


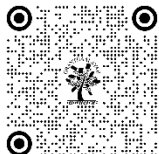


THE BANARAS GHARANA OF KATHAK DANCE: A STUDY FROM THE PAST TO PRESENT

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ABSTRACT

The term "gharana" pertains to a specific art form that is passed from one generation to the next. Simply put, a gharana refers to a "house" wherein each member follows the artistic traditions of their ancestors. In the field of music, there are several gharanas which emerged, each representing a distinct artistic structure or style of its own. When we look back at the history of music, gharana came up as a result of performers working hard to perfect their skill and set themselves apart from other performers. This unique style was then passed down through generations, creating a lineage of artistic tradition. Thus, the concept of gharanas was born out of this organic evolution and transmission of musical knowledge from one generation to the other.

In Kathak, three prominent gharanas stand out: Lucknow Gharana, Banaras Gharana, and Jaipur Gharana. Each gharana boasts distinct artistic characteristics and styles that set them apart from one another. The Banaras Gharana is famous for its strong movement and devotional presentation. Janaki Prasad and Sukhdev Maharaj are considered to be the two founders of Banaras Gharana. Janaki Prasad was born in Rajasthan, but moved to Banaras and spent rest of his life teaching Kathak there, which led to the establishment of the Banaras Gharana. On the other hand, Sukhdev Maharaj was born in Banaras, but he rendered his musical services in the court of the King of Nepal, after which his children stayed in Banaras and strengthened the Banaras Gharana. Presently, all the artists representing the Banaras Gharana are related to this lineage.

The present research article focuses on the genealogy of past and present artists of Banaras Gharana of Kathak and their contribution to Kathak dance.

Keywords: Kathak, Banaras, Gharana, Dance, Genealogy

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

- The present study goal is to better understand the history and current state of artists from the Banaras Gharana of Kathak dance.
- To provide detailed information about the Banaras Gharana, primarily emphasizing the genealogy of the Gharana through blood relations (sons and Kutumbijan).

- To describe the most notable artist disciples outside the family and to add additional insights among students, researchers, and Kathak dance enthusiasts about the historical significance and contributions of Banaras Gharana artists in the field of Kathak dance.

1.2. DATA COLLECTION

The written material in the research article has been compiled through oral discussion with the contemporary artists of Banaras Gharana, various books, research papers, websites, and journals.

1.3. RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

- 1) **Literature Review:** A review of the literature on Banaras Gharana and Kathak dance has been done by the researcher.
- 2) **Interviews:** Conducted interviews of senior practitioners, scholars, and family members associated with the Banaras Gharana.
- 3) **Genealogical Research:** Traced lineage of Banaras Gharana using historical records and family trees obtained from Artists during the interview and several books.

2. REVIEW LITERATURE

According to scholars, the term “Gharana” is derived from the Sanskrit word “Griha.” In Hindi, it is commonly called “Ghar.” The word Ghar was formed from Sanskrit “Griha,” and the word “Gharana” evolved from Ghar. A house with distinctive features that define its identity, Gharana, is essentially a symbol of the ancient Gurukul system. In Sanskrit, these classes were called Amnaya. Every disciple was a member of an Amnaya. The word Amnaya later came to be known as “Charan.” During the Mughal period, the term “Charan” became “Gharana.” [Azad \(2022\)](#).

Scholars also suggest that another reason for the emergence of Gharanas was the limited mobility of artists, attributed to the patronage system. Since the 16th century, when the term "gharana" gained prominence, many skilled artists found patronage in princely states, where they were esteemed and supported. However, these states were reluctant to allow these artists to travel to other regions, restricting the exchange of artistic styles and techniques. Consequently, artists from different regions developed distinct styles, leading to the visible differences observed among them. Accomplished artists assumed the title “acharyas” and began imparting their knowledge to their disciples. It was from this point that the concept of gharanas started taking shape.

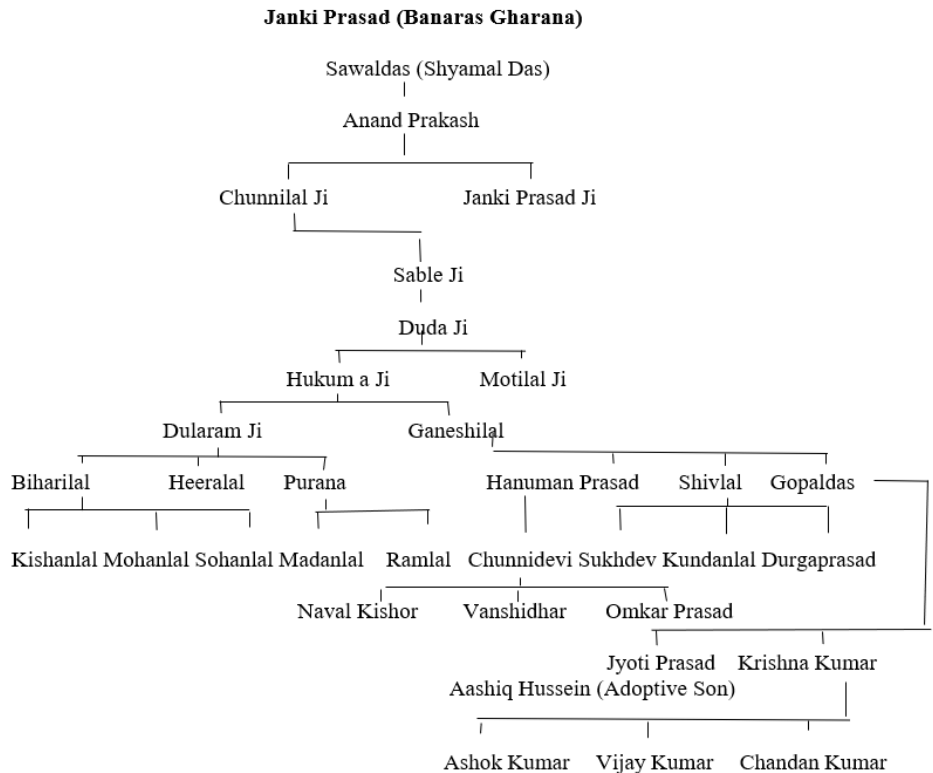
Under Kathak dance, the word “gharana” signifies a special style of Kathak dance. The presentation style and technicalities of Kathak artists performing within a particular gharana remain consistent across different places, maintaining uniformity in their approach to the respective gharana. These different styles gave a unique expression of Kathak within each gharana. Mainly three gharanas are prevalent under Kathak dance: Banaras Gharana, Lucknow Gharana, and Jaipur Gharana, but at present Raigarh Gharana also has its own artistry emerging due to the new dance style. Banaras Gharana is considered to be a branch derived from Jaipur Gharana, while Raigarh Gharana has faithfully adhered to the Lakshya-Lakshana customs, incorporating the beauty of Jaipur and Lucknow Gharana which can be considered as artistic achievement of post-independent India. [Byohar \(2019\)](#)

The beginning of each gharana is considered to be from a main artist, who laid the foundation of that gharana by establishing a new style by using innovative experiments on the strength of his amazing talent. According to beliefs, no tradition can be called a gharana until it has been going on for at least three generations. In other words, there must be three qualified artists in every gharana: the guru or the founder; his disciple or son; and his son's disciple or disciple's disciple. [Azad \(2022\)](#).

At present, young dancers are getting dance training from gharanas, but they prefer not to be confined to any single gharana. The spread of education has emphasized the need for educated dancers to learn the specialty of each gharana and bring innovation to their dance. Today It is not surprising to see glimpses of other gharanas in the dance of the artists, by adopting the artistic beauty of each gharana and presenting it in the dance, each dancer is trying to display innovation in their dance presentation.

Among the three main gharanas associated with Kathak dance, the "Banaras Gharana" was once considered relatively lesser-known. However, it would now be inaccurate to call it as such, given that artists trained in the Banaras gharana are currently performing not only within the country but also internationally. Art is being performed with dexterity. Therefore, it would be appropriate to call it a well-known gharana. The names of two genealogies are often mentioned in the Gharana: (1) Janki Prasad and (2) Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj.

Janki Prasad (Banaras Gharana)



The Banaras Gharana was founded by Janaki Prasad, a native of Bikaner, Rajasthan, and a member of the Sawaldas dynasty. However, he taught dancing to Sabla ji, the son of his brother Chunnilal ji, and Duda ji, the son of Sabla ji. Following this, Hukum a ji and Moti ji, the sons of Duda ji, received schooling from their great-grandfather as well. Hukum a ji had two sons, Dulharam and Ganeshilal; Janki Prasad

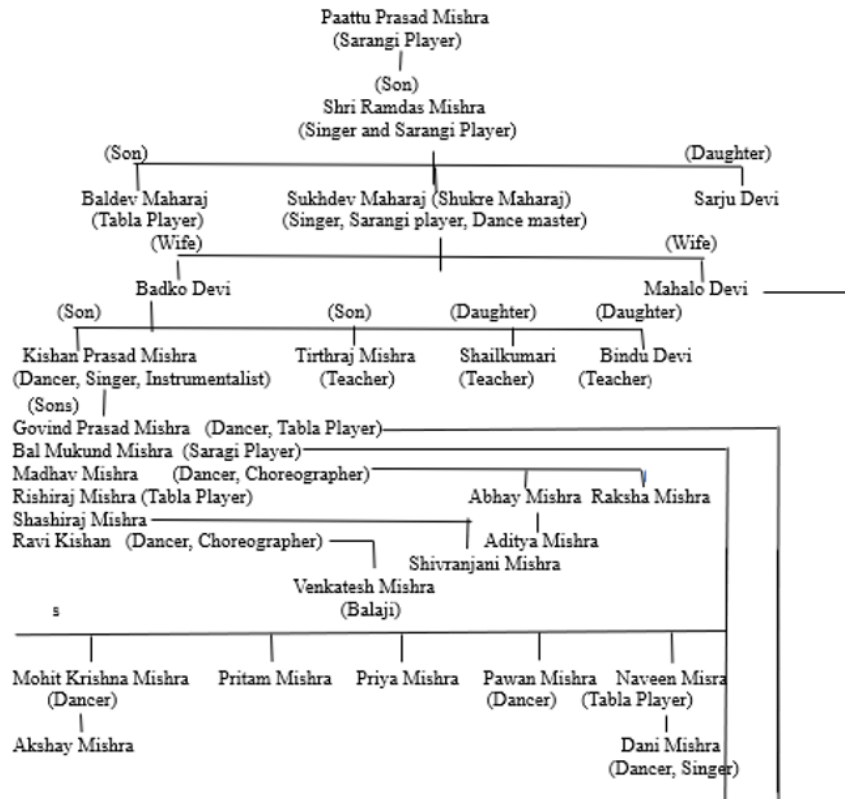
ji had no children. Dulharam taught music to his three sons, Puranlal, Hiralal, and Biharilal, in addition to making Kashi his place of employment. Bihari Lal had three sons, Kishanlal, Mohanlal, and Sohanlal; Kishanlal received his training in Mumbai, while the other two brothers had theirs in Dehradun. Bihari Lal was also the court dancer for Holkar Maharaj of Indore.

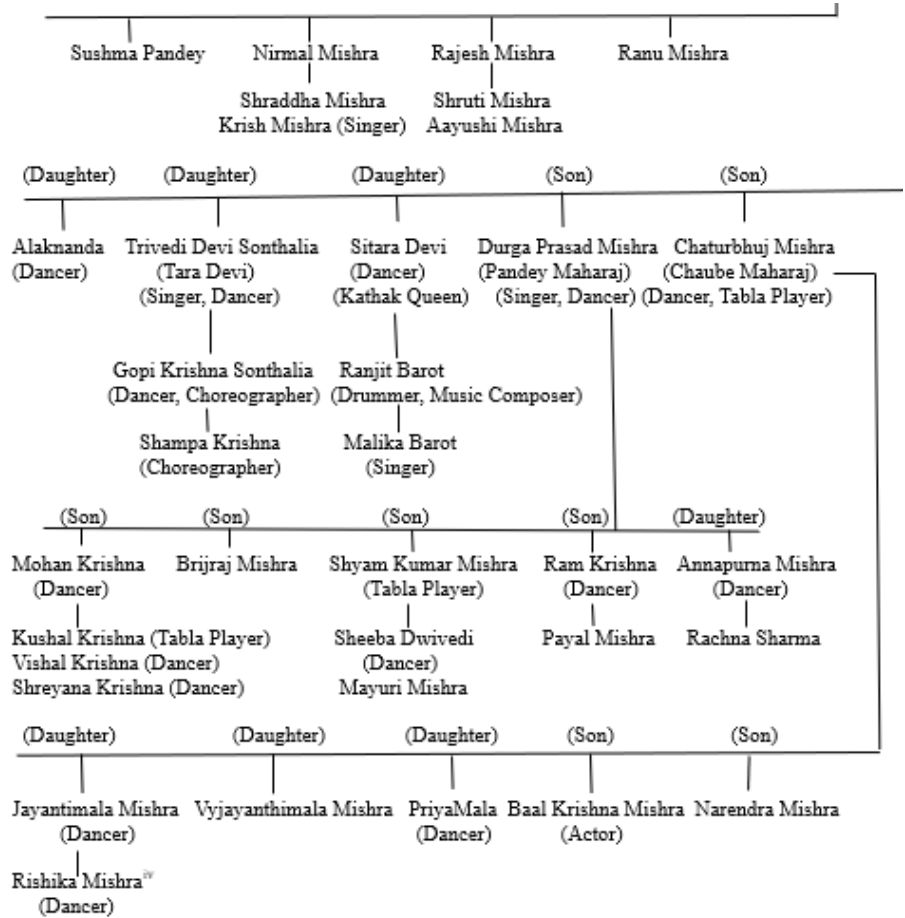
Hiralal, the second son of Dulharam, was also a high-quality artist, but the present information related to his married life remains missing. On the other hand, Puranlal, the third son of Dulharam, also contributed significantly in the field of Kathak dance. He had two sons, Madanlal and Ramlal, who made Patiala his workplace.

There were three sons born to Ganeshilal, the second son of Hukuma ji, among whom were Hanuman Prasad, Shivlal, and Gopaldas. His first son, Hanuman Prasad, was appointed as a royal dancer / court dancer in the courts of Jammu, Patiala, Bikaner, and Nepal. He had a daughter, Chunni Devi. Chunni Devi, who had three sons, Navalkishore, Vanshidhar, and Omkarprasad, played a significant role in promoting dance in Delhi. Shivlal, the second son of Ganeshilal, was a high-class Tabla player who served in the court of Raigarh King Chakradhar Singh. Shivlal's three sons of these, only Kundanlal remained associated with dance; the remaining two sons, Sukhdev and Durgaprasad, made business their means of livelihood.

Ganeshilal's third son, Gopaldas, made Lahore Patiala his workplace and taught dance to his friend's son, Bhure Khan, who was later adopted and changed his name to "Jyoti Prasad." A son was born, whose name was Krishna Kumar. Krishna Kumar received dance education from his brother Jyoti Prasad, alias "Aashiq Hussain" (adopted son), and from his father's elder brother Hanuman Prasad. Krishna Kumar had three sons: Ashok Kumar, Vijay Kumar, and Chandan Kumar.

"Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj (Banaras Gharana)





(Mishra, V.K., Personal Interview, 2023, April 22)

The second genealogy of Banaras Gharana, is known by the name of “Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj”. Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj was born into a Brahmin family in Banaras; his father's name was Shri Ramdas Mishra. He was also a Sanskrit scholar. Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj had two marriages, the first with Badko Devi, from whom four children were born: Shailjakumari, Kishan Maharaj, Bindu Devi, and Tirathraj (Tiwari uncle). When he appointed as a musician in the court of Nepal King, he married Mahalo Devi, the daughter of Rajguru of the King of Nepal, from whom he had five children: Alaknanda, Tara Devi, Sitara Devi, Durga Prasad (Pandey Maharaj), and Chaube Maharaj (Chaturbhuj Mishra). Acchan Maharaj adopted Chaube Maharaj and taught him dance, while their other four children received instruction from their father in all genres of music. Alaknanda made Kolkata her workplace and stayed there to train her disciples.

Tara Devi's son was Gopi Krishna, who took the Banaras Gharana to its pinnacle. Sitara Devi, who is known as the supreme artist of the Banaras Gharana, married Pratap Barot, from whom she had a son named Ranjit Barot. Due to his lack of interest in dance, she trained her brother Chaube Maharaj's two daughters, Jayanti Mala and Priya Mala, both in dance. Apart from Priya Mala and Jayanti Mala, two more children of Mr. Narendra were born. Shri Durgaprasad ji had five children, whose names were Mohan Mishra, Brijraj Mishra, Shyam Mishra, Ram Mishra, and Annapurna Devi.

3. FORMER ARTISTS OF BANARAS GHARANA AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO KATHAK DANCE

1) **Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj:** Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj was born in Varanasi in 1888. He has been interested in music since childhood; he was a musician of high quality, a poet, and a Sanskrit scholar. After serving in the court of the King of Nepal, when he returned to Banaras, he started studying "Natyashastra", and taking "Natyashastra" as the basis, he created lots of 'Parans' on the stories of 'Radha-Krishna' and 'Shiva-Parvati'. Many compositions were done on related subjects. The credit for including 'Tandav' in Kathak dance also goes to him alone. Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj thought that Kathak dance, which was revered because it was performed in temples, had been given an inferiority complex by the Mughal courts. When Kathak came out of the temples and reached the courts, obscenities also entered the courts along with it. As a result, the existence of Kathak was limited only to the luxurious environment of courtesans. During that period, Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj courageously dedicated his three daughters (Alaknanda Devi, Tara Devi, and Sitara Devi) to the advancement of Kathak, despite facing social ostracization from the Brahmin community of Banaras, who treated them as Shudras. Undeterred by societal backlash, this noble individual persisted in their commitment to Kathak dance. [Singh \(n.d.\)](#)

Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj created various 'Parans' including Kali Paran, Durga Paran, Shiv Paran, Ram Paran, etc. He made his children adept at various styles of music, regardless of their age. His dedication and selflessness restored respect for Kathak dance in society.



2) **Sitara Devi:** Sitara Devi was born in Kolkata in 1916. Even before her birth, her father, Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj, had announced that if I had a daughter, I would make her the best dancer in the world. At the age of five, anklets were tied to Sitara Devi's feet. She gave many performances in Banaras during her childhood. In Calcutta, she took classes from Shambhu Maharaj, and after going to Mumbai with Acchan Maharaj, she took dance lessons.

In 1930, a famous music institution in Bombay, "Three Arts Circle", organized a program in the palace of Mrs. Atiya Begum Faizi, in which 'Guru Rabindranath Tagore, impressed by her dance, gave her the title of 'Nritya Shyam Ragini' and 'Kathak Queen'. After this she also played the role of lead actress in the Hindi film industry, under which Mr. Niranjana Sharma's film 'Usha-Haran', Mr. Mehboob Khan's film 'Watan' and after that Pooja, Nadi

Kinare, Alhilal, Holi, Roti, Hulchul, Phool, Anjali, etc. for which she also got 'Gauhar Gold Medal'.

Seeing her dedication and contribution to Kathak, she was awarded the 'Sangeet Natak Akademi' in 1969. On April 13, 1970, she did a miraculous work in Birla Matushree Auditorium, Bombay. She Established a record by dancing continuously for 13 hours. On the other hand she received 'Nritya-Vilas' award by the Government of Maharashtra, 'Padma Shri' by the Government of India, etc.

Sitara Devi was such a woman who devoted her entire life to dance without caring for society when it boycotted her and her family. She hoisted the flag of her art in foreign countries as well. The Banaras gharana of Kathak dance can never forget her contribution in the field.



3) Chaturbhuj Mishra: Chaturbhuj Mishra was born in Calcutta in 1923 in the house of Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj. Since childhood, he has seen his sisters (Tara Devi, Sitara Devi, and Alaknanda Devi) dancing and started dancing himself. Seeing the dance of this little boy, Acchan Maharaj asked his father to teach him dance. Acchan Maharaj gave him a formal education and got his dance performances done in many places and in the royal courts of the country. Chaube Maharaj was as skilled a dancer as he was a skilled Tabla player: he also played Tabla with Sitara Devi Ji for a long time and also explained the nuances of dance to her. The credit goes to you for popularizing, expanding, and giving many new compositions to Kathak dance. You were counted among the famous scholars of India. All the artists with whom he danced convinced him of his art. He used to present difficult rhythms with great ease, as well as used miraculous sparkles and blinks in Gat-Nikas. [Singh \(n.d.\)](#) The form of Acchan Maharaj was visible in his dance.



- 4) Nataraja Gopi Krishna:** Gopi Krishna was born in Calcutta in 1933. He was the son of Tara devi and grandson of Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj. He certainly took lessons from Acchan Maharaj, Lachhu Maharaj, and Shambhu Maharaj, but always included the specialty of his grandfather's dance in his performance. At the young age of 13, he was awarded the title of 'Nataraja' in the Bengal Conference, Calcutta, under the chairmanship of Lalbabu.

Gopi Krishna also learnt Bharatnatyam from Guru Mahalingam Pillai and Govind Raj Pillai from the school of Sri Raj Rajeshwari Bharat Natya Kala Mandir. His main interest is in the use of classical dancing in Indian films. His first film success came with "Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje", a full-length film by V. Shantaram [Gopi Krishna \(n.d.\)](#). At the mere age of 17, Gopi Krishna's portrayal in the acclaimed film bestowed upon classical dancing a newfound status and dimension. This cinematic masterpiece marked a significant milestone in the history of India's dance and cinema, demonstrating the rich dividends that could be attained when classical dancing is utilized effectively by filmmakers.

In the film world, he first taught dance to actress Madhubala, after which he got an influx of choreography. Apart from this, He gave dance training to actresses like Asha Parikh, Geeta Bali, Waheeda Rehman, Vyjayanthimala, Meena Kumari, Hema Malini, etc. In the field of Kathak, he first presented Tandav dance through 'Angharas' and 'Karans'. From his maternal uncle, Chaube Maharaj, he learned to dance easily, even on complex taals.

Dancing to the lyrics of Tarana, sliding across the stage, standing on a platter, through eyebrows Showing Tah, Dugun, Tigun, Chaugun, etc. is his gift to the Kathak world. Hence, the miraculous performances by Gopi Krishna made Banaras Gharana world-famous.



4. PRESENT ARTISTS OF BANARAS GHARANA

- 1) Pt. Mata Prasad Mishra:** Pt. Mata Prasad Mishra was born on July 6, 1968, in a musical family in Varanasi. His father, Mr. Mahesh Prasad Mishra, was himself a Sarangi player and singer, and his mother, Mrs. Laxmina Devi, was a music lover along with a housewife. Lived among well-known artists and seekers of music. Early on, he developed a passion for Tabla, but at the age of 6, inspired by his elder brother Mr. Chandrashekhar Mishra's dancing, he also began studying Kathak under the guidance of

Vidushi Alaknanda Devi, a renowned dancer from the Banaras Gharana. He received Tabla training from Pt. Panchu Maharaj. Along with music education, Pandit Mata Prasad obtained a postgraduate degree in sociology. (Mishra, M. P. Personal Interview, 2023)

Pt. Mata Prasad advanced the legacy of Kathak dance, Indian music, and Banaras Gharana through the music education received from his ancestors, as a result of which he received several awards like the Shringaramani Award, Kala Prakash Award, Sangeet Natak Akademi (2019), etc., Apart from his birthplace and workplace in Banaras, he displayed his talent on various platforms across India, including Sankat Mochan Sangeet Samaroh (Varanasi), Artists of Tomorrow Sangeet Sammelan (Mumbai), Kathak Festival (Delhi), Shivranjan Sangeet Samaroh (Mumbai), Sharad Chandrika Kathak Kendra (Delhi), etc. In addition to this, he performed on numerous international stages in countries like Spain, Switzerland, and Japan.

Pt. Mata Prasad Mishra, as a very special master and artist of the Banaras Gharana of Kathak dance, is currently teaching the Banaras Gharana to the disciples under the Guru-Shishya tradition, as well as playing an important role in the education and promotion of Kathak throughout the country and abroad.



- 2) **Pt. Ravi Shankar Mishra:** Pt. Ravi Shankar Mishra is a well-known Kathak artist and guru from Banaras who is the son of Pt. Nageshwar Prasad Mishra and Sundar Devi. Born on August 8, 1969. Father of Pt. Ravi Shankar himself an accomplished Tabla player who worked in the music department of Banaras Hindu University. Pt. Ravi Shankar obtained his post-graduation degree in Hindi for his keen interested in literature, at the same time he also continued to represent the Kathak Gharana of Banaras. Before the birth of Pt. Ravi Shankar, his father and his mother went to their elder brother's house in Kashmir for some time, due to which Pt. Ravi Shankar got the name "Pahadu." Pt. Ravi Shankar is an expert Tabla player and in addition he is a skilled Kathak dancer. Pt. ji received formal lessons in Tabla from his father in his childhood and from his cousin Pt. Mata Prasad Mishra, he was inspired to learn Dance and he started dancing under the guidance of Alaknanda Devi. (Mishra, R. S. Personal Interview, 2023)

He received many awards and honors as a result of his inherited art practice; he took his dance and music to foreign countries, and at present he is teaching Banaras Gharana to many students. He received many awards like "Sangeet Bhaskar" by Prayag Sangeet Samiti, "Sangeet Praveen" by Prayag Sangeet Samiti, "Sangeet Martand" by Hindu University Prayag, "Nritya Prakash" by Kala Prakash Varanasi, and "Sangeet Natak Akademi" Award (2019) by Uttar Pradesh Government, etc.

The Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, the Governor, and the Indian Prime Minister all gave him the chance to receive the honors. He appeared in "Parakh," a program on Delhi Doordarshan (Indian National Television) that was dedicated to the Varanasi Classical Art of Music tradition, as a guest artist on TV and radio. He appeared in the Hindi movie "Tulsidas."

In the year 1998, he has collaborated with flamenco dancer Ana la China to perform the highly regarded Flamenco-Kathak program "From Banaras to Jerez" in numerous European cities. Emilio Artessero Quesada, a contemporary dancer, and well-known Swiss jazz musicians like Maurice Magnoni and Claude Jordon are among the other western artists with whom he has collaborated. He is frequently invited to conduct kathak workshops by the Geneva-based "Ateliers d'ethnomusicologie" due to his high regard as a teacher. He frequently participated in the "La Croisee des Cultures" initiative, directing various international dance and music workshops. He is also a member of the I.C.C.R. (Indian Council for Cultural Relations).



- 3) **Vishal Krishna:** Taking forward this link to the Banaras Gharana, Vishal Krishna, grandson of Durga Prasad Mishra (Pandey Maharaj) and son of Mohan Krishna ji, is presenting the uniqueness and miraculousness of this gharana in many forums and functions. Vishal Krishna was born on May 16, 1991, in Varanasi. From birth, he heard the chimes of the ghunghuru and musical instruments around him. And then he started learning his family's musical tradition. He began taking dancing lessons after being inspired by "Sitara Devi" (the kathak queen). Along with this, he also took dance lessons from his father and Pt. Ravi Shankar Mishra. He went to Mumbai for training in dance, remained there till the age of 22, and continued to learn dance under the tutelage of his grandmother. His father, Shri Mohan Krishna, was himself a skilled dancer and was also a teacher at Guru Nanak Khalsa School. His mother, Mrs. Vimla Devi, is a

homemaker, as a result of which after returning from Mumbai, he got the musical environment in which he propagated his acquired art.

Bringing fame to Banaras Gharana dance in the country and abroad and winning the hearts of the audience, Vishal Krishna met renowned Odissi dancer "Madhavi Mudgal." Under the leadership of "Madhavi Mudgal," Vishal Krishna gave a dance performance at Gandharva Mahavidyalaya. From her, he learned the nuances of "acting" (Abhinay). He also got knowledge of the technical side of Kathak from Pt. Birju Maharaj Ji. Through his Kathak performances, Shri Vishal Krishna spread Kathak dance not only in India but also abroad and received many awards and honors from various institutions, organizations, and governments.



5. CONCLUSION

Banaras holds a significant place in Indian culture and history, with its origins dating back thousands of years. It is a tapestry woven from centuries of history, tradition, spirituality, and creativity, making it a unique and cherished part of India's cultural heritage. An American writer, Mark Twain, has also said "Banaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together." This historic city has been a center of learning, philosophy, music, and arts. It has been a hub for scholars, poets, musicians, and artists, attracting people from all over India and beyond. The saying, "बनारस में रस सदैव विद्यमान रहता है" underscores the enduring presence of artistic inspiration in the city of Kashi, where the Nava Rasa perpetually resonate through music. The name "Varanasi" is rooted in ancient nomenclature, deriving from its location on the banks of the River Varuna and Assi Ghat. This Varanasi got fame as Anandvan, Rudravas, and finally Banaras. [Parvatkar \(2002\)](#)

After the Mughal period, when Kathak recovered its broken existence, the credit also goes to the artists of Banaras Gharana for taking Kathak towards the path of devotion. Sukhdev Maharaj ji composed many poetic paranas to maintain the devotional aspect of Kathak. Some of his remarkable compositions are Kali Paran, Hanuman Paran, Shiv Tandav Paran, Ram Paran, etc. These compositions also play a significant role in today's presentation of Banaras gharana. The artists of Banaras Gharana persistently contribute to the ongoing progression of Kathak, demonstrating their commitment to its continuous growth and refinement.

The Banaras Gharana, revered as one of the oldest traditions of Kathak gharanas, has left an indelible mark on this art form through its profound contributions.

Renowned for its emphasis on intricate footwork, graceful movements, and literary compositions, the Banaras Gharana has elevated Kathak with its distinctive style and rich repertoire. Its lineage boasts celebrated artists who have not only preserved the tradition of Kathak but also propelled it forward through innovative techniques and artistic expressions, ensuring its enduring relevance and vibrancy in the realm of dance. While contemporary challenges, such as dwindling interest among younger audiences, the Banaras Gharana stands firm, demonstrating resilience and adaptability.

Embracing innovation in choreography, musical collaborations, and technological advancements, it continues to thrive, expanding its reach and enriching its legacy. In doing so, the Gharana not only upholds tradition but also pioneers new frontiers, remaining a beacon of cultural heritage in a dynamic world.

In addition to its contributions to Kathak dance, the Banaras Gharana is also known for its significant influence on Tabla playing. By seamlessly integrating Tabla compositions and techniques into Kathak performances, the Banaras Gharana showcases a harmonious interplay between rhythm and movement. This fusion enhances the depth and complexity of Kathak presentations, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between dance and percussion within the Banaras tradition. In sum, the Banaras Gharana's profound contributions to both Kathak and Tabla playing have left an enduring mark on the landscape of Indian classical arts.

The Gharana symbolizes the timeless essence of India's cultural heritage, exemplifying the transcendental beauty and transformative power of classical art forms. As emerging artists carry forward its legacy, we anticipate a future adorned with even more captivating and innovative performances, perpetuating the essence of this esteemed gharana for generations to come.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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