

Original Article

EVOLUTION OF KATHAK DANCE AS A TEMPLE TRADITION OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to study the evolution of Kathak Dance as a Temple Tradition of India. With the earliest developments and proceedings over the period of time that helped Kathak dance emerge as a Temple Tradition are brought to light. The changes that transcended Kathak towards a living tradition in the Temples of India are highlighted thereby. The practices followed by the Kathavaachaks and their transitioned journey that spiritually crafted the form of Kathak into an artistic tradition observed in the Temple premises today, have been notedly discussed. The paper thus illuminates various cultural contexts that refined a simple art of oral storytelling into its present classicality and a glorious heritage of India.

Keywords: Katha, Kathak, Kathik, Kathavaachan, Temples

INTRODUCTION

The adoration of the Lord has always been the primary goal of dance, according to the Vishnudharmottar Purana. Dance holds a prominent place among offerings such as flowers, oblation, etc. Dancing to vocal and instrumental music guarantees the merit of a sacrifice made, and it not only satisfies all desires but also guarantees the devotee's liberation (moksha). Vishnu, who created this art, is especially pleased with it. [Srivastava \(2008\)](#)

The word "Kathak" comes from the root word "Katha," which means "to sing," "to praise," "to say," "to inform," or even "to describe, order, and express" (nirupana). The word "Kathak" is used in the Sabdakalpadruma to refer to a vakta (speaker), Kathapajivi (a person who makes a living by telling stories) and natakavarnama karta. [Srivastava \(2008\)](#)

Dance in India was common all across India until the 10th and the 11th century. The origins of Kathak are said to be as old as the Aryan Civilisation of the north but it is difficult to say properly when and how it took its present form. Kathak is known to have taken its roots from the Kushilava Parampara dating back to the Vedic period.

It is said that the twin sons of Shriram, Luv and Kush, in the Treta yug were excellent orators and they narrated the Sant Valmiki's Ramayana in Lord Shri Ram's royal Durbar, so influentially that the spectators were really touched and rather filled with Karuna Ras. They were the first known Kathavaachaks. [Anand \(2012\)](#)

But as it has developed over time amid numerous diffusions, Kathak exhibits striking similarities to numerous other regional and local traditions of music, dance, and acting that are practiced by various communities, including the Andhra, Karnataka, and Maharashtra Harikatha singers in the south, the Gujarati Mahabhatts in the west, the Kala-Kshapa of Madhya Pradesh, the Katha Vachaks of Vrindavan, the Jogis of Punjab, the Raasila of Vrindavan and the Kathaks from Ayodhya. [Srivastava \(2008\)](#)

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Received: 11 January 2025; **Accepted:** 06 February 2026; **Published** 10 March 2026

DOI: [10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i2.2026.6797](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i2.2026.6797)

Page Number: 69-73

Journal Title: International Journal of Research -GRANTHAALAYAH

Journal Abbreviation: Int. J. Res. Granthaalayah

Online ISSN: 2350-0530, **Print ISSN:** 2394-3629

Publisher: Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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

Authors' Contributions: Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Transparency: The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.

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Kathak as a Kathavaachak Shaili evolved through the times of Ramayana, Mahabharata, Jain- Baudhha Yuga, the periods of the Guptas, Harshavardhan, the Rajputs and the Mughals. [Nagar \(2020\)](#) Kathaks and Kathiks have been contextualised in the Puranas and texts like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Harshacharita, Sangit Ratnakar, Mansollas etc. Hence, the origins of Kathak are really old. The practice of male devotional dancers had always existed while the temple dancing tradition by women became prominent from the 4th century AD. Suta, Magadha, Granthika, Saubhika, Bhandra, Bhata, Carana, Kathak, Kushilava and Harikatha singers are some of the names which refer to different classes of the Harikatha singers who wore Ghungroos and carried Karatala in their hands, fully conversant in Pauranik Kathas, first praying to God and then like a Sutradhara detailing out their performances. [Srivastava \(2008\)](#) The occupation of the Kathaks in the tenth century AD was comparable to that of the Vaishnava reciters and the Kathak function today.

It is said that in the Dwaapur Age, when Krishna was leaving Mathura to go to Vrindaavan, he consoled the Gopis by giving them a Shaligram stone telling them that it bears an image of him on which they can meditate and thus connect with him. That is believed to be the start of Moorti Puja. The stone eventually would have incarnated as the form of Krishna which gradually would have adorned the temples and thus initiated the Temple tradition. In the same context the Kathik community is known to sing praises of the ShreeHari in olden times through hymns and tales, quite possibly emerging as the Kathak Nritya now. The Kathiks, to earn a livelihood, followed this tradition for the entertainment and enlightenment of the people at different temples of the country until gradually at the time of Mughal invasions they took shelter in the Durbars and thus accordingly transformed the artform as more 'Shringaarik' or elegant, to suffice the environment of the Court.

The Vaishnavite tradition gained popularity and Islamic culture developed concurrently in the fifteenth century. There were two types of musicians: one who preached in temples and the other who accompanied the men who went to fight in the battles to support the troops. The singers and dancers who followed this devotional path undoubtedly became the Vaishnavite tradition's Kirtaniyas and the Ashtachhap poets. [Nagar \(2020\)](#)

Due to Akbar's magnanimous policies, temples were built at Ayodhya, Mathura, and Vrindavana in the middle of the 16th century. This also marked the beginning of the Nritya Gaan Sewa in the temples. Temples in ancient India developed into ornate buildings with a Nata Mandapa and musicians and dancers as essential components. Temple buildings in both the North and the South bear witness to this custom. Khajuraho, Konark, and Bhubaneswar relief panels depict scenes that highlight women's dancing, primarily by the Devadasis. The Kavyas and Sanskrit dramas make mention of the temple dances. In Meghdoot, Kalidas has described about the dancing tradition in the Mahakala Temple of Ujjain as well. [Bhate et al. \(2022\)](#) When temples were made as part of the Shayan Bhog to the deities, dance by the Devadasis, was conceptualised.

Islam's arrival in India and the subsequent establishment of Muslim authority had a significant effect on northern society and culture. It was not recommended to have a female temple dancer. The society was demoralized by the ongoing battle. One of the most notable breakthroughs in India's cultural history was the formation of a new culture that was so different from anything that had existed earlier in the nation i.e., the synthesis of two civilizations.

Serving the temple's ruling deity through dancing was entirely taken over by the Kathaks during the turbulent times. Up until recently, such temples could be found in Ayodhya. India went through a difficult time during the 12th and 16th centuries, when temples were even demolished. As a result, the Varaanganas' or Devadasis' dance moved from temples to the kings' courts. Hence, the contribution of the Devadasis to the development of Indian Dance is immense.

Kings, Nawabs, and the Aristocracy frequently requested the services of Kathaks, either for entertainment or to commemorate a special occasion. A few Kathaks who were invited to the princely courts eventually moved to large cities to work as court dancers. Kathak thus found a home in the palaces of the Rajas of Rajasthan and the courts of the Nawabs of Oudh. The most well-known of these Kathak lineages is that of Prakash ji, who arrived in Lucknow under Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula. [Bhate et al. \(2022\)](#)

Instruments like Tarab, Sarod, Chang, Shehnai and Rubab were popular in the Mughal Age. Because of the influence of the Muslims, Raag-Raaginis like the Jangla, Jaif, Shaahaana, Darbari, Jila etc. amalgamated with the Indian music. The Mughal period saw the adaptation of Gazals, Thumris and Gats in the Kathak Dance. Before Dhrupada, there were Prabandhas that were soft in nature, one of the examples of which was Gita Govinda's Ashtapadi. Raja Mansingh Tomar and Swami Haridas were the ones who developed the Dhrupada style. At first Dhrupada was not masculine. It was soft but later the male-oriented Kathak dance invited 'Ladant-Bhidant' to present 'Chamatkaar' of Laya-Taal in courts. Amir Khusro greatly influenced the musical scene then. Khayal and Dadra also developed at the same time.

As reciters, Kathaks can be broadly divided into two groups: Pathaks, who recite the poetry, and Dharaks, who elaborate on them using colloquial language. [Srivastava \(2008\)](#) These Kathaks adorn Kathavaachan with dance, in which they recreate a character, mood, or feeling from a katha (usually drawn from the epics) with musical accompaniment through gestures and facial expressions. The bhava is easily understood by everyone, regardless of class or level of education. According to Mahant Mithilesh Nandini Sharan of Ayodhya, Katha was one way of giving Updesh. Three types of rendering Katha are as follows-

- 1) Vyas (Ved) or Prabhu Sammit Updesh:** Here, the subject matter of teaching is the Vedas or the Upanishads. Method of instruction is Sermon. It is like giving instruction and is devoid of Rasa. The Updesh is given only by Brahmins referred as Vyas or Kathavaachaks.

- 2) **Suhrid (Purana) Sammit Updesh:** Suhrid means friend. In it there can be Samvaad or instructions. It can be given by any learned man, not Brahmins. Eg. Lord Krishna giving Updesh to Arjuna. The persons giving Updesh are called Kathakaar, Granthikas or Granthis.
- 3) **Kanta Sammit Updesh:** This is used by using Kavya - stories and verses from Mythology, Epics and Literature. The teaching is accompanied by music, dance and drama. Listening to it is like listening to the words of your beloved. [Narayan and Kalha \(2022\)](#)

According to a theory put forth by Shovana Narayana, a Kathak is a storyteller who uses forceful, elegant movements. "Kat" in Kathak means to speak or talk, while "thak" means to use movement to harness latent energy. The five disciplines of Geetvidya, Vadyavidya, Nrityavidya, Natyavidya, and Kavyakriya vidya are known to have been mastered by the progenitors of the Kathak Lok. From time to time to make Kathavaachan more interesting and relevant to their times, elements like music, expression, aspects of both Tandav and Lasya as well as Natyadharmi and Lokdharmi styles were added in Kathak dance. The Kathak Lok from the Kathak villages like Paraspur, Kichkila, Nasirpur, Gaur, Isarpur, Bigha and Jagir Kathak etc. call themselves as custodians of the Samaveda and are mostly Brahmins. They consider Dance, Music and Drama as a vehicle of religious enlightenment, merely surviving on Lokaashraya and never needing any Rajyaashraya. Twelve villages named Kathak, all located in the region of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have specialised classes of people such as Dhadhi, Charan, Langas and Bhagvatalus. Many sport the name of Misra or Mishras and are also associated with instruments like Tabla and Shehnai. Up to 36 households are involved in classical performing arts in the village of Isarpur. According to F. Buchanan's survey report, between 1807 and 1827, there were around 100 Kathak families living in Ayodhya and Banaras. Thus, Mathura, Ayodhya, and Banaras were the centres of Indian music, and it is believed that the Muslim singers and composers were also influenced by the Indian music. [Nagar \(2020\)](#)

The Charans, who are known as Stuti Reciters in the Padma Purana, are the traditional dancers of Rajasthan. The Churu and Sujangarh regions are home to Rajasthan's contemporary Kathak dance practitioners. They are members of the Nagarchi or Dholi community, whose traditional occupation was playing drums. Similarly, Rasadhari and Bhandis also were associated to Kathak since long. The majority of Kathak villages are found in western Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. It is quite remarkable how the Kathak villages happened to extend north and northeast of Pratihthanpura, the fabled location, where Natya was believed to be first introduced to India. [Narayan and Kalha \(2022\)](#)

Back in the 16th century, the dance performed in the Vaishnava temples was not only devotional and expressive but also technically strong and thus popular among people too. This can be known as the poets have used the technical terms like Sulap, Sanch, Urap, Tirap, Gati Sudhang in their compositions and these are names used for Kathak's some of the oldest movements. Actually, these are names that developed in the Desi danceforms of the medieval period. Thus, the literary content in the Braj language featuring Krishna prominently positions Kathak as an important danceform in the middle age. [Dadheech \(2020\)](#) Desi Karanas, hence, more relate to Kathak instead of margi ones. In the Ganesha Purana, Upasana Khanda, Ganesha has been called a Kathak, and thus the reference acquires new dimensions in view of the Nritya Murtis (dancing idols) of Lord Ganesha. [Srivastava \(2008\)](#)

In the 16th century, the Raasleela of Braj evolved as a performing art. Raas which means a group dance was replete with Nritya aspect, i.e., the leelas and dances of Radha, Krishna and the Gopis while later Shri Narayan Bhatt also added the stories of Shri Krishna into the Raas which began featuring as the expressive part showcased after the Nritya Raas. Thus evolved the solo dimension of Raas that later adapted and came to be known as Natwari Nritya. [Dadheech \(2020\)](#) The credit of strengthening Raslilanukarana goes to Shri Hari Ram Vyas. [Srivastava \(2008\)](#)

The Kathiks expanded over the areas of Pratapgarh, Azamgarh, Raebareilly, and Gorakhpur when the Raas gained popularity in the Braj and Mathura districts. The Raas elements are also present in the Kathavaachan style due to the two styles' concurrent evolution. Several Raas Padas boast of Shudhh bols or phrases like Ta Ta Thei, Trikat, Tatta Thei, Tathunga, Dradum, etc. because the Bhakti Kaal coincided with Akbar's reign and as Raas Nritya and Kirtanas were very prominent at that time. [Nagar \(2020\)](#)

There is an invisible interweaving, adaptation, and modification between the Kathiks, Kathaks, and the Lucknow Gharana of Kathak dance. Their dance was referred to as Natwari Nritya by experts such as Pt. Achhan Maharaj, Pt. Shambhu Maharaj, and others. Even now, phrases that are essentially taken from Raas, such as "Takit Dhikit Dhillamatho Deem Tho Deem," are danced in Kathak's Jaipur Gharana Parans. [Dadheech \(2020\)](#)

Kathak Nritya developed on both Tandav and Lasya sides in this era. Whether it be graceful chakkars, difficult Toda-Tukdas, Parans, the sheer rendition of Tabla and Pakhawaj bols like Kidnag, Ghidnag, Dhumkit, Naraan, Kraan, Dhir Dhir Kit Tak etc. through the feet, all of them were quite impressive. The tradition of dancing Darjedaar bandishes subsequently in Thaaah, Dugun, Chaugun layas etc. evolved at that time. Apart from all the Nritta technicalities, even the bhava gained immense focus and depth in that period. [Nagar \(2020\)](#) Following the Lucknow Gharana, evolved the Jaipur and the Banaras Gharana and later the Raigarh Gharana of Kathak.

Sahakaras, Dadhis, Akharas, Hurakiyahas, Natavas, Bhagatiyas, Bazigars, Mirasis, Nakkalas, and Brahmana Dhrupada singers are few of the communities and classes that continued to preserve North Indian music and dance traditions through their distinct dance and music practices. [Srivastava \(2008\)](#)

As a living practice even today, Kathaks continue to serve the gods in the Ayodhya's temples, including the Lakshman Kila Temple, Janki Ghat, Manas Temple, Hanuman Garhi, Shri Raj Gopal Temple and others. In all other Hindu temples across India, dance as an offering is majorly performed for Shri Ramji, Mahadevji, Parvati ji and Kanhaiyaji. It is only the male Kathaks who perform Nritya Sewa at the temples. Shreedhur Kathak, one of the most distinguished Kathaks, has composed several devotional songs of great merit. [Srivastava \(2008\)](#) According to D.G. Vyas, the original Kathak music was composed by Dhrupad and Kirtana, and the propensity to exclusively consider dance and music in the context of Muslim kings' courts has hindered an accurate assessment of the entire cultural domain, which includes environments of the temple. [Srivastava \(2008\)](#)

Just as Dhrupada Gayana was a product of the original Dhruva song style that was prevalent in the early days, Dhrupad Nritya was a product of the evolving forms of the ancient dance techniques. [Srivastava \(2008\)](#) The advent of bringing in Dhrupads or composition based on many deities like Ganesh ji, is one aspect of Temple Tradition, i.e., Gunakirtana or varnana of the Divine (praising the divine). In the temples, be it singing at the Ashyaamsewa (where the Ragas are chosen accordingly to the eight Prahars of the day) or the depiction of the verses through Dancing while using both Abhinaya and rhythmic pieces like Kavitts, Tukras, Parans, Tatkaar, Tihai, Rela etc., the Kathaks with their great observation, Citrabhinaya, Kathaantar skills and pure spontaneity offered detailed philosophical interpretations of the texts. Here, Kathaantar skill is to differentiate the meaning of one single word eg. Laal in various ways and contexts such that in the narration of Kathas, inception of wonderful ideas take place and thus morals are taught by the Kathaks, which is also synonymous with the Natya Shastra, as it upholds Updesha or preaching as the foremost duty of a performer.

The Kathaks perform the Padas of saint poets from the pre-Bhakti and early Bhakti periods, such as Goswami Tulsidas, Surdas, and Valmiki. These days, people also perform the verses of Sant Kabir, Radhe Shyam ki Ramayana and Tulsi Saheb Hathraswala. From the time of Tulsidas, Natya became prominent and Abhinaya became a major part in performances and it was then that Ramlila began to flourish. These days, even Kathaks prefer to play recorded music and also teach dance in the nearby villages. The ghungroos worn by the Kathaks are tied across a blue thread devoid of any leather pads. Apart from that, there is a tradition of using scarves or dupattas by the Kathakaars for the enactment of the verses, if need be, as for example, a dupatta had been popularly used by Pt. Gopi Kishan from Banaras at some time. [Srivastava \(2008\)](#)

The music, clothing, and repertoire of Kathak dance evolved as a result of the Kathavaachan tradition's adaptation of the Raas and courtly "Shringaarika" aspects. The established masters and the Gurus in the field always continued to sustain and glorify the form as a revered and prosperous art in the community, despite the Kothas and the courts greatly enriching it. [Nagar \(2020\)](#)

The name 'Kathak' was first coined in the year 1936, by the efforts of Pt. Mohanrao Kallianpurkar. As the first teacher of Nautch (now Kathak dance), Pt. Ramdatt, at the Marris College (now Bhatkhande Sanskriti Vishwavidyalaya, Lucknow) belonged to the Kathak community himself, thus the name was chosen and Kathak as a subject - incorporated in the first ever music school of India.

Kichkila, in Allahabad (now Prayagraj) is known to be the ancestral village of Pt. Birju Maharaj ji. It's interesting to note that Birju Maharaj's ancestors had a close relationship with Srinathji's temple, where an earthen light known as a dipa is still burned in their honour today. Prakashji and Thakur Prasad ji have been described by Mohan Khokar as Kathaks of the Rasadhari tradition, Coomarswamy has discussed Bindadin's extraordinary talent for abhinaya (acting), and Birju Maharaj has mentioned his ancestors' Rajasthani origins as well and also about his relationships with the Kathaks of Ayodhya, who are renowned for their style of Kathaopkathana (conversation, dialogue, or verbal exchange in a literary work like a story, novel, or play). [Srivastava \(2008\)](#)

Kanta Sammit Updesh, an important tradition is said to have been manifested first in the Valmiki Ramayana. It employs the medium of Kavya, Sangeet and Abhinaya very distinct from the other two methods which internalises the rasa of the text in the hearts of the audiences. Through this method the Kathaks in the temple tradition refer to God as their Beloved and try to establish love for God while describing his beauty and glory and thus connecting to the Nirguna by way of the Saguna. All practitioners of Kathak are becoming part of this living tradition, as the costumes worn by the dancers and the stories retold, by that, we know that the tradition is relived each time.

The Kathik community is known to still practice Kathavaachan in Ayodhya, Allahabad, Pratapgarh, Ghazipur, Siwan, Gaya, Sultanpur, Balia, Azamgarh, Faizabad, Raebareilly, Varanasi etc. The "Jhoolanotsav" is a very popular example of it in the temples of Ayodhya in the monsoon months. [Nagar \(2020\)](#)

The role of Kathak Lok, to impart values to the society through their heart touching enactment of the epics and sacred verses at the temples, shall remain phenomenal. Hence the evolution took its course, but the sacred dimensions offered by the Kathaks to the present day Kathak, shall ever remain contextual, fortifying the roots of tradition for the future ahead.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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