

SUB: PERFORMING ARTS (DANCE/THEATER)

Production of Courseware



- Content for Post Graduate Courses



PAPER 6

**DANCE IN INDIA TODAY, DANCE-DRAMAS,
CREATIVITY WITHIN THE CLASSICAL FORMS,
INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE IN DIASPORA
(USA, UK, EUROPE, AUSTRALIA, ETC.)**



PAPER 6

MODULE 5 KATHAK DANCE DRAMA

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Paper 6
Module 5
Kathak Dance Drama



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MODULE 5 KATHAK DANCE DRAMA

Teaching of any dance form today implies the teacher and the taught. The old guru-shishya parampara / गुरु-शिष्य परंपरा, though less, is still relevant, since Indian dance and music arts are abhyas / अभ्यास arts (meaning, one has to practice) where the close proximity is lost in mass class or university typesetting that makes transmission of arts, impersonal. In this scenario, what is the implication, mode, variety of teaching and training in Kathak, especially to equip a person plan and produce Dance Dramas?

In first generation, we saw Madame Menaka, Sadhona Bose and Shambhu Maharaj. Madame Menaka established her own dance troupe in 1934 in Mumbai and started dance classes at her residence. She discarded traditional Kathak lyrics and took the help of trained musicians to create orchestral ensembles, a break from the traditional way Indian music was played. Thus her productions were a clever merger of traditionalism and innovation. At Berlin Olympics in July 1936, Menaka and her group participated in the Dance Olympiad for two days and the first three prizes were won by

Menaka, Ram Narayan and Gourishankar. This international recognition for Kathak helped boost the popularity of the dance form. Sadhona Bose was popular as a glamorous heroine of the silver screen in the 1930s and 1940s. She even sang her own songs in some of her films including her first Alibaba / **अलीबाबा**. An English version of her best-known film, Raj Nartaki, was distributed in the USA as Court Dancer.

In next generation we saw stars like Sitara Devi, Damayanti Joshi and Roshan Kumari.

Damayanti Joshi (1928-2004) was the chosen protégé of Madame Menaka, who adopted her as a daughter when she was four. Damayanti so trained in the Lucknow gharana and was a successful solo artiste. She danced and toured the world in Menaka's troupe from the time she was five and by 15 she had already performed at all the major cities of Europe. Damayanti's entire dancing career was centered on the concern to make Kathak a dance performed outside the court.

Roshan Kumari, an exponent of the Jaipur Gharana, has danced in films Waris (1954) and Basant Bahar (1957). She runs Nritya Kala Kendra at Mumbai from 1971. In Parineeta (Hindi, 1953), Roshan Kumari and Gopi Krishna give a dazzling duet performance.

Then we saw stars of the form like Maya Rao, Birju Maharaj and Kumudini Lakhia. Some of their students who attained stardom are Saswati Sen, Shovana Narayan, Rani Karna and Durgalal. In the next generation we saw Daksha Sheth, Aditi Mangaldas and Shobana

Jeyasingh. In recent years we see new stars of the form rise like Anuj Mishra (the son of Pt Arjun Mishra), Tushar Bhat and Prashant Shah

After the first generation of pioneers like Madame Menaka, Sitara Devi, Damayanti Joshi and Roshan Kumari the work of Birju Maharaj is seminal. Birju Maharaj was initially trained by his father Achchan Maharaj and later by his uncle Shambhu Maharaj. He taught for many years at Bharatiya Kala Kendra, Delhi and was Head of Faculty and Director at Kathak Kendra. Birju Maharaj uplifted Kathak to great heights with his Kathak dance dramas. As a creative choreographer, he has given Kathak dance a new dimension through his fascinating group compositions. He retired in 1998 after which he opened his own dance school Kalashram in Delhi. He is a versatile artist, a vocalist, percussionist, music composer, poet and painter. Birju Maharaj has also contributed to Kathak in films. He directed dance, composed music and sung playback for two classical dance sequences in the film, The Chess Players directed by Satyajit Ray. He has done choreography for the films Dil To Pagal Hai / **दिल तो पागल है**, Gadar / **ग़दर**, Devdas / **देवदास** and Vishwaroopam / **विश्वरूपं**. Birju Maharaj used all languages in Kathak: his native Awadhi, then Braj, Sanskrit, Hindi, even English! He is a multi-talented genius and equipped to use any mode and method. His wide ranging works in different languages of Kathak – classical, contemporary, films. When one sees his lifetime work, one can see that he is one-man superstar of Kathak.

Many believe that Kumudini Lakhia's solo performance entitled Duvidha was a turning point of Kathak as a dance form. She founded

the Kadamb School of Dance and Music in Ahmedabad in 1967 and has done more than 70 successful productions all over the world. Her choreographies include Dhabkar / धबकार, Yugal / युगल, Atah Kim / अतः किम, The Peg, Okha-Haran / ओखा-हरन, Sama Samvadan / समवाद, Suverna / सुवर्ण, Bhav Krida / भाव क्रीडा, Golden Chains, Kolaahal / कोलाहल, Mushti / मुष्टि to name a few.

“All my first compositions were abstract. We were always doing stories from Indian mythology – on Radha, Krishna, Shiva, Rama, Sita.... We could not get away from it. I thought we are imposing our mythology on the dance form. Can’t the dance stand on its own? Is it not an art form which has its own feet? So, no mythology. Let dance be dance. So I did all abstract things. My first production was Dhabkar- pulse, then Kolahal-noise, I’ve done Atah Kim (Now where do I go from here?) three times. My students like Daksha Sheth, Aditi Mangaldas felt encouraged to experiment after the East West Encounter (1984 & 2001).”

With extensive training under the leading gurus of Kathak, Kumudini Lakhia and Pandit Birju Maharaj, Aditi Mangaldasis today recognized for her artistry, technique, eloquence and characteristic energy that mark every performance. Like her gurus, she has attempted to break new ground by using her knowledge and experience of Kathak as a springboard to evolve a contemporary dance vocabulary, infused with the spirit of the classical. “As I remember, Aditi was never satisfied with just the technique or the kinetics of dance. She wanted to explore - the space around her, the energy as a driving force, the

innumerable patterns forming kaleidoscopic extensions, the colours, moods and just about everything. Her concerns were of larger images outside her own little frail being,” says Aditi’s guru Kumudini Lakhia. The purists, Aditi says, refuse to see her work as Kathak, and the modernists say that she is too traditional. She calls it contemporary Kathak, and continues experimenting, unfazed by either the brickbats or the bouquets which come her way. “I wanted to grow out of Kathak and extend beyond it. But I’ve learnt Kathak for so many years that I want the base, the feel, the spirit, the vitality of it to remain. I want it to stay recognizable as Kathak. I think it always will be.”

Daksha Sheth studied with guru Kumudini Lakhia for 18 years before leaving her native Gujarat for Delhi in 1982. She soon decided to experiment outside the dance form’s boundaries and drew from her experience of Kathak from North India, Chhau from East India, Kalaripayattu from South India and Mallakhamb from West India to combine tradition with contemporary Indian dance. Daksha’s use of hand beat over the body was inspired by Kathak. Each production has radical changes in the context of music costume, staging, themes, music, lighting design etc. Daksha Sheth's choreography along with her composer husband Devissaro’s conceptualization and visual direction has resulted in some visually spectacular productions.

Shovana Narayanhas produced international collaborative works with leading dancers of Western Classical Ballet, Spanish Flamenco, Tap dance, Buddhist chants with Buddhist monks as well as to the compositions of western classical composers. She has worked on

philosophical themes, on the lives of contemporary sages such as Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi, Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Mahatma Gandhi. She has incorporated modern themes such as child abuse and human rights in her performances. Her concern for environment ended in Dishantar / **दिशांतर** way back in 1982 when such themes were not yet common. In the 90s, Shovana presented a traumatic burning issue of incest at a traditional Kathak dance festival through Toota yeh Vishwas Kyon / **टूटा यह विश्वास क्यों** that focused on the psychology of the victim and the mother. Shovana's list of productions is long!

In the last 25 years, Nad Roop / **नाद रूप** headed by Shama Bhate in Pune has presented several collaborations like Naad Bindu / **नाद बिंदु** with dance choreographed to Sayed Haider Raza's paintings to Nishabd Bhed / **निशब्द भेद** to dance based on French Documentary Exploring Silence on marine lives and the lack of sound. Confluence is based on the life of Kasturba Gandhi. "The new format sees jazz music provided by an Austrian Band, Manfred Weinberger and the music is based on Peer Parayee Jane Re / **पीर परे जाने रे**. The band plays the trumpet and it is incorporated in the performance," says Bhate who feels that experimentation is imperative for art forms.⁸

The words contemporary and modern are two different terms in context of art. Any art form, design, film, fashion, music can be contemporary. Each generation or time cycle brings something to the table of this development in society but modern means a whole new

language. It means new structure, new grammar and new form. So, in dance when we speak of a modern Kathak, what does it imply? So modern dance can be modern but not Kathak! Kathak can look new, with lights and stage and costumes and aesthetics but not still be called modern. However modern developments are many. Costume first. Gone is the fancy and frill, all props like cap even that was very popular in 50s and 60s. See photos of old Kathak stars, Sitara Devi or Birju Maharaj and one see the Mughal cap. This was important as not covering one's head in presence of nobleman or ruler was sign of disrespect in north, central and west India and especially in Kathak. Thus cap went first when Mughal court influence waned and slow revival of Hindu traditions began.

It is interesting that while Sitara Devi wore cap, her father created Shiva Tandava and other Durga invoking dances in Kathak, as he felt that Kathak had become a "durbari dance."

Next went the veil. Then heavily layered skirt. All this was in mid 80s when new design and aesthetics desired to make it simpler. From where else but the textile capital of west India, Ahmedabad, where Kumudini Lakhia, trained under renowned masters, undertook to reform and redesign Kathak costume aesthetics. So pastel and earth colours replaced pink and purples of yore. She used different shades of a color in her costumes that she designed herself and composed the choreography so colors don't clash and come together in a way that they themselves create a design. Excessive chunnis / चुन्नी also were done away with as new gender equality and feminist concerns

made costumes for women neutral and less feminine. Form was important not content.

Music also was simplified. Sarangi / सारंगी was replaced by violin and sitar / सितार with flute. It was easy to carry these instruments and if one wished to carry none, then recorded music came to the rescue, although in Kathak lot of talking on stage happens as tradition (and time filler!) Breath-catching technique after rigorous pirouettes and flexing of footwork), so recorded music limits

Maya Rao's years spent in Delhi added both to her knowledge of dance and enhanced the dance scene. Though not one to push herself much, she remained a gracious artiste, who did her work quietly, without fanfare. She was also selected in 1960 to go to Moscow, then the cultural capital of dance in Europe, to learn choreography. With N.K. Sivasankaran, an ace student of Uday Shankar she set about to add yet another feather to her crown. That stay made her learn a lot and she can truly be called the first lady from classical background who properly learnt choreography. Her three year stay there remains most memorable for she saw masters at work; travelled to nearby countries like East Germany, England and France.

Upon return, local politics made her key patrons change priorities but a closed door at Bharatiya Kala Kendra became an opportunity for her to start her long association with Natya Ballet Centre in 1964, with Kamala Lal, another important patron of dance and music. Her

association led to creation of many ballets like Hoysala Vaibhav / होयसला वैभव , Surdas / सूरदास, Amir Khusrau / आमिर खुसरो , Ramayana Darshana / रामायण दर्शन, Tulis Ke Ram / तुलसी के राम, Venkataeswara Vilasam / वेंकटेश्वर विलासम , and Krishnaleela / क्रिश्नालीला. Leading from 1988, her Natya Institute of Kathak and Choreography, was affiliated to Bangalore University, until recently and through her course, many students have benefitted. Today, if Kathak and choreography as a discipline have grown manifold in stature in this region, it is thanks to her efforts. She has been the lone candle whose light has dispelled darkness.

Her own students, from seniors like Sai Venkatesh, Vijaya Marthanda, Satya Charkha, Shakti Roberst, Sonar Chand, Pasha Syed to younger talents like Madhu, Satya Raju, Niru-Raju, Nadini Mehta, Ashok Kumar, Tushar Bhatt, Ramya, Brinda Jacob, Janardhan Urs, Ponamma, Anitha Santhanam, Arpana have shown what good training and great guru can do. An art form has survived because of Guru Maya Rao. As she strides into her eighties, she can be satisfied she has done a lot for dance, genuinely and affectionately

Pt. Chitresh Das (1944 – 2015), disciple of Pt. Ram Narayan Mishra, settled in San Francisco area and has collaborated with composer George Ruckert incorporating western violin, banjo and synthesizers. He even incorporated the high kicks of the French Can-Can dance and a Mexican Mariachi waltz. He created innovative choreographies ahead of his time such as Gold Rush, Energy, Class Tech, and Rhythmic. Dancers wore black body suits, short silver kurtas / कुरता,

and he even wore a tank top in one of his choreographies. Some of the music he composed used synthesizers and an electric flute. He is famous for his intense high-energy dancing and Kathak yoga that focuses on the union of breath, voice, dance, footwork and subtle expression, and sometimes playing an instrument simultaneously. This requires super stamina. It was the subject of a doctoral dissertation at Harvard University.⁶

Prerana Shrimali, a disciple of Kundanlal Gangani, is concerned about what ails the Kathak dance form. She feels, “A lot of differences have crept in over the years. Kathak has become more of a performing art than anything else, and the proscenium changes a lot. At the performing level it is difficult to tell the difference between the gharanas of Jaipur, Lucknow and Banaras, unless you are aware of the subtle technical differences, such as the bol (rhythmic syllables) used in each. Elements like the costumes, make-up, the lighting, and even in some cases the manner of speaking are the same in almost all presentations. The exceptions are legends like Sunayana Hazarilal, who has maintained the distinctiveness in costuming as well as presentation, and Sitara Devi who is a unique artiste.

Madhu Maya Rao, as a youngster has evolved her own language in creating dance dramas.

“As a little girl I followed my sibling by instinct, a more intuitive rather than structured learning. I learnt Dance through osmosis, being with my mother was my training. Dance was like a womb memory. I was led into the beautiful world of Kathak by guru Maya Rao and Chitra Venugopal “But I can’t say the same of the system in

which it exists; exploited by the Babu culture, the fight for supremacy between the Gharanaas, the 'chela-ism', the irritating coquettishness and false servility that is sometimes a prerequisite for Dancers. People ask me if I 'left' Kathak for Contemporary Dance.

I firmly believe that Dance needs to move away from the shackles of rigidity to become more meaningful. My training at NIKC gave me a thorough insight into all integral aspects of choreography and I still dip into this vast oasis of knowledge while creating. At the same time, I was inducted into the Natya performing unit and on one of our tours to the USA I stayed back in New York attending classes at the Martha Graham center, Nikolais & Louis lab and the Jose Limon center.

For the next few months, I was caught up in the buzz of New York, watching shows, and meeting inspiring artistes and then suddenly I missed India. I realized that my Dance although universal in nature had to have the essence of India. Dance is not imitation, learning does not prescribe imitation. So why did I need to perform like a western contemporary dancer?"

Nadam's Nandini Mehta and Murli Kalva have also undertaken works in Kathak and done so with solid results in productions. NADAM (an acronym for Narthan Academy of Dance and Music) since its inception in 1997, staged several productions and also helped to showcase talent from across the country. Through dancing, they also generously give back to the society through fund raising events under the aegis of KALA NADAM their annual festival held in November each year.

The productions that they have to credit in Kathak are Ritu Dhvani- depicting the seasons basant, varsha etc, Ramana Namana – a biography on the life of the saint Sri Ramanamaharishi, Tawaif Ki Kahani – the life of a courtesan, Jai Sri Krishna, Antardhwani – The voice of the inner soul, Madanotsav – celebrating the festivals of India, Dashaavatar – the ten incarnations of The Lord, Tap-Tak, a collaborative creation of Kathak and Tap Dance.

Based in Bangalore, and to have a greater outreach of the North Indian art form, they have presented Kannada & Sanskrit poems by St. Purandara Dasa, St. Vyasaraaya, St. Thyagaraja, St. Muttuswamy Dikshitar, St Vallabhacharya. The traditional framework of Kathak has been maintained intact by the duo, and their student's Smita Srinivasan, Poorna Acharya, Arpita Banerjee, Samanvit Sharma, Sowmya Ravi, Mitha Vinay. To relate with the present times, they have experimented with different genre of music.

Thanks for Visiting



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