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Kathak Dance

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Kathak Dance

The word Kathak has been derived from the word Katha which means a story. **Kathakars** or story-tellers, are people who narrate stories largely based on episodes from the epics, myths and legends. It probably started as an oral tradition. Mime and gestures were perhaps added later on to make the recitation more effective. Thus evolved a simple form of expressive dance, providing the origins of what later developed into Kathak as we see it today.



Thate, Basic position

The Vaishnavite cult which swept North India in the 15th century, and the resultant bhakti movement contributed to a whole new range of lyrics and musical forms. The Radha-Krishna theme proved immensely popular alongwith the works of Mirabai, Surdas, Nandadas and Krishnadas.



Rasliila, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh

The emergence of **Rasliila**, mainly in the Braj region (Mathura in Western U.P.) was an important development. It combined in itself music, dance and the narrative. Dance in Rasliila, however, was mainly an extension of the basic mime and gestures of the **Kathakars** or story-tellers which blended easily with the existing traditional dance.

With the coming of the Mughals, this dance form received a new impetus. A transition from the temple courtyard to the palace **darbar** took place which necessitated changes in presentation. In both Hindu and Muslim courts, Kathak became highly stylised and came to be regarded as a sophisticated form of entertainment. Under the Muslims there was a greater stress on **nritya** and **bhava** giving the dance graceful, expressive and sensuous dimensions.



Taking Pirouettes



Salami

The nineteenth century saw the golden age of Kathak under the patronage of Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of Oudh. He established the Lucknow **gharana** with its strong accent on **bhava**, the expression of moods and emotions. The Jaipur **gharana** known for its **layakari** or rhythmic virtuosity and the Benaras **gharana** are other prominent schools of Kathak dance. The technique of movement in Kathak is unique to it.

The weight of the body is equally distributed along the horizontal and vertical axis. The full foot contact is of prime importance where only the toe or the ball of the foot are used, their function is limited. There are no deflections and no use of sharp bends or curves of the upper or lower part of the body. Torso movements emerge from the change of the shoulder line rather than through the manipulations of the backbone or upper chest and lower waist muscles. In the basic stance, the dancer stands straight, holds one hand at a level higher than the head and the other is extended out on the level of the shoulder.

The technique is built by the use of an intricate system of foot-work. Pure dance (**nritya**) is all important where complex rhythmic patterns are created through the use of the flat feet and the control of sound of the ankle bells worn by the dancer. As in Bharatnatyam, Odissi and Manipuri, Kathak also builds its pure dance sequences by combining units of movement. The cadences are called differently by the names **tukra**, **tora**, and **parana**, all indicative of the nature of rhythmic patterns used and the percussion instrument accompanying the dance. The dancer commences with a sequence called **That** where soft gliding movements of the neck, eyebrows and the wrists, are introduced. This is followed by a conventional formal entry known as the **Amad** (entry) and the **Salami** (salutation).

Then follow the various combinations of rhythmic passages all punctuated with and culminating in a number of pirouettes. The pirouettes are the most characteristic feature of the dance style in **nritya** portions. Recitation of the rhythmic syllables is common; the dancer often pauses to recite these to a specified metrical cycle followed by execution through movement. The **nritya** portion of Kathak is performed to the **nagma**. Both the drummer (here the drum is either a pakhawaj, a type of mridangam, or a pair of tabla) and the dancer weave endless combinations on a repetitive melodic line. The metrical cycle (**tala**) of 16, 10, 14 beats provides the foundation on which the whole edifice of dance is built.



Angika Abhinaya

In the mime portions (**nritya** or **abhinaya**), words are not used in simple numbers called the **gata**, which is performed in a lyrical manner to gentle rhythm. These are short narrative pieces which portray a brief episode



Dancer with Musicians

from Krishna's life. A poetic line set to music is interpreted with gestures in other numbers, such as the **tumri**, **bhajan**, **dadra** - all lyrical musical compositions.

In these sections, there is a word to word or line to line synchronisation in the same fashion as in Bharatnatyam or Odissi. Both in **nritta** (pure dance) and the **abhinaya** (mime) there is immense scope for improvisation of presenting variations on a theme. The interpretative and the abstract dance techniques are interwoven into each other, and the dancer's greatness lies in his capacity for improvisation on the melodic and metric line on the one hand and the poetic line on the other.

Today, Kathak has emerged as a distinct dance form. Being the only classical dance of India having links with Muslim culture, it represents a unique synthesis of Hindu and Muslim genius in art. Further, Kathak is the only form of classical dance wedded to Hindustani or the North Indian music. Both of them have had a parallel growth, each feeding and sustaining the other.

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