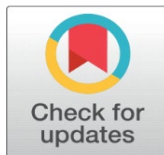
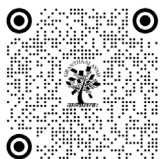


## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF UNIFORMITY IN KATHAK NRITTA HASTA

Dr. Parul Purohit Vats <sup>1</sup>  

<sup>1</sup> Dean and Professor, School of Performing Arts, World University of Design, Sonipat, Haryana, India



Received 03 May 2023

Accepted 01 June 2023

Published 08 June 2023

### Corresponding Author

Dr. Parul Purohit Vats,  
[preciousparul.kathak@gmail.com](mailto:preciousparul.kathak@gmail.com)

### DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.382](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.382)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2023 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



### ABSTRACT

This paper talks about the significance of uniformity in the Nritta Hastas of Kathak dance across gharanas and eras. Kathak, an Indian classical dance form, hails from North India. Nritta Hastas refer to hand gestures or movements used in Indian classical dance. Often interchanged with “hasta mudra”, “Nritta Hastas” encompass all hand movements and gestures, whereas “mudras” are more indicative of emotions and literal depictions of objects present in our environment.

Kathak has evolved to appeal and cater to the spectators of today’s times - with lightning fast spins and hand movements along with intricate footwork. However, this has caused unfavorable negotiations with the original technique and overall uniformity of Nritta Hastas, thus resulting in the deterioration of quality in dance performances. For example, prioritizing the ability to execute multiple spins in quick succession, aiming to impress the audience with their speed and agility, leads to neglecting the intricate hand movements and mudras, which are essential for conveying the nuanced emotions and storytelling aspects of the dance. The purpose of this research paper is to shed light on the importance of maintaining uniformity by adhering to techniques, methods and pedagogies mentioned in ancient scriptures pertinent to Indian classical dance.

**Keywords:** Kathak, Nritta Hastas, Uniformity, Hand Gestures, Mudras, Technique, Evolution, Storytelling

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The body is an instrument through which the dancer explores an integration of technique, observation, and creativity [Chakravarty \(2018\)](#). In Kathak dance, this integration is visible through “Upaj” (loosely translated to spontaneous improvisation), which is also an integral aspect in this art form.

Kathak is one of the eight Indian classical dance forms belonging to the northern belt, and earlier practitioners of Kathak dance were known as Kathakars or storytellers [Chatterjee and Bandyopadhyay \(2014\)](#). These stories performed by the Kathakars, covered episodes from various epics, myths, and legends! This age-old traditional dance form was ahead of its time.

Kathak gives dancers the freedom to synthesize their training with experience whilst gauging the spectator's level of understanding to create spontaneous and unique compositions on the spot [Sarkar \(2016\)](#). Such intensive training received by Kathak dancers eventually prepares them to fully embody a given character through the use and authentic hand movements and gestures to portray the same on stage [Deshpande \(2017\)](#).

The movements in Kathak are not just limited to the portrayal of characters but also include broad and expansive movements with sharpness and power, as well as smaller and subtle movements with grace and elegance [Singh \(2019\)](#). There is beauty in the execution of every hand movement, provided it is performed with immaculate and in-depth understanding of the same.

The Kathak dance form has undergone changes from its original form of storytelling while travelling to different parts of the country to a globally popular art form dominated by technical repertoire and precision [Pandey \(2018\)](#). The sharp, angular hand gestures and intricate footwork combined with lightning-fast spins are some of the mesmerising factors of this everlasting traditional art form - besides the Abhinaya (expression-based) aspect ([Sahapedia, n.d.](#)).

## 2. ABOUT NRITTA HASTAS AND UNDERSTANDING ITS IMPORTANCE IN KATHAK

Nritya hastas in Indian classical dance forms encompass hand movements that synchronize with the upper body and footwork, distinct from hasta mudras, which are gestures specifically used for object depiction [Nair \(2017\)](#). The terms should not be used interchangeably, as nrityahastas encompass complete arm movements coordinated with the upper body and footwork, while hasta mudras solely depict elements from our environment like flowers, animals, pens, and paper [Goswami \(2017\)](#). To summarize, nrityahastas represent whole hand movements, while hasta mudras are gestures for object representation.

Chapters 9 and 32 of the *Natyashastra* and *Abhinaya Darpana*, respectively, are dedicated to nrityahastas in Indian classical dance [Garg and Goyal \(2018\)](#). The root thought while practising nrityahastas has been explained beautifully through this shloka in the *Abhinaya Darpanam*:

*“Yatho Hasta ThathoDrishti, YathoDrishtiThatho Manah  
Yatho Manah ThathoBhaava, YathoBhaavaThatho Rasa”*

[Nandikeśvara and Vallabh \(2013\)](#)

Just as how one cannot create a sentence without understanding words, a Kathak student cannot improve upon their movements without understanding how to execute a particular hand movement.

Hastas are synonymous with letters in an alphabet that allow Indian classical dancers to create words, sentences, phrases and stories. Nritya hastas in Kathak have continually developed over time. While aesthetics have a significant role to play in shaping and beautifying the once sharp and somewhat stiff movements, the introduction of concepts that challenge conventional norms of storytelling has also led to exploring a different movement vocabulary in this dance form.

## 3. UNIFORMITY OF NRITTA HASTA IN KATHAK

When delving into the essence of Kathak dance, a glance at the modern Indian texts reveals, Lt. Pt. Birju Maharaj's "Anga Kavya" elaborates extensively on

approximately forty nrittahastas (addressed as “Nritya Hastakas), which have become prevalent amongst today's Kathak practitioners and students! [Maharaj \(2002\)](#) It's easy accessibility across online and offline platforms has aided in its popularity over the years.

While there is attention to detail on the visual aesthetics of Kathak dance, there is not enough textual emphasis on nrittahastas. Despite undeniable evidence across different shastras and other forms of literature, there seems to be a lack of awareness regarding nrittahastas in the realm of the Kathak world. In other words, the attention toward "nrittahastas" in Kathak dance has not been uniform and formalised across educational and vocational institutions across the globe.

Every practitioner of Indian classical dance can affirm the relentless and never-ending practice required to refine their nrittahastas, particularly when guided by the strictness of a mentor or Guru. During regular practice sessions, a mentor or teacher may provide corrections to a student's movements, such as aligning their fingers or using upper arm strength to elevate their hand. However, these corrections often remain limited to the immediate context of the practice session, lacking a broader systematic approach to the development and mastery of Nritta Hastas.

In her interview with The Hindu, world-renowned Kathak Guru and legend, KumudiniLakhia says - “I did not plan my path. I just wanted to break away from a restrictive order. Labels such as 'innovator' or 'trailblazer' did not mean much to me. I initially faced a lot of ridicule. Many felt I was crazy and up to something unacceptable in the classical realm.” [Swaminathan \(2020\)](#)

However, when we look at her work today, it is characterised by breathtaking spins, long leaps, and a paced yet confidently stylised gait that contradicts the traditional slow and calculated "chaal" in the Kathak repertoire. To quote The Hindu's article KumudiniLakhia: The Lovable Diva of Choreography by Chitra Swaminathan - “From sensual swirls and fluid leaps to expansive lines and sharp formations, her movement language is both - thought-provoking and visually thrilling. Thus, the veteran has shown subsequent generations how to push boundaries aesthetically”. [Swaminathan \(2020\)](#)

Another example of how expansive Kathak's movement vocabulary can become is Akram Khan - a young, vivacious dancer who has taken the world by storm through his vision and creativity, which is now visible to the world through his brainchild - "Akram Khan Company".

To quote a statement from an interview with him on Darbar's official website by George Howlett - “Khan has always lived at the confluence of these tensions - classically trained, but not a classicist.” (<https://www.diginow.co.uk/>, n.d). While his roots are in Kathak, Akram Khan has not shied away from experimenting with the art form while keeping its core specialities alive. Keeping this sentiment alive, he says - "Classicism is not about stasis - it is about adherence to particular boundaries and creating using ideas within them. They all show that traditional forms can evolve without losing their core”. (<https://www.diginow.co.uk/>, n.d.-b)

Dheerendra Tiwari, a world-renowned Kathak exponent who has mesmerised spectators with his clean yet intricate style of dancing, says - “There must be some degree of uniformity of any art, as long as the original form of that art is visible -

preservation to that extent is alright. However, if it remains as it is, the art form loses its ability to evolve and progress, as I believe any art form depends on its space, time, and personality (of the individual and art form) - more than the original form.

When I speak of space, it refers to the 'physical location', i.e., where one practices the art form. Therefore, wherever an individual practices Kathak, the culture, environment, certain sociological norms and many other aspects add to the art form!

Time refers to 'when' the individual practices the art form. If you see Kathak amongst artists around fifty years ago, like I was watching just a few days back, I saw a substantial difference in the 'anga-bhaav' (aesthetics and presentation of nrittahastas). Seeing the dance of some people, I could not even imagine that this used to be Kathak! It made me think - 'Was this Kathak?' or 'Was this the original form of Kathak?'. Therefore, I cannot even imagine what Kathak was 100 years ago!

When we compare Kathak fifty years ago to what it is today, we notice a distinct difference in its original form and can trace its evolution when we watch performances today. Moreover, in current times, many people use digital devices to a point where they depend on them - further aiding in a shift in the presentation of the dance form.

Now we come to 'personality'. Art and art forms are beautiful and apt reflections of one's personality. Let me explain the reason for this through an example. I know a Tappa singer, and as many would know, tappa is a complicated and complex singing style requiring a need for speed and clarity. As soon as she enters her home, she finishes many tasks quickly. However, she does it with utmost perfection. Therefore, it matches his personality.

On the other hand, Thumri singers are gentle, with a hint of softness and subtlety in them. Similarly, in dance, you can see one's personality very clearly, which further manifests in their bodies." (Tiwari Dheerendra, personal communication, 2022, October 8<sup>th</sup>).

Despite countless years and decades of training and dancing, many Kathak dancers would not know or understand the names of different nrittahastas, let alone understand the finer nuances of the same.

While different gharanas (loosely translated to schools or styles) emphasise different aesthetic perceptions, one can still not deny the underlying commonalities in executing a particular nritta hasta or a set of nrittahastas. While nrittahastas in Jaipur Gharana are broader, more expansive, and sharper, the same nrittahastas in Lucknow Gharana are more rounded, delicate, and precise regarding the length and breadth of the movement. However, its essence and execution are still the same.

Dheerendra Tiwari adds - "It is through space (physical/geographical locations) that the concept of 'Gharanas' came into existence.

For instance, if we look at Pune, we will notice that both the Jaipur and Lucknowgharanas of Kathak are prevalent. However, Kathak in Pune (as a region) has its own distinct form. If we look at Kathak in Delhi, we will see a difference; an evolution, and if you see the same Kathak by Guru KumudiniLakhia Ji in Gujarat, you will observe a difference in that art due to the impact of the environment of that place. Similarly, if we look at Kathak in Pakistan by NahidSiddiqui Ji and Fasih-ur-Rehman Ji, their bending techniques, and the way they execute a 'salami' are quite different, adding more beauty and grace to the art form!" ((Tiwari Dheerendra, personal communication, 2022, October 8<sup>th</sup>).

Dheerendra believes that - "Kathak, like any other art form, depends more on space, time and personality than uniformity in nrittahastas. It is only to ensure that an artist does not commit any fundamental errors by compromising the loss of originality of the art form to these three dimensions that there is repeated emphasis on keeping uniformity intact. Kathak Gurus, mentors and practitioners alike should maintain uniformity in nrittahastas till it becomes monotonous - because if every student has the same approach and methodology towards executing a movement, it will look mechanical - as if someone has copy-pasted their style onto another person. Thus, it will lead to the dancer losing their individuality." (Tiwari Dheerendra, personal communication, 2022, October 8<sup>th</sup>)

It is a matter of concern that the foundation of several Kathak students and practitioners is not as solidified as it should be which indicates an alarming level of oblivion, along with a dire compromise on the classicality of the same. An art form heavily reliant on visual aesthetics and coordination cannot afford to invite such callousness at any level, especially when there is a growing concern about losing its roots and cultural heritage. Therefore, to bring a change to this aspect, it must start at an institutional level.

Just as there are workshops, lecture demonstrations, theory classes and seminars covering aspects related to various processes and milestones in the field of Kathak, institutions must also organise workshops and lectures on adapting the language and vocabulary of nrittahastas in everyday conversations. More discussion should be encouraged around understanding the history and cultural context of hand movements while also gaining knowledge about the shift in its practice over time.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the essence of Kathak dance reveals the importance of understanding and emphasizing nrittahastas, which unfortunately has been overlooked in modern Indian texts and educational institutions. While there is attention to visual aesthetics in Kathak, there is a lack of textual emphasis on nrittahastas, resulting in a lack of awareness and uniformity in their execution. Nritta hastas are an indispensable part of Indian classical dance, and Kathak is no exception. Kathak has constantly upheld the notion of "khulanaach", meaning an implicit sense of freedom in the performance arena while confining within certain boundaries. However, with the growing popularity of group choreographies, uniformity and coordination in movements is becoming more and more integral.

The interviews with various Kathak gurs shed light on the need for preserving the original form while allowing for evolution and individuality. The example of Lt. Pt. Birju Maharaj's "Anga Kavya" highlights the accessibility and popularity of certain nrittahastas in contemporary Kathak practice. However, it is concerning that many Kathak dancers are not well-versed in the names and nuances of different nrittahastas. The diversity among gharanas further demonstrates the influence of space, time, and personality on the execution of nrittahastas. The existence of different gharanas adds variety to the execution of nrittahastas, but their essence remains consistent. It is crucial to bridge the gap in knowledge and understanding of nrittahastas among Kathak practitioners, ensuring a solid foundation and preserving the classicality of the art form. Institutions should incorporate workshops, lectures, and discussions focused on the language, history, and cultural context of nrittahastas, facilitating a thorough understanding and practice for



dancers. By nurturing a strong foundation, artists can then confidently explore and innovate within the boundaries of the art form, breaking the rules like true artists.

To address these issues, institutions should incorporate workshops and discussions on nrityahastas to deepen understanding and preserve the cultural heritage of Kathak. As Picasso famously advised, "learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist." Bergs (2018). However, the challenge arises when one is not adequately versed in all the rules of a particular art form. Regrettably, numerous videos found on the internet under the category of "Kathak" serve as evidence to support this assertion.

Despite the concept of "aesthetics" being visually perceptive (therefore also subjective), it is imperative to understand the basic grammar underlying nrityahastas. While this paper does not aim to dissuade the encouragement of exploring the boundaries of its movement language and vocabulary, it is essential to acknowledge and be mindful of the fact that Kathak, like any other Indian classical dance form, has its set of rules and regulations that practitioners and students must always follow. The importance of retaining uniformity in nrityahastas in Kathak dance while encouraging individuality is something we all have to collaboratively work for.

As George Howlett articulately echoed the sentiments of many artists - "*Modern experiments can miss the deep knowledge of the past, but ancient forms that stay too ancient are consigned to the history books.*" Rajamani (2012)

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

### **REFERENCES**

- Bergs, A. (2018). Learn the Rules Like a Pro, So You Can Break Them Like an Artist (Picasso): Linguistic Aberrancy from a Constructional Perspective. *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 66(3), 277–293. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2018-0025>
- Chakravarthy, S. (2021). Understanding Nrityahastas in Kathak. *Hindu*.
- Chakravarty, S. (2018). The Art of Kathak Dance: Tradition and Modernity. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research*, 8(1), 25–31. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.hssr.2018.81003.13>
- Chatterjee, T., and Bandyopadhyay, A. (2014). Kathak dance: An Artistic Expression of Classical Indian Dance Form. *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences*, 4(1), 143–148.
- Deshpande, N. (2017). Kathak Dance: Art and Technique. *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 8(2), 144–146. <https://doi.org/10.5958/2321-5828.2017.00025.9>
- Garg, K., and Goyal, D. (2018). A Comprehensive Review on Nrityahastas in Indian Classical Dance. *International Journal of Engineering and Computer Science*, 7(8), 22756–22759.
- Goswami, M. (2017). Nritya Hastas: Understanding the Importance in Kathak. *International Journal of Engineering Technology Science and Research*, 4(4), 398–400.

- H. (2022, September 30). Akram Khan Interview: "Indian Dancers Place Themselves in the Shoes of Gods and Mortals." Darbar Arts Culture and Heritage Trust.
- Maharaj, B. (2002). Ang Kavya.
- Nair, S. (2017). The Art of Nrityahastas in Indian Classical Dance. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research*, 6(3), 23–26.
- Nandikeśvara, and Vallabh, A. (2013). *Abhinaya Darpanam: An Illustrated Translation*.
- Pandey, S. (2018). Kathak Dance: Tradition and Modernity. *International Journal of Current Research and Review*, 10(7), 68–72. <https://doi.org/10.31782/IJCRR.2018.10717>
- Rajamani, I. (2012). Natya Sastra Revisited: Theory and Interpretation. *Indian Literature*, 56(4), 57–75.
- Ramanathan, V. (2019). Understanding Hasta Mudras in Indian Classical Dance. *Indiafacts*.
- Sarkar, M. (2016). The Technique and Form of Kathak dance. *International Journal of Scientific Research and Management*, 4(10), 4854–4859.
- Singh, S. (2019). The Contemporary Art of Kathak Dance. *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 10(4), 981–984. <https://doi.org/10.5958/2321-5828.2019.00163.8>
- Swaminathan, C. (2020, May 21). KumudiniLakhia: The Lovable Diva of Choreography. *Hindu*. Retrieved March 23, 2023.
- Swaminathan, C. (2020, May 21). KumudiniLakhia: The Lovable Diva of Choreography.