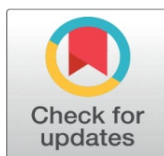


KATHAK DANCE OF BANARAS GHARANA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The Banaras Gharana of Kathak is one of the principal stylistic schools of North Indian classical dance, known for its distinctive repertoire, aesthetic, and lineage-based transmission of knowledge. Rooted in the sacred city of Varanasi, the Banaras Gharana has historically played a significant role in preserving and shaping the Kathak tradition. Despite its cultural and historical importance, comprehensive academic studies specifically focused on this gharana—especially its genealogy and present status—remain limited.

Keywords: Banaras Gharana, Kathak, Genealogy, Tradition, School

1. INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to address this gap by conducting a focused inquiry into both the historical origins and contemporary practices of the Banaras Gharana. It aims to examine how familial lineage has influenced the transmission of dance knowledge and maintained the identity of the gharana, particularly through hereditary ties such as sons and other Kutumbijan (extended family members). By tracing the genealogical roots and understanding the socio-cultural trajectory of the artists associated with this gharana, the study hopes to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Kathak's evolution and current state.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

- 1) To gain a deeper understanding of the historical development and contemporary condition of artists belonging to the Banaras Gharana of Kathak dance.

- 2) To document and analyze the genealogical lineage of the Banaras Gharana, with a particular emphasis on blood relations, including sons and other Kutumbijan (extended family members), who have played a vital role in the preservation and transmission of the tradition.
- 3) To highlight the contributions of prominent disciples outside the hereditary lineage, thereby offering additional insights for students, researchers, and Kathak enthusiasts into the historical significance and cultural impact of Banaras Gharana artists within the broader field of Kathak dance.

3. DATA COLLECTION

The information presented in this research has been compiled through a combination of oral discussions with contemporary artists of the Banaras Gharana, as well as an extensive review of written sources including books, research papers, academic journals, and reputable websites.

4. RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

Literature Review: A comprehensive review of existing literature related to the Banaras Gharana and Kathak dance was conducted to establish a scholarly foundation for the study.

Interviews: In-depth interviews were carried out with senior practitioners, scholars, and family members associated with the Banaras Gharana to gather primary data and personal narratives.

Genealogical Research: The lineage of the Banaras Gharana was traced using historical records, oral accounts, and family trees provided by artists during interviews, as well as from relevant published sources.

5. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholars trace the origin of the term Gharana to the Sanskrit word Griha, which means "house." In Hindi, Griha became Ghar, and eventually evolved into Gharana. A Gharana refers not only to a physical household, but symbolically to a school or lineage characterized by a distinctive style, philosophy, and artistic identity, particularly within the Indian classical music and dance traditions. The concept of the Gharana is deeply rooted in the ancient Gurukul system, where students (shishyas) lived with and learned from their teacher (guru) in a residential setting. In Sanskrit, such knowledge traditions were often referred to as Amnaya, denoting an authorized oral transmission of teachings. Over time, the term Amnaya came to be associated with the word Charan (meaning a school or lineage of teaching). During the Mughal period, Charan gradually transformed into the term Gharana, reflecting both continuity and adaptation in the transmission of artistic traditions.

Scholars also suggest that another key factor contributing to the emergence of gharanas was the restricted mobility of artists under the patronage system. Beginning in the 16th century, when the term gharana began to gain prominence, many accomplished artists found stable patronage in princely courts. These courts offered financial support and prestige, but often limited the artists' ability to travel or perform elsewhere. This restriction led to a reduced exchange of artistic styles and innovations between regions. As a result, performers began to develop highly localized and distinct stylistic identities. Over time, accomplished artists were recognized as acharyas—master teachers—and began training disciples in their unique methods and philosophies. This transmission of artistic knowledge, largely confined within regional and familial circles, laid the foundation for what came to be known as gharanas.

In the context of Kathak dance, the term gharana refers to a specific stylistic school or tradition within the art form. Artists belonging to a particular gharana exhibit a consistent approach to performance—maintaining technical, rhythmic, and aesthetic uniformity that reflects the legacy of their tradition. These stylistic differences are not merely regional but also ideological, influencing the interpretation, expression, and pedagogy of Kathak. Traditionally, three major gharanas are recognized within Kathak: Banaras Gharana, Lucknow Gharana, and Jaipur Gharana. More recently, the Raigarh Gharana has also emerged, known for its distinctive style and contribution to the evolution of Kathak in post-independence India. While the Banaras Gharana is often considered an offshoot of the Jaipur Gharana, the Raigarh Gharana represents a deliberate synthesis of elements from both the Jaipur and Lucknow traditions. Its emergence reflects the artistic innovation and cultural dynamism of modern India, where traditional Lakshya-Lakshana (aim and characteristic) principles have been creatively reinterpreted.

The origin of each gharana in Kathak is typically traced to a principal artist who, through his exceptional skill and creative innovations, laid the foundation for a distinct style that would come to define the gharana. It is generally believed that a tradition does not attain the status of a gharana until it has been sustained through at least three generations of practitioners. In other words, a gharana must include: (1) a founding guru or pioneer; (2) his son or primary disciple; and (3) a succeeding disciple or the disciple's disciple. This generational continuity is essential in affirming the legitimacy and historical depth of the tradition.

In contemporary times, while many young dancers continue to receive formal training within gharanas, there is a growing inclination not to remain confined to a single stylistic lineage. The widespread availability of formal education and exposure has encouraged dancers to study and absorb the unique features of multiple gharanas. This has fostered a spirit of experimentation and creative synthesis in Kathak. It is now common to witness performances that incorporate stylistic elements from various gharanas, as dancers seek to innovate and enrich their personal expression while maintaining technical rigor.

Among the three historically established gharanas of Kathak—Jaipur, Lucknow, and Banaras—the Banaras Gharana was once considered relatively less prominent in comparison to the other two. However, such a perception is no longer accurate. Today, artists trained in the Banaras Gharana are performing with remarkable skill not only across India but also on international stages. The technical precision and expressive depth exhibited by contemporary Banaras Gharana performers have earned the style significant recognition. It is now more appropriate to consider Banaras as a well-established and widely respected gharana within the classical Kathak tradition.

Within the Banaras Gharana, two prominent genealogical lineages are frequently cited, each playing a vital role in shaping and transmitting the gharana's legacy across generations.

(1) Janki Prasad

(2) Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj.

Janki Prasad (Banaras Gharana)

6. GENEALOGICAL HISTORY OF THE BANARAS GHARANA

The Banaras Gharana of Kathak traces its origins to Janaki Prasad, a distinguished artist originally from Bikaner, Rajasthan, and a member of the Sawaldas dynasty. Janaki Prasad, the founder of this gharana, did not have children of his own, but he passed on his knowledge and training to Sabla Ji, the son of his brother Chunnilal Ji, and to Duda Ji, Sabla Ji's son. This early transfer of artistic heritage marks the first generation of disciples within the family lineage.

Following this, Hukuma Ji and Moti Ji, the sons of Duda Ji, received rigorous training, including direct tutelage from their great-grandfather Janaki Prasad himself. Hukuma Ji had two sons, Dulharam and Ganeshilal. It was Dulharam who established Kashi (Varanasi) as the family's main centre of activity and transmitted his musical and dance knowledge to his three sons: Puranlal, Hiralal, and Bihari Lal.

Bihari Lal emerged as a prominent figure in this lineage. A court dancer for Holkar Maharaj of Indore, Bihari Lal had three sons: Kishanlal, Mohanlal, and Sohanlal. While Kishanlal received his training in Mumbai, Mohanlal and Sohanlal trained in Dehradun, further spreading the reach of the Banaras Gharana.

Parallel to this lineage was the branch descending from Ganeshilal, Hukuma Ji's second son. Ganeshilal had three sons—Hanuman Prasad, Shivilal, and Gopaldas—each of whom contributed significantly to the spread and evolution of the gharana.

- Hanuman Prasad, the eldest, served as a court dancer in multiple royal courts including Jammu, Patiala, Bikaner, and Nepal. His daughter, Chunni Devi, played a pivotal role in bringing the dance tradition to Delhi, and her sons—Navalkishore, Vanshidhar, and Omkarprasad—further promoted Kathak in the capital.
- Shivilal, the second son of Ganeshilal, was a renowned Tabla player who served in the court of King Chakradhar Singh of Raigarh. Among his three sons, only Kundanlal remained closely associated with the Kathak tradition, while Sukhdev and Durgaprasad pursued business careers.
- The third son, Gopaldas, relocated to Lahore and later to Patiala, where he trained Bhure Khan, the son of a friend. Bhure Khan was later adopted by Gopaldas and renamed Jyoti Prasad, who also became known by the name Aashiq Hussain. Jyoti Prasad trained his younger brother, Krishna Kumar, who also learned from their

uncle Hanuman Prasad. Krishna Kumar continued the lineage, passing on the tradition to his three sons: Ashok Kumar, Vijay Kumar, and Chandan Kumar.

This extended genealogical lineage exemplifies the multi-generational transmission of knowledge, both within blood relations and through adopted disciples, and highlights the evolving yet rooted nature of the Banaras Gharana. It underscores the importance of familial legacy, royal patronage, and geographic mobility in shaping the gharana's historical trajectory and contemporary standing.

Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj (Banaras Gharana)

7. GENEALOGY II: THE LINEAGE OF PT. SUKHDEV MAHARAJ

A second prominent genealogical branch of the Banaras Gharana is centred around Pandit Sukhdev Maharaj, a Brahmin by birth from Banaras. He was the son of Shri Ramdas Mishra, a noted scholar of Sanskrit. Sukhdev Maharaj is revered not only for his contributions to music and dance but also for establishing a lineage that would greatly influence the development and visibility of Kathak on the national and international stage.

Marital and Familial Lineage

Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj had two marriages, both of which played key roles in shaping the artistic inheritance of the gharana:

- From his first marriage to Badko Devi, he had four children:
 - 1) Shail kumari
 - 2) Kishan Maharaj
 - 3) Bindu Devi
 - 4) Tirathraj (commonly known as Tiwari Uncle)

During his tenure as a court musician in Nepal, Sukhdev Maharaj entered a second marriage with Mahalo Devi, the daughter of the Rajguru of the King of Nepal. From this union, he had five children:

- 1) Alaknanda
- 2) Tara Devi
- 3) Sitara Devi
- 4) Durga Prasad (known as Pandey Maharaj)

8. CHATURBHUJ MISHRA, ALSO KNOWN AS CHAUBE MAHARAJ

Among these, Chaube Maharaj was adopted by Acchan Maharaj, who trained him rigorously in Kathak dance. The other children were educated in a variety of musical disciplines by their father, making them accomplished in both vocal and instrumental forms.

9. CONTRIBUTIONS OF DESCENDANTS

- Alaknanda made Kolkata her professional base and became an influential teacher, training numerous disciples in the style of Banaras Gharana.
- Tara Devi was the mother of Gopi Krishna, who is widely regarded as one of the most celebrated performers of the Banaras Gharana. Gopi Krishna elevated the gharana to new heights through his performances, especially in film and on international stages.
- Sitara Devi, perhaps the most iconic figure from this lineage, was celebrated as the “Empress of Kathak.” A trailblazer in classical dance, she was married to Pratap Barot, with whom she had a son, Ranjit Barot. Although Ranjit Barot did not pursue a career in dance, Sitara Devi continued her pedagogical legacy by training her nieces—Jayanti Mala and Priya Mala—the daughters of Chaube Maharaj.

10. OTHER NOTABLE FAMILY MEMBERS

Shri Durga prasad Ji (possibly the same as Pandey Maharaj or another close relative), had five children:

- 1) Mohan Mishra
- 2) Brijraj Mishra
- 3) Shyam Mishra
- 4) Ram Mishra
- 5) Annapurna Devi

These individuals continued the family's engagement with Kathak and music, helping to sustain the tradition in various regions and institutions.

This lineage further emphasizes the intersections of familial ties, royal patronage, and artistic excellence within the Banaras Gharana. It also highlights the contributions of female artists and their role in carrying forward the legacy, particularly through education and global performances.

Former artists of Banaras Gharana and their contribution to kathak dance

1) Pandit Sukhdev Maharaj

Pandit Sukhdev Maharaj, born in Varanasi in 1888, was an eminent figure in the Banaras Gharana of Kathak. From an early age, he exhibited a deep interest in music and performing arts. He was not only a highly accomplished musician, but also a poet and Sanskrit scholar, whose intellectual and creative contributions laid the groundwork for a renewed vision of Kathak in the 20th century.

After a distinguished period of service in the royal court of Nepal, Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj returned to Banaras, where he began an intensive study of Bharata's *Natyashastra*, the foundational Sanskrit treatise on dramaturgy and performance. Drawing upon this classical text, he innovated numerous compositions, especially *Parans*—rhythmic syllabic compositions—based on mythological themes, such as Radha-Krishna, Shiva-Parvati, and other divine episodes.

A significant contribution of Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj was the integration of the 'Tandava' style into Kathak dance. Tandava, traditionally associated with Lord Shiva and characterized by vigorous and masculine movements, added a new dynamism and spiritual depth to Kathak's expressive range. This inclusion rebalanced Kathak's devotional and dramatic dimensions.

He was deeply concerned with the decline in the moral and cultural perception of Kathak, especially following its transformation during the Mughal period. While Kathak's origins were temple-based and devotional, its shift into court performances led to associations with *tawaifs* (courtesans) and an increasingly secularized and eroticized form, contributing to its marginalization in orthodox circles. Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj actively sought to restore Kathak's dignity by reasserting its spiritual and classical roots.

His most radical act—and one that subjected him to social ostracism from the orthodox Brahmin community of Banaras—was the decision to train his three daughters: Alaknanda Devi, Tara Devi, and Sitara Devi, in Kathak. At the time, this was viewed as a transgression of caste and gender norms, with his daughters derogatorily labeled as *Shudras* for participating in a form considered tainted by its courtly past. Yet, he remained undeterred in his mission to reclaim and elevate Kathak, viewing his daughters not only as heirs of the tradition but as pioneers in its public resurgence.

In addition to his socio-cultural efforts, Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj composed a large body of traditional works including:

- Kali Paran
- Durga Paran
- Shiv Paran
- Ram Paran

He trained all his children in a wide array of musical disciplines, thereby ensuring that they possessed a holistic understanding of the classical arts. His dedication, reformist vision, and artistic excellence played a crucial role in re-establishing the respectability and vitality of Kathak in modern Indian society.

"His courage, vision, and artistry not only resurrected the image of Kathak, but also set a foundation upon which future generations could build with pride." – Singh (n.d.)

2) Sitara Devi (1916–2014)

Sitara Devi, one of the most iconic exponents of the Banaras Gharana, was born in Kolkata in 1916. Even before her birth, her father, Pandit Sukhdev Maharaj, had famously declared, "If I have a daughter, I will make her the greatest dancer in the world." True to his vision, he tied anklets (ghungroos) to Sitara's feet at the age of five and began her rigorous training in Kathak.

Sitara Devi gave her first public performances in Varanasi during childhood, receiving early acclaim for her extraordinary stage presence and natural flair. Her formal training was further enriched under the tutelage of renowned gurus: she studied with Shambhu Maharaj in Kolkata and later moved to Mumbai, where she continued her training under Acchan Maharaj, gaining exposure to the broader traditions of the Lucknow and Banaras Gharanas.

A turning point in her career came in 1930, when she performed at an event organized by the Three Arts Circle at the palace of Mrs. Atiya Begum Faizi in Bombay. Present at the performance was Rabindranath Tagore, who was deeply moved by her artistry. He bestowed upon her the titles of "Nritya Shyam Ragini" and "Kathak Queen," titles that acknowledged her unique blend of musicality, expression, and classical rigor.

In addition to her classical dance career, Sitara Devi also made a notable mark in the Hindi film industry, where she played lead roles in several films, including:

- Usha Haran (dir. Niranjan Sharma)
- Watan (dir. Mehboob Khan)
- Pooja, Nadi Kinare, Al Hilal, Holi, Roti, Hulchul, Phool, and Anjali

Her performances in these films earned her critical acclaim, including the Gauhar Gold Medal. Despite the glamour of cinema, Sitara Devi remained deeply committed to classical dance and continued to perform across India and abroad.

A landmark moment in her career occurred on April 13, 1970, when she gave a 13-hour uninterrupted performance at Birla Matushree Auditorium in Mumbai—an unprecedented feat that set a new benchmark in the history of Kathak dance.

Sitara Devi received numerous awards and accolades for her contributions to Indian classical dance:

- Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1969)
- Padma Shri (Government of India)
- Nritya Vilas Award (Government of Maharashtra)

Despite facing social ostracism for practicing a classical dance form that had been stigmatized during the colonial era, Sitara Devi remained steadfast in her dedication. Her career is emblematic of artistic resilience, and she played a pivotal role in restoring dignity to Kathak, particularly within the context of the Banaras Gharana.

She also represented India on international stages, becoming a global ambassador of Kathak and influencing generations of dancers both within and outside of India. Sitara Devi's life and work continue to be remembered as a cornerstone in the modern history of Kathak, and her legacy is deeply interwoven with the evolution and recognition of the Banaras Gharana on the world stage.

"Sitara Devi did not just dance—she ignited a movement. Her defiance of societal boundaries and dedication to her art redefined the very soul of Kathak."

3) Pandit Chaturbhuj Mishra (Chaube Maharaj) (1923–)

Pandit Chaturbhuj Mishra, affectionately known as Chaube Maharaj, was born in Calcutta in 1923, into the illustrious household of Pandit Sukhdev Maharaj, one of the most pivotal figures of the Banaras Gharana of Kathak. Raised in an environment steeped in music and dance, he was surrounded by legendary artists—his elder sisters included the renowned Tara Devi, Sitara Devi, and Alaknanda Devi—all of whom were accomplished Kathak dancers.

From a young age, Chaturbhuj Mishra displayed a natural inclination toward dance, inspired by watching his sisters perform. His early talent did not go unnoticed. The great Acchan Maharaj, a towering figure of the Lucknow Gharana, observed his potential and recommended that Pandit Sukhdev Maharaj formally initiate him into Kathak training. Under the guru-shishya tradition, Acchan Maharaj personally undertook his training, shaping him into one of the most refined and accomplished artists of his generation.

Chaturbhuj Mishra performed widely across India's royal courts and cultural platforms, earning recognition for his exceptional technical command and artistic expression. He was equally proficient in Tabla, a rare combination that allowed him not only to accompany other dancers—especially Sitara Devi, with whom he frequently collaborated—but also to explore rhythmic complexities in his own solo Kathak presentations. His unique dual mastery of *nritta* (pure dance) and *tala* (rhythm) made him stand out among his contemporaries.

One of Chaube Maharaj's most celebrated contributions was his ability to infuse new compositions into the traditional Kathak repertoire, thus expanding the expressive vocabulary of the Banaras Gharana. His dance was known for its intellectual depth, innovative *bol* patterns, and miraculous precision in intricate rhythmic cycles. His *Gat-Nikas*, particularly, were revered for their brilliant sparkles (*chamak*) and expressive eye work (*nazar ka kaam*)—hallmarks of the Banaras Gharana style.

Scholars and fellow artists consistently recognized him as one of the most erudite Kathak practitioners of his time. His artistry bore a visible resemblance to the style of Acchan Maharaj, not only in its physical form but in its aesthetic depth and sophistication. Through his performances, teaching, and innovations, Pandit Chaturbhuj Mishra played a key role in preserving and evolving the Kathak tradition, particularly within the Banaras Gharana.

“Chaube Maharaj embodied the soul of Kathak—not merely as a performer but as a scholar, composer, and rhythmic visionary.”

4) Nataraja Gopi Krishna (1933–1994)

Nataraja Gopi Krishna was born in Calcutta in 1933 into the eminent family of the Banaras Gharana. He was the son of Tara Devi and grandson of Pandit Sukhdev Maharaj, from whom he inherited a profound artistic legacy. Though he trained under celebrated Kathak maestros like Acchan Maharaj, Lachhu Maharaj, and Shambhu Maharaj, his style always bore the distinct imprint of his grandfather's Banaras Gharana technique.

Gopi Krishna's brilliance was evident from a young age. At just 13 years old, he was awarded the prestigious title of “Nataraja” during the Bengal Conference in Calcutta, chaired by Lalbabu. This early accolade reflected not only his innate talent but also his exceptional understanding of rhythm, expression, and movement.

He was a versatile artist, expanding his classical training beyond Kathak. He studied Bharatanatyam under Guru Mahalingam Pillai and Govindraj Pillai at Sri Raj Rajeshwari Bharat Natya Kala Mandir, which added a stylistic depth and diversity to his performances.

Gopi Krishna's most significant cultural breakthrough came in the realm of Indian cinema. At the age of 17, he played a lead role in V. Shantaram's pathbreaking film “Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje” (1955). The film was a milestone in Indian cinematic history, being among the first to use classical dance as a central narrative form. His performance captivated audiences and elevated Kathak's status on the national stage, proving that classical dance could thrive within popular culture.

In the film industry, Gopi Krishna became one of the most sought-after choreographers and dance trainers, working with legendary actresses such as Madhubala, Asha Parekh, Geeta Bali, Waheeda Rehman, Vyjayanthimala, Meena Kumari, and Hema Malini. His teaching helped bridge the gap between traditional classical dance and mainstream cinema, broadening the appeal and accessibility of Kathak to newer generations.



A hallmark of Gopi Krishna's artistry was his bold experimentation and technical prowess. Drawing from the Banaras Gharana tradition, he innovated with Tandav elements by incorporating Angaharas and Karans, typically found in ancient treatises like the *Natyashastra*. Under the guidance of his maternal uncle, Pandit Chaturbhuj Mishra (Chaube Maharaj), he developed the ability to perform complex rhythmic patterns (taals) with remarkable ease and clarity.

Gopi Krishna introduced unique innovations to the Kathak stage:

- Dancing to Tarana lyrics
- Gliding across the stage
- Performing on a brass platter (thali)
- Expressing rhythm through eyebrow movements

Executing Tah, Dugun, Tigun, Chaugun (rhythmic variations) with theatrical precision

These stylized movements and innovations captivated audiences and popularized Banaras Gharana globally. His dedication to fusion, expression, and cinematic stylization ensured that the Banaras Gharana entered the modern world with relevance, energy, and grace.

"Gopi Krishna did not just perform Kathak; he reinvented its possibilities for the screen and the stage."

11. PRESENT ARTISTS OF BANARAS GHARANA

Pandit Mata Prasad Mishra (1968–)

- 1) Pandit Mata Prasad Mishra, an eminent Kathak exponent of the Banaras Gharana, was born on July 6, 1968, into a culturally enriched musical family in Varanasi. His father, Shri Mahesh Prasad Mishra, was a respected Sarangi player and vocalist, and his mother, Smt. Laxmina Devi, though a homemaker, was a passionate music enthusiast. Growing up in an environment surrounded by musicians and connoisseurs of classical arts, Mata Prasad was immersed in a vibrant cultural heritage from an early age.

Initially drawn to Tabla, he developed a deep interest in Kathak at the age of six, inspired by his elder brother Chandrashekhar Mishra, a dancer himself. He began his formal Kathak training under the tutelage of Vidushi Alaknanda Devi, a revered figure of the Banaras Gharana. His Tabla training was undertaken under the guidance of Pandit Panchu Maharaj, further strengthening his rhythmic foundation—an essential component of Kathak. Alongside his artistic pursuits, he also completed his postgraduate degree in Sociology, demonstrating a balanced engagement with both academic and cultural studies (Mishra, M. P., personal interview, 2023).

Pandit Mata Prasad Mishra has significantly contributed to the preservation and global promotion of Banaras Gharana's Kathak tradition. A highly accomplished artist, he has received numerous accolades in recognition of his artistry and dedication, including:

- Shringaramani Award
- Kala Prakash Award
- Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (2019)

His career has been marked by prolific performances on national stages, including:

- Sankat Mochan Sangeet Samaroh (Varanasi)
- Artists of Tomorrow Sangeet Sammelan (Mumbai)
- Kathak Festival (Delhi)
- Shivranjan Sangeet Samaroh (Mumbai)
- Sharad Chandrika Kathak Kendra (Delhi)

In addition to his national presence, he has represented Indian classical dance on global platforms with performances in Spain, Switzerland, Japan, and other international venues. These efforts have played a vital role in taking the aesthetic and rhythmic brilliance of the Banaras Gharana to global audiences.

As a dedicated guru, Pt. Mata Prasad Mishra continues to teach the nuances of Kathak in accordance with the Guru-Shishya parampara (traditional teacher-disciple lineage). He is committed to training the next generation of Kathak artists and ensuring the continuity of the Banaras Gharana's rich stylistic legacy.

“Pandit Mata Prasad Mishra exemplifies the rare combination of traditional authenticity, academic insight, and contemporary outreach—ensuring that Kathak remains both preserved and evolving.”

2) Pandit Ravi Shankar Mishra

Pandit Ravi Shankar Mishra is a distinguished Kathak exponent, guru, and Tabla virtuoso of the Banaras Gharana, born on August 8, 1969, in Varanasi. He hails from a renowned musical lineage—his father, Pandit Nageshwar Prasad Mishra, was a respected Tabla player and a faculty member in the Department of Music at Banaras Hindu University, while his mother, Sundar Devi, was equally supportive of the musical tradition. Due to his parents’ temporary stay with relatives in Kashmir before his birth, he was affectionately nicknamed “Pahadu.”

Ravi Shankar Mishra’s early exposure to classical music came through Tabla, which he studied under the guidance of his father. However, it was his cousin, Pandit Mata Prasad Mishra, who inspired him to pursue Kathak. He commenced his formal Kathak training under the mentorship of Vidushi Alaknanda Devi, a legendary figure of the Banaras Gharana. Simultaneously, Pt. Mishra completed his postgraduate studies in Hindi, demonstrating a deep affinity for literature alongside his dedication to classical arts (Mishra, R. S., personal interview, 2023).

With a robust foundation in both rhythm (Tabla) and expression (Kathak), Pt. Ravi Shankar Mishra has emerged as a dynamic performer, educator, and ambassador of the Banaras Gharana. His contributions have been widely recognized, and he has been the recipient of numerous awards, including:

- Sangeet Bhaskar – Prayag Sangeet Samiti
- Sangeet Praveen – Prayag Sangeet Samiti
- Sangeet Martand – Hindu University, Prayag
- Nritya Prakash – Kala Prakash, Varanasi
- Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (2019) – Government of Uttar Pradesh

He has been honored by leading public dignitaries, including the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, the Governor, and even the Prime Minister of India. Pt. Ravi Shankar Mishra has made appearances on national platforms such as Doordarshan's "Parakh", a program highlighting classical traditions from Varanasi, and has acted in the Hindi film "Tulsidas."

One of his most celebrated international achievements is the 1998 Indo-Spanish collaborative program titled “From Banaras to Jerez,” where he performed alongside flamenco dancer Ana la China across Europe. He has also collaborated with contemporary dancer Emilio Artessero Quesada and Swiss jazz musicians such as Maurice Magnoni and Claude Jordon, demonstrating Kathak’s versatility in fusing with global styles.

Highly respected as a teacher and cultural ambassador, Pt. Mishra is frequently invited to conduct Kathak workshops by the Ateliers d’ethnomusicologie in Geneva. He is a recurring figure in the “La Croisée des Cultures” project, where he leads international workshops on dance and rhythm. Moreover, he is an empaneled artist with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (I.C.C.R.), actively promoting India’s classical heritage on the world stage.

“Pandit Ravi Shankar Mishra embodies the confluence of tradition and innovation—his dual mastery in Tabla and Kathak continues to enrich the global narrative of Banaras Gharana.”

4) Vishal Krishna

Vishal Krishna, a prominent young exponent of the Banaras Gharana, is carrying forward the illustrious legacy of his family through his vibrant and innovative Kathak performances. Born on May 16, 1991, in Varanasi, Vishal Krishna is the grandson of Pandit Durga Prasad Mishra (Pandey Maharaj) and son of Mohan Krishna Ji, a noted Kathak dancer and teacher. Growing up in a household steeped in classical music and dance, he was immersed in the rhythmic sounds of ghungroos, tabla, and sarangi from a very early age.

Inspired deeply by the legendary Sitara Devi, whom he considers a guiding light in his dance journey, Vishal Krishna began training in Kathak under the watchful eyes of his father and Pandit Ravi Shankar Mishra. To further refine his artistry, he relocated to Mumbai, where he lived and studied Kathak intensively until the age of 22 under the direct mentorship of his grandmother—thus reinforcing his connection to the matrilineal stream of Banaras Gharana tradition.

His father, Shri Mohan Krishna, not only taught dance at Guru Nanak Khalsa School but also provided critical artistic guidance and discipline, helping Vishal Krishna remain grounded in the spiritual and technical roots of the tradition. His

mother, Mrs. Vimla Devi, a homemaker, cultivated a warm and culturally rich environment at home that enabled his creative growth upon his return to Varanasi.

Vishal Krishna's exceptional talent has earned him acclaim both in India and internationally. He has performed on numerous prestigious stages, bringing attention to the rich heritage of the Banaras Gharana. One of his notable encounters was with the esteemed Odissi dancer Madhavi Mudgal, under whose guidance he explored the nuances of Abhinaya (expressive acting). He also received advanced instruction in the technical aspects of Kathak from Pandit Birju Maharaj, one of the most revered figures in Indian classical dance.

Over the years, Vishal Krishna has received numerous awards and honors from cultural institutions, government bodies, and international organizations, affirming his role as a rising torchbearer of the Banaras Gharana. With his dynamic stage presence, emotive storytelling, and technical mastery, he continues to bridge tradition with modern expression, ensuring that the essence of Banaras lives on through his dance.

"Vishal Krishna represents the youthful spirit of an ancient tradition—his artistry resonates with devotion, discipline, and innovation, offering a compelling vision of Kathak's future in the global arena."

12. CONCLUSION

Banaras, one of the oldest living cities in the world, holds a deeply significant place in Indian culture, spirituality, and the performing arts. Its roots trace back thousands of years, weaving a tapestry of devotion, philosophy, learning, music, and artistic brilliance. As the American writer Mark Twain aptly remarked, "Banaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together." The city has served as a confluence of sacred traditions and creative expression—an eternal wellspring of artistic inspiration.

The spirit of Kashi, often encapsulated in the phrase "बनारस में रस सदैव विद्यमान रहता है", reflects the perpetual presence of Nava Rasa—the nine aesthetic sentiments—within its music and dance traditions. Rooted in antiquity and nurtured along the sacred banks of the Varuna and Assi rivers, Banaras, once known as Anandvan and Rudravas, earned the name that now resonates with cultural grandeur. (Parvatkar, 2002)

Among Banaras's most profound contributions is the Banaras Gharana of Kathak, which played a pivotal role in reviving the devotional essence of the dance post-Mughal era. Pandit Sukhdev Maharaj was instrumental in this transformation, crafting poetic Parans such as Kali Paran, Shiv Tandav Paran, Ram Paran, and Hanuman Paran, which reintroduced the dance form to its sacred roots. These compositions remain integral to the contemporary repertoire of the Banaras Gharana, sustaining its devotional character and classical integrity.

As one of the oldest Kathak Gharanas, Banaras Gharana has left an indelible imprint on the dance form. Known for its literary richness, expressive abhinaya, and sophisticated footwork, the Gharana has been home to legendary artists who have preserved and enriched Kathak through both traditional and innovative approaches. Despite contemporary challenges—such as dwindling interest among the younger generation—the Gharana has demonstrated remarkable resilience, continuing to evolve without losing its foundational ethos.

By embracing new choreographic styles, cross-cultural collaborations, and digital platforms, the Banaras Gharana remains vibrant and globally relevant. It not only preserves its centuries-old traditions but also paves the way for future explorations in the art form, maintaining a dynamic dialogue between past and present.

Beyond Kathak, the Banaras Gharana is also renowned for its contributions to Tabla, further enriching the rhythmic and aesthetic dimensions of Kathak performances. The harmonious interplay between percussion and movement, particularly evident in Banaras-style recitals, highlights the deep symbiotic relationship between these two classical forms. This rhythmic synergy enhances the narrative and emotive power of Kathak, elevating it as a composite, holistic performance art.

In sum, the Banaras Gharana stands as a timeless symbol of India's classical heritage—a beacon of spiritual expression, artistic devotion, and cultural resilience. As contemporary artists and young disciples carry forward this venerable tradition, the Gharana promises a future filled with captivating performances, innovative expressions, and continued reverence for the classical ideals it so gracefully embodies.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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