

*Rhythmic Echoes and Reflections*

# KATHAK

SHOVANA NARAYAN



Lotus Collection

© Shovana Narayan 1998

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior permission of the publisher.

This edition first published 1998

Reprinted 2001

The Lotus Collection

An imprint of

Roli Books Pvt Ltd

M-75, G.K. II Market

New Delhi 110 048

Phones: 6442271, 6462782, 6460886

Fax: 6467185

E-mail: [roli@vsnl.com](mailto:roli@vsnl.com), Website: [rolibooks.com](http://rolibooks.com)

Also at

Varanasi, Agra, Jaipur and the Netherlands

ISBN: 81-7436-049-2

Rs. 250

Cover: Krishna's ring dance. Kangra, 1815; 41.5 x 31 cm  
C.L. Bharani Collection

Photo Credits: Alok Kumar Jain p. 30 (left), p. 31 (left);  
Ashwini Chopra p. 30 (right).

Typeset in Galliard by Roli Books Pvt Ltd and  
printed at Pritha Offsets Pvt Ltd, New Delhi-110 028

# Contents

KATHAK	7
CLASSICAL DANCE FORMS	43
KATHAK AND THE SHASTRAS	51
SYMBOLISM IN DANCE POETICS	83
DANCE AND MUSIC	97
COSTUMES AND INSTRUMENTS	111
PATRONAGE AND SCHOOLS	125
CHANGING AESTHETICS	137
EMOTIONS, GESTURES AND MOVEMENTS	147
SUMMARY	155
SELECT READINGS	164
APPENDIX	167

## Kathak



Dance and music have always played an important part in India's religions and social life. Its rich culture and religious and philosophical thoughts have evolved over 5000 years as a result of interculturalism of the pre-Aryan and Aryan practices and concepts. The beauty of creation inspired a sense of wonder and humility before this 'power'. Worship which grew out of this sure of awe utilised dance as its vehicle of expression. The various evidences available in the last 2500 years from the Indus-Gangetic region reveals the presence of dance in the region which was performed by both men and women. The stories of the bards from which epic compositions originated, lent themselves to dance and music presentations. These were the 'Kathaks' or the 'kushilavs' of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, 'kauthumaris', 'nautankis', 'rasadharis' and 'swaangs' in the Gangetic belt. The Amarkosha refers to the 'kushilavs' as:

*shailalinastu shailusha jayajeeva krishashwinah  
bharat ityapi natashcharanastu kushilavah*

(shailali, shailusha, jayajeeva, krishashvi, bhārata, nata, charana and kushilav are the six names of 'natas').

In the *Kalpadruma*, the 'kushilava' has been described as those who practice the art of drama through story-telling:

*kushilava vrityārtha natyashastra pracharkatvat valmiki  
muniti*

According to the *Natyashastra*, 'kushilava' are persons well-versed in music and dramatics and are able to utilise their creative faculties. 'Kushilavs', who are also known as 'charanas', are referred to in the *Sangeet Ratnakar* as those who narrate and have absolute knowledge of all the 'ragas', dance and ankle-bells, the latter being also used as musical instruments:

*kinkinivadhvedi ca vritto vikatnartakaih  
marmagayah sarvarageshu chaturashcharano matah*

The 'Kathakas' of the *Mahabharata* were a special group of story-telling brahmins, establishing identifying ties with the Kathak tradition of our day. In a passage in the Arjunavanvasa section of the Adiparva in the *Mahabharata*, there is an indirect reference to the art practised by the Kathaks:

*Kathakascapare rajan sramanasca vanaukasah  
divyakhyananani ye capi pathanti madhuram dvijah*

(Arjun, on his departure for the forest, was accompanied by an entourage of Kathaks and forest dwelling ascetics

and brahmins who recited sweetly the divine tales).

Thus, the skill of the Kathaks in articulation was a professional characteristic and they, therefore, belonged to that class of men whose work was associated with oral meditations in the sacred traditions.

Indication that the Kathaks were brahmins are given in the Anusasnikaparva of the *Mahabharata*, in an enumeration of the various kinds of brahmins who ranked above those brahmins conducting the 'sraddhas' (ceremony following death):

*gayana nartakascai' va plavaka vadakastakha*  
*Kathaka yodhakascai' va rajan na rhanti ketanam*

(singers, dancers, rope dancers, instrumentalists, Kathaks and fighters are not to be invited, O'king).

These references indicate the existence of dancing story-tellers in the pre-Christian era. Thus, it appears that Kathak, as the name suggests, originated in the Indus-Gangetic belt where the brahmins (priests) while recounting stories based on Hindu mythology reached the point of ecstasy in their devotion which manifested itself through the medium of dance. This dance form danced by the Kathakas or Kathaks in the ecstasy of their devotion was called Kathak derived from the words 'Kathakar' (story-teller) and 'katha' (story).

The *Kathasaritasagar* (11th century AD) records King Sahasratika listening to a Kathaka, Sangataka. Kaiyata (10th century AD) has equated the 'Kathaka' and the 'granthika' in his commentary Bhashyapradiga as both classes being synonymous in their professions. Sharangadeva's Sangeet Ratnakar (13th century AD) mentions the existence of 'kauthumari' i.e. singing accompanied by acting in the Samaveda as practised by the 'kauthums' and Guru Tumburu.

In the 7th chapter of the *Sangeet Ratnakar*, mention has been made of the Kathaks which is as follows:

*Kathaka bandinaschatra vidyavantah priyamvadah  
prashansakulashchanye chaturah sarvamatushu*

(the Kathakas, the devotees, the enlightened etc. who recite sweetly, win the hearts of . . . .)

According to *Abhidan Rajendra*, the Jain lexicon, 'kathya' means a type of music composition and 'kahaga' and 'kahub' as one who narrates the story in a vivid manner, find mention in the Kalpasutra and other Jain works. According to various Jain munis, the 'dharma' (profession) of the Kathak is to enact the stories through dance as expressed in the following shloka: *katha akoorti nibah*:

While 'kathiko' means a preacher in the Pali dictionary and an 'actor' in the Nepali dictionary, Kathak denotes a story-teller in the Sanskrit dictionary. The Kathak is a person who preaches the stories through the medium of acting: *kathayati yah sah Kathakah*.

There is also a reference to the 'Sumati Kathaks' in the *Ragatarangini* of Lochan (17th century) who were those brahmins who enacted out stories from the *Puranas* to Raja Sumati. In the *Ain-e-Akbari*, Abul Fazal has mentioned two distinct categories of male dancers, namely the professional dancers called 'natas' or 'natwas' and the 'brahmin' dancers called 'kirtaniyas' or 'Kathakiyas'.

William Crooke's census figures of 1891 indicate the presence of 569 Kathaks in Gorakhpur, 215 Kathaks in Azamgarh, 210 Kathaks in Rai Bareli and 149 Kathaks in Partapgarh. Similarly, the census conducted by James Prinsep in 1825 and Buchanan in 1814 in the regions of Benaras and Bihar respectively indicate the existence of more than hundred and fifty eight Kathak families together.

Simultaneously, the 'ras-leela' tradition of the 'rasdharis' of Brindaban and the 'bhaktiyas', the 'nrityakalis' and the 'jhumariyas' of various regions of Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, which had their birth during the Bhakti Movement (religious renaissance) sometime in the 14th and 15th centuries, are based on the Katha tradition.

A close interaction of religion with dance interwoven with the powerful impulse for expression became a way of life in Vedic India. Chanting of the Riga-vedic hymns was accompanied by ritual dancing. From a review of the music and dance scenario of the region, it emerges that:

- a) Dance was associated with rituals.
- b) Both men and women danced.
- c) Study of music and dance was part of the education process of royal princes and princesses.
- d) There existed many categories of dancers: the common people as well as the highly skilled professional groups.
- e) Amongst the professional groups, there were the exalted courtesan dancers and the temple dancers (the demarcation between the two was often blurred) as well as groups of male dancing priests.
- f) There existed some difference between the 'margi' and the 'desi' namely the classical and folk approaches, thus supporting the existence of highly trained professional groups of dancers together with dance as part of community activity.
- g) The references to 'apsaras' and 'yakshinis' as celestial dancers or water nymphs were allegories for extremely skilled and beautiful dancers.
- h) The style of dance danced in the temples or the courts was essentially the same.

In the Vedic age, prevalence of music and dance in society can be gleaned from various shlokas. The *Rigaveda* has

likened dance to nectar while the Prithvisookt in the *Atharvaveda* describe the singing and dancing people on earth as *yasyam gayanti nrityanti bhumyanmartyah*.

In the following verse of the *Samaveda*, the importance of 'gandharva veda' relating to music and dance can be seen:

*vachamashtapdeemaham  
navastraktimritavridhamindrat  
paritanvam mame*

(I receive from God, the knowledge of the vast, eight footed Vedic speech consisting of the riga -*yajur-sama-atharva*- vedas and the four upavedas namely *ajurveda* (medicine), *dhanurveda* (military science), *gandharva veda* (music and dance) and *arthaveda* (political science)).

*Samagana* was a very special feature of Vedic times. In the tenth adhyaya of the *Bhagwada Gita*, Lord Krishna declares, 'I am *Samaveda* among the Vedas'. Next to the Vedas are the two great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The existence of dancers are evident at the time of Lord Rama's coronation at Ayodhya.

*natnartaka sanghanam gayakam ca' gayatam  
yatakarnasukhavachah sushrava janta tatah*

(the people are entranced by hearing the sweet words in the dance of the dancers and the songs of the singers).

The Ayodhyakand of *Ramayana* reveals that Lord Rama, as a young prince, was trained in the 'gandharva veda' and was, therefore, adept in the art of music and dance. He has often been referred to as the 'gandharvaraja'. In the *Mahabharata*, Arjun is supposed to have been an

accomplished dancer having learnt the art from 'gandharva' Chitrasena:

*geetamvaditram nrityani bhooya evadideshab  
tathapi talamachbarma tarasyi drutkaritam  
sa shikshito nrityagunananekan vaditra  
geetartha gunascha sarvan  
na sharmalebhe parveerbhanta bhratrina  
smaranmatarshchaiva kuntim*

(Well-versed in the arts of music and dance, Arjun, the victor over ruthless enemies, obeyed the advice of Kunti).

Furthermore, during his period of incognito exile, Arjun, as the eunuch Brihanalla, taught the art of dance to Uttara, daughter of King Virat of Matsya, the area between Alwar and Jaipur.

The Puranic period (4th century to 8th century AD approximately) saw many references to dance and dancers. According to the *Vishnupuran*, the mother of Vishal of the Ikshvaku dynasty at Vaishali, was an 'apsara' by the name of Alambusha, proficient in the arts of music and dance. The various Upanishads also refer to the existence of music and dance. In the *Vrihadaranyakopnishad*, there is a reference to Rishi Yagyavalkya who lived during the time of Raja Janak at Mithila and who believed that the practice of the fine arts were paths to 'moksha' (salvation).

Many references to dancers have been made in various Buddhist and Jain canons.

The sixth century BC in India saw the emergence of two new faiths: Jainism and Buddhism. During the pre-Mauryan, Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods, a prolific system of music and dance flourished as is evident from eminent dancers such as Amrapali, Salvati, Padmavati, Roopkosha, Upkosha, etc. Similarly, the curriculum at

Nalanda University had music and dance as its subjects.

The importance of the involvement of artistes and dancers in the state administration has been dwelt upon by Chanakya (or Kautilya), prime minister during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya, in his *Arthashastra* (a treatise on state administration). There was a flowering of art and architecture, the use of script and the system of 'shrenis' (guilds), the latter giving rise to hereditary professions. Music and dance became an integral part of each household. Specialised knowledge began to be handed down from father to son even while disseminating the art amongst the common people. There was a clear distinction between the trained dancers and the common dancers. Differences between skilled and trained dancers and popular dancers have been given in the *Arthashastra* and also in the *Samaveda*. Difference between 'ganikas' (courtesans) and the trained courtesan dancers and the 'nartakas' (dancers) have been highlighted in the 'rasyaranga' episode of the *Ramayana* where the categories of the 'natas', 'nartakas' and 'ganikas' are mentioned distinctly and also the fact that no festivity or ceremonial occasions could take place without them. The 'apsaras' were also taken to be excellent courtesan dancers. In a few references, the 'ganikas' seem to refer to those courtesans whose main forte lay in singing and music. There was also the distinct group of the 'kushilavs' and the 'Kathakas' associated with the art of story-telling. The dance teachers have been referred to as the 'sailusa' in the *Ayodhyakand* of Valmiki's *Ramayana* as well as in the *Yajurveda* and bears a close relation to the 'silalin' of Panini and Bharata's *Natyashastra* and the 'sailali' of the *Harshacharita*. Kautilya has differentiated between the 'nartaka' and the 'kushilava'. While the former was a trained dancer, the latter was a story-teller through dance. He also maintains a difference between a temple-associated dancer and a classical dancer but these fine distinctions overlap in other subsequent works.

Mention has been made about the movement of professional groups of artistes from one place to another involving a maximum stay of 15 days during the monsoons. The *Arthashastra* also refers to the members of the royal household being trained in the fine arts. As Patliputra was the capital and, therefore, the political centre during the Mauryan times, the experience of Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya is significant. In his *Indica*, he dwells on dances for rituals and comments on the dance halls attached to temples and palaces. Various Buddhist stories and the Vinay texts reveal the presence of many courtesan dancers such as Amrapali (or Ambapali), Salvati, Padmavati and Vimla. It emerges that the pre-Mauryan and Mauryan period saw the 'nagar badhu' (state dancer) system at Vaishali and Patliputra, implying the high standards of perfection attained in dance along with the power and prestige supposedly enjoyed by them. Many Jain texts such as the *Brihatkalpa*, *Srikalpasutra*, *Vayadhammakaha*, mention.

In the *Uttarapithika*, Ragamanjari is a woman described with rare artistic endowment whose dances in the 'pancavira goshti' have been praised. Similarly, like the 'samajjas' of the Lichhavis, the 'nrityagoshtis' have been mentioned in the *Harshacharita* along with 'sailali', 'nartaki' and the 'lasaka' categories of dancers. Dances such as the 'hallisaka', 'charchari' or 'natyarasaka' and 'rasa' find mention in Bhasa's *Balcharita*, Harsha's *Ratnavali* and the *Bhagwadpurana* respectively.

Panikkar writes 'among the 64 arts which a well-educated man was supposed to know, dancing and music ranked high'. Vatsyayan, while describing the life of a citizen mentions the keeping of musical instruments thereby indicating 'the interest of every household in fine arts'.

Patliputra continued to be the centre of political power even during the Gupta period which saw the golden age of

classicism in ancient India. This period saw the flowering literary, cultural, social and political activities and also saw both the Mahayana and Hinayana forms of Buddhism flourishing throughout the empire. At the same time, Hinduism was revived and reached its golden age.

Many compilations of literary works were done during this period. Most of the Gupta rulers were proficient in the fine arts of music and dance, with Samudragupta being the outstanding artiste amongst members of this royal dynasty. He himself was an accomplished 'veena' player (displayed on the coins of his period), and also patronised writers and artistes. The *Kathasaritasagar* refers to Patliputra (present day Patna in Bihar) as an abode of culture, learning and fine arts. The written accounts of various Chinese travellers such as Fahien (in 399-411 AD during the reign of Vikramaditya), Hiuen-tsang (around 606 AD during the reign of Harshavardhana) and Itsing, refer to the prevalence of music and dance in daily life. Fahien describes the *rathyatras* (chariot festivals) taken out at Patliputra every year on the 8th day of the second month preceded by a galaxy of musicians and dancers.

Efflorescence and fulfillment of the gradual development in the field of arts were achieved to a degree of perfection never achieved before in the realms of music, dance, literature, drama, sculpture, architecture and the plastic arts. Decorations on pillars and friezes while giving an extremely rich and baroque effect have provided an insight into the form of dance prevalent then. Of the few surviving gems of the Gupta period, the reliefs and figures in the temples at Deogarh reveal, the 'sense of emergence from the limitless background; their faces reveal a rapt, entranced expression of absorption in their own being; and the forms move in each curvilinear rhythm, their contours intermingling with the fluidity of waves or flames.' Sanskrit was the language of the educated upper caste while Pali and Prakrit, the

popular forms of Sanskrit, were spoken in towns and villages. This too, had its local variations: Shauraseni in the west and Magadhi in the east. Thus the usage of local languages and dialects such as Brajbhasha, Avadhi, Bhojpuri and Rajasthani in Kathak today is a logical development.

By the 10th century, signs of decay had become visible. Toynbee believes there was a weakening of the 'ancient spirit and characteristic soul'. Nonetheless, works of Raja Nanyadeva of the 10th -11th century of the Karnat dynasty at Mithila point to the continuing practice of music and dance in certain pockets of the Gangetic belt. The treatise, *Saraswati Hridayalankar* popularly known as *Bharatbhashya* and authored by Nanyadeva throws light on the various ragas in usage and its effect on the delineation of expression.

The establishment of Muslim rule in India witnessed a religious renaissance: the Bhakti Movement. With the rise of Vaishnavism as a consequence of the Bhakti Movement, the Gangetic belt witnessed a spurt in literature, poetry and dance. As mentioned in the book *Rasasarvaswa* in the 15th century, Swami Haridas encouraged Vithalnath, son of Vallabhacharya, to stage the *rasa*, a dance sequence woven around Lord Krishna. Ghamand Deva and later Narayan Bhatt revived the *ras-leela* in the area. Shri Vallabha, a Kathak from Rajasthan, was invited to Karhela near Vrindaban, in order to help stage the *leela*. Thus, the staging of the *ras-leela* gained ground with young boys, enacting the roles of Lord Krishna, Radha and the gopis (cow-maidens). The themes based on verses of poets including the *ashtachhap* poets from the Bhakti Movement namely, Haridas, Namdev, Surdas, Nand Das, Parmanand, Kumbhadas, Krishnadas, Chaturbhujdas, Govindaswami and Chittaswami were sung in the Dhrupad style and enacted out with mime and dance involving simple *toras-tukras* or rhythmic patterns in a simplistic Kathak style.

The *leela* shows begin with the traditional 'manglacharan' (an obeisance to the lord) followed by 'arti' (circling lights

before an image), 'gopi prarthana' (prayer of the maidens), 'Radha prarthana' (prayer of Radha), 'rasa' (dance of Lord Krishna), 'leela' (sportive play) and 'pravachan' (exposition). At this point of time, the mobility of the Kathaks of western parts of India led them to newer pastures west of the Hindukush mountains. These Kathaks later retained the characteristic flavour of footwork, body language and some of the hand gestures but imbibed many Arabic and Judaic nuances during their travels resulting in the flamenco dance form of the Andalusian region of Spain.

In another stream of development, a small group of Kathaks especially in the regions of Rajasthan, Gujarat and western Madhya Pradesh introduced the 'kala-baazi': sensational aspects within the dance form such as dancing on the edge of a brass-plate, on a bed of 'gula' (red powder), on beds of nails, swords and 'batasha' (sugar puffs) in a bid to please the local chieftains and rulers. As of today, there are very few surviving performers who stress these sensational aspects. However, the 'bhavai nritya' of western India has kept the tradition alive. Abul Fazal in his *Ain-e-Akbari*, has mentioned the dances of the 'bhanvaiya' (or 'bhavaiya') who danced on 'thalis' (brass plates).

With the establishment of Muslim rule, rigid imposition of the 'purdah' (veil) and early marriages affected the practice of the arts. The emphasis was on architecture, music and painting by the early Mughals while some of the later Mughals indulged in entertainment and gave patronage to musicians and dancers. Some of the Persian dances of the medieval period such as those of the 'hourinis' (or 'hourkinis'), 'domnis' and 'lolonis' which were on simplistic lines, were integrated into the fabric of Indian society. As with the case of 'apsara' of the Hindu mythology, a beautiful dancer is referred to as an 'apsara' or 'hourini' in various myths.

But the approach to music and dance as religious offerings practised by the Hindus was not in conformity

with the principles of Islam and, therefore, it was not surprising to see localisation of the dance form. Some patronage was given to Kathak and the associated groups of dancers during the reign of Emperor Akbar owing to the influence of his Rajput Hindu wife, Jodhabai. However, the fullest expression of patronage came later with Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Oudh (or Awadh) who was not only an accomplished poet but also a student of Kathak.

In pockets where Hindu rulers reigned, there still continued the tradition of patronage to music and dance as is evident from various works such as the *Sri Hastamuktavali* (a treatise on hand gestures as utilised in dance) by Shubhankar of Mithila and *Sangeet Damodar* (treatise on music), the *Varnaratnakar* (a treatise on music and dance) by Jyotishwar Thakur and the *Ragatarangini* by Lochan.

The *Ain-e-Akbari* of Abul Fazl also details the classification of dancers, instruments, music, themes and treatment within music and dance. A contemporary of Vallabhacharya, Guru Nanak (1469-1538) in his hymn *Asa ki Var* mentions actors and dancers in costumes enacting Krishna tales during his time. The hand-written manuscripts of Roop Goswamiji, disciple of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and founder of the Govind Dev temple of *Gaudiya sampradaya* at Vrindaban and Shri Hitaharivansha Goswami, a contemporary of Swami Haridas, also bear witness to the widespread practice of dance in the sixteenth century, based on the legends of Lord Krishna.

Apart from dancing mystics and story-tellers, there were communities among whom dancing was a profession. Some of these were the 'dadhis', 'natwas', 'bhagtiyas', 'murakiyas', 'bhavaiya' or 'bhanvaiya', 'rasadharis', 'kanchanis', 'kirtaniyas' and 'Kathakas'. These dance forms flourished under the impetus and resurgence of Vaishnavism (i.e. based on the theme of Lord Krishna and Radha) and were pure Kathak in style, technique and form.

These works would not have been possible in the 15th to the 17th centuries had there not been a living atmosphere conducive to music and dance in the region. Whatever little patronage was given to the Kathak community of Churu-Sujangarh near Shekhawati and the dancers of the Mithila region in the sixteenth century by the local kings and nobles, circumstances changed with the coming of Aurangzeb as the Mughal ruler.

In the process, the courtesans proved an invaluable link between the temple priests or gurus and the society at large, in the maintenance and development of the music and dance systems. Some of the famous courtesans, renowned for their skill in music and dance, from the region of Avadh included Zohrabai, Mushtaribai, Sukhbadan and Gulbadan, (both of Benaras), Janbaksha Bandawali, Adhvan Unnaonivasi, Bi Lutfan, Chandrabai Akbarabadwali and Jaddanbai. Furthermore, there were the courtesans of the 'pankhana' of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah who performed 'rahas', a dance-drama conceptualised by the Nawab on inspiration drawn from the 'ras-leela'. In Rajasthan, some elements of Muslim culture had come to stay. Notable was the 'purdah-system' taking the form of 'ghunghat' which is still strong in some pockets of society. In the royal household, this translated itself into the 'zenana' (the feminine) system. A class of courtesans, skilled in artistic qualities sported the title of 'rai' as they danced not only for the 'zenanas' but also for the king on social and religious occasions. Some of the eminent courtesan-dancers from this area were Kishorebeli, Anandrai, Gulabrai, Jonrai, Govindi, Uttamrai, Chandarai and Kishorerai. In Patna, the night 'mehfils' called 'khari mehfil' starting at 8 pm lasted till the early hours of the morning when 'raga bhairavi' was sung. These 'mehfils' boasted of exceptionally gifted dancers such as Mahtab, Choudhrain, Zohrabai, Allah Jilai, Badi Kaneez and Haider Jan Begum many of whom find mention in Buchanan's travelogues.

Besides, there were many male dancer-cum-teachers apart from the traditional Kathak gurus. Fazal Hussain Bhand, Amanullah Khan and Ataullah Khan were such gifted dancers at Patna and Muzaffarpur respectively. At Lucknow, Kalandar Baksha, Mohammad Hussain, Ghulam Abbas, Haider Ali, Kayam Khan and Kanhaiya in addition to Prakashji Mishra (of the legendary Lucknow 'gharana'), Lalluji, Mansingh, Ram Sahay (of Hadia), Beni Prasad and Parasadu of Benaras were some notable names. Of these, Kayam Khan and Kanhaiya were disciples of Wajid Ali Shah.

It was Bindadin's grandfather, Prakashji Mishra, a Kathak, who moved from Hariya in Allahabad district into the court of Nawab Asaf-ud-daulah, while his son, Thakur Prasad, became the guru and mentor of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah in the art of Kathak. Though the Nawab ruled from 1847 to 1856 yet he laid the foundation of patronisation of Kathak and formalisation and stylisation of the art. While excelling in the art of dance, the artistes were also required to be well versed in the arts of singing, poetry writing and playing percussion and musical instruments. Thus, the best Kathak artiste with all the above requisites and having over 100 disciples was honoured with the title of 'Maharaj'. In keeping with this practice, the Kathak favoured by the Nawab of Oudh (Awadh) was also bestowed the title of Maharaj i.e. King of kings (amongst the dancers), which has now become a family title and has been handed down from generation to generation. This was the period which gave recognition to individuals as skilled artistes.

However, a clear distinction is to be kept between the true Kathaks maintaining the traditional spirit of the dance and persons who have studied Kathak nuances for some time and then are able to incorporate certain aspects into their dance. Viewed strictly, the dancing girl of north India, the 'nautch' or 'nachaniya' or 'nachni' cannot be termed as Kathaks. They were the common 'bais'; but there were many

categories of dancers such as the 'dharimirasins', 'nagarnts', 'rais' and the 'rumzans' who were considered good trained artistes technically. Often their teacher was a Kathak who imparted to them some aspects of the dance. Falling within these categories would be the women dancers during the time of Muhammad Shah. Muhammad Shah was one of the later Mughal rulers who had been given the title of 'rangile' (the colourful one) due to his passionate interest in the fine arts. Perhaps, one tends to overlook the immense patronage given to artistes of high calibre by Muhammad Shah as it is usual to describe him as the 'rangila' in a derogatory manner. The well-known singers Adarang and Sadarang were gems of his court and these singers, were the best artistes of their time.

After the death of Muhammad Shah in 1748, quite a few of the artistes seem to have migrated to various centres such as Lucknow, Alwar, Jaipur, Jodhpur and Raigarh. Thus, new pockets of patronage sprang up. It also indicated great mobility in the Kathak caste as this group comprised of hereditary brahmin dancers and also those who had been admitted to the occupation. The patronage of arts by temple orders and local courts continued during the British rule in India.

### **Influence of Muslim Rule**

Any dance form, if alive today and sharing a long traditional history, owes its present position to the inherent dynamism within the dance-form, capable of withstanding all forms of onslaught while continuously adapting and innovating in the wake of changed circumstances,—socially, artistically and politically—and so it is with Kathak. One of the predominant factors was the external change of environment which was not the usual change of dynasties ruling the region but along with it, a change in the religious

belief of the rulers of medieval India. Thus, with Muslim rule, some changes were to be seen in the practice of Kathak.

As idol-worship goes against the tenets of the Islamic faith, the traditional male brahmin Kathak performers resorted to a heavy display of rhythmic virtuosity. Thus, this period saw furtherance of rhythmic patterns, the practice of 'sawal-jawab' (question and answer) between the dancer and the percussionist as well as the 'jugalbandi' (friendly competition), between two artistes. It was during this period that many 'farmaishi bols' (special patterns) were created. These 'bols' (rhythmic patterns) included patterns based on observance of moods of nature, sounds of instruments and life and animation.

In the field of 'abhinaya' (mimetic exposition) the element of Sufi interpretations were incorporated in the delineation of expression whereby 'Mohan' (Lord Krishna) or 'sajan' or 'saiyan' or 'piya' (beloved) became synonymous with the 'paramatma' (the Supreme Lord). However, this internalised religious feeling was misutilised and misinterpreted by common practitioners and lowly courtesans who equated 'Mohan piya' with the benefactor in the mimetic delineations of 'thumri', thus giving the dance a different colour. But interestingly, the contents and themes danced by genuine Kathaks continued to be strongly based on Krishna and Radha or Shiva-Parvati. In fact, even the great patron, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah wrote 'thumris' (under the pen name 'Akhtar') alluding to Hari or Krishna.

Some of the rhythmic pieces such as the 'salami' (the Muslim way of greeting) and the 'amad' (the rhythmic entry piece) came into vogue. But the 'salami' was replaced by 'rangmach ki pooja' (obeisance to the theatre and place of dance) in addition to the traditional 'stuti' (prayer to the Lord) in the courts of the Hindu rulers of eastern Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. However, the 'salami' was discontinued in the last 80 years or so.

The medieval period also saw the usage of many new instruments which till then were not associated with Kathak such as the tabla, sitar, sarod, sarangi and harmonium. The 'pakhawaj' was replaced by the 'tabla' as the main percussion instrument while the 'sarangi' or the 'harmonium' came to stay as the main keeper of the rhythmic cycle or the 'lehera'. Musical compositions made heavy utilisation of sitar, sarod, harmonium, sarangi, etc.

The tradition of dancing in the temple precincts and open spaces may be seen from the fact that the 'kirtaniyas' of the temple of Nathdwara (Rajasthan) danced in praise of Lord Krishna in the inner court at Dol Tiwari. Similarly, the 'bhaktiyas', 'nriyakalis' and the 'kalavagntis' danced in praise of Shiva-Parvati and Radha-Krishna in various parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

The 20th century saw the:

- re-emergence from obscurity or from the confines of temple and court scenarios
- acceptance of the dance form and their performers in society in full measure
- conscious effort by artiste, art historians, lovers of music and dance to trace the roots and stages of development with a sense of pride and awareness of the rich cultural heritage inherited by us
- further formalisation of dance repertoires and manner of presentation
- unconscious assimilation of the changing ethos of the 20th century in the repertoire and presentation of dance.

Only the intimate temple and 'samajjas' (gatherings) for dance performances of ancient India has given way to dancing in large and formal theatres or auditoria of today with their inherent demands on choreography, lighting and sound requirements.

The entry pieces of the Muslim and Hindu courts, the 'salami' and the 'rangmanch-ki-pooja' were dropped from modern-day renderings of Kathak. Similarly, most of the 'gats' (gaits) introduced by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah disappeared from the horizon with the exception of a few such as the 'rukhsar' and 'chhapka gats'. The 'abhinaya' (mimetic expression) is rendered in its correct perspective, thereby rectifying some of the aberrations of the last few centuries.

In terms of costume, the artiste today has a choice between the 'lehenga-choli', the 'churidar-angarkha' and the 'sari' or some of their modern variants. While violin is being increasingly used, yet there is a diminishing use of the 'sarangi'.

The literature of the past 2500 years (with the exception of the late 19th century onwards) do not reveal the names of any outstanding or well-known male Kathaks. Names of women dancers such as Amrapali, Salvati, Kosha and Kuvalya, do appear in the various Buddhist and Jain canons only, despite male dancers having had a hegemony in the temples and also in the courts as may be seen by the training in fine arts given to the male members of the royal households. One reason for non-appearance of names of male dancers could be attributed to the fact that Indian society is not individualistic, for no account mentions the contribution of individuals to their respective field of art (barring adulation of the king). Mention of a few women dancers in the Buddhist and Jain religions works are incidental and not primarily because of their achievements as artistes.

Kathak, even with a strong Hindu base is, perhaps, the most secular of all dance forms displaying a beautiful synthesis of all that is best in the two distinct cultures belonging to both periods of political rule and consequent social ethos of the Indo-Gangetic belt.

### System of Devadasi

Even though traditional Kathaks were the bards and the story-telling priests of the temples while the courtesans of 2400 years ago such as Amrapali and Salvati were accomplished dancers, yet the system of 'devadasi' was not unknown in the Indo-Gangetic belt. When the system of Hindu temple building came into prominence, the various temple rituals connected with the need for serving God also began. This gave birth to the system of singing and dancing girls who had to bathe, rock to sleep and entertain the Gods. Kalidasa makes a reference to the 'devadasis' in the Mahakala temple of Ujjain at the time of 'sandhya pooja' (evening worship) in his *Meghdoot* while amongst the earlier literary works, only the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya seems to have made a reference to the 'devadasi'. Most of the earlier works mention the courtesan-dancers and the various categories of 'kushilavs' (story-tellers and dancers). It, therefore, follows that the system of 'devadasi' started out as a regalia connected with temple duties and was endorsed in the later day *Puranas*. The following 'shloka' (verse) in the *Srishtikhanda* of the *Padmapurana* went to the extent of recommending the purchase of beautiful girls for dedication to the temples in order to attain heaven:

*krita devaye datavya dheerenaklishtakarmana  
kalpakalam bhavetsvargo nripo vaso mahadhani*

The *Bhavishyapurana* also echoes a similar (goes to the extent of recommending dedication of girls to the sun temple in order to win 'suryalok' by the kings as is evident from) thought in the following verse:

*veshyamdabakam yastu dadyatsooryaya bhaktitah  
sa gachchhetparamam sthanam yatra tishthati bhanuman*

By the sixth or seventh century AD, the system was well-established. From a few 'shlokas' in the *Puranas*, it also appears that childless couples pledged their first-born to the temples, which also added to the number of 'devadasis'.

Hiuen Tsang makes a reference to the number of 'devadasis' (dancing girls) he saw attached to the Sun temple at Multan while the *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana also indicates to the prevalence of this custom in Kashmir from about the 7th century AD onwards. This system was also not unknown at the Vishwanath temple at Benaras as is evident from the reference in *Kuttinimatam*. The Jogimara caves at Ramgarh hills in Bihar supports an inscription describing the love between Devadonna, a sculptor and Satunuka, a 'devadasi'.

Even though the system of 'devadasi' seems to have died down in the Indo-Gangetic belt with the establishment of Muslim rule when temple building came to a halt by about the 10th. century, some of the chronicles pertaining to the Mughal period refer to the existence of 'devadasis' in the temples of the Indo-Gangetic belt. One 'parwana' dated 25 January, 1644 AD (15 zulqada 1053 AH) written by Azam Khan mentions the presence of 'nrit-kanyan' (women dancers) in the Govind Dev temple at Vrindaban.

The practice of dedicating the first-born daughter to Lord Khandoba who eventually takes up her profession as a 'lavani-dancer', is seen even today in Maharashtra. The 'lavani' dances are influenced by Kathak; therefore, it is not uncommon to find Kathak footwork and rhythmic patterns within their presentations. This practice is also evident in the 'vaghya-murli' dancers of the state whose foreheads are smeared with turmeric. As turmeric has a symbolic significance in the context of a Hindu girl's marriage, therefore the 'murlis', supposed to be the wives of Lord Khandoba, apply turmeric on the forehead, denoting the

fact that though married (to God) yet they are untouched by males.

This system was evident in pockets of Rajasthan even as late as 1970. In the areas of Hadoti Anchal and Keshavrai Patan in Bundi district, the 'devadasis' were known as 'bhagtans'. These 'bhagtans' who had been donated as offerings by their poor parents, usually performed in the Manik Chowk of Keshavrai temple. Richly bejewelled in silver and gold ornaments and owning about three thousand 'bighas' of land, they danced in the temple not only to the Krishna devotee, Keshavdas, but also in the 'rath-yatras' (chariot journeys). These 'bhagtans' did not entertain people in their homes but instead, 'rasikas' had to come to their performances. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Kesar, Kasturi, Saubhag, Vilas, Lad Kanwar Nanda, Ganeshi and Phoola were some of the well-known 'bhagtans'.

### Poses and Stances

The existence of a full-fledged dance right from 900 BC in the region of the Indus-Gangetic belt cannot be denied. Pre-historic cave paintings and figures and figurines of the pre-Christian era point towards the 'natural vertical stance' of the dancers. Curvatures in the body stances as also seen in frescoes and carved friezes came into vogue with later-day developments. All dance forms, initially in the vertical stance, later developed into distinct forms in the post-Christian era. In the Indus-Gangetic belt, there was, however, a continuing almost vertical stance of the dance form, that is reminiscent of Kathak. A sweeping glance at the enormous wealth of carved railings, sculptures and frescoes that are available from the neolithic and paleolithic period and third millennium BC to about the 13th century AD would indicate that the outward bend of the knees were not so important in the representations upto the 6th-

7th century AD. This aspect dominates the sculptures of the period especially around the tenth to the thirteenth centuries AD. The sculptural evidences establish the continuity in the basic form of dance, from the ancient times to the present-day practice. As bards or story-tellers (Kathaks), the dance form while assuming definite contours in terms of 'angas' (body movements), 'caris' (gaits), 'hastas' (hand gestures) and expression, sought to depict the perfect point or movement of balance along the 'brahmasutra' (vertical median) concerning itself in direct relation to the pull of gravity. The dance form developed greater stylisation in terms of rhythmic movement and mime as it became part of social life. In order to study the stances and poses adopted in the various sculptural pieces or in painting representations, it is necessary to understand the hallmarks of Kathak:

- a near vertical stance
- naturalistic, as distinct from the exaggerated, use of 'tribhangi' and the 'ardhamandali' positions
- usage of 'pataka', 'adhomukha', 'hansapaksha', 'hansasya', 'alapadma', 'arala', 'sarpasirsa', 'swastika', 'dola', 'samputa' and 'puspaputa hastas' predominantly in the 'nritta' segments.

Sculptures reflect the dance forms as they might have been prevalent or might have existed during a specific period. Some of the stances and poses exhibited in the sculptures could be universally applicable to all dance forms; however, in order to relate the sculpture's poses and stances to a particular dance form, the historical thread of continuity through which a sculpture evolves into, perhaps, a more complex form in a particular region, has to be taken into consideration. It is in this thread of continuous evolution that a practicing dance form of a region should be

contextualised, reflecting the ethos of the sculptural traditions of the area.

In the pre-Mauryan period, the figurines of the dancer from Harappa and Mohenjo-daro reveal that the basic stance of the dance was on vertical lines with hardly any angular



*The 'laughing nati'.*



*An example of pirouette in Kathak.*

exaggeration of the torso, hip and knees. The hand movements are natural. The stance adopted by the dancers of the Mauryan empire indicate certain likeness of poses to the Kathak of today. A glance at the statue of the 'laughing nati' (3rd century BC) discovered by Mr. Jackson in 1912 at Patliputra, shows a striking resemblance to a Kathak artiste in a moment during a execution of the pirouette. A

comparison with a modern day Kathak artiste would reveal similarities in upper hand and leg positions including the flared state of the skirt. The 'nati' statues of Patlipura of 3rd century BC are similar to Kathak poses in their natural vertical stance and the manner of holding the arms with



*Two examples of a dancer from Pataliputra.*

the feet in the 'samapada' position. The figures of the 'yakshis' and 'apsaras' from Patliputra, Bharhut, Sanchi, Kausambi, Mathura, Jhusi, Bodh Gaya and Deoghar also indicate dance movements practised in that region. Some of the recesses in the ruins of Nalanda show dancing 'apsaras' in poses not dissimilar to the ones used in Kathak. Similarly, the steatite plaque exhumed at Rajgir, depicts through the



*Dancer from Kosambi.*

carvings in the three registers, the social life and custom of the period replete with music and dance. The top register depicts a man in a dhoti playing a harp while the lady, in a dancing pose with a vertical stance, has her right hand raised in the 'uttarkarana' and the left hand in the 'adhomukha hastaka' respectively. The Bharhut panel (west gate corner of the Ajatsatru pillar) representing nymphs and



*A panel of dancers and musicians from Deogarh; fifth century.*

dancers dancing to the accompaniment of music in the 'paradise of Indra' is revealing for the poses and feet positions used. The predominant position of the dancing figures in these panels is vertical with only a very naturally slight outward bend of the knees of one leg. The hand movements are on simplistic lines. The first and third dancers in the

panel from the left have their right arms in a stretched lower position with the left arms near the ear and the feet in a crossed position in one and in an outstretched position with a slight bend in the knee in the other. Most of the dancers have one arm near the ear in a 'pataka hasta'. In subsequent years, the 'hasta' (hand gesture) near the ear was lowered to the bust level. If raised to the forehead, the



*Dancers and nymphs from the Bharut panel.*

pose formed corresponds to the 'chhapka' (head ornament) movement. Another figure in the panel with the two hands joined together at the centre can be traced to the 'tatkar' movement, a third to the outward 'thai' movement (elongated hand movement). This panel also reveals the presence of a musician playing an elongated drum.

In the second Bharhut panel (outer face of Prasanajit pillar), while two positions of the dancers have been repeated, of the other two dancers, one has both the hands in 'pataka hastas' near the neck. If lowered slightly, the dynamic movement of the hands are utilised within the rendering of 'thaat' and 'amad' in Kathak. The movement of the fourth dancer with outstretched hands over the head finds echoes



*Yet another example from the Bharhut panel.*

in the 'udan' movement.

The figures of 'yaksh' and 'yakshi' from the Bharhut panels again emphasise their almost vertical stance. The sinuous outline of the arms, the right being raised above the head while the left being directed towards the thighs, suggest graceful rhythm in the movement. Even though



*Dancing couple from Mathura.*

these figures of 'devatas', 'yakshis' and 'salabhanjikas' are strictly not related to dance, they are, however, significant for an indication of the placement of feet and the postures used which can be illustrative of the art traditions in the area. In *Le theatre Indien*, Sylvain Levi describes the dramatic recitation of the Kathaks. He defines the dance sequences as given in the Sanchi bas-reliefs of the pre-Christian era. Schlagintweit, in his lithograph *Kathak-tanzer* from his *Indien in Wort und Bild* refers to an indistinct photograph of a sculptured panel at Sanchi which is said to represent a female entertainer dancing before a king. He also says, 'the modern representatives of the ancient Indian court actor are the Kathaks.... Their discourse takes the shape of an artistic declamation supported by gesticulations. Song and dignified graceful dance fill the pauses.'

Arthur Berriedale Keith, in his *Sanskrit Drama*, says: 'Fortunately, we have in a bas-relief from Sanchi, which may safely be placed before the Christian era, a presentation of a group of these Kathaks.'

The reliefs of Sanchi, Deoghar and Mathura are characteristic of naturalism and spontaneity of movement while also being representative of the 'thaat ang', the 'angrai ang', 'svastika cari' (crossed feet position) where the weight of the body was on one leg, the other being free to move and also the 'parsva' (side) movement near the waist, thereby being a mirror of restraint, precision and grace. The terracotta figurines of dancers from Kausambi (second and first centuries BC) and the dancing couple from Mathura (first century AD) reflect naturalness of movements. Even the terracotta figure from Manipuri (5th century AD) and the headless dancing woman from Jhusi are examples of the directness of approach of the Gupta period with a flowing sense of beauty and rhythm even while maintaining the vertical stance of the position with no great deflections. Jhusi has been identified as Pratishtanpur of ancient India.

The possibility of more wealth of information emanating from this area has been indicated by Sir Mortimer Wheeler writing in *Ancient India*.

The sculptures of some of the 'apsaras' at the Vaman temple of Khajuraho, the figures in the Tejpal temple at Mount Abu, Telika Mandir, Gwalior, and the temples at Mathura, reveal the existence of a highly developed dance



*The headless dancing woman from Jhusi.*

form in ancient India in the Indo-Gangetic belt and the adjacent areas with identifying links to the present day Kathak. The sixth century figures of the 'dancing Kartikeya' found at Gaya shows the 'tribhangi' movement as though caught in a moment of dynamism and being frozen in time by the sculptor. The 'hastas' (hand gestures) used were simplistic.

The sculptures of the later date temples of Rajasthan and Allahabad, indicate certain variations in the stance of the

dancer. While continuing the near vertical median of the body and the 'samapada sthan' and the 'svastika cari' of the feet with the accompanying natural hip deflection and 'kshipta' bend of the knees, the use of the 'urdhvajanu' placement of the feet with raised knees is evident. This was a period where sculptures from all regions saw flights of imagination of the sculptor not only in forms but also in the use of the human body, highlighting the beauty of the physical form and the display of 'tantric' philosophy through erotic art. The ideas centering around the potent phallus symbol as a recognition of the world coming into being through the union of the male and female gained ground. This interpretation of the sacredness of the physical aspect, 'bhoga' (tasting of earthly pleasures to seek union) as against 'yoga' (prayer of contemplation) gave certain sanctions and liberties to the artistes of the renaissance period in order to bring sensuality and refinement to their art. This trend along with the use of 'urdhvajanu' stance seems to have been discontinued shortly after it was evident from the later date reliefs and paintings from the regions of Rajasthan, Kangra, etc.

In the ancient period the tradition of frescoes and paintings co-existed even while sculptures came to prominence. A glance at the pre-historic wall paintings in the Bhimbedka caves and Singanpur caves in Madhya Pradesh and the paleolithic paintings discovered near Mirzapur indicate dance forms which mirrored the natural stances adopted in real life.

With the establishment of Muslim rule in India, sculpture gave way to painting as any hint of iconography did not blend well with the tenets of Islamic thought.

During the Pala period, some evidences of mural paintings in Bihar have been discovered in the excavated ruins at Nalanda from the Serai mound. Amongst the figures is one of a dancer in a vertical stance, wearing a close fitting bodice.

The painting tradition from the twelfth century to the eighteenth century also provides considerable insight into the form of dance prevailing in the area through the ages, providing an invaluable continuity to the tradition such as the paintings in the Madanpur temple in Jhansi as distinct from the paintings of the later Mughal period. The paintings of the Gujarat school (11th-16th centuries with emphasis on Jain manuscripts as well as themes based on the love of Radha and Krishna), and the Rajasthani school (16th-18th centuries on themes relating to Radha-Krishna, Shiva-Parvati, ragmalas), offer visual representation to the emotional states of mind. The 'Pahari' school (including Kangra) again centering around the eternal theme of Krishna and his love-episodes with Radha, and the Mughal school especially of the later period where music and dance in the courts were portrayed through singular tenderness and lyrical grace, held up a mirror to the dance form prevalent in those times. The dance performed by the dancing girls hailing from the court of Baz Bahadur before the Mughal Emperor Akbar, in the Akbarnamah, has been identified as Kathak by the authorities of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Similarly, the paintings of the dancing scene 'samgrahini sutra' of the sixteenth century depicting a dancing girl in a short blouse, skirt with bare midriff and tight pyjamas, in the court of Baz Bahadur and in the procession at the court of Akbar in the Padishahnama series, are clearly Kathak.

Even though some of the paintings and earlier sculptures may show evidence of 'ardhamandali' or the 'tribhangi' positions yet these are not unknown within Kathak and the Ras. Thus, foot movements and positions corresponding to 'ardhamandali', 'svastika' etc. form part of dynamic movements such as while playing a 'pakhawaj' (drum) or while denoting the 'devi' (a goddess). However, the increasing virtuosity in the demonstration of footwork and

pirouettes which reached newer heights of excellence and demanded equal balance of weight on both feet while maintaining a vertical axis for acquiring greater speed and momentum, automatically shifted the emphasis in the body posture. Similarly, the 'abhanga' and the 'tribhangi' positions utilised by Kathak dancers while denoting Krishna or Radha carrying water pitchers on her waist, are camouflaged by the loose flowing costume of the dancer.

The art of painting was highly mature in Patna and one of the frequently treated subject was dance. From 1760 onwards, the Kayastha artistes from Murshidabad moved to Patna. The paintings of Sewak Ram (1770-1830) depicted various dancing girls thereby portraying Indian occupations of the kind that generally appealed to the British. The Patna school of paintings (the Patna Kalam) shows a clear departure from ordinary Mughal usage in the illustration of literature depicting of court life. The paintings of Hulas Lal (1785-1875) again depict groups of dancing girls not unlike those of Sewak Ram. A water colour painting by Shiv Lal (1817-1877) shows a gentleman being entertained by dancing girls. This was apparently painted by him in 1860 and now hangs in the Victoria and Albert museum. Painting on mica of lady musicians attributed to Shiv Dayal Lal (1820-1880) was done by him in 1865 approximately and also hangs in the Victoria and Albert museum. One of the assistants of Shiv Dayal Lal, by the name of Jamuna Prasad (1859-84), has painted dancing girls wearing pink and blue blouses.

*Yaadgar-e-rozgar*, an Urdu work by Syed Badrul Hasan, senior honorary magistrate at the Patna city court, describes Patna at the turn of the century. This work contains sketches of famous courtesans of Patna who were experts in the field of music and dance. Some of these courtesan dancers became the subject of painters of the Patna Kalam. Interestingly, the poses adopted by the dancers, as depicted

in these paintings, were extremely natural holding a vertical stance. This is not surprising as they had been initiated into the art of Kathak. It follows that there is an identifying link in the 'angas' and 'angikas' of the dance prevalent in this region right from 900 BC till today, portraying social life, dance form, concept of beauty and musical instruments prevalent in that period. Also conceding the fact that most of the temples and other specimens of architecture of this region have not survived till today, yet the few remaining sculptural and painting evidences, throw light on the gamut of poses used in the dance form through the ages.

## Classical Dance Forms

---

Deliberating on the form and stances adopted by the different classical dance styles in relation to the available temple sculptures depicting dancing postures, a number of questions come to mind. Did the near vertical stance of kathak influence the sculptors of the area or were the dancers influenced by the sculptors? Was the 'tribhangi' of the Odissi derived from sculptured panels or was it just the reverse? The answer, perhaps, may be somewhere in the middle. Imagination plays a key role in the creative output of an artist whether he is a dancer or a sculptor or painter. While giving form to his art, the artist may resort to exaggeration in order to bring out the mood of the subject. In dance, the basic stances adopted were exaggerated versions of real life stances, though not to the extent as shown in paintings or sculptures.

To begin with, drama, music and dance were integral parts of theatre not unsimilar to an opera, operetta or a

'nautanki' of today. The emotional process occurring during any dance performance transports the dancer and the audience into a realm of beauty binding them together in the thread of 'rasa' (bliss). All dance forms originating as the outward expression of a deep religious sentiment and ending with the taste of 'rasa', are similar in their origins and ultimate aims. It is only the regional development which has given each dance form its characteristic flavour. The dancer's personality and her aesthetic and spiritual involvement cannot be set aside. Nardas, in his *Sangita Makaranda*, defines the attributes of a dancer as—

*ange 'na lamba ye'gditam haste, nartham pradarshayet,  
netrabhyam bhavyedhatam padabhyam tala nirnayal.*

(by his body he indicated the general import of a song, with his hands its meaning; with his eyes he expresses the feelings and sentiments and with his feet he keeps the time.)

The plurality of dance forms could be compared to the various streams of the river, having a similar origin but traversing different paths in their voyage to mingle with the mighty ocean and rest in its tranquility. Our dance forms, originating from belief and worship of 'ananda - dhyana - vishwas', traverse the experience of 'rasa' before attaining the sublime bliss of 'moksha'. Even in terms of the mood generated, all the dance forms attempt to transport the performers and the audience to a level of spiritual bliss.

In keeping with the theory of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, evolving from a loose-limbed dance form in a naturalistic stance to narrate stories about the Lord or to sing his praise, the practice of narration through dance spread to remote corners of the country, only to coalesce into distinct postures to become distinctive dance forms. In the process, the basic

stance adopted by each form became the fulcrum from which emanated various other movements and the types of gaits and foot contacts with the earth.

While Bharatnatyam and Kuchipudi saw the 'ardhmandali' or the half sitting position with the heels pressed together as the basic stance, Odissi, Kathakali and Mohiniattam had incorporated a similar body posture but with the feet placed apart. In direct contrast, Kathak from the Gangetic belt continued with the naturalistic near vertical stance of the body with the feet placed together. The basic posture struck by the Manipuri dancers lies somewhere between Kathak and the other forms.

As far as the vertical positioning of the body is concerned or the body's position from the torso upwards, Bharatnatyam, Kathak and Kathakali predominantly use the 'samabhanga' (the vertical position) or the 'abhanga' (with one deflection resulting in a slightly imbalanced position). This does not mean that the 'tribhanga' (with two deflections when the body can be divided into three distinct parts) is not employed in these dance forms or that the Odissi form utilises only the 'tribhanga'. However, 'tribhanga' is utilised to a very great extent by Odissi dancers, thus lending the form its own characteristic flavour. Similarly, the 'ardhmandali' or the 'urdhvajanu' (one leg lifted up from the knees) are employed in Kathak and Manipuri, not as basic static positions but in transitory motion making them dynamic movements. While 'mrigasirsa hastas' are employed in Bharatnatyam with the feet crossed, the hind foot supporting the weight of the body which is itself in a slight 'tribhanga' position and a slight tilt of the head, the Kathak artiste would employ two 'katakamukha hastas' for the flute and also stand with the feet crossed but with the front foot supporting the weight of the body which again is in a slightly 'tribhanga' position with a slight tilt of the head. 'Singamukha mudra' of the flute is supported by the body

adopting a very sharp 'tribhangi' position involving a sharply pronounced 'atibhang' in the Odissi style. Thus, a combination of the torso posture the feet placement along with the positioning of the body helps in the identification of a dance form.

Kathak perceives the body along the central vertical median, not far removed from life itself with the three-dimensional effect emerging through dynamic motion. In characteristic poses resembling the postures adopted by the 'salabhanjikas' of the various sculptures, the slight 'tribhangi' deflection of the body gets camouflaged under the loose-flowing robes, whether it be the 'lehenga' (ankle-length skirt) or the full-skirted 'angarkha' unlike the costumes of Bharatnatyam or Odissi which emphasise even the slightest curve of the body. The weight of the body is equally divided on both feet with a very slight flexing of the knees. While moving forward, the placement of the 'ancita' foot (heel on the ground) before the entire foot is firmly placed is extremely subtle leaving the impression of placement of foot as though in real life. Similarly, in moving backwards, the usage of 'kunchita' foot (placing of toe on the ground) is so subtle that the picture of movement or the flat foot carrying the weight of the body emerges. However, in the 'gat sequence', the 'kuncita' foot is repeatedly used to move forward, backward or sideways.

In Bharatnatyam, the body position emerges as triangles with the shoulders to the waist forming an inverted triangle. The second triangle is conceived from the waist to the outstretched knees while the third triangle is conceived through the outstretched knees to the heels placed together.

Kuchipudi largely follows the same pattern and positioning but with a certain springiness in the gait. In Kathakali, though largely following the 'ukkara' position for the knees, yet the feet are kept apart with the soles of the feet touching the ground in the position known as the 'mandalasthana'. The

dancer moves in rectangles and squares with clear extensions of the leg.

Odissi adopts the 'chowk' with its outstretched knees in the 'ardhamandali' position and the feet placed apart, yet it differs from the other forms in that the body is invariably given a 'tribhangi' or the 'natwarbhangi' treatment in which the hip is given a sharp deflection leading the torso to tilt in the opposite direction while the head is deflected on the same side as the hip. Such sharp hip deflections are not visibly practised in other dance forms.

Manipuri from the north-eastern region is very different from all the other dance forms. Even though this dance follows a near vertical stance of the body, yet this stance flows from the 'samabhanga' to the 'abhanga' and the 'tribhanga' position with such ease, thus imparting to it a dynamic fluidity and grace. Sharp deflection of the body is totally unheard of in Manipuri. The feet starting from a 'samapada' position moves in a serpentine gait with a corresponding movement of the body and hands, giving the effect of drawing fluid pictures of eight or Ss, through controlled movements of all parts of the body.

Amongst all the classical dance forms, Kathak maintains the most natural body stance emphasising the dynamic aspect of nature and life. The common impulse to externalise those states into movements which otherwise is latent within is the basic principle underlying Kathak. The movements, gestures and postures are drawn from everyday life and the emotions expressed by the dancer are immediately identifiable by the spectator despite certain phrases of abstraction and formalisation that is inherent in any classical dance form.

Broadly speaking, the format of presentation highlighting the 'nritta', 'nritya' (associated with mime) and 'natya' (dramatic) aspects can be classified as invocation, pure rhythmic sequences with musical accompaniment, expressional or mime pieces (with or without interspersed rhythmic

patterns) and melodic-rhythmic pieces as the finale. Invocation may be done through the 'alarippu' in Bharatnatyam, 'cholkettu' in Mohiniattam, 'shloka' or 'vandana' in Kathak and Manipuri, 'mangalacharan' or 'bighnaraj puja' in Odissi and 'todayam' or 'purappad' in Kathakali. The pure rhythmic sequence include the 'jatisvaram' in Bharatnatyam and Mohiniattam, 'thaat', 'amad', 'tore', 'tukre' in Kathak, the 'kirtiprabandh' or 'swarmala' in Manipuri, the 'pallavi', 'swarpallavi' or 'batu nritya' in Odissi and the 'adakkam' or 'tomakaram' in Kathakali. As regards Manipuri, the repertoire includes the 'lai haroba' and the 'khamba thoibi' as pure dance sequences with expression while the various 'cholan' dances and the 'thanghaiba' and 'takhew-saiba' are rhythmic, virile and acrobatic in nature.

The expressional sequences are the 'sabdham', 'varnam' and 'padam' in Bharatnatyam, the 'gat-bhava', 'gat-nikas', 'thumri', 'dhrupad', 'dhamar', 'bhajan', 'geet' and 'gazal' in Kathak, the 'batu nritya', 'gitabhinaya' and the 'sabhinaya' in Odissi and the 'rasa' dances (maharasa, basantrasa, kunjrasa and the nityarasa) of Manipuri. In Kathakali the story is enacted by the characters. Here, the basic nine moods, the full gamut of expression and a variety of hand gestures are utilised by the dancers of all dance forms in order to mime the story.

For the finale, the 'tillana' followed by a 'sloka' are performed in Bharatnatyam and Mohiniattam, 'tarangam' in Kuchipudi while the Kathak repertoire includes the 'tarana', 'chaturang', 'adana', 'sargam' and the 'tatkar'. The 'telena' or the 'chaturang' in Manipuri, the 'tarajan' and 'moksha' in Odissi and the final sloka in Kathakali are executed as finale pieces.

Interestingly, while dancing on a brass plate still exists as part of 'tarangam' in a Kuchipudi recital, such an item which had formed a small part of the Kathak repertoire of the Jaipur and Benaras 'gharanas' in earlier times has now been dispensed with.

All classical dance forms in India though born in the temples of different regions of the country, incorporated and displayed the rhythmic (nritta) and expressional (nritya) aspects while the dramatic (natya) was predominant in the more theatrical styles. The dance forms in the format as seen today were formalised only during the last 300-400 years.

Most of the seven classical dance forms are story-telling, soloistic dance forms necessitating the use of 'hastakas' (hand gestures), body movements and facial emotions in the delineation of the story, emphasising the individualistic skill and artistry of the artiste. The themes enacted by the dancers are taken from Hindu mythological stories. The 'Dasavatara' enumerating the 10 incarnations of Lord Vishnu, various episodes taken from the Ramayana featuring Rama, Sita, Ravana, Lakshman and Hanuman and from the Krishna-leela featuring Lord Krishna and Radha and various episodes from the religious epic, the Mahabharata, verses from the various vedas and upanishads, teachings of saints and sages and the various states of a maiden in love enumerated in the 'ashtanayika' and devotional songs are the common sources of 'abhinaya' for all the Indian classical dance-forms.

On the historical front, all Indian classical dance forms share some similarity in their phases of development. Temples were the places of origin where the dancers or the priests danced in praise of the Lord enacting various mythological stories. The system flourished under the patronage given by the rulers and society at large. However, with exploitation (often sexual in so far as women dancers were concerned), the art forms degenerated and so did the status of dancers in all parts of India. In certain areas, due to political changes, social customs underwent a sea change and all the dance forms regressed, surfacing only when a local ruler or zamindar displayed a personal interest in patronising the art form in all areas of his domain. In some areas that remained

untouched by Muslim rule, a large number of dancers performed in the temples and the courts patronised by the local ruler, the priests and society at large. As a result of the social renaissance initiated in the last two centuries, the 20th century too witnessed a cultural renaissance. Not only did the dance forms and their practitioners regain their old glorified status but many innovations and inter-regional and cross-cultural influences were seen resulting in further development within the various forms.

In medieval India when Muslim rule held sway, the veil which had been adopted by society has often been cited as one of the primary reasons for confining the various dance forms to the temples. However, a comparison of the areas under Muslim rule with those areas which did not see Muslim rule, predominantly in the southern regions of India, show that in all these regions, dance remained confined to the temples revealing a strong presence of the brahminical tradition and a common social norm.

As long as dance was taken to be mere entertainment, there was a predominance of women dancers in the courts; but when dance became more cogent or when the attitude of the patron changed to a deep abiding interest in the art form, then the sex of the artiste became immaterial. It is perhaps due to this that Kathak and male performers (who had till then been temple dancers) came to the limelight during the reign of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. The Nawab gave a fillip to the art-form, sowed the seeds of the Lucknow 'gharana' (Lucknow school of dance) and raised the artistry of dance. Similar contributions were made by the Hindu rulers of Rajasthan and Eastern Uttar Pradesh. The 20th century, especially the later part, has seen the dance canvas dotted with many women and male dancers with the former outnumbering the latter mainly because of social acceptance and psychological conditioning in favour of dance today.

Copyright © 2004, Shovana Narayan  
Photographs © Avinash Pasricha  
Design Kamal P. Jammual

ISBN 81-86685-14-6

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise—without the prior permission of the publishers.

Published by  
Wisdom Tree  
C-209/1 Mayapuri, Phase-II,  
New Delhi-110 064.  
Tel.: 28111720, 28114437

Printed at  
Print Perfect,  
New Delhi-110 064.

## Contents

Origin and History .....	11
Sahitya .....	27
Technique .....	35
Repertoire .....	55
Music and Instruments .....	73
Costume and Jewellery .....	81
Gharanas .....	87
New Directions .....	91



## Music and Instruments

In an evening of Kathak performance, the curtain rises to show a group of seated musicians, at least four to five in number, each with an instrument that covers the range of the four major classifications as given in the Natyashastra. These are the solid, wind, stringed and percussion instruments. The solid instrument (ghana vadya) is seen in kathak in the use of cymbals, ghunghuroos as well as in the use of jhanjh. The sushira vadya (wind instrument) is usually present in the form of the flute (bansuri) while the string instruments, whether plucked or bowing (tata vadya), are provided by the sitar, sarod, sarangi or the taar shehnai. The percussions are provided by the tabla and the pakhawaj. While the tabla, a two piece drum, has



today become the principal accompanying percussion instrument (avanaddya vadya) to Hindustani classical music and to Kathak dance, the pakhawaj is older of the two. The name mridanga by which the pakhawaj was originally called, is a horizontal drum.

The word mridanga is a generic name for all percussion instrument belonging to the ankyā (horizontal) variety as the term is derived from the words mrid namely earth and anga which means a part of it. This drum provided the basic accompaniment right up to the early part of the 20th century, as is seen in the literature of the Indo-Gangetic belt wherein there are references galore to the mridanga. Even the paintings of the medieval period show the dancers dancing to the mridanga.

But this does not mean to say that the tabla is an absolutely new instrument. The genesis of tabla (ta i.e. tala+ ba i.e. baant, rhythmic permutations + la i.e. laya, tempo) can be seen in the two-piece drum seen in the sculptural reliefs from Sanchi and Pawaya.

In the rhythmic (nrīta) sequences, the element of rhythm becomes



extremely important for it, along with music, forms the backbone of dance, per se. More so, when we see the manner in which rhythmic patterns are danced out in Kathak. The tala is a cycle of pre-determined number of beats, each having its own accents of emphasis, imparting a uniqueness of its own to that particular tala.

It is commonly believed among the kathaks that the word tala has been derived from the Sanskrit word tal, viz. palms of the hand which are used to strike each other in order to produce a beat. Mythologically, it is believed that tala is comprised of ta + la, ta being taken from the tandava (virile) dance of Shiva and la from the lasya (graceful) dance of his consort Parvati.

The most commonly used tala is the cycle of sixteen beats called the teen-tala or tri-tala. The sixteen beats has been divided into four quarters with heavy accent on the first, fifth and the thirteenth beats and that is the reason for it being known as teen (three) - tala. There are many cycles of beats (talas). The Sangeet Ratnakar mentions the existence of 120 talas while the Swar Sagar mentions that even



though there are over 5900 talas, only about sixteen talas are in popular use.

Besides teen-tala, the other well known talas happen to be multiples of two, three, five, seven, nine, 11, 13 etc. For example, the keherwa tala is a cycle of four beats, the dadra — cycle of six beats, rupak — cycle of seven beats, basant — cycle of nine beats, jhaptal — cycle of 10 beats, ashtamangal — cycle of 11 beats, ektal and chautal — both being cycle of 12 beats but with different emphasis, dhamar — cycle of 14 beats and pancham sawari — cycle of 15 beats. In addition, there are many talas which are not whole numbers but are in fractions, such as cycles of five-and-half, nine-and-half, etc. Because of the inherent nature of presentation of the rhythmic aspect in Kathak, the importance of such difficult cycles becomes, not only evident, but also possible.

Maintaining the rhythmic cycle is a cycle of musical notes called the lehera, which is kept on a musical instrument. To an undiscerning or an uninitiated audience, the lehera may seem a monotonous repetition of a musical cycle but this, however, forms the spine of the nritta





aspect of a kathak performance. Without the lehera marking time, it would be impossible to execute the various complicated rhythmic patterns as well as the gat bhava, the gat nikas or even the sawal-jawab (question - answer) and jugalbandi (friendly competition) between the dancer and the percussionist. A dancer's mastery over rhythm is proved when the dance can be performed to the theka alone, i.e. marking of the time cycle by the percussionist while the lehera continues simultaneously. This is, perhaps, acid test for the dancer.

Kathak is accompanied by Hindustani classical music based on the system of ragas. The musical forms within the raga system are broadly categorised as the anibaddha i.e. not bound and seemingly free of rhythmic discipline and the nibaddha i.e. bound. While rendering Kathak, care is taken to use suitable ragas appropriate to the time of the performance in the lehera i.e. keeping of time-cycle. As regards the abhinaya (expressional, mimetic) aspect, appropriate ragas are used for the different characters, time, circumstances and mood contained in the text, which is being enacted in dance. While rendering a thumri, even with the presence of a predominant raga,



the music could take beautiful, languorous diversions so as to evoke the mood suitable for not only sanchari bhavas (transient moods) but also for bhava banana and bola bhava wherein as many interpretations to the text are manifested as possible under flight of imagination.



## Costume and Jewellery

The sculptures of dancers from the Maurya period, and later from the Gupta and Pala periods, provide valuable information on the clothing and costumes of dancers in those eras. The dancer holding the damaru (rattle-drum) from the 3rd century BC as well as dancers of later periods are all seen wearing long ankle length skirts. Figures clearly show the prevalence of the long skirt type of costume (lehenga) that was and still is in vogue.

There is yet another statue of a dancer from the Maurya period (3rd century BC) who is clearly in a state of pirouette, for her frock-like robe, is seen in a state of flare that is possible only with fast twirls. Beneath this frock, she is seen wearing a kind of tight fitting pants.



A comparison of this laughing and pirouetting nati from Patliputra (as she is called), with a photograph of a modern day Kathak dancer caught in a pirouette shows striking similarities! Similarly, the figure of the central dancer in a panel of musicians and dancers pertaining to the Gupta period (4th-5th century AD) and excavated at Bharhut, again shows her preference of wearing the kurta-pyjama style of costume. Her standing posture is again reminiscent of the posture used by modern day Kathak artistes.

As regards the costume of the male dancers, it is the dhoti tied from the waist, with the chest being adorned by the sacred thread (janeyu). However, during winter, a kind of a top (bandi) was utilized over the thread. In the western provinces around river Indus, where the winters are harsher than on the plains of river Ganga, the common folk resort to long pants and a flowing top, similar to the churidar pyjama and angarkha or kurta concept.

The vast area of the Indo-Gangetic belt with a large variety in this field too, can be seen reflected in the jewellery of the kathaks. Thus, a woman kathak makes use of all possible material whether kundan,



gold, silver or with studded stones. The tika adorns the parting of her hair, while large earrings (jhumkas) adorn her ears. The neck is covered by a close fitting necklace as well as a long chain. The nose pin or the nose ring could be optional, though some of the traditional verses on solah sringar mention the two as parts of adornment. The waist is adorned by a kamarbandh (also called kardhani). The fingers are seen flashing beautiful stone embedded rings or an arsi (with a central mirror) while the delicate wrists are covered with bangles. Rather natural to a woman, and even more so to a dancer, the eyes are highlighted with kohl while the forehead usually sports a bindi. Traditionally, the lips were painted red with the redness that comes with the chewing of paan (betel leaves); however this has given way to the modern lipstick. Similarly, highlighting the movements of the fingers and the feet during dance was the colour of henna (mehndi) in earlier times which has given way to the alta, a washable red coloured fluid.

Another feature that stands out when seeing Kathak dancers, are the ankle bells that are donned around the ankles. Unknown to any other dance form, the kathaks wear hundred to two hundred ankle



bells around each ankle, called ghunghuroos or kinkinis. These ghunghuroos are tied on a long string. The number of bells and the method of tying the ghunghuroos namely, on a string, have been mentioned in the dance treatise, Abhinaya Darpana, where the relevant verse states as follows:

suswarashca surupashca sookshma nakshatradevatah  
kinkinyah kansyarachita ekaikangulikantaram  
badhniyaannilasootren granthibhishca dridham punah  
shatdwayam shatam vapi padyornatyakarini

(the ghunghuroos or kinkinis (tiny bells) should be made of bronze and should be having a pleasant tinkling sound. At least a hundred or two hundred should be bound around each ankle with blue thread in tight knots)

The reason for tying the ghunghuroos in such a manner, is not difficult to understand. The kathaks being priests of the temples, who could offer prayers through the medium of dance in the sancto sanctorum of the temple itself, (unlike women dancers who were permitted to dance only in the temple pavilions), had to tie their ankle bells on some permissible material, namely string! The



sculptures from Sanchi, Bodh Gaya and Kausambi show ankles of the dancers sporting a fair amount of bells, once again reminiscent of the kathak tradition.

It is, therefore, evident that the kathaks have not forgotten the fact that their roots lie in the people. Thus, whether it is their life-like poses or stances or even their costumes, they have never projected themselves as being someone apart nor have they divorced themselves from life or from people.

As regards material and design, the choice available is large as the Kathak area is also widely spread out. Material that the dancer could use can range from cotton to silk and from heavy brocades and zari work to bandini and use of mirror work. Attention is also drawn to the costume jewellery worn by women kathaks, for the dancer is heavily bejewelled. Here too, Kathak is fortunate to have a large choice available owing to the vastness of the Kathak area. Thus, the range spreads from the use of gold, silver, kundan or precious stone studded jewellery. Interestingly, today in the urban areas, there seems to be an increasing emphasis on the use of kundan jewellery.