

KATHAK

A DYNAMIC SYNTHESIS



One of the most well known of the seven classical dance form of India, it traces its origins to the period of the great Epics when the term “Kathak” was originally coined to denote a storyteller. The role of the Kathak or story tellers was to teach as well as to entertain. They used to sing & dance, narrate, enact & mime stories from the Ramayana, the Mahabharat & the Puranas in the Temple Courtyards & Village Squares. These nomadic bards of Northern India specialized in recounting mythological & moral tales from the scriptures & embellished their recitals with hand gestures & facial expressions & eventually the word Kathak evolved to encompass the classical dance form.

The performing arts in India have deep rooted traditions that span the country, nurtured too, by the cultural influences down the ages of different people who came here & made this country their home. Through a confluence of culture the Indian spirit has managed to assimilate her own rich indigenous values & traditions with the very best of foreign traditions. This meeting, merging of aesthetic forms. The Kathak Dance is an appropriate example of one such form.

In time, this dance became a distinct part of the social organization and has kept changing from one period to another. Originally, it had its roots in religion, flourishing under

the vast spiritual empire established in the North India & enjoying the patronage of temples, priests & devotees. Eventually, with the advent of the Mughals & especially in the time of Akbar [1556 – 1605] dance ceased to be accepted as a form of worship & shifted its place from the temples to the royal courts. With rhythm & stylized mime it became a sophisticated chamber art. The rulers of the time, brought with them traditions from Persia & naturally these merged with the existing dance forms in India. In fact Kathak is the only dance form that has a synthesis of Hindu & Muslim Cultures.

Although later Indian rulers like the Marathas, the Sikhs and the Nawabs of Oudh patronized this art, it was neglected under the British and went through a period of oblivion. It was only because of the dedicated effort on the part of many masters of the art, that Kathak was revived in the 1930's and with an enlightened cultural policy followed by the Government to preserve our artistic legacy; the dance has now crossed all frontiers to attain a substantial measures of international recognition.



Kathak – Expressional Dance

Today, Kathak is characterized by flowing lyrical movements, fast rhythmic footwork set to complex time cycles and an in depth interpretive aspect that is brought forth in abhinaya or expressive pieces. The pure dance sequences are matched by the accompanying percussion instruments such as the Tabla and Pakhwaj and the Dancer and the Percussionists often give themselves to a virtuoso display of rhythmic wizardry. The dance movements include numerous pirouettes executed at lightening speed and ending in statuesque poses. Kathak strongly adheres to tradition and yet develops in new directions.

A traditional Kathak performance features a solo dancer. The repertoire includes Amad [entry' in Persian; this is the first introduction of spoken rhythmic pattern or bol into the performances and the composition uses variations of the bols 'ta, thai, tat'], Thaata [first composition of a traditional performance ending in a statuesque pose], Tukda, Tora [abstract dance compositions] & Paran [a composition using bols from the Pakhawaj instead of only dance or table bol], Padhant [recitation of a rhythmic pattern – Tihai, Tukda, Paran, etc.] & Tatkaar [Footwork].



Instruments uses in Kathak Dance



Ghunghroo

FORM [TECHNIQUE]

As in all classical dance forms of India, Kathak too has three major dance aspects – the Nritta or Pure Dance, the Abhinaya or Expressional Dance and the Natya or the Dance-drama.

Nritta or Pure Dance is dependant on the Tala which denotes the time cycle & the Laya which denotes the speed or tempo of the dance. A dancer's composition is based on the rhythmic beats called Bols woven intricately in the Tala & the Laya. Beginning in a slow tempo the dancer employees the subtle use of wrists, neck & eye movements [in Thaata & Amad] and gradually traverses through various compositions – culminating in the Tala presentation in the Drut or fast tempo. During Tatkaar; the Dancer displays her command over the rhythmic & laya aspects of Kathak, through complex footwork.



Kumudini Lakhia

Traditionally, there are between a 100 & 200 Ghunghroos tied around the anklets that act as the dancer's instruments to convey the sound patterns. A unique feature performed by some dancers is to maintain a steady balance and produce the sound of a single Ghunghroo. The Tabla, Pakhavaj, Sarangi, Sitar, Sarod, Flute & the Harmonium accompany pure dance performance.

Nrittya or Abhinaya is in fact where the term Kathak originated from. It speaks of the expressional aspect of the dance, that of storytelling. Dancers enact a story to the accompaniment of a song performed by the vocalist. Many well known Kathak Gurus & exponents have been accomplished singers as well. The hallmark of this aspect is to improvise varied of moods & emotions. Besides performing to vocal accompaniment there is one part of Abhinaya called Gatbhava that is very similar to mime – the dancer enacting stories only through movements & expressions.

Over a period of time, Kathak has assimilated many hues and colours, keeping pace with the social changes of times. This is evident in Abhinaya. For example, the Muslim Influence seen in the enactment of Abhinaya set to a Gazal in the Urdu Language, or Abhinaya based on modern poetry & verse.



Pt. Birju Maharaj

Natya is the dance drama aspect of Kathak. The Raaslilas of Braj & Mathura, or the Krishna, Radha & Gopi sequences epitomize the dramatic tradition of Kathak. These ballets narrate stories & events from Krishna's life. Primarily a solo dance form, there have been great presentations of group choreography and Natya by dancers like Pt. Birju Maharaj & Kumudini Lakhia that encompass both traditional & contemporary themes. The costume of a male dancer includes a dhoti, a tight Angarkha or a Chooridar – Pyjama, a belt and a scarf across the body or a Kurta. A woman dancer wears a Chooridar – Pyjama with a long sleeved flowing Angarkha or a Ghagra [long skirt] & Choli [Blouse] & lots of ornaments.

MUSIC

Hindustani classical music that is used in Kathak has essentially developed in the North of India. While at first it was to the chants of Vedas & Kirtans & Dhrupad that Kathak compositions were rendered, the dance later also included in its repertoire the Thumri, Dadra & Gazal of the Mughal Courts. The rhythmic variations of Hindustani classical music have been interwoven in Kathak in a fascinating manner. As also the rhythmic dialogue between the percussionist and the dancers makes for interesting viewing. Similar to North Indian Music the element of improvisation too, holds great importance in Kathak which comes to the fore in the foot work or Tatkaar.

THE GHARANA



Pt. Birju Maharaj

The concept of Gharana is peculiar to North Indian Art forms. It literally means 'The House of the Teacher' & is closely linked to the Guru – Shishya Parampara [Lineage of Teacher – Disciple]. A Gharana can only be called so if the art or style has been in the family for three generations. The names of Gharana are derived from the city that the founder belonged to. This system is about 300 years old. In the artistic sense, one can compare a Gharana are entrusted with the duty of maintaining a certain tradition of dance. Kathak today is classified into three important Gharanas or Schools of thought, each with well defined system of values that distinguishes them from the others. Originally it was a family profession passed on from one generation to another, each taking pride in the pursuit of excellence.



LUCKNOW GHARANA



Lucknow Gharana

This Gharana originated with Shri Iswariprasadji in Uttar Pradesh and today Pt. Birju Maharaj is his 7TH direct descendent. Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of Oudh, himself a student of dance, emphasized dramatic & sensuous expression. This Gharana received great patronage during his reign, with Thakur Prasadji being the court dancer at that time. This style distinguishes itself by the beauty & delicacy of movements imbued with a lyrical quality in the Abhinaya. The beauty of the posture is reminiscent of Mughal Miniature Paintings. The great masters of this form were Kalka Prasad, Bindadin Maharaj, Lachhu Maharaj, Shambhu Maharaj, & Achchan Maharaj. Birju Maharaj personifies contemporary Kathak with extraordinary beauty & grace and an amazing command over rhythm.

JAIPUR GHARANA



Jaipur Gharana

In contrast to the soft flowing movements of the Lucknow Gharana, the Jaipur Gharana lays stress on vigorous & forceful movements. Developed under the royal patronage of the rulers of Rajasthan and nurtured by a galaxy of grand masters, this school of thought is remarkable for its variety and intricately of long Parans. And the Abhinaya too was largely Bhakti based. The masters of this Gharana include Guru Sunder Prasadji, Guru Kundanlal Gangani, Roshankumari & Pandit Durgalal.

BENARAS GHARANA [Also Known as Janaki Prasad Gharana]



Benaras Gharana

Janaki Prasad Gharana from Bikaner in Rajasthan went over to Benaras and developed his special school of dance, which eventually acquired this name. Some of the exemplary dancers of this Gharana were and are Guru Pandit Krisna Kumar, Pandit Sukhdev Prasad & Sunaina Hazarilal.

Today, Kathak has moved from Temples & Village courtyard, Royal Courts & Mansions of Zamindars & patrons to concert platforms in towns & cities. The practitioners have changed from professional court dancers to the educated young & despite various demands; the dance has managed to survive, retaining its identity and character.

Combining the spiritual fervour of the Hindu Temple with complex performing techniques developed in the Mughal Courts, the Kathak Dance Tradition in the 21ST Century continues to evolve through dancers in India & throughout the world. With a contemporary outlook to an age-old tradition, Kathak responds to an increasingly global culture.

