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RESEARCH ARTICLE

AN OVERVIEW OF THE INDIAN CLASSICAL FORM – KATHAK

¹Dr. Vandana Chaubey and ²Arshdeep Kaur Bhatti

¹Professor, Department of Performing Arts, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan

²Research scholar, Banasthali, Vidyapith, Rajasthan

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ABSTRACT

The term Kathak is derived from the Vedic Sanskrit word 'Katha' which means "story", and Kathakar which means "the one who tells a story". Wandering Kathakars or the traveling bards conveyed tales, inspired by our ancient epics and mythologies, through dance, songs, and music. Kathak performers exhibit stories through graceful hand movements, extensive footwork, flexible body movements, and most importantly intense facial expressions capable of evoking a range of emotions.

INTRODUCTION

Dance or 'Nritya' has been a constantly evolving process from the centuries. It has its roots in our Vedas which were written by the rishis in the ordinary languages, so that people of lower castes could easily relate and find their purposes of life. The four Vedas – Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda. Containing 10600 verses, the oldest among these Vedas is the Rigveda which can be believed as the oldest Sanskrit Text (1800-1100 BCE). Various important elements were taken from each Veda that have contributed to every syllable of classical music or dance or theatre. But the Gods felt that there was something or some element missing which could be a source of entertainment for all. On requesting, the Lord Brahma originated the 'Fifth' Veda which had the glimpses of all the four Vedas in a proper ratio. "While subject selection (story line) was made from Rigveda, music was contributed by Samaveda, art of emoting (Abhinaya) from Yajurveda and 'RAGAS' were taken from Atharvaveda and thus a fifth Veda i.e. Natyaveda was born."¹ It was a Veda that could be heard and seen as various aspects of arts were mentioned in it, and also their implementation was another welfare for the both Gods and the ordinary people. A need for better demonstration or execution was felt by the Gods that took them to Lord Brahma, who further taught this whole Natyaveda to sage Bharatmuni, so that he could find a different way to implement these teachings and could make these teaching learnable to the Gods.

*Corresponding author: Dr. Vandana Chaubey

Professor, Department of Performing Arts, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan

Lord Brahma ji succeeded and created 'apasaras' to make the natya more interesting. It is believed that first ever dance or nritya performance was done in the 'Indradhwaj' festival that was celebrated within the world of lords, while watching the performance, theasurs who were invited to the festival, felt a great disrespect as the performance portrayed their defeat from the Gods. They started interrupting the ongoing performance by reaching out to the performers and discomforting them badly. Watching all this, another need was felt by Lord Brahma himself of giving a proper land or space for the ones who would enact the various themes. "This performance depicted the defeat of asurs (demons) and victory of Gods, but the Asurs were obviously displeased and created trouble during performance and by using their magical powers rendered the dancer still. Then, Indra removed the Asurs by using the force and the need for a theatre (Naty Mandala) was felt."² Lord Brahma then asked Vishwakarma to build a theatre that would be accessible to the performers. Bharatmuni taught this Veda to his hundred sons and tried to come up with the very first Theatrical production ever which was "Amritmanthan". It was a successful effort that was appreciated by the Gods but was criticised by the demons or Asurs as it again depicted their failure. But Sage Bharatmuni somehow managed to convince the Asurs that the following production was only for the means of entertainment. Another play 'Tripurdaha' was also staged in front of Lord Shiva who further added various components such as Tandav and Lasya to make it more elegant. Bharatmuni mentioned about this in Chapter-4 in his Granth – Natyashastra.

¹Gupta, Bharti, Kathak Sagar, Radha Publications, New Delhi, 2004, Pg – 1.

² Ibid, pg-2.

Lord Shiva on the other hand taught tandava and lasya to his disciple Tandu so that he could help Bharatmuni in the play. "He (Lord Shiv) appointed his disciple Tandu for teaching Tandava to Bharat. Tandu explained the components of Tandava, the categories of its movements, and their composition in choreographical patterns. Lord Shiva felt that without the Lasya, the performance was incomplete. He taught Lasya to Parvati. Lord Shiva deputed his favourite disciple Tandu for teaching Tandava and Lasya to Bharata. This Tandava and Lasya became two basic components of Dance."³ Other components such as Nritta, Rasa, Bhava, Natya and Nritya, these aesthetics were also a concern for Bharatmuni, so he tried to compile all these in his treatise 'Natyashastra', which till date is successful in proving its authentication for these arts. As the time evolved these arts went through a lot of modification. The Indian culture is blessed to have dance forms like Bharatnatyam, kathak, kathakali, Manipuri and According to Mrinalini Sarabhai these are considered to be the four main classical styles of the Indian Dance. Each form has its own existence, the classical dance form from Northern India- Kathak can be considered the most flexible form among all the classical dances. We all are well known with the fact that kathak is known as the 'Art of Story Telling' and the ones who narrate these stories are known as kathakars or kathavachaks. All these stories involved the mythologies such as Ramayana, Mahabharata and many more. "Communities of kathaks wandered around the countryside conveying the stories of these great epics and myths to the people by means of poetry, music and dance, all three of which were closely linked. The chief aim of the kathaks was to instruct the indigenous population of the subcontinent in the knowledge of the gods and mythology of the Aryans."⁴ Like other classical forms, Kathak too, went through lot of stages or periods such as Mughal period, Rajput period and British period. Its growth totally depended on the interests of the then ruling party and the styles of presenting kathak changed from period to period.

Many scholars have commented on this evolution of the dance, according to Dr. Bharti, culture played a greater role in the changes that were made in this dance form. Being in the Hindu culture, this dance form was purely a way to worship Gods but after the rise of Mughals, Kathak dance emerged as a source of entertainment on one hand and means of sensual pleasure on the other. The presence of 'kathaks' during Mughal was mentioned in the book- 'Ain-e-Akbari' by Abul Fazal, who stated different categories of the dancers of those times and found the 'kathaks' to be the dancers from Brahmin caste. Though every religion had their different beliefs and approaches towards the Path of God, the dancers that entered the courts of Muslims, made implementations in their performances as they were not allowed to worship Lord Krishna or Vishnu or any other Hindu deity as 'Idol worship' was prohibited in the Islamic faith. Different emperors viewed this form from their own perspectives, some of them declined these arts totally but some came up as such art lovers that helped in the revival of Kathak Dance. "The personal interests of a select few, particularly, Nawab Asaf-ud-Daulah and later Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Oudh (also known as Awadh) who had their capital at Lucknow, saw kathak emerging from the confines of the closet of Hindu temples and make its entry into the Muslim Court, without diluting its original pristine

flavour."⁵ Nawab Wajid Ali not only revived Kathak or its Lucknow style but also contributed literature that enriched both music and dance. Prominent Gurus of Kathak in those times were Thakur Prasad ji, Hanuman Prasad ji, Durga Prasad Ji and many more that performed in the court of the Nawabs and taught kathak to the contemporaries. It was this period that saw kathak rising at its highest along with other arts such as dhrupad, khayal, thumris etc. But Nawab could not retrieve all these forms from the British Soldiers during the revolt of 1857 as they overcame the Oudh (Awadh) cleverly from the Nawab and demolished the art forms, architectures, buildings, baghs that were the centre of survival for the dancers, singers, instrument players. The practitioners of kathak like Bindadin Maharaj ji, Kalka Prasad Ji, Achhan Maharaj Ji, Lacchu Maharaj Ji, Birju Maharaj ji, were fortunate enough to maintain the 'Lucknow Gharana' after the independence of India. "Established in 1952, Bhatiya Kala Kendra was one of the first of its kind, a private institution of Classical Dance and Music. Following independence, a great resurgence of Classical art, music, and dance took hold of the nation, resulting in the institutionalization of these forms."⁶ As an effort by them, various other institutions were inaugurated to promote the kathak form under the GURU- SHISHYA PARAMPARA. With the changing trends and the need of earning money, these gurus worked as tutors of kathak in different fields. "Lachhu Maharaj taught Kathak in Bombay and created several ballets, the most important being Malti Madhav. He experimented with using Kathak for films and often worked in conjunction with the Dagar brothers, Moinuddin and Aminuddin, the leading exponents of the Dhrupad style of north Indian classical music."⁷ Where as Shambhu and Birju Maharaj ji delivered their services at the Bhartiya Kala Kendra (which is known as Kathak Kendra in today's time in New Delhi). "Pandit Narayana Prasad in Ghandharva Mahavidhyalya, Guru Lacchu Maharaj in the kathak Kendra of Uttar Pradesh, Sangeet Natak Academy, Lucknow, Pt. Birju Maharaj, Guru Kundan Lal Gangani and Pt. Durga Lal in Kathak Kendra, Delhi and Maharaj Krishna Kumar worked in Triveni Kala Sangam."⁸ Birju Maharaj ji initiated a series 'Learn Kathak Online with Birju Maharaj' which was telecasts on Doordarshan channel in the 90s. It showcased the exact teaching atmosphere as he used to dictate, compose, padhant and play table and pakhawaj while teaching his students. This became a convention that art lovers accepted and participated in, enthusiastically. It will serve as a repository, that will always act as a primary source for the persons in this field. The whole initiative and credit goes to the team of "Doordarshan" that made it possible to take kathak to the every door across the India.

This not only helped in boosting kathak but also provided various sources of income to work as a choreographer, musician, dancer, singer, accompanist in the films, songs and documentaries. Birju Maharaj ji got the opportunity, to choreograph a masterpiece in the very famous film- "Shatranj Ke Khiladi", his very beloved disciple 'Sashwati Sen' acted as a Mughal court dancer and mesmerised everyone with her grace.

⁵ Narayan, Shovana, Kathak. Wisdom Tree, New Delhi, 2004 pg.- 20.

⁶ Shah, Reena, Movement in stills, The Dance and life of Kumudini Lakhia, Mapin Publishing Pvt.Ltd., Ahmedabad, 2005, Pg-82.

⁷ Massey, Reginald, India's Kathak Dance Past, Present, Future. Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1999 pg-28,29.

⁸ Walia, Aarohi, Glimpses of Indian Classical Dances, Unistar Books Pvt. Ltd, Chandigarh, 2013, pg -59.

³ Bajpai, Gyanendra Dutt, Textbook of Dance, Pg-2

⁴ Massey, Reginald, India's Kathak Dance Past, Present, Future. Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1999 pg-15

Figure 1⁹Figure 2¹⁰.

With the blend in time, the teaching techniques of the dance changed. Guru- Shishya Parampara was meant to be the only way to teach and pass on the knowledge. "There the students lived with their teacher (Guru) and the members of his family (Kula) in the Guru's house (Gurugraha) or hermitage of a Rishi (Rishi Ashram). This brought the teacher and the taught in a very close contact, in a solitary environment, amid sylvan surroundings, beyond the distractions of urban life, which helped in influencing and moulding the life of pupils."¹¹ With the challenge of institutionalization this Parampara could not make it to that level. It can be said that the earlier Gurus taught according to their own mind setups but today the Guru has to teach according to the capability, speed, discipline, intelligence etc of the students. It has come up as a major drawback as the students are not able to grasp the skills properly because of the curriculum being practised in the institutions in comparison to the guru shishya Parampara which was practised far away from the residential areas in the earlier times with a vision that there would not be any distraction for the students. They (students) were not only taught the various martial arts, dance forms, singing, archery but also the ways of leading a disciplined life. "Things have changed much now. Neither are the gurukuls nor disciples. Time makes everything undergo change, nothing remains the same, yet guru shishya is worst affected by the growing greed of material possessions."¹²

Kathak dance maintained its uniqueness and continued to attract the common masses with its imitating styling techniques. With due respect to these styles Kathak was able to produce many different 'Gharanas' that were associated historically as well as artistically. The founders of the each Gharana were very well versed in the fields of arts and music. They lived very simple lives and were succeeded in uprooting Kathak forward to many generations. The names of the Gharanas are Lucknow, Benaras, Jaipur, Raigarh (Parampara) among them Lucknow and Jaipur are considered to be the two main schools of Kathak by the contemporaries. "The Lucknow Gharana Developed in and around Lucknow under the patronage of Mogul emperors, while the Jaipur Gharana, as the name implies, was supported by the Rajas of what is now Rajasthan, with its centre being the Amber Palace in Jaipur."¹³ A critic, Ally Adnan mentioned about another Gharana that was founded by Maharaj Ghulam Hussain, who, later became the disciple of Achhan Maharaj ji. After the partition, Maharaj ji migrated to Pakistan and continued to teach Kathak there. Many of the disciples who practised this gharana were Nahid Siddiqi, Nighat Chaudary, Fasih Ur Rehman, Amy Minwala and Panna that carried his legacy forward over the 20 years in Pakistan. No evidence is required, if one asks for the contributions of these Gurus and their disciples in the journey of Kathak, centuries say it all. Developing different schools to promote Kathak and other classical forms have been an appreciated initiative from the beings around. Carrying the students from their initial stage of dance to its advance stage have been the outcome of these institutions or schools. "Apart from the Kathak Kendra there is also in Delhi the Bhartiya Sangeet Sadan headed by Uma Sharma. In Ahmedabad, the Kadamb Centre for Dance and Music, founded by Kumudini Lakhia, has earned a high reputation as has Lucknow's Bhatkhande Sangeet Vidyapith."¹⁴ Another excellent centre for Dance and music- 'KALASHRAM', was set up by Late Pt. Birju Maharaj Ji.

From carrying a pattern of a Solo performance, the dance has shifted to group choreographies with little and different amendments in presenting the themes. Talking about the 'Ahraya abhinaya' which means the attire that a dancer adapts during the performance has taken a new and creative turn. With due respect to the early Kathakars, who dressed for the Kathak recitals according to their respective gharanas or styles, were very absolute and determined about the costume while dancing. Every religion such as Hindu or Muslim, had their own features, "Among the Hindu Costumes, the oldest and that which is most generally used is the 'ghagra and orhni'. The ghagra is a long, very full, gathered skirt with a broad gold or silver border. The choli, worn with the ghagra is usually of a contrasting colour and has embroidered sleeve-bands. The light, transparent orhni is interwoven with gold and draped over the head and left shoulder."¹⁵ Whereas in Lucknow style we can see long anarkalis with jackets covering the upper body and a choordidarpaijami. As the area of dance was a typical 'mehfil' style during Mughal period, the costumes were made to attract the emperors and neglecting the actual authentic showcase of the Kathak dance. Picturising Kathak today, one can see experimentation on a large level by the Kathak maestros like

⁹<https://www.oneindia.com/india/i-don-t-believe-fusion-kathak-legend-birju-maharaj-2257748.html>

¹⁰<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/290271138452910639/>

¹¹ Jha, Rajeev Indramani, Kathak Dance Education Contemporary Systems, Problems and Suggestions Volume – I, B. R. Rhythms Delhi, 2015, pg. -3

¹² Koser, Shobha, An Exposition of Classical Dances of India (with special

reference to Kathak), Abhishek Publications, Chandigarh, 2010. Pg – 119.

¹³ Shah, Reena, Movement in stills, The Dance and life of Kumudini Lakhia, Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., Ahmedabad, 2005, Pg-97.

¹⁴ Massey, Reginald, India's Kathak Dance Past, Present, Future. Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1999 pg-51.

¹⁵ Ibid, pg.-30.

Shoavana Narayan, Aditi mangal das, Kumudini Lakhiya, Late Pt. Birju Maharaj Ji, many more. The Drishtikon dance Foundation owned by Aditi Mangal Das has set the new levels for kathak in her productions like 'Inter_rupted', 'Uncharted Seas', 'Infinite-Journey', 'Timeless' and much more. A wide range of movements in an experimented manner can be seen in the production 'Meraki' by Kumudini Lakhia Ji. Variations in the costumes and innovations in the live music are something that are very remarkable.



Figure 3.¹⁶



Figure 4.

(Some of the stills from the 'Meraki' Production by Kumudini Ji's Kadamb Dance Centre). Apart from that, today's generation misunderstands 'kathak' with 'kathakali' as they find them similar because of their first names. Also kathak is perceived to be the dance form that only has chakkars and the speed of these chakkars (spins) varies from dancer to dancer. But this is not true at all, 'kathak' is much more than we all think and much deeper ocean of art.

The rhythmic patterns, the footwork, the Satvik abhinaya are some of the important components that keep the dance captivate. Audiences can relate to the themes because of its grammar, its wide range of gesticulation that allows each dancer to fly on stage and beautifully express him or herself. Yes, with the growing trend, it seems that much more modifications are on their way in Kathak and it's the very essential duty of the today's kathakars or Kathak practitioners to keep the authenticity alive and should teach their students the genuine 'kathak'. Many famous dance festivals are held every year that celebrate different reputed artists from all corners of the world. It is a huge victory for the kathak dance to be practised not only in India but also in countries like Canada, America, France, England, Europe and many more.



(Konark Dance Festival, Orissa)

Figure 5

Government bodies like Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), Indian Council of Social Science and Research (ICCSR) also provide scholarships to all those who tend to research in this field. More dance schools should be encouraged by the government so that it helps the generations to promote the heritage, the culture of India as well.

¹⁶<https://kadamb.net/meraki.html>