



Bridging Tradition and Technology: The Evolution of Kathak Pedagogy in the 21st Century



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Abstract

Kathak is an Indian classical dance form, deeply rooted in the traditional pedagogy, i.e., Guru-Shishya Parampara (teacher-descendant tradition), where the guru imparts his knowledge and experience to his shishya through oral tradition. This tradition evolved and took the shape of institutions, which have proper curriculum and syllabuses for the students to learn in a suitable structure. Nowadays, students can learn with the help of technology simply by being at home and taking classes online. The COVID-19 pandemic gave a new structure to the teaching and learning system, which resulted in being both fruitful and venomous. Today, technology is so advanced that artificial intelligence is working on our fingertips, though it is helpful, it is not less dangerous. The evolution of Kathak pedagogy, from its traditional roots to modern practices, gives a panoramic view to this study of how digital tools and platforms are revamping teaching and learning within the precincts of Kathak. Furthermore, this paper offers insights into the practical application and potential drawbacks of digital integration in Kathak's education. There is a need for balance that preserves the values and traditions of Kathak while assimilating technology and expanding its reach on a global level.

Keywords: Kathak pedagogy, traditional teaching methods, technological integration, innovative teaching methods, and digital tools.

Research Paper

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative and exploratory research approach, primarily based on secondary sources. In response to contemporary pedagogical shifts, the study incorporates informal primary information gathered through brief interactions, reflective responses and feedback from the experience of Kathak students and practitioners involved in both online and offline learning environments. This information is used illustratively to understand practitioner perspectives rather than to claim statistical generalisation.

1. Introduction

In Kathak, knowledge was imparted through the oral tradition within the confines of Gurukuls, where the “Guru-Shishya Parampara” (teacher-descendant tradition) emphasizes experiential learning. This tradition

relies heavily on the proverb “Dekheya - Seekhiya - Parekhiya” (observe-learn-understand), where students learn from direct observation and personal interaction with the Gurus. Pedagogy, defined as the approach to teaching and learning, forms the backbone of artistic education by establishing methodologies that facilitate effective knowledge transfer (Carney). All the artistic disciplines rely on these pedagogical frameworks to nurture technical expertise and creative countenance. Artistic pedagogy is not only about teaching techniques, but also about inspiring students to inherit their cultural heritage, strengthen their voices, and contribute to its preservation for future generations.

Through the advent of digital technology, a paradigm shift has affected Kathak's pedagogical approach, where online classes, instructional videos, digital archives, virtual workshops, and seminars have become an

integral part of Kathak's education, making it accessible on a global level.

2. Historical Context of Kathak Pedagogy

Kathak's pedagogy is deeply rooted in the traditional teaching method, which is known as "Guru-Shishya Paramapara". At its core, the Guru-Shishya Paramapara embodies a deep, personal relationship between the guru and the shishya, its foundation being trust, respect, and dedication (Dalidowicz). This system is rooted in the concept of 'oral transmission,' where performing techniques and their various concepts are passed down through direct interaction rather than written materials or formalized instruction (DPU SLA). That is why the knowledge acquired from this tradition is known as the "Gurumukhi Vidya," which means the vidya imparted through the Guru's Mukha, the oral transmission of knowledge. Traditionally, the students reside in the guru's house and learn and immerse themselves in the daily practices and rituals of the art form. This one-on-one mentorship provides Shishya with extensive training tailored to their strengths and weaknesses (Gurusathya).

This tradition includes a spiritual dimension where the guru is not merely a teacher, but also a mentor who guides the student to immerse himself in the path of Bhakti and Sadhana. This spiritual relationship cultivates a sense of affinity and encourages shishyas to perceive Kathak as part of their identity and cultural heritage (Kalashri). For example, renowned Kathak gurus like Pandit Birju Maharaj have illustrated the profound impact of the guru's teachings on a student's holistic development, and he was one of the key figures who was instrumental in bringing Kathak out of the confines of traditional settings and into contemporary spaces, thereby expanding its appeal globally, and developed numerous innovative compositions that incorporate modern themes while retaining classical elements, thus enriching Kathak's repertoire (Singh). He personifies the idea that mastering Kathak is not only about executing intricate choreographies but also about expressing one's own emotion and devotion while carrying forward the tradition.

3. The Role of Technology in Modern Kathak Education

The origin of Kathak is traced back to the ancient Hindu temples, where it emerged as a storytelling medium through dance, which was primarily performed by men who were known as Kathakars or storytellers. These dancers were trained under esteemed gurus, who

emphasize devotion, rhythm, and divine storytelling, which laid the foundation for pedagogical methods in this tradition. With the arrival of the Mughal Empire, a significant transformation was seen in the practices of Kathak. Assimilation of elements of Persian, Mughal, and indigenous traditions, which led to innovations in technique, costume, and themes. Under the patronage of royal courts, the teaching of Kathak evolved into a more structured and formal approach. During the colonial period, Kathak underwent Western influences, resulting in an amalgamation of classical and contemporary elements (Sharma and Makkar). Being rooted in oral tradition initially and guided through experiential learning, Kathak moved on to more formalized methods by stepping forward to the structured curricula and learning Institutions. One significant shift is the establishment of formal dance schools such as Kathak Kendra (Delhi), etc., or faculties in reputed universities, such as Banaras Hindu University (Varanasi), Bhatkhande Sanskriti Vishwavidyalaya (Lucknow), Rabindra Bharati University (Kolkata), Indira Kala Sangeet Vishwavidyalaya (Khairagarh), Maharaja Sayajirao University (Baroda), etc., where structured training programs are developed for both technical skills and performance techniques, not only for the specialization in Kathak, but also for the other dance forms (DPU SLA).

In the 21st century, the realm of Kathak pedagogy is witnessing a transformation led by technological advancements. From learning in traditional pedagogical settings to interactive online learning platforms and immersive experiences, technology has transformed the entire scenario of teaching and learning Kathak.

• Online Learning Platforms

With the rise of Online learning platforms, teaching and learning got democratized in the field of Kathak. Platforms such as STEEZY Studio and IndianRaga offer inclusive online dance classes featuring renowned instructors (IndianRaga; Steezy). These platforms allow students from all over the world, regardless of diverse backgrounds and geographical constraints, to learn practical and theoretical aspects of Kathak. The flexibility of online classes enables learners to learn and practice at their own pace, accommodating different learning styles and schedules (Dansync). These platforms also utilize video analysis tools, which allow students to receive feedback and analyse their dance movements more precisely through recorded lessons. This learning experience enhances the overall engagement of the

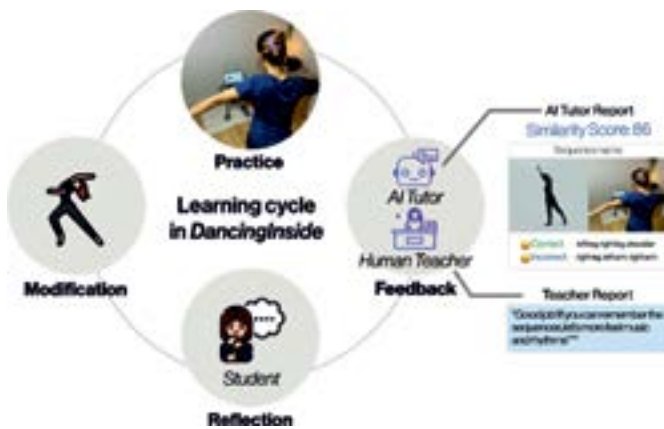


student, where they can revisit the provided materials and improve their skills.

• Artificial Intelligence and Adaptive Learning

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming an integral part of every industry by enabling them to perform multiple tasks with ease. Now, it is also being used extensively in the field of Dance, by giving personalized learning experiences to the learners (Kang et al.). “DancingInside” is the pivotal example of this kind of platform, which attempts to utilize artificial intelligence to provide real-time feedback on learners' movements through pose estimation techniques. “DancingInside” is an online learning platform that aids learning dance through a cyclical process, consisting of ‘practice, feedback, reflection, and modification’ (refer to Fig. 1) via online, where feedback is provided by the Human and AI tutor which transforms the role of students from a passive recipient to an active learner, and then students review the feedback received and reflect on it (Kang et al.). This online learning platform is designed to provide two types of Feedback (Kang et al.):

- (i) explicit feedback to correct a detailed movement, and
- (ii) social feedback to encourage a supportive learning environment



(Fig.1) Proposed process for online dance learning with human and AI tutors (Kang et al.)

AI in choreographic creation assists dancers with various sets of algorithms that suggest movements, which are usually based on the dancer's skill and style, enhancing the creative level of dancers (Kang et al.).

• Immersive Technologies

Immersive Technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) open up countless opportunities for educational systems in the field of

Dance. VR creates a simulated three-dimensional environment that appears to be genuine, enabling users to experience a sense of immersion in their own environment. This experience is facilitated by a device called a VR headset or helmet. Its invention dates back to the mid-1950s (Iberdrola). These platforms allow students to have an immersive dance learning experience, where they can interact within virtual classrooms or rehearse in simulated environments. On the other hand, Augmented Reality (AR) is a combination of virtual and graphic three-dimensional images, where, within a real-world environment, it provides an enriched interactive experience that can be accessed through digital visuals, audio, and other sensory stimuli that uses holographic technology (Craig; Microsoft).

This platform allows students to envision dance techniques and movements overlaid onto their actual practice space. This dual-layered approach, which combines the physical and digital environments, enhances the understanding of space dynamics and body positions in Dance. Not only in dance, the use of technology in the field arts and design can also be seen. Alyssa, in her blog, mentions the impact of VR and AR in the field of art and design, where she talks about an immersive tool called “Tilt Brush” invented by Google, which enables students to paint and draw in 3D and she also discusses another tool viz., “Panoforn”, which also allows artists to create virtually and observe their creation in 360 degrees using Google Cardboard (Froehling).

• Mobile Learning Applications

Through learning applications on mobile brings increased accessibility to Dance education. The applications, such as ‘Learn Kathak’, enable learners to practice various Kathak techniques and choreographies according to their convenience. This application includes features like video tutorials, music resources, and interactive features for more engagement. These applications act as a bridge between formal training and self-practice, which makes Kathak more approachable for individuals, which otherwise may not be that accessible for all to have an access to formal education. Another application, "Kathak Studio," developed by the creators of the internationally renowned “Lehra Studio”, is the world's first app dedicated solely to Kathak dancers. This application offers an ambience of a live Kathak rehearsal, offering sounds of authentic instruments like Tabla, Sarangi, Sitar, Harmonium, Esraj, etc., and a large library of Talas and Ragas recorded by the best



musicians in the industry, making it accessible from anywhere at any time (Kalyan). Like this, there are many such applications out on the online platforms like Google Play, App Store (Apple), etc., and they are mostly shareware apps, where initially no cost is charged for trial use, but required to pay to continue using them, or freemium apps, where basic product is free of charge but charges may apply to access premium features.

The COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably moulded the structure of education, including the field of Kathak, by necessitating a rapid transformation to online learning environments. This rapid shift has presented its dual nature, proving to be both fruitful in its innovations and creativity and venomous in its challenges. This period has not only expanded the reach of Kathak to its global audience but has also detracted from the holistic learning experience due to increased screen time.

4. The Perspectives on the Digital Transition in Kathak Pedagogy

In the discussion of technological integration, the perspectives of practitioners and students of Kathak, makes it obligatory to understand the opportunities and challenges it carries. This section of the study covers informal feedback and responses from Kathak students and practitioners involved in the different modes of learning (i.e., Online/Offline/Hybrid).

• Students Experiences

Students of Kathak dance, attending classes on Online mode, consider flexibility and global accessibility as major advantages of it. The students, especially from abroad, acknowledged that the digital platforms enable regular interaction with the eminent gurus, which otherwise would not have been possible due to geographical and financial constraints. Several students noted that in online mode, the absence of tactile correction results in incorrect posture alignment and limited embodied understanding. Though online classes are convenient and allow one to learn in his/her own pace, but perfection in dance requires physical learning. So, learning classical dances like Kathak, solely through online classes or videos, can be a little challenging due to the intricate nature of the art form. The offline institutional students expressed that the structured curriculum enhances the systematic progression of learning, with digital tools serving as a supplement to their individual Riyaz.

Whereas the Hybrid learners, combining online and offline training sessions, reported it as the most effective

model, which allows continuity of practice without compromising experiential depth.

• Practitioners Responses

The teachers and instructors of Kathak dance gave divergent responses towards technology. As those teachers who are tech-adaptive acknowledged the utility of technology and digital platforms for dissemination, documentation and sustaining pedagogical continuity, even during the disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic. According to them, digital tools function as a support system that aids the demonstration and provides immediate feedback.

On the other hand, some practitioners voiced concerns regarding the dilution of the Parampara and its discipline. Where Kathak and its pedagogy are inseparable from physical experience and observation, which is difficult to replicate digitally and is potent to disrupt the traditional values. These divergent views on digital adoption stresses on the generational and philosophical divide within the community of Kathak.

• Economic Accessibility and Digital Divide

Digital platforms are often projected as the democratizing forces, but they seem uneven economically. Subscription-based learning platforms, high-speed internet requirements, quality devices, specialised software, financial constraints, etc., impose particularly on those students and practitioners who are from rural areas, or who belong to economically disadvantaged backgrounds, or are technologically challenged (Mythili et al.). Compared to the traditional Guru-Shishya Parampara, which involves long-term learning, often being non-monetary exchanges (known as Seva), the digital platform for dissemination introduces a commercialised learning structure. Thus, where technology is expanding its reach globally, it simultaneously risks exclusion through affordability barriers.

5. Potential Drawbacks of Digital Integration in Kathak Pedagogy

Though there are numerous benefits of integrating digital tools in Kathak education, it also presents several drawbacks that can impact the learning experience of Kathak. The online classes may not be able to provide the complete experience of this performing art, as they lack tactile correction and real-time feedback, diminishing the emotional bonding and personal mentorship, reducing hands-on experience, which are



one of the crucial elements of Guru-Shishya Parampara (Chaudhary). Another concern is the authenticity, as the AI-driven dance choreography lacks pure human expression, over-relying on technology deteriorates dance's raw emotion, and advanced technologies are much costlier, which hinders accessibility of dancers as well as audiences. Practitioners fear losing the traditional values, its sacredness, cultural identity, and the role of Guru, while adapting to technologizing dance and its training. The excessive use of these technologies in dance education may impede students' critical thinking, hinder communication, and risk repositioning the students as content consumers, which can be a challenge to the epistemological foundation of classical dance pedagogy and can be a potential distraction to learners, as suggested by some studies (Brown; Midgley).

Therefore, technology cannot fully replace the physical aspects of dance, but can be fruitful in optimizing dance classes and motivating students to learn from their own land.

6. Conclusion

The technology integrated into pedagogy, especially in the field of Dance, has undeniably extended its reach, increased accessibility, and filled geographical gaps, thereby providing wider access and engagement in this art form. The online learning platforms such as Steezy studio and Indian Raga, AI embedded learning platform such as Dancing Inside, and the mobile applications such as Learn Kathak, have shown a transformation in traditional teaching methods, making dance worldwide accessible. Applications such as Kathak Studio, Lehra Studio, Nagma Live, etc., have significantly improved the Riyaz of artists without in-person accompaniment.

While digital tools have provided opportunities to learn and to disseminate knowledge to a wider audience, they also present challenges in preserving the essence of Guru-Shishya Parampara, where experience and personal interaction shape not only the learning but also help the disciple to have discipline and devotion for the art. The digital tools, like online classes and virtual archives, should act as a supplement rather than supplant to the Guru-Shishya tradition. That is why the balance between technology and tradition is very crucial for the future of Kathak. To bring balance, we can develop hybrid models that integrate online resources into the periodic in-person intensives, or create an immersive experience of a traditional gurukul without compromising the art form's integrity. Nonetheless, future studies may explore the integration of Immersive

technologies, Artificial Intelligence (AI), etc., and their fusion with Indian classical dance pedagogy, practice, and performances for developing and understanding new dimensions for both scholars and artists.

The transition from traditional to digital pedagogy is neither linear nor universal. The future of Kathak pedagogy doesn't lie in replacement but in pedagogical mediation, where tradition should actively govern the technological use rather than being governed by it. The evolution of Kathak Pedagogy in the 21st century brings thoughtful innovation into the spotlight, bringing technology as a powerful ally to preserve and promote Kathak, conserving the cultural values and experiential learning methods that have sustained it for centuries. This balanced approach honours heritage and expands its reach to a global audience, ensuring the authentic tradition is passed down to future generations.

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