

## Pedagogical Excellence: The Innovative Teaching Methods of Pandit Birju Maharaj in Kathak



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### Abstract

*This research paper explores the innovative teaching methods of Pandit Birju Maharaj, one of the most revered and celebrated figures in Kathak. His exceptional talent, combined with a profound understanding of rhythm, expression, and storytelling, propelled him to international acclaim. This research utilizes a qualitative approach, comprising interviews with his disciples, Kathak instructors, performers, practitioners, and scholars, along with an in-depth analysis as experienced personally through classes and video recordings of Maharaj Ji's classes and workshops. The study also reviews existing literature on Kathak pedagogy and examines how Maharaj Ji's methods have been adopted and adapted over time. In conclusion, this paper highlights the transformative impact of Pt. Birju Maharaj's teaching methods on Kathak pedagogy. This research paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the innovative teaching methods of Pandit Birju Maharaj, illustrating how his approach has revolutionized Kathak pedagogy and contributed to the preservation and evolution of this ancient art form.*

**Keywords:** Kathak Pedagogy, Innovation, Tradition, Legacy, Pandit Birju Maharaj

### Research Paper

#### Introduction

Kathak is one of the eight classical dance forms of India. It is believed to have originated from the traveling bards of ancient northern India, who would narrate mythological stories through dance, music and expressive gestures, mostly in the temples. These storytelling bards were called 'Kathaks'. The word 'Kathak' has been derived from Sanskrit language which means 'story' and 'Kathaks' means 'the ones who tell a story' as also goes by the saying 'Katha kahe so kathak kahave'.

This research paper delves into the innovative teaching methods introduced by Pt. Birju Maharaj, focusing on how these methods have influenced and transformed Kathak pedagogy. By integrating traditional practices with modern approaches, Maharaj Ji has made Kathak more accessible and appealing to a broader audience. While he introduced fun learning techniques for the younger ones, at the same time he tried to simplify the dance bols for international students who found kathak bols intimidating.

#### Background

Pandit Birju Maharaj, one of the most revered and celebrated Kathak dancer in the world, stands out as a revolutionary figure among the luminaries who have shaped Kathak in the modern era. Born into the 7th generation of the illustrious Kalka-Bindadin gharana of Lucknow, known as the originators of the Lucknow branch of Kathak. This gharana is well known for the emphasis it places on bhava (expression) and rhythmic footwork. At a very tender age, Maharaj Ji started showing his talent and began his formal training under his father, Achhan Maharaj. Unfortunately, that training was too short as his father passed away when Maharaj ji was only 9 years old. Later, he continued the training under his uncles, Pandit Lachhu Maharaj and Pandit Shambhu Maharaj, both of whom were exceptional dancers and choreographers.

Before starting his formal training under his father, he would stand and listen to his father, Acchhan Maharaj taking classes and would remember what was being taught to the senior students. When he had difficulty

remembering the bols, he would remember the rhythm and count in his head. That way he was able to remember and perform pieces which were complicated, for which he also earned respect of the seniors and most of all his father (Birju Maharaj). His mastery of rhythm, expression, and storytelling, was always visible in his performances and compositions and these have been witnessed all over the world by millions of spectators. His unparalleled devotion to Kathak, combined with a deep understanding of the dance form, has not only elevated Kathak to international acclaim but also redefined its pedagogy.

Since childhood, Maharaj Ji was aware of the nuances of rhythm, expression, and storytelling in Kathak. He could easily connect with the emotions of his students and using his profound knowledge of the art form along with the connection with his students, he was able to teach every student according to their needs (Ragini Maharaj).

During his classes and workshops, he would weave various stories for the students so that it became easier for them to understand the expression and they were able to perform better. One of such examples, Maharaj ji was once teaching a senior disciple of his, Véronique Azan from France, who was on scholarship and was being trained under him. He was teaching her a piece, where she was playing Radha and she had to look at Krishna in a certain way like Maharaj ji wanted. Somehow, she was not able to act like the Radha and Maharaj ji felt that she was not able to understand the character. He advised her to take a picture of Krishna and practice with it, whenever she could. He clarified that he was not asking her to worship Lord Krishna but just simply gaze at the picture and absorb the beauty of the God and imagine herself as Radha when she looked at it. As witnessed by various senior artists in the Kathak Kendra, there was a remarkable difference in the next few days in her expressions as Radha compared to the previous occasions. In just a matter of few days, her Abhinaya had improved. Maharaj ji was able to accurately assess the situation and find a way to make her understand the emotions and she was able to express the feelings that were required (Sen).

## **Innovative Teaching Techniques of Pandit Birju Maharaj**

### **1. Use of Simple, Playful Words for Teaching Little Children**

One of the most notable innovations of Pandit Birju Maharaj was the use of simple, everyday words to teach

young children the intricate rhythms and movements of Kathak. He was once teaching his niece who was facing difficulty in understanding the intricacies of the bols and was not able to perform what Maharaj ji was trying to teach her. He then thought of weaving some playful words instead of the bols and she understood it quickly. That's how Maharaj ji developed the technique and later incorporated it in the classes for young children. Once he was in America for a workshop where he taught similar tihais (a rhythmic phrase repeated three times) to young children. Some of the children were so happy that they started demanding to make some more tihais using the names of their favorite foods. Some children insisted on making tihais with pizza and burgers and cakes (Mamta Maharaj). Instead of overwhelming the young ones with complex bols (rhythmic syllables), he employed playful words like "halwa poori" and "kachori" to make learning more engaging and relatable. This approach infused a sense of joy and creativity into the learning process. It engaged the youngsters in the class for much longer without feeling bored and also fostered a deeper connection with the dance form.

He also innovated some pieces using playful words that were easier to pronounce like pam pam, for his Chinese students (Sen). One of his ladis (footwork) that he taught to them gained a lot of popularity since it used only counts and those students were able to perform it back in their country without any difficulty.

### **2. Simplification of Traditional Bols into Numerical Counts**

In addition to using playful words, Maharaj Ji also popularized the use of numerical counts (1, 2, 3, 4...) in tihais for students who found hindi complicated and were not able to pronounce the bols including children and foreign nationals. Pandit Shambhu Maharaj once taught a tihai using counts from 1 to 8, to some foreign students who were unable to speak hindi and this inspired Pandit Birju Maharaj to experiment with this style and develop it into a full-fledged system which is now a part of mainstream Kathak and almost all the Kathak dancers throughout the world use counts in tihais in their teachings and performances.

The traditional bols (rhythmic syllables) of Kathak are often complex and can be intimidating for people who are not used to Hindi language. He would break down the complex rhythmic patterns into simple counts, thereby making the dance form less daunting and more approachable for non-hindi speakers, allowing them to easily grasp the fundamentals of Kathak (Ragini Maharaj).

He often said to the foreigners who came to attend the workshops to learn the counting from 1 to 8. He said that he could teach entire kathak in these 8 counts for people who have the zeal to learn but are unable to do so because of language barrier (Das).

### 3. Infusion of Nature and Storytelling in Tihais

Pt. Birju Maharaj's was fascinated by nature and would often find ways to infuse nature and storytelling into the rhythmic complexity of tihais. By drawing inspiration from nature and incorporating storytelling elements, he enriched the traditional tihais with layers of meaning, making them more expressive and emotionally resonant. This also enhanced the narrative quality of the dance.

He mentioned how he once heard a bird sound while he was travelling in a train and the train had stopped in the middle of the night at some random place. Since it was late at night, there were no other sounds and Maharaj ji could hear the bird clearly. He found that sound so fascinating that he created a tihai then and there (Birju Maharaj). When he performed it on the stage, it was appreciated by the audience and from there Maharaj ji started developing more and more of such tihais. For example, he would use the imagery of rain, trees, birds, and animals to create such a vivid and expressive portrayal of the rhythmic patterns, that the audience was always left in awe of his genius. Few examples of such tihais are how he depicted a falling leaf from a tree, the way it would come down from the sky and drop to the ground. He has woven the tihai so beautifully that it is almost magical. While in the class, this technique deepened the emotional impact of the performance and at the same time provided students with a richer understanding of how rhythm can be used to tell a story.

### 4. Initiation of Short-Term Workshops

Often students who wanted to learn Kathak would speak to Maharaj ji about how they wanted to learn from him but were not able to come to Delhi to do so because of various personal reasons. Some people expressed concerns about the high living cost of the capital city while some were not able to leave their homes and families to come and live here. Even though these people would express their deep desire to learn from him, they had their challenges. After listening to many people talking about this, this provoked a thought in the mind of Maharaj ji to try and find a way to teach them. He once said that to some of these people who had come to meet him backstage after a performance, "if you people cannot come to me, I will come to you." He

further elaborated that he would come to their city for a few days and conduct a day long workshop for 2-3 days and teach them various things and then he would return next year again. Meanwhile, those students were to keep practicing what he taught and if this helped, he would make it an annual practice (Birju Maharaj).

These workshops proved to be a great success since these provided an opportunity for students from different parts of the country and the world to learn from him. This initiative played a crucial role in spreading Kathak beyond regional and national boundaries.

Later, all the Kathak Gurus adapted this system and started taking workshops in different parts of the world. In the current scenario, this has become a norm.

### 5. Introduction of Structured Nomenclature for Hastaks

In his book 'Ang Kavya,' Pandit Birju Maharaj introduced a structured nomenclature for the hastaks (hand movements) in Kathak. He codified almost all the hand movements which provided a clear and consistent framework for students and teachers all across the globe. The introduction of this nomenclature facilitated in teaching since the Guru was now able to call a hastak by name and the students would immediately understand what was being taught.

### 6. Introduction of the Bol "Ghin" and Kathakali-Inspired Foot Movements:

Maharaj ji was inspired by a performance of Kathakali to such an extent that he introduced a new bol "Ghin" and a unique foot movement into Kathak. This innovation expanded the rhythmic and expressive possibilities of the dance form, adding a new dimension to the footwork in Kathak (Birju Maharaj). This bol and the foot movement blended so easily into Kathak that they have now become a part of the mainstream.

The incorporation of these elements leading to an innovation enriched the Kathak dance form and also shed light on Maharaj Ji's ability to draw inspiration from other art forms while staying true to the essence of Kathak.

### 7. Introduction of Vandana as 'Invocation'

Maharaj ji played a significant role in shaping the modern Kathak performance across the globe. He introduced "Vandana" in the beginning of the performance as invocation, which has now become a fundamental element of the Kathak repertoire. Traditionally, dancers only did a shlok and started the performance. Maharaj ji choreographed a Vishnu Vandana "Shantakaram Bhujangshayanam" for his close friend and disciple





Pratap Pawar. The Vandana was appreciated by many dancers and Kumudini Lakhia encouraged Maharaj ji to choreograph more such Vandana for other students and performances (Lakhia). Over time, vandana has become an integral part of Kathak learning and performance across the globe. Gurus worldwide now teach various forms of Vandana, invoking different gods and goddesses, like Ganesha, Saraswati, Krishna, and others. The practice allows students to connect with the divine while upholding the classical dance tradition.

### **Pedagogical Approach: Experiential Learning and Guru-Shishya Parampara**

Pandit Birju Maharaj's approach to teaching was deeply rooted in the traditional Guru-Shishya Parampara, a system deeply rooted into Indian tradition, where knowledge was passed down from teacher to student through direct and personal instruction. However, Maharaj Ji brought a modern sensibility to this ancient tradition, emphasizing experiential learning and personalized instruction keeping in mind the learning ability of the individuals. He believed that each student was unique and tailored his teaching methods to suit individual needs, ensuring that each disciple could reach their full potential.

### **Methodology**

This research paper is based on a qualitative approach, utilizing a combination of primary and secondary sources. The primary data being the interviews with Maharaj Ji's disciples, Kathak instructors, performers, and scholars which provide the firsthand insights into his teaching methods. The study also includes an analysis of video recordings of his classes and workshops, offering a visual and auditory understanding of his techniques.

Secondary sources include a review of existing literature on Kathak pedagogy, and an examination of books, newspaper reviews, etc. The research also draws on the author's personal experiences as a student of Kathak trained under Pandit Birju Maharaj, adding a subjective perspective to the analysis.

### **Impact and Legacy**

The impact of Pandit Birju Maharaj's teaching methods on Kathak pedagogy is profound and far-reaching. His innovative approach made the dance form easily accessible to a global audience thereby ensuring the preservation and continuation of Kathak's rich cultural legacy. By adapting traditional teaching methods and tailoring them to suit the modern mindset of the students

as well as the audience, Maharaj Ji paved the way for future generations of dancers to connect with the art form in a meaningful and authentic way. His contributions to the formalization of Kathak terminology, the introduction of new movements and bols have left an indelible mark on the dance form. Today, his disciples continue to propagate his teachings, ensuring that his legacy lives on in the performances and pedagogical practices of Kathak dancers around the world.

### **Conclusion**

Pt. Birju Maharaj's contributions to Kathak pedagogy are unparalleled. His innovative teaching methods have transformed the way Kathak is taught and learned, making it more accessible to a diverse audience while maintaining its traditional roots.

Pandit Birju Maharaj's teaching methods represent a unique blend of tradition and innovation, reflecting his deep commitment to preserving the essence of Kathak while making it accessible to a broader audience. His creative approach to pedagogy has not only enriched the dance form but has also inspired countless students to explore and express their own artistic voices. As the torchbearer of the Kalka-Bindadin gharana, Maharaj Ji has left an indelible legacy that will continue to influence and inspire the world of Kathak for generations to come.

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