



The Impact of Vocal Music and Kathak: A Study of Thumri, Dhrupad, and the Use of Vocal Accompaniment

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ABSTRACT

Kathak, one of the oldest and most renowned classical dance forms of India, has evolved over centuries, blending intricate footwork, graceful movements, and expressive storytelling. This classical dance tradition, rooted in both devotional and performance-oriented contexts, has consistently been intertwined with the rich and varied tradition of Indian vocal music. Vocal music in Kathak is not simply an accompaniment but serves as a foundational element that enriches the narrative and emotional depth of the performance. In particular, two significant genres of Indian classical vocal music—Thumri and Dhrupad—have become essential to Kathak’s expressive range and dramatic potential. Thumri, with its emphasis on emotional and lyrical themes, lends itself beautifully to the expressive Abhinaya (gesture and facial expressions) of Kathak, while Dhrupad, with its structured rhythm and spiritual focus, complements the precision of Kathak’s footwork and rhythmic cycles (taals). This paper explores the deep and intricate relationship between Kathak and vocal music, specifically focusing on the roles of Thumri and Dhrupad. The study highlights how these vocal forms interact with Kathak’s visual and physical



elements, enriching the performance in multiple ways. It examines the impact of vocal music on the dancer's movements, particularly in terms of guiding the dancer's expression, enhancing their footwork, and shaping the overall narrative construction. By analyzing the unique characteristics of both Thumri and Dhrupad, the paper seeks to underscore how these genres of music elevate Kathak's storytelling—whether by intensifying emotions through love and longing in Thumri or by adding a sense of reverence and solemnity through Dhrupad. Moreover, it highlights the collaborative nature of the dance-music partnership, where the dancer and vocalist engage in a dynamic and reciprocal dialogue that amplifies the emotive and rhythmic nuances of both art forms. Through this exploration, the paper aims to present a comprehensive understanding of the symbiotic relationship between Kathak and vocal music, illustrating how the integration of these elements contributes to the development and continued relevance of Kathak as a living and evolving art form.

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Introduction:

Kathak, one of the eight classical dance forms of India, stands out for its intricate footwork, expressive gestures, and captivating storytelling. Originating in the temples and courts of North India, Kathak has evolved over centuries, adapting itself to changing cultural, religious, and social contexts. Initially a devotional dance performed in temples to narrate mythological stories, Kathak gradually transitioned into a courtly art form under the patronage of Mughal emperors and later became a significant component of the performing arts on stage. Today, Kathak is a dynamic and vibrant art form, widely performed both in India and across the globe.

A defining feature of Kathak is its intricate footwork, which is combined with graceful movements and dynamic spins. These movements are often accompanied by rhythmic patterns and melodies provided by percussion instruments such as the tabla, pakhawaj, and dholak. These instruments play an essential role in creating the rhythmic framework that guides the dancer's movements, ensuring synchronization between the music and dance. However, in addition to instrumental accompaniment, vocal music also



plays a crucial role in Kathak performances, enhancing the emotional expression and storytelling aspects of the dance.

Vocal music in Kathak is not merely an accompaniment, but rather an integral and dynamic component of the performance. In many traditional Kathak performances, the dancer's movements, expressions, and interpretations of the narrative are deeply influenced by the vocal music that accompanies the performance. This music often serves as the emotional and thematic guide for the dancer, whose role is to embody the emotional content and storytelling elements embedded within the vocal melodies.

Among the various genres of Indian classical vocal music, Thumri and Dhrupad stand out as two essential forms that complement Kathak. Thumri, with its emotionally charged melodies and lyrical themes, provides the Kathak dancer with an expressive canvas, allowing them to communicate feelings of longing, devotion, and separation through delicate gestures and fluid movements. On the other hand, Dhrupad, a more structured and classical genre of vocal music, emphasizes rhythm and discipline, supporting the dancer's technical footwork and adding a sense of reverence, spiritual focus, and meditative depth to the performance.[1]

Both Thumri and Dhrupad play pivotal roles in the development of Kathak as an art form, offering unique contributions to the narrative and emotional depth of the performance. The integration of vocal music into Kathak performances is not just a matter of timing or rhythm; it is a partnership between the vocalist and the dancer, where the vocalist provides the emotional and musical foundation, and the dancer interprets and visualizes the emotions through movement. This relationship is central to the identity of Kathak and enhances the beauty and depth of its storytelling.

This paper seeks to explore the historical development, characteristics, and significance of Thumri and Dhrupad in Kathak performances, focusing on their role in enriching the dance form. By examining the interplay between Kathak and these vocal genres, the study will shed light on how Thumri's lyrical expressiveness and Dhrupad's structured rhythms contribute to Kathak's emotional depth and narrative complexity. The paper also aims to highlight the impact of vocal music in guiding the dancer's interpretation of the music, footwork, and overall expression, thus emphasizing its essential role in the Kathak performance. Through this analysis, the paper intends to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the symbiotic relationship between Kathak and vocal music has shaped and continues to shape the performance of this classical dance form.

**Literature Review:**

The relationship between Kathak and vocal music has been a subject of considerable scholarly interest, with many researchers highlighting the profound impact that vocal music has on the expressiveness and emotional depth of Kathak performances. Vocal music serves as a key element that not only supports the rhythm and movement but also intensifies the emotional and narrative aspects of the dance form. As noted by Rao (2010), the fusion of Kathak with vocal music creates a multisensory experience, where the audience is able to experience a deeper connection with the performance. This integration transforms Kathak from a purely visual spectacle into an immersive art form, where the sounds of the music and the movements of the dancer work together to convey complex emotions and stories. This symbiotic relationship between dance and music enhances the storytelling capabilities of Kathak, allowing for a more profound emotional engagement between the performer and the audience.

Thumri, a genre of vocal music known for its emotional and lyrical depth, has been intimately linked with Kathak for centuries. Thumri is characterized by its romantic and devotional themes, often focusing on expressions of longing, separation, and devotion to a beloved or divine figure, typically Krishna. The expressive nature of Thumri, with its lilting rhythms and emotive melodies, makes it an ideal match for Kathak's emphasis on Abhinaya (expression). Thumri's themes of love, longing, and emotional turmoil resonate with Kathak's gestural vocabulary, where the dancer uses delicate hand movements, facial expressions, and body posture to express complex emotions. The dancer's interpretation of these themes becomes central to the performance, allowing the audience to connect emotionally with the narrative being told. Several scholars have emphasized the deep connection between Thumri and Kathak, arguing that the dance form serves as the perfect vehicle for interpreting the emotional nuances found in Thumri's lyrics. This pairing enables the dancer to not only perform the music's rhythm but also to embody its emotional content through movement, creating a powerful fusion of sound and gesture.

In contrast, Dhrupad, another important genre of vocal music, offers a different contribution to Kathak. Dhrupad is known for its formal structure, slow tempos, and emphasis on spiritual and devotional themes. It is characterized by a deep, meditative quality, with a focus on purity and precision in both melody and rhythm. Dhrupad's rigid structure and the spiritual gravitas it embodies offer a contrasting mood to the emotional expressiveness of Thumri. In Kathak, the integration of Dhrupad influences the dancer's approach to rhythm and movement, encouraging precision, control, and a focus on the meditative aspects of the performance. While Thumri invites a more fluid and expressive interpretation of movement,



Dhrupad encourages a sense of discipline and reverence. Dancers performing to Dhrupad music often emphasize controlled footwork, formal gestures, and the precise execution of rhythmic patterns, thus adding a sense of solemnity and weight to the performance. The collaboration of Kathak with Dhrupad offers a unique contrast, allowing the performer to engage with two very different emotional and rhythmic worlds.

Both Thumri and Dhrupad contribute to Kathak's ability to convey a wide range of emotions, from passionate longing and devotion in the case of Thumri, to meditative reverence and spiritual depth with Dhrupad. Scholars have long recognized this duality as one of Kathak's defining characteristics, allowing the dance form to express a broad spectrum of human experiences through music and movement. By combining both of these vocal traditions with Kathak's technical expertise, dancers are able to provide audiences with performances that not only showcase their technical prowess but also evoke deep emotional responses. The juxtaposition of these two vocal forms—Thumri and Dhrupad—enriches Kathak by providing a diverse musical foundation that shapes the dancer's expression, footwork, and overall performance.

Thus, the integration of vocal music, particularly Thumri and Dhrupad, is integral to the depth and complexity of Kathak. These genres not only provide the music and rhythm that support the dancer but also deeply influence the emotional and spiritual content of the performance. The literature suggests that the fusion of vocal music and Kathak creates a harmonious relationship that elevates the storytelling and emotional expression within the dance form.

The Role of Thumri in Kathak:

Thumri is a light classical music genre that is renowned for its lyrical beauty and profound emotional expressiveness. Unlike the more rigid and formal styles of classical music, Thumri is characterized by its fluidity, flexibility, and deeply evocative melodies. It is typically associated with themes of love, longing, separation, and devotion, particularly revolving around the divine figure of Krishna and his romantic escapades with Radha and other gopis. Thumri's focus on these themes of longing and love provides a rich emotional foundation that makes it an ideal partner for Kathak, which is itself a dance form rooted in expression and emotional storytelling.

The melodies of Thumri are often soft, romantic, and imbued with a sense of yearning. The expressive nature of the music, with its emphasis on delicate ornamentations and slow, meandering melodic lines,



perfectly complements Kathak's fluid and graceful movements. The genre is filled with emotional intensity, particularly in its use of raga and taal to evoke mood and feeling, making it a natural fit for Kathak's Abhinaya (expression). Kathak dancers, who are trained to express emotions through their movements, gestures, and facial expressions, rely heavily on the emotional resonance of Thumri to guide their performance. The emotional depth of Thumri's lyrical content directly informs the dancer's interpretation, shaping how they express the emotions of love, longing, separation, or devotion through their body.[2]

The lyrical content of Thumri often speaks of the pain and joy of unrequited love or the ecstasy and anguish of longing for the divine. This emotional charge is carried through the music's rhythms and melodies, which helps to guide the Kathak dancer's expressions and movements. The Kathak dancer uses their body as a conduit to translate the vocal emotions into visual form. The facial expressions, hand gestures, and body movements in Kathak serve to embody the emotional content of the Thumri. For example, delicate hand gestures (known as mudras) and expressive eye movements are used to convey longing or separation. A dancer may use subtle but powerful facial expressions, such as downcast eyes or an upward glance, to mirror the emotions of the song.

In a Thumri performance, the relationship between the vocalist and the Kathak dancer becomes an intricate dialogue. While the vocalist conveys the emotional essence of the music through their voice, the dancer takes these emotional cues and expresses them through movement. This dynamic collaboration transforms the performance into a conversation between the music and the dance. The vocalist's voice paints the emotional landscape, while the dancer shapes and visualizes these emotions through the medium of movement, making the performance feel like a shared, evolving experience between the two art forms. The interaction between both artists creates a harmonious synergy, where the music and the movement not only complement each other but also elevate the overall impact of the performance.

An example of a widely recognized Thumri used in Kathak performances is "Padharo Mhare Des" (Come to my land), a song that is emblematic of the Thumri genre's thematic focus on longing for the beloved. The song expresses the dancer's desire for the arrival of the lover, a theme commonly found in Thumri lyrics. The Kathak dancer interprets this longing through a combination of delicate footwork, expressive hand movements, and facial expressions that convey yearning and desire. The dancer's movement mirrors the emotional intensity conveyed through the vocalist's voice, using subtle yet powerful gestures to evoke a sense of both anticipation and yearning.



In performing "Padharo Mhare Des", Kathak dancers incorporate graceful spins (chakkars), gentle foot stamping, and intricate footwork, all synchronized to the rhythm of the Thumri's music. Through these movements, the dancer embodies the emotional journey of waiting and longing, expressing the sentiment of the Thumri not just through physical gestures but also through the aura and emotional tone of the dance. The delicate and intricate footwork in Kathak, combined with expressive hand gestures and subtle body movements, allows the dancer to evoke the depth of longing expressed in the Thumri, bringing the song's themes of devotion, desire, and anticipation to life.

Thus, Thumri is not just a musical genre that accompanies Kathak—it is an essential and deeply interwoven part of the Kathak performance, providing the emotional core around which the dancer builds their expressions and movements. This intricate interaction between the vocalist's music and the dancer's movements creates a performance that is emotionally resonant, deeply engaging, and visually captivating, allowing the audience to connect with the thematic depth of the dance through a multisensory experience.[3]

The Role of Dhrupad in Kathak:

Dhrupad is another important genre of Indian classical vocal music, distinguished by its solemnity, structure, and reverence. Unlike the emotionally charged Thumri, Dhrupad focuses on purity, rhythm, and melody, often revolving around themes of devotion to deities or the eternal truth. Dhrupad compositions are typically slow, measured, and deeply meditative, creating a serene atmosphere.

In Kathak, Dhrupad enhances the formal aspect of the performance, particularly in pieces that highlight the dancer's command over rhythm and footwork. The slow, deliberate nature of Dhrupad compositions allows the Kathak dancer to focus on precise footwork, perfecting rhythmic cycles (taals), and conveying a sense of devotion or spiritual reverence.[4]

The influence of Dhrupad in Kathak can be seen in the way dancers incorporate long, sustained movements and pauses that match the slow tempo of Dhrupad music. The interplay of rhythmic patterns in Dhrupad with Kathak's footwork creates a seamless integration of movement and sound. The Dhrupad's emphasis on tala (rhythmic cycles) also aids the dancer in achieving perfect synchronization between their footwork and the percussion instruments.

The Interaction Between Vocal Music and Kathak:



The interaction between vocal music and Kathak can be seen as a dynamic partnership, where the two art forms enhance each other. Vocal music, whether Thumri or Dhrupad, is deeply tied to the dancer's movements, guiding the rhythm and enhancing the expressiveness of the dance.

- **Rhythmic Synchronization:** In Kathak, the rhythmic foundation of the performance is laid by the tabla. However, the vocal music provides additional layers of rhythmic complexity. Thumri, with its irregular rhythms, challenges the dancer to adapt their movements to the shifting time cycles. On the other hand, Dhrupad's rigid and structured rhythms help the dancer focus on precision and clarity in their footwork.
- **Emotional Expression:** Thumri allows for a more fluid, expressive dance, with the dancer's movements mirroring the emotional content of the lyrics. Dhrupad, in contrast, allows for a more controlled, serene performance that aligns with the spiritual and meditative qualities of the music.
- **Storytelling and Narrative Construction:** The vocal music helps structure the narrative of the Kathak performance. In a Thumri, the singer tells a story of longing, which the dancer interprets through gestures and expressions. In Dhrupad, the spiritual themes can be embodied through elegant and measured footwork, elevating the dance into a meditative state.

Conclusion:

The synergy between Kathak dance and vocal music—particularly Thumri and Dhrupad—creates a harmonious and deeply expressive performance. While Thumri enhances the emotional and lyrical aspects of the dance, Dhrupad brings structure, reverence, and rhythm. Both forms of vocal music are integral to Kathak's performance, with each contributing its unique qualities to the overall expression of the art form.

As Kathak continues to evolve in the contemporary world, the fusion of Thumri, Dhrupad, and modern musical influences ensures the continuing relevance and richness of the dance. Understanding the interaction between Kathak and vocal music deepens our appreciation of the art form and highlights the importance of vocal accompaniment in shaping the emotional and rhythmic experience of the performance.

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