gayaki Ang*”—a style that closely mimics the nuances and ornamentation of vocal music. This vocal-inspired approach contrasts with the more technically intricate “*Tantrakari Ang*”, which focuses on purely instrumental virtuosity. A transformative figure in the *gharana*'s evolution was “Ustad Vilayat Khan”, one of the most celebrated Sitar maestros of the 20th century. His innovations gave new dimensions to the Sitar, including the further development and refinement of *Gayaki Ang*. His contributions also led to the creation of a specific type of Sitar, now referred to as the “Vilayatkhani Sitar”, designed to better accommodate the expressive needs of this lyrical style. Another major contribution of the *gharana* is the development of the “Surbahar”, a larger, bass version of the Sitar. Known for its deep, resonant tones, the Surbahar is typically pitched one or two octaves lower than the Sitar and is often used to perform slow, meditative *aalaps* (introductory improvisations). Some famous sitarists belonging to the Etawah Gharana are Ustad Shahid Parvez Khan, Pandit Budhaditya Mukherjee, Pandit Arvind Parikh, Roopa Panesar and Anupama Bhagawat.

Maihar gharana - It is a prominent school of Hindustani classical music founded by Ustad Allaaddin Khan in the princely state of Maihar, located in present-day Madhya Pradesh. Renowned for its strong emphasis on instrumental performance - particularly on the Sitar, Sarod, and Surbahar, the *gharana* is recognised for its distinctive blend of musical styles and significant contributions to the evolution of Indian classical music. An insignia of the Maihar Gharana is its rigorous and precise stroke work, which enhances the clarity and articulation of each note. Another defining feature is its fusion of Hindustani and Carnatic elements, resulting in a rich and vibrant sonic palette that sets it apart from other *gharanas*. Among the most celebrated sitarists of the Maihar Gharana are Pandit Ravi Shankar, Pandit Nikhil Banerjee, Anoushka Shankar, Niladri Kumar, and Purbayan Chatterjee - all of whom have played vital roles in popularising the *gharana*'s unique style both in India and internationally.

The types of Sitar are often distinguished not only by their physical characteristics but also by the *gharanas* that influence their playing techniques. Among the various styles, the two most prominent are the “Vilayatkhani Sitar” and the “Ravi Shankar Style Sitar”, named after the maestros Ustad Vilayat Khan and Pandit Ravi Shankar respectively, which showcase the characteristics of their *gharanas*. The Vilayatkhani Sitar, also known as “*Gandhar-Pancham*” (the third and the fifth note of the scale respectively) style Sitar has 6 main strings and 11 sympathetic strings. It is known for its delicate tones. With minimal design and ornamentation, it is relatively light weight. This type of Sitar is played by the sitarists belonging to the Etawah Gharana. Whereas, the Ravi Shankar style or “*Laraj-Kharaj*” Style is associated with the Senia-Maihar Gharana. It has 7 main strings as the *Laraj* string missing in Vilayatkhani Sitar gets added over here. *Laraj* and *Kharaj* are two thick, bass strings tuned to *Ati Mandra Pancham* (the fifth note of the scale in lower octave) and *Ati Ati Mandra Shadaj* (the first or the root note of the scale in much lower octave) respectively, features a fuller bass sound. The *tumba* or the pumpkin-shaped guard resonator is comparatively bigger in size as compared to the Vilayatkhani sitar and an additional small resonator at the top of the neck contributes to the instrument's deep, rich sound. It also has more design and carved ornamentation on its structure which makes it heavier. While each *gharana* brings its distinctive aesthetic and technique, both styles share a common foundation in the principles of Indian classical music. Their differences exemplify how diverse *gharanas* have collectively enriched the Sitar tradition, balancing continuity with innovation and ensuring the evolution of the instrument across generations.

Sitar in the 20th and 21st centuries

In the 20th century, the Sitar gained global recognition and influence, primarily through the pioneering work of Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad Vilayat Khan. This was a golden period which also marked the emergence of distinct playing styles : the "Ravi Shankar style," characterised by elaborate instrumental compositions and intricate ornamentation, and the "Vilayat Khan style," or *Gayaki ang*, which emphasised melodic expressiveness and technical mastery to mimic the nuances of vocal music. Indian cinema also played a vital role in popularising the Sitar. Film soundtracks widely featured the instrument, helping to integrate its sound into the broader cultural consciousness. The Sitar became synonymous with Indian music, further holding its place in the global music scene. The globalisation of music in the 21st century has led to further innovations in Sitar playing techniques and repertoire. Contemporary sitarists are exploring new genres and fusion styles, incorporating elements of jazz, rock, electronic music, and beyond into their performances. This blend of musical traditions has expanded the sonic possibilities of the Sitar, pushing the boundaries of tradition while preserving its essence. With the rise of fusion music and cross-cultural collaborations, the Sitar has discovered new ways for artistic expression. Today, it features in a wide range of contexts, from ensemble performances and film songs to experimental music projects. This adaptability has preserved the Sitar's relevance in contemporary musical landscapes while continuing to honour its centuries-old heritage.

Invention of the Electric Sitar and the rise of “Zitar”

Although the first electric Sitar was developed in the early 1960s, it gained significantly more recognition in the 21st century. The primary goal behind the "electrification" of the Sitar was to replicate the unique sound and tonal characteristics of the traditional Indian Sitar, while creating an instrument that could be plugged into an amplifier and easily played by guitarists. Electric Sitaris are typically modified versions of electric guitars. They feature specialised bridges and sometimes other components designed to create the distinctive buzzing sound associated with a plucked Sitar string. This allows musicians to capture the Sitar's iconic timbre without the complexity of mastering a traditional Sitar. The first electric Sitar was developed in the early 1960s by American guitarist Vinnie Bell in collaboration with the instrument manufacturer Danelectro. This instrument, known as the “Coral Electric Sitar”, was created to offer a more familiar experience for guitar players. It used a standard guitar fretboard and tuning but was engineered to produce a Sitar-like tone. The Coral Sitar emerged during a period when Western musical groups were increasingly incorporating the Sitar into their sound, inspired

by Indian classical music. However, despite its sonic similarities, the Coral Electric Sitar differed greatly in structure from a traditional Sitar. Visually and mechanically, it resembled a guitar much more than the complex, gourd-bodied Sitar of Indian origin. Simultaneously, development of the transistor Sitar was underway in India. The first transistor Sitar was created in 1962 to address the challenges faced by Sitarists due to the limitations of contemporary amplification systems, which often failed to produce the desired sound quality. This innovative Sitar featured a transistorised amplifier embedded within the main gourd resonator, along with volume and tone controls, and an in-built speaker located at the other end of the instrument. The transistor Sitar gained popularity among Indian classical musicians and remained relevant for about 7–8 years, until advancements in external audio systems rendered it less necessary. The concept of the electric Sitar reemerged in the early 21st century with the introduction of the “Zitar”, a groundbreaking instrument credited to Indian sitarist Niladri Kumar. The Zitar represents a bold reimagining of the traditional Sitar, blending classical aesthetics with modern technology to create a unique instrument tailored for contemporary music. Unlike earlier electric Sitaras such as the Coral Sitar, which deviated significantly from the acoustic Sitar in design - the Zitar closely resembles its traditional counterpart in both structure and playing technique. The main differences lie in subtle modifications made to facilitate electrification. Crafted from a single piece of well-seasoned wood, the Zitar boasts enhanced resonance and a clean, rich tonal output. Its flat base offers greater stability and makes it more accessible for beginners and live performers. A key innovation is the addition of a humbucking pickup, which minimises noise while delivering a clear, powerful signal suitable for amplification. Die-cast machine heads have replaced traditional pegs for the main strings, enabling easier and more precise tuning. However, the sympathetic strings retain the classic wooden tuning pegs, preserving the instrument’s traditional sonic character. The Zitar is played using a unique approach known as the “Zitar Style”, which allows for greater versatility and expression, bridging the gap between classical Indian music and modern genres. While electric Sitaras like the Zitar offer expanded soundscapes and performance flexibility, many musicians continue to favour the acoustic Sitar for its unmatched traditional tone and tactile feel.

Methodology

In this research, content analysis serves as the primary methodology for systematically examining historical texts, scholarly articles, documented interviews, and biographical narratives of Sitar maestros to trace the instrument’s evolution. By analysing both primary and secondary sources—including archival documents, books, musical compositions such as *gats*, and interviews of Sitar maestros and contemporary sitarists - the study identifies patterns, themes, and recurring references related to structural modifications and evolving playing techniques of the Sitar. Content analysis has allowed the researchers to draw the connections between historical developments, stylistic variations across *gharanas*, and innovations such as the Zitar. The method has further helped to identify the timeline of key changes, the influence of individual artists, and the sociocultural context in which these transformations occurred, ultimately supporting a deeper understanding of the Sitar’s creative and structural journey from the 18th century to the present.

Conclusion

The journey of the Sitar from its ancient origins to modern adaptations is a testament to the enduring legacy of Indian classical music and the spirit of innovation within its traditions. Through centuries of evolution and experimentation, the Sitar has remained a symbol of cultural identity and artistic expression, captivating audiences around the world with its enchanting melodies and timeless beauty. In conclusion, this research has traced the remarkable journey of the Sitar from its likely origins in the 18th century to its contemporary global presence. The evolution of the instrument has been characterised by significant structural developments, from the initial three-stringed forms to the modern 17 or 18-stringed configurations, each change invariably influencing the techniques employed by Sitarists. The establishment of distinct *Gharanas*, such as the Etawah and Maihar, further diversified playing styles and the nuances of Sitar construction. Over the centuries, Sitarists continued to refine and expand upon these playing techniques. The use of meend (glissando), gamak (ornamentation), and taans (fast melodic phrases) became integral aspects of Sitar performance, allowing musicians to express a wide range of emotions and moods through their music. The advent of electric Sitaras, culminating in innovations like the Zitar, signifies the instrument's adaptability to modern musical landscapes, broadening its applications. Ultimately, the Sitar's enduring popularity and its continued relevance in both traditional and fusion music underscore the profound impact of these structural and creative adaptations, solidifying its position as a vital emblem of India's rich musical heritage for generations to come.

REFERENCES

1. AlecCooperSitar. (2022, October 30). The history of the Sitar [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/tNM6FfsLIJY>
2. Pink Lotus Academia. (n.d.). History and development of the Sitar. Retrieved May 21, 2025, from <https://thepinklotusacademia.com/history-development-Sitar-pink-lotus-academia/>
3. Wikipedia contributors. (n.d.). *Sitar*. Wikipedia. Retrieved May 21, 2025, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sitar>
4. Rikhi Ram. (2019, July 16). The transition from transistor Sitar to zitar. <https://www.rikhiram.com/blog/the-transition-from-transistor-Sitar-to-zitar/1.html>
5. Serenade Team. (2024, April 16). The Sitar’s journey: Evolution and innovations in playing techniques and repertoire. Serenade Magazine. <https://serenademagazine.com/the-Sitar-journey-evolution-and-innovations-in-playing-techniques-and-repertoire/>
6. ipassio. (n.d.). *Sitar*. ipassio. Retrieved May 21, 2025, from <https://www.ipassio.com/wiki/musical-instruments/string/Sitar>

7. Vedabala, S. (2021). Sitar music: The dynamics of structure and its playing techniques. Wizard Publisher.
8. Miner, A. (1993). Sitar and Sarod in the 18th and 19th centuries. Motilal Banarsidass.
9. CH 02: CEC-UGC 02: History, Culture and Philosophy. (2017, September 11). Historical Development of Sitar and Various Parts of Sitar [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/rW47sGAcgiE?>
10. Banerjee, I. (2015, January 9). History and origins of the Sitar. Antara School of Indian Classical Music. <https://antaraschool.com/2015/01/09/origin-of-Sitar/>