



Dance Direction Based on Kathak: Changing Socio-Cultural Contexts



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Abstract

This research paper is an attempt to study and analyse the historical development of dance direction based on Kathak and how its socio-cultural dimensions have changed with time. It shall also aim to understand the performative changes in dance direction due to changes in the political patronage of Kathak dance. The research also highlights the use of digital technologies and globalised aesthetics in performances and productions based on Kathak dance that challenge the conventional understanding of traditional Kathak repertoire. It shall also focus on the use of social themes in these performances and productions in modern times, making it an instrument for social sensitisation. The theoretical approach of the research shall be analytical in nature. Information and data shall be collected through primary and secondary sources, including treatises, classical literary texts, books, journals, newspapers, and internet sources. Discussions with Kathak Gurus, performers, scholars, musicians, technicians, and critics shall provide strong inputs and insight into the work, along with witnessing live performances of Kathak dancers. This research shall highlight the socio-cultural, political, and aesthetical perspectives to examine the evolution and changes in dance direction based on Kathak.

Keywords : Kathak, Dance Direction, Choreographies, Productions, Socio-cultural Contexts, Globalized Aesthetics.

Research Paper

Introduction

Art is a creative process. It requires several creative thoughts and sustained introspection to lay out the creativity from the abstract to the physical form. In dance, the body gives a language to the innovative and imaginative abstract thought through the use of appropriate technique. The ongoing editing and omitting of this process leads to the final structure and framework. Creativity without direction is useless and aimless. Dance direction is the structural path and a major component in giving birth to the dance recital. It involves gathering together the grammar of dance, selecting a particular technique from the stock of techniques gathered so far through learning, developing movements using the technique with the blend of emotion into aesthetical dance phrases, and creating the final structure of the dance presentation. The entire process and thought of dance direction has an aesthetical value and depends on one sole purpose of dance presentation, i.e., Rasanubhuti (experiencing the bliss). Choreography is another name for dance

direction. Choreography also means sequencing aesthetical body movement in terms of space, shape, time, and energy with an emotional context to it. The process of choreographing is something similar to dance direction.

Dance Direction: Definition and Concept

Dance direction is the art of making dances, the gathering and organization of movement into order and pattern (Mackrell).¹ Dance direction in cultural paradigms and creative affairs involves creating and assembling movements for a dance performance based on a particular story and music with the use of costumes, set design, and props in order to reach a level of aesthetics. When these elements are structured, metamorphosed, rehearsed, revised, and resolved, a dance presentation takes shape. It basically follows the following steps: (Saha).²

1. **Conceptualization:** Contemplate and visualize the theme, mood, or story that the choreography will convey. Consider cultural, regional, religious, performative, and artistic elements.
2. **Music Selection:** Choose suitable music that

complements the theme and sets the desired mood and tone for the performance.

3. **Gathering Movement through Exploration:** Experiment with various movements and gestures to express the planned emotions or narrative. Consider cultural nuances and traditional dance elements.
4. **Structuring:** Organize the movements into an artistic pattern, creating a choreographic sequence and structure that flows aesthetically and rhythmically.
5. **Transitions:** Smoothly connect different movements by adjusting and altering them to ensure a visually pleasing performance.
6. **Spatial Design:** To determine how to use the space in dance. Dictate how dancers will move within the performance space. Consider formations, levels, and spatial relationships for visual impact.
7. **Rehearsals:** Practice and refine the choreography with performers by repeating, adjusting, and timing the movements and expressions as needed.
8. **Costume, Set Design, and Props:** Coordinate with costume, set, and prop designers to enhance the visual elements and cultural authenticity of the performance.
9. **Feedback and Revision:** Gather feedback from performers and artistic collaborators, making adjustments to improve the overall impact of the recital.
10. **Finalization:** Once satisfied, finalize the choreography, ensuring that it effectively communicates the intended cultural, artistic, and aesthetic elements.

Throughout the process the dance director's creativity, grasping the abstract meaning of the theme, and rapport with dancers and other artists play a crucial role in giving birth to and shaping the dance presentation. At the same time, the cultural background, personal experiences, and cognitive abilities help in shaping the creative skills of the dance director. The challenge for almost each creative director is to deliver what the art demands without letting their biased opinions intervene and still giving out the fragrance of their identity through their work. Despite this, the dance director needs to have knowledge about other arts like painting and sculpture, which shall further give insights into alignment, geometry, and scenography for dance direction. They should also be well versed with creating, composing, and understanding music, as it plays a crucial role in giving shape and soul to dance.

Historical Perspective of Dance Direction in Kathak Dance

The ancient period involved performing rituals to worship the divine called dharmic anushtaan. The performance of these rituals was directed by the priest and involved following a proper procedure, including choreographing dance sequences to worship the divine. Thus, here the dance direction was done by the priests or the temple dancers, who were responsible for acting out the ritual, and maintaining its dignity and sanctity. According to the *Natyashastra*, dance direction was a part of creative activities since the times when Bharat Muni, after learning about dance, music, and theatre from Lord Brahma, performed a play named *Amritmanthana* among other deities (Azad 46).³ Since theatre is a composite art, it involves music and dance direction as an integral part of the performance. Notably, Kathak has evolved from the Kathaakars of India, who were the bards known for the narration of stories from the Hindu epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. This musical narration too had involved a certain kind of dance direction of choosing the movements appropriate for the narration of the story. Initially, the Guru was the creator, director, choreographer, and main force or nucleus behind the whole tradition. Thus, we trace the ancient cultural background of dance direction through the religious configuration of dance in temples, narrating bards, and its mentioning in the treatises.

With the advent of Islamic rule in India, Kathak dance presentations were shifted from temples to the royal courts. During this time patronising the arts was seen as a sign of a king being responsive and visionary. Gradually, Kathak dance got reduced to a mere source of entertainment where dancers were no longer independent to show their creativity. The most relished subject matter in Kathak-based dance direction revolved around the *Nayika-Bheda*, which is an archetypal classification of the romantic heroines and their relationship with the *Nayaks*, or the heroes, for its romantic, picturesque, and amorous attributes. New vocabularies such as “ched-chad” and “kasak-masak” were developed to create suggestive sentiments and gestures. During the different reigns of Mughal emperors, the context of dance and dance direction changed continuously according to the creative abilities and socio-political interests of the rulers. Some rulers used to be a part of the dance repertoire, fulfilling their creative desires; some to entertain themselves, and some developed love interests



with courtesans, who in turn choreographed their moves in lavish costumes to dazzle the kings. During the later Mughal period, which saw the performing arts at their zenith, courtesans like Rani Roopmati, Rana Dil, Lal Kunwar, Nur Bai and others led to dance direction of Kathak in complete obeisance to rulers' interests and gratification (Nevile).⁴

Dance Direction Based on Kathak During the Reign of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah

One such ardent ruler and lover of art was Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh (1822- 1887). Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was very fond of music, dance, and acting, and spent a sumptuous amount of money on them. He was both a patron and a visionary dance director. After descending the throne in 1847, he established his famous Parikhaana, in which hundreds of beautiful and talented girls were taught music and dancing by expert teachers like Thakur Prasad ji and the Kalka-Bidadin brothers. For dance performances he built a huge open theatre in Kaisar Bagh, adjacent to it was his 'Mehfil-e-Paristan', in which many beautiful dancers and singing women lived (Azad 437).⁵ There, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah began to stage magnificent dance performances choreographed and performed by him as Lord Krishna, based on moves of Kathak and incorporating his sensuous poetry into the performance and naming it as Rahas (a Persianized name for Rasa Leela). With the grand pageantry of the Rahas, Jogiya Jashan, Kathak performances, and other dance dramas, Lucknow became the magnetic cultural centre where the most reputed musicians, dancers, and poets of the time flourished. Therefore, dance direction based on Kathak in Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's court was more of a creative extension of his love for arts and his socio-political and socio-cultural competence, promoting his ideas through art with much pomp and show.

Kathak Based Dance Direction and Raja Chakradhar Singh

Patronage to Kathak dance, and that too at another level, was given by Raja Chakradhar Singh (1905-1947) of Raigarh. Raja Chakradhar Singh belonged to a royal family of art lovers and musicians, and for him patronage to dance and music was not something new. Raja Chakradhar Singh learned Tabla and Pakhawaj from his uncles, Shri Peel Lal and Shri Lal Narayan (Singh 45).⁶ He hired high-quality artists in his court from faraway places. Among the dancers and musicians to have performed or served his court

were Pandit Makhan Lal Chaturvedi, Dr. Ramkumar Verma, Pandit Mahaveer Prasad Dwivedi, and Pandit Padumlal Punnalal Bakshi. Raja Chakradhar Singh himself learned Kathak from Shiv Narayan ji, as he was mesmerized with his dancing style. He also patronised training in Kathak of Shri Kalyan Das, Shri Kartik Ram, Shri Firtu Maharaj, and Shri Barman Lal in his court (Azad 434).⁷ They were the torchbearers who carried forward Chakradhar Singh's dance style and legacy in India. Apart from being a benevolent patron of Kathak artists and teachers/gurus, he himself composed Bandishes on Tabla and passed them down to dancers of his royal court, who performed them further to show their artistic prowess. Later the same tradition became popular in the form of the Raigarh style (gharana) of Kathak. Raja Chakradhar Singh himself was more of a composer than a dance director, and all that he wrote and composed was documented in the treatises, namely Nartan-Sarwasya, Taal Toynidhi, Raag Ratna Manjusha, and others. Thus, Raja Chakradhar Singh not only encouraged dance direction and choreography based on Kathak but also immensely contributed through his intellectual competence and mastery over it.

Revival of Kathak Dance Under Nationalism

Gradually, with the advent of British rule in India, dance direction lost its artistic sanctity and profundity. The courtesans and other dancers, in fear of maintaining their livelihoods, in due course compromised their artistic expertise. Seeing the eroticism and voluptuousness in dance, Britishers labelled these dancers as 'nautch girls'. Christian missionaries demanded that this must be stopped, launching the "anti-dance movement" or "anti-nautch movement" in 1892. After a period of time, Indian classical dances were banned from the cultural scene. It was during the struggle for independence that a movement for the revival of Indian classical dances, including Kathak was begun by educated upper-class people with a reformist vision. Through the early decades of the 20th century, with the decline of royal patronage, Kathiks gradually migrated to urban centres where new patronage was available from the nationalist middle class in the process of creating independent India. Central to the revival was the need to link contemporary culture to an indigenous past.

Kathak Based Dance Direction in the Early 20th Century

During the times of struggle for Indian independence, dance as a performing art had reached a level of



coarseness. Dancers were either lacking a patronage or had renounced their art due to lack of livelihood and shifted to other professions, as dance was considered a disrespectful profession as well as a taboo for the so-called upper class. The colonial form of British education produced youth who were divorced from their ancestral reserves and cultural heritage. There was little or no curriculum for Indian fine and performing arts in the education system, which was creating fragmented personalities in the society. The bourgeoisie class, which had connections through business and administration with the Britishers, almost shunned the areas where folk and classical dances were still prevailing. In those times pioneers of Indian modern dance, Uday Shankar and Madame Menaka, rose and changed the socio-cultural scene, giving dance the respect it deserved in Indian society as well as abroad.

Advent of Uday Shankar: A Paradigm Shift

Uday Shankar was a pioneer of modern dance in India (Khokhar 5).⁸ He was an Indian dancer and choreographer, best known for creating a fusion style of dance, adapting European theatrical techniques to Indian classical dance, imbued with elements of folk and tribal dance, which he later popularised in India, Europe, and the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. Uday Shankar had no formal training in any Indian classical dance form, but he was well-versed with tribal and folk dances. He was highly influenced by Kathakali, and the Lord Nataraja sculpture and the sculptures at Ajanta, Ellora, Elephanta Caves, Konark, Mt. Abu, Khajuraho, and Mahabalipuram became his inspiration. He was a genius and decided to bring the elements of Indian dances and contemporary dances together to create new kinds of Indian ballets. As a dance director, he was an erudite in composing music for his productions, and that too without any conventional training in it.

His meeting with legendary Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova led to the creation of ballets based on Hindu themes, such as Radha-Krishna, presented at the Royal Opera House in London. Soon he embarked on a seven-year tour in Europe and America with his own dance troupe- 'Uday Shankar's Company of Hindu Dancers and Musicians' along with Alice Boner, Vishnu Das Shirali, and Timir Baran. Uday Shankar started the Uday Shankar Indian Cultural Centre in Almorah (1939-1944). There he got other Gurus for teaching different Indian classical dance forms. Here, he directed his two famous choreographies, Rhythm of Life and Labour and Machinery. As a dance director, he brought a shift

in the paradigm of Indian dances by bringing radical changes in the theme, using mortal characters and their compelling social problems. His choreography Labour and Machinery was an ode to industrial workers struggling for their rights. He changed the vision and minds of the audience by giving them themes to think and ponder upon and not only mere entertainment. Another out-of-the-box production of Uday Shankar was his first shadow-play, Ramlila (1942).

Revivalism is an expansion of ideas that comes with something new and different along with the already surviving yet forgotten traditions. Uday Shankar as a revivalist was wise enough to understand the essence of Indian traditions and the symbolism behind them and yet smart enough to intermingle the occidental methods to enhance the presentation.

Contribution of Other Dancers

In 1940s, with Uday Shankar's contribution to dance, the name of Ram Gopal is also known for his grand productions with handsome costumes that remained etched in public memory for long, both in India and abroad (Khokhar 6).⁹ He is known for his productions, namely Radha- Krishna (1960) with British ballerina Dame Alicia Markova, Legend of the Taj Mahal (1956), Dance of the Setting Sun (1948), and Dances of India.

The contemporary of Uday Shankar and Ram Gopal was the legendary dancer, Madame Menaka. Her real name was Leila Roy, and she was trained in Kathak under Pandit Sitaram Prasad. She is recognised as an instrumental figure in the transformation of 'nautch' dance to respectable Kathak dance in the 1930s. She was a pioneer in refashioning the form with a modern, dance-drama format and introduced Kathak technique to the international community through her troupe's tours of Europe and Southeast Asia (Minai).¹⁰ The Kathak-based dance direction of Madame Menaka involved changing the Kathak dance recital scenario from solo to group dances based on mythological themes, lavish costumes, extravagant stagecraft, and vibrant music. Menaka changed the monotonous Lehra and introduced various ragas, used the Sarod, Shehnai, Pakhavaj, Tabla Tarang, and Xylophone, devised sophisticated costumes, and succeeded in creating a considerable impression abroad and at home (Kothari).¹¹ Some of the prominent Kathak dance ballets presented by Menaka and her troupe were Krishna Leela (1934), Dev Vijay Nritya (1935), Menaka Lasyam (1935), Malvikagnimitram (1939), and Kaliya Daman (1939).



Dance Direction Based on Kathak in Post Independence Era

Post-independence, there was a fervent search for form and content that would define and also echo the spirit of nationalism and re-establishment of Indian art and culture. With the advent of talkies, Hindi cinema established itself till 1950s, and dance songs were choreographed with great aesthetical imagination. Maestros like Lachchu Maharaj, Sitara Devi, Gopi Krishna, and Kumudini Lakhia did a great job in dance direction in Hindi cinema. These dance sequences were mainly based on Kathak dance, and thus Kathak also got recognition and popularity. There emerged a need to institutionalise Kathak dance. Hence, in 1952, Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra was established. Further, in 1953, Sangeet Natak Akademi was established for the preservation and promotion of music, dance, and drama. Kathak Kendra, established in 1955, became a part of the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1964, and in July 1969, the Akademi took over its functioning. Gradually, Pandit Birju Maharaj took over, who took dance from solo recitals to large group performances in proscenium theatres. Birju Maharaj's dance direction involved emphasis on minute movements with depth and a balance of innovation.

Over the years the repertory wing, formerly known as 'Ballet Unit', has created remarkable productions of Kathak ballet, with evolved stage and costume design as well as elaborate music. *Taj ki Kahani* (1966) was choreographed by Krishna Kumar and had music by Amjad Ali; *Shan-e-Audh* (1968), *Kumara Sambhav*, and *Dalia* were all choreographed by Birju Maharaj and with music by the Dagar Brothers. Several of the productions, like *Govardhan Leela*, *Makhan Chori*, and *Phag Bhara*, employed mythological themes and gave them a modern presentation (Akademi).¹² Kendra also became a hotspot of experimentation in Kathak, where productions like *Radha Krishna*, *Chhed Chad*, *Gat Bhav*, and *Tode Tukde* paved the way for thematic dance directions in Kathak.

Another dynamic dance director is Kumudini Lakhia, a disciple of Shambhu Maharaj. Her dance choreographies involved the idea of freeing oneself from handcuffs of blind traditions, exploring abstract ideas through movements that were not used in Kathak before, and liberating Kathak from its feudal trappings. According to her, it was our responsibility to acknowledge its greatness and not violate its spirit, dilute or trivialize it (Khokhar 8).¹³ She even used miniature paintings and vertical space with coloured papers hanging from the

ceiling of the theatre, as stagecraft in her productions. Some of her prominent choreographies include *Variation in Thumri* (1969), *Venu Naad* (1970), *Duvidha* (1971), *Dhabkar* (1973), *Yugal* (1976), *Atah Kim* (1982), *Okha Haran* (1990), *Bhav Krida* (1999), *Samanvay* (2003), and others. Daksha Sheth is another versatile dancer and choreographer. She combined Kathak with other dance forms like *Mayurbhanj Chau*, *Kaliaripattu*, and others to create her works. Her dance direction involved esoteric themes with suspense, pace, dance, and drama and the use of simple elements of *Tatkaar* and *Chakkars* of Kathak to bring an extraordinary effect. Some of her experimental works are *Vivaldi's Summer* (1986); *Time-piece*; *Modern Times*; *Chaya* (1988); *Ashtyam* (1922); *Search of My Tonuge* (1994-95); *Rachna*; *Sangeetam* (1996); *Sarpagati* (1997); *Bhukham* (2001) etc. Shama Bhate, as a dance director, amalgamated both traditional and contemporary format of dancing. She has created a repertoire of traditional and classical compositions – *Taals*, *Taranas*, *Thumris* etc. with her own perspective. For instance, *Trishul* (a blend of *Taal* cycles of 9, 10, and 11 beats); *Samvaad* (domuhi composition); and *Layasopan* (traditional Kathak sequence presented through *Panch Jatis*) (Nadroop).¹⁴ Some other productions by Shama Bhate include *Naad Bindu*; *Chala Vahi Des* (2015); *Chaturang Ki Chaupal* (2018)¹⁵; *Echoes* (2018); *Nishabda Bheda*¹⁶; *Krishna-The Liberator*, etc. (Srikanth)¹⁷.

Some Kathak dancers have also experimented by using western instruments in their Kathak based dance productions like Abhimanyu Lal's use of drums in the production *Bandish and Beyond* (2025)¹⁸. Kathak dancers also indulged in fusing different cultures to create Kathak based dance productions like Kathak and Flamenco duet. This collaboration is rooted in the historical, migratory connection where the ancestors of the Romani people travelled from Rajasthan, India, to Southern Spain, between 9-15th centuries, bringing with them rhythmic and musical elements that later evolved into Flamenco. The collaboration has flourished, with notable productions like *Yatra*¹⁹ featuring Pandit Chitresh Das and Antonio Paz, as well as Flamenco Katha emerging in Mumbai in the late 2010s.

At the same time, many dancers got back to traditional poetry and prose by Kabir, Tulsidas, Surdas, Meera, Kalidas, Rabindranath Tagore, and others. They made productions of such classic works to reconnect the audience with forgotten literary culture. Perna Shrimali as choreographer used such literary treasures in her productions such as *Doosro Na Koi-verses of Meera*,



Aavartan, Vistaar, Vivriti and Aaratis and Saptaavart (2019) in which she used Kabir's hymn 'Bande Karle Aap Nabera' and Chintamani's Thumri. Shobha Koser's Kamayani, Kumar Sambhav, Chandralekha, Geet-Govinda, and Meghdoota; Geetanjali Lal's productions Meghdoot, Chitrangada, Chandalika, and Ritu Rang; Shovana Narayan's Shakuntala (1996), a soliloquy by Maithili Sharan Gupta; Rani Khannum's Ashtapadi 'Shri Nand Nandan Nachat Sudhang' by Surdas and The Vision of Kabir; and Sanjukta Wagh's Faqeer Nimaana (2019) (poetry by Shah Hussain), Jheeni (2016)²⁰, Bheetar Bahar (2010) (poetry of Kabir), Ubha Vitewari (hymns by Varkari Sampradaya) are some examples of it (Mumbai)²¹. Artists like Shama Bhate in Atit ki Parchhaiyan- Reflections on the Mahabharata Sage (2015)²²; Uma Dogra as Kaikeyi in a production named Tejasa from Ramayana; Shobha Koser's Urvashi Milan; Rani Khanam's Ramayan, Krishna the Blue God; Sanjukta Wagh's Rage and Beyond (2014)²³, Putana and I (2012); and others have tried to interpret and portray these epics from their perspectives through these dance directions. Similarly, Rajendra Gangani's Leela Varnan, vividly depicts the divine lilas of Lord Vishnu through synchronised footwork and expressive abhinaya, fusing mythological storytelling with intricate bol patterns and Maharaas captures the ecstatic love of Radha and Krishna in a group format, emphasizing fluid group movements and emotional layering to evoke devotional fervour.

With the advent of modernity, female artists got a space to share the stage. As female participation increased, the core issues of the females were expressed through dance-dramas on stages and got public attention. These female dancers have broken the traditional stereotypes and have come forward to carry the lineage ahead and portray the various aspects of femininity in Kathak. Uma Sharma's Stree-depicting the position of a woman down the centuries and her search for identity was a thought-provoking production. Rani Khanam has worked and directed choreographies specially based on Indian Muslim women, namely Naqab-Black White (2013), Shiver, Un Tender Touch, Shakti, and Woman of India (Khanam).²⁴ Aditi Mangaldas's dance-drama productions Forbidden (2022)²⁵ and Mehek (2024)²⁶; and Gauri Diwakar's Mugdha-Celebration of Beauty and Womanhood (2014)²⁷, talk about unsaid issues of females. Kathak dancers since time immemorial have tried to expand the narrative of Kathak presentations by adding more conventional themes, philosophical ideas, socio-cultural behaviours, extravagant music, esoteric

ideas of stagecraft, magnificent lighting, and globalised aesthetics in their dance directions.

Conclusion

Indian classical dances are a reservoir of tradition, norms, and values that have been shaped and are being shaped by various socio-cultural and political influences since time immemorial. These art forms are considered to be larger than life and act as the mirror to the society, and at the same time, the influences of modernity and innovation also affect them. The traditional repertoire of Kathak and the socio-cultural-political influences are the warp and weft of the fabric named 'time'. Philosophically, it is the present time or scenario that decides the power and influence of art and artists on the society. The emergence of each socio-cultural phase, political patrons like Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and Raja Chakradhar Singh and artists like Uday Shankar, Madame Menaka, and Pt. Birju Maharaj was the need of the hour or will of the nature, for contributing into the reservoir of Kathak dance form. Kathak dancers nowadays are traditionally sound as well as conscious about the current issues of the world. Besides, their traditional training in dance, they are also aware of the technical aspects such as stagecraft, sound, acoustics, and visual effects and use them creatively in their productions, which is an example of how dance directors and artists go along with the ebb and flow of time. Therefore, the future of dance direction is bright and brilliant in Kathak dance.

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