



Gender and Costumes in Kathak: Tradition, Transformation, and Inclusivity



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Abstract

Kathak, a classical Indian dance form, intricately weaves storytelling with rhythm and movement, with costumes playing a vital role in its expression. This paper explores the evolution of Kathak costumes from ancient to modern times, focusing on how these garments reflect shifts in aesthetics, cultural influences, and gender norms. While Kathak costumes traditionally mirrored Hindu and Mughal cultural amalgamations, recent trends towards gender-neutral designs challenge conventional norms, promoting inclusivity and enhancing the dance's expressive potential.

The study employs a qualitative approach to analyze the significance of traditional Kathak costumes, using literature, paintings, and interviews with dancers, choreographers, and costume designers. It investigates how contemporary experiments in costume design align with or diverge from traditional aesthetics and their impact on preserving Kathak's historical and cultural essence. This research aims to offer insights into the role of costumes in shaping gender identity within Kathak, highlighting both its rich heritage and its dynamic modern expressions.

Keywords: gender-neutral norms, costume evolution, gender identity, traditional aesthetics

Research Paper

Introduction

Kathak, a captivating classical dance tradition of North India, brings together storytelling, rhythm, and intricate footwork. Every movement in Kathak carries a narrative, and costume is integral to how that narrative is communicated to the audience. Over time, Kathak attire has evolved in response to changing aesthetics, cultural interactions, and shifting social and gender norms. Modern Kathak costumes reflect a distinctive blend of Hindu and Mughal influences. A careful examination of the disparities between ancient, medieval, and contemporary attire is essential for understanding the complete evolution of Kathak.

Despite this rich history, the role of costume in shaping gender identity within Kathak has received limited scholarly attention. This paper seeks to address this gap by tracing the historical trajectory of Kathak costumes and analyzing their relationship with gendered

performance. It explores how Kathak attire retains elements of its traditional heritage while also engaging with contemporary ideas of creativity and inclusivity. By doing so, the paper aims to contribute to broader discussions within dance studies, fashion history, and cultural aesthetics.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and practice-based approach to examine the relationship between gender and costume practices in Kathak.

This research is based on a combination of different approaches; it examines classical treatises and historical writings to establish a textual foundation; study of Mughal, Rajasthani, and Deccan miniature paintings to understand costume changes, and interviews with senior Kathak practitioners and costume designers, along with direct observation of both solo performances and group choreographies. When examined together, these

sources highlight the balance between continuity and transformation in Kathak costume practices.

Limitations of the Study

The study is based on a small group of institutionally recognised practitioners and does not aim for broad regional representation, prioritising depth of analysis instead.

Historical Context and Traditional Costumes

Origin And Development of Kathak and its Costumes

‘Kathak, originating in the temples of India and closely linked to raas (traditional folk) dance, traditionally featured costumes that reflected the attire of Lord Krishna and his consort, Radha. Male dancers likely wore costumes resembling Krishna's pitambar (a yellow dhoti) and uttariya (a long shawl), while female dancers donned lehengas, cholis, and chunnis, mirroring the imagined garments of Radha. Both genders adorned themselves with elaborate gold and silver jewellery, emphasizing their status and the cultural richness of the era.’ (Ramya)

However, it is important to note that while these costumes were appropriate in the context of raas, such attire was never used in Kathak while performing in temples, and women never performed Kathak in temples. Male Kathak dancers traditionally wore the Angrakha, a long tunic with intricate designs, paired with churidar pants (similar to pyjamas) and a turban (pagri). This costume symbolized strength and authority, aligning with the heroic and divine characters depicted in Kathak.

Surdas captures the essence of the Kathak dancers' attire in a devotional context with the following verse:

“Ab Main Nachyau Bahut Gopal.

Kaam-Krodh Kau Pahir Cholana, Kanth Vishay Ki Maal.

Maya Kau Kati Phenta Bandhyau, Lobh-Tilak Diyo Bhaal

Bhram-Bharyo Mann Bhayo Pakhawaj, Chalat kusangat Chaal.

naa naa Naad Karat Ghat Bheetar, Jal-Thal Sudhi Nahin Kaal

Surdaas Ki Sabahi Avidhya, Duri Karau Nandalaal.”
(Singh)

In this verse, Surdas uses the attire of the Kathak dancers, symbolizing various worldly attachments and emotions, to convey the spiritual message of overcoming ignorance

and seeking divine grace. This portrayal reflects the metaphorical use of Kathak costumes in devotional literature, aligning with the broader themes of the dance form's evolution and its spiritual significance.

Dr. Puru Dadheech



Pt. Birju Maharaj



Gender Dynamics in Kathak

Kathak has predominantly been a male-centric dance form; therefore, it is appropriate to first discuss male costumes. The current form of Kathak took shape approximately five hundred years ago. During this period, the general attire consisted of an angarkha (a traditional garment) worn with churidar pyjamas or dhotis, a dupatta tied at the waist, and a pagri (turban) on the head. Angarkhas existed in various sizes and forms; smaller versions were known as ang and angi, the latter of which can still be observed in the villages of Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Malwa. A related variation is the bagalbandi, while another form, the jama, featured a wide, flared cut. The term jama is Persian in origin, and the word payjama is derived by adding pāy (foot) to it. The pagri also appeared in diverse styles and forms. Much like a tilak on the forehead signifies religious affiliation, the design of the pagri revealed the wearer's regional identity (Dadheech 35).

In its early phases, Kathak was performed predominantly by men and emphasized heroic and devotional narratives such as Kaliya Daman, Govardhan Dharan, and Jatayu Moksha. These themes, supported by structured costumes like the angarkha, churidar, and pagri, projected vigour, authority, and a distinctly masculine performative identity.

After the twelfth century, with the establishment of Islamic rule in North India, the destruction of temples, the decline of the Devadasi system, and the seclusion of women from respectable families, dance gradually became the domain of professional courtesans. As noted by Dadheech, the costumes of courtesans were predominantly black, reflecting contemporary social norms in which bright colours such as red and yellow were reserved for high-caste women, while darker shades like moongiya green were associated with lower social status. Given the marginal position of courtesans within the social hierarchy, black became designated for their attire.

Courtesans, who were highly skilled performers, introduced śrīngāra (romantic) and emotive elements into Kathak, softening its earlier heroic orientation. Their participation reshaped both the repertoire and costume aesthetics. While male attire continued to emphasize strength and sharp movement, female costumes—such as lehenga-choli, anarkali, and later embellished ensembles—accentuated elegance and fluidity.

Mughal court dance costumes have intrigued scholars for their unique blend of cultural and aesthetic elements.



The study of historical miniatures reveals significant details about the evolution of these costumes, particularly the layered skirts resembling modern ballet tutus, which offer insight into the cultural and sartorial practices of the Mughal era. Some mistakenly attempt to prove Kathak as a Mughal dance style, which is not correct. The truth is that Emperor Akbar, under his policy of 'Sulh-e-Kul,' adopted the Rajput (Hindu) attire as his court dress. In contrast, images of Akbar's father Humayun and grandfather Babur, or previous Mughal emperors, depict them in Pathani attire. The strongest evidence is that the deities in North Indian temples are adorned in angarkha and churidar pyjamas. If it were Muslim attire, it would not be used for deities.

Key Evidence from Miniature

The miniature from the Akbar-nama (circa 1600-1605), held at the Victoria and Albert Museum, reveals Indian dancers in costumes resembling European ballet tutus, though such skirts did not exist in Europe at that time. The dancers, depicted with traditional Indian elements such as muslin turbans, pyjamas, anklets, and bodices, are distinctly Indian despite the tutu-like skirt. This skirt consists of three-layered, stiff skirts, echoing the structure of the French tutu. The depiction of Akbar and the shocked reactions of his court highlight the unusual

nature of these costumes, underscoring their uniqueness and cultural significance in the Mughal era.



Bei einem Fest in Sarangpur sieht Akbar den Tänzerinnen von Baz Bahadur zu. Illustration zum 1. Akbar-nama im Victoria and Albert Museum, IS. 2:16-1896

As late as 1750, Lady Rothenstein's miniature (from the Faber Gallery) shows dancers in transparent skirts, contrasting with the solid attire of other figures. This echoes the transition from Akbar's multi-layered skirts to Jahangir's trend of transparent muslin skirts and churidar pyjamas. Evidence from a 17th-century Rasikapriya leaf depicts Krishna wearing a two-layered skirt, while a friend sports the newer, transparent style, highlighting the shift in fashion from Akbar's to Jahangir's reign.

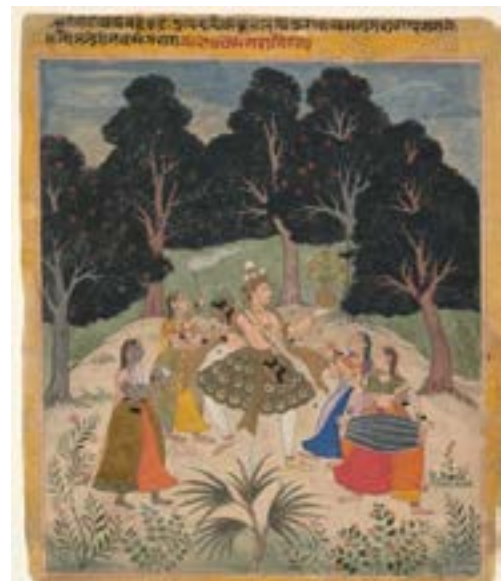


The Lover's Dramatic Behavior



Vaikuntha, The Heaven of Vishnu [Rajasthani school, 1750]

Coomaraswamy's 1930 dating of the Rasikapriya as around 1060 is now considered too early; it is likely closer to 1620, reflecting significant Mughal influence. This suggests that Akbar's multi-layered ballet skirts were replaced by those of Jahangir, which were visible in 18th-century depictions of dancers. The Laud Ragamala miniatures, potentially dated around 1615, feature these earlier skirts, indicating that the staggered tutu was specific to dancers and widespread across various regions, including Agra, Delhi, Rajasthan, and the Deccan.



Vasant Ragini, Page from a Ragamala Series (Garland of Musical Modes) Early 17th century



The study of Mughal and Rajasthani miniatures reveals the dynamic nature of dance costumes, reflecting both regional variations and broader fashion trends. The transition from the layered skirts of Akbar's era to the transparent skirts under Jahangir illustrates how dance attire adapted to shifting sartorial preferences while preserving traditional elements. This exploration enhances our understanding of Mughal court fashion and its impact on performing arts.

Historical Records

My Guru, Dr. Puru Dadheech, received correspondence from the pioneering Kathak researcher, the late Pt. Rajaram Dwivedi 'Surangadev,' via the late Jagdish Narayan Pathak, Registrar of Prayag Sangeet Samiti, Allahabad. These letters include illustrations of Kathak dancers from Lucknow, Rewa, Jaipur, Chitrakoot, and Ayodhya, along with comments on their costumes. These illustrations were created from Dwivedi ji's memory for his book, which unfortunately was never published. We present these illustrations and comments as they are, as they hold significant importance in the context of Kathak costumes. Dwivedi ji writes:

"The importance of dance costumes has been recognized by ancient scholars. Hence, if the Kathak tradition loses its costume, the dance will become 'Natwari' or similar. These illustrations are fictional but observed and recognized by many musicians and the public who distinguish Kathak costumes from those of courtesans. Many merchants, tabla players, and sarangi players who were once involved with performances still remember them. These costumes were created to preserve historical richness." (Dadheech 36)

Costumes of Kathak Dancers in Different Regions

Lucknow Kathak Costume



The male Kathak costume of Lucknow, which continued up to Achchan Ji, is characterized by its specific features. Shambhuji and Birju Ji also danced in this attire. However, there is a distinction between the costumes of Thakur Prasad Ji and Bindadin Ji. All these costumes fall under the category of Lucknow's nawabi attire. (Previously mentioned was that angarkhas came in various shapes and sizes. Additionally, in Lucknow, the turban was replaced by a cap.) (Dadheech 37)

Rewa Kathak Costume

Male Kathak costume of Rewa State. This costume ceased with Bhojraj in 1917. (Dadheech 37)



Jaipur Kathak Costume

This was the court Kathak costume of Jaipur. However, it has now become obsolete. The evidence of costume in Kathak dance is fundamental, as tradition is quickly recognized through costume. (Dadheech 37)



Chitrakoot, Banda Kathak Costume

This Kathak costume from Chitrakoot, Banda, i.e., Bundelkhand, ended in 1920. The Nawab of Banda, Zulfiqar Sahib, used to have Kathak dancers in this attire. (Dadheech 37)



nuance and subtly altered the balance between nritya (pure dance) and abhinaya (expression). Costume design thus emerged as a key medium for negotiating gender roles within performance: structured garments continued to signify masculinity, while flowing silhouettes highlighted femininity, together reflecting prevailing social perceptions of gender in Kathak.



Dr. Vibha Dadheech

Ayodhya Kathak Costume

This costume decreased after 1918 and is now obsolete. (Dadheech 37)



The 20th and 21st centuries have brought significant changes to Kathak costumes under the influence of modernization and globalization.

Contemporary designs integrate traditional aesthetics with modern sensibilities, introducing flexible fabrics, lighter silhouettes, and gender-neutral elements. Costumes that once reinforced strict gender roles are now being adapted to reflect inclusivity, with innovations such as the anarkali ghera paired with choli and jacket. Leading dancers and choreographers like Dr. Vibha Dadheech, Kumudini Lakhia, Kshama Bhate, Aditi Mangaldas, and Sanjukta Sinha have pioneered such experiments, balancing respect for tradition with a vision for contemporary expression. Dr. Vibha Dadheech has also experimented with costumes by incorporating a patka into the sari for Kathak performance. This subtle modification supports movement while maintaining the traditional character of the attire. It reflects a measured approach to innovation within established aesthetic boundaries.

Transformation and Modernization

In the post-independence period, women from respectable families increasingly entered the Kathak tradition, further expanding its expressive scope. This growing participation introduced greater emotional

The trend towards inclusivity in Kathak aligns with broader societal movements towards diverse gender identities. Modern practitioners are adopting costumes that challenge traditional gender binaries, incorporating non-traditional roles and designs that reflect a more inclusive and contemporary approach to Kathak.





Shama Bhatte

Practitioner Perspectives on Tradition and Experimentation

Kumudini Lakhia's approach to costume design in Kathak was both revolutionary and deeply rooted in her experiences and observations. Reflecting on her exposure to international dance practices, she remarked, "I saw ballet in Spain, the USSR, Britain, the US, and I saw the planning that went into dance—the costuming, stage design, lights. I saw how beautiful dance can look when there is discipline in the lines of the body." (Lakhia). This insight inspired her to bring a similar level of discipline and elegance to Kathak. Lakhia's commitment to modernizing the costume elements of Kathak is evident in her decision to simplify traditional attire. She challenged conventional norms by stating, "Most famously, she asked her dancers to abandon the billowing yards of dupatta. When Dhabkar, based on the beating pulse, came to Delhi, the outrage over this was huge. 'They called us 'besharam' for not covering up the chest.'" (Nair)



In contrast, Dr. Puru Dadheech approaches Kathak from a position firmly rooted in its textual and historical foundations. He believes that innovation should not detach the form from its classical literature, narrative traditions, or the Katha-Kathan lineage that shapes its identity. His choreographic works, such as *Parvati Parinay*, *Sampoorna Ramayan*, and *Katha Somnath Ki*, reflect this conviction. In these productions, costume is not treated as a visual embellishment but as an essential narrative tool that supports characterisation, evokes rasa, and maintains thematic coherence.



"Sampoorna Ramayan" choreographed by Dr. Puru Dadheech in Old Katha-Kathan Style

Sharat Prabhat highlights that costume design should reflect the character's gender expression and role requirements, balancing artistic freedom with cultural norms. For male dancers, various styles can express diverse identities while maintaining the form's essence. Historical figures like Kumudini Lakhia have shown how changing societal attitudes can influence costume design.



Sharat Prabhat and Bharat Prabhat presenting Mesmerizing Dance Drama "18 Days - Dusk of an Era"

From a performer's perspective, Shanky Singh speaks about practical concerns such as comfort, confidence, and effective use of stage space. His reflections show that contemporary dancers consciously adjust elements

like layering, gher, and fabric weight depending on the venue, the nature of the choreography, and how the performance will be viewed by the audience. Such choices recall the disciplined aesthetic associated with Pt. Birju Maharaj, where costume was thoughtfully aligned with thematic intention and rhythmic clarity.

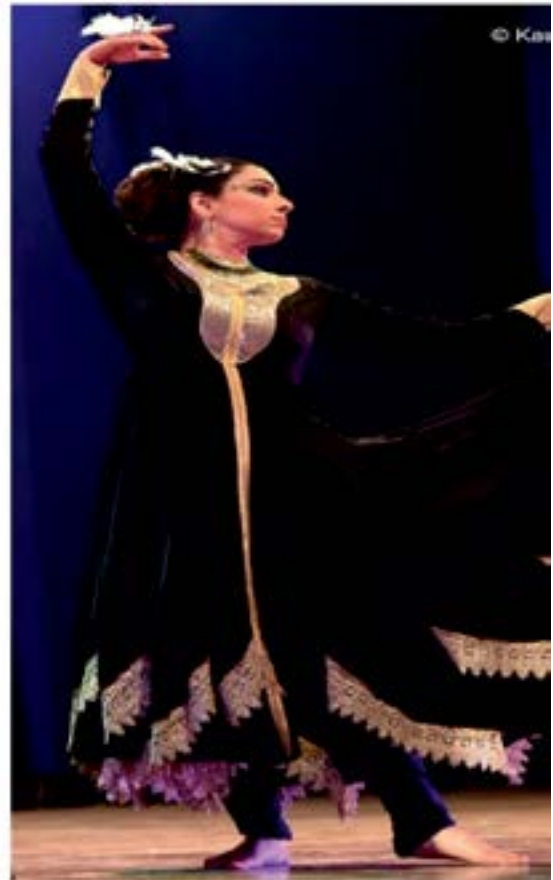


Shanky Singh

Speaking from a designer's perspective, Sheetal Oak describes Kathak as a versatile form that allows thoughtful experimentation in costume, music, and choreography. She believes costumes should be created according to the demands of the role rather than the dancer's gender, as any performer may portray any character. Even while experimenting, she ensures that her designs remain within Kathak's traditional framework. For instance, while designing for Rujuta Soman's Black Swan, she introduced innovation without departing from the form's aesthetic grammar. Since Kathak gives equal importance to hand gestures and footwork, she carefully considers how the costume supports movement and enhances visual clarity. She also observes that there is often a tendency to imitate prevailing trends instead of developing original costume ideas.

Together, these practitioner perspectives show that contemporary Kathak costume practice does not stand in opposition to tradition or innovation, but moves between the two. Through a balance of historical awareness, practical performance needs, and creative

adaptation, aaharya continues to shape meaning and aesthetic experience within Kathak.



Choreographic work of Rujuta Soman, The Black Swan

Analysis and Discussion

Synthesis of Traditional and Modern Perspectives

The transformation of Kathak costumes from traditional to modern illustrates a dynamic interplay between historical practices and contemporary values. Traditional costumes reinforced specific gender roles, while modern designs seek to challenge and redefine these roles. This synthesis highlights Kathak's adaptability and its ongoing engagement with evolving societal norms.

Challenges and Opportunities

Balancing traditional practices with modern inclusivity presents both challenges and opportunities. Maintaining the cultural integrity of Kathak while embracing new gender perspectives requires thoughtful consideration. Future developments in Kathak costumes will likely continue to explore this balance, offering new opportunities for expression and representation in line with contemporary values.



Conclusion

The exploration of gender and costumes in Kathak reveals a complex interplay between tradition, transformation, and inclusivity. Kathak's historical association with male performers has shaped its development and performance practices, while the evolution of costumes reflects broader changes in fashion and performance norms.

As Kathak continues to evolve, it embraces a more inclusive approach to gender representation and costume design. The increasing participation of women in Kathak has led to new interpretations and styles, enriching the dance form and expanding its appeal.

The transformation of Kathak costumes and the growing inclusivity in performance practices highlight the dynamic nature of this classical dance form. Kathak's journey from a male-centric tradition to a more inclusive and diverse art form reflects broader societal changes and underscores the dance's enduring relevance in contemporary culture.

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