



The Bansuri in Kathak: Melodic Dialogue between Dance and Flute in Expressing Rasa and Bhava

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ABSTRACT

This research paper delves into the intricate and deeply emotive relationship between the bansuri (Indian bamboo flute) and Kathak, one of India's most expressive classical dance forms. Rooted in centuries-old traditions, both Kathak and the bansuri have evolved through spiritual, royal, and modern cultural contexts, finding common ground in their ability to convey powerful emotional narratives. The study emphasizes the melodic richness and lyrical sensitivity of the bansuri, highlighting its unique ability to enhance the aesthetic experience of rasa (emotional flavor) and bhava (emotive expression) in dance performances. By tracing the historical significance of the bansuri in Indian classical music and its gradual integration into Kathak ensembles, the paper establishes a foundation for understanding the musical and emotional synergy between dancer and flautist. Theoretical frameworks from ancient texts such as the Natyashastra are examined to contextualize the expressive potential of melody in classical dance. Additionally, through performance analyses, artist interviews, and case studies of renowned Kathak exponents, this paper



reveals how the bansuri functions not merely as an accompanying instrument, but as an active co-narrator—engaging in a dynamic dialogue with the dancer to enrich the storytelling process. This research ultimately argues for a deeper appreciation of the bansuri's role in Kathak, advocating for continued exploration of interdisciplinary performance and live musician- dancer collaborations to preserve and expand the expressive power of Indian classical arts.

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1. Introduction: Kathak, one of the eight recognized classical dance forms of India, originates from the word katha, meaning “story.” It is a dance form that intricately weaves together expressive storytelling (abhinaya), rhythmic footwork (tatkar), fast spins (chakkars), and intricate hand gestures (mudras). Evolving from the ancient tradition of temple storytelling by wandering bards (kathakars), Kathak eventually moved into the courts of Mughal emperors, where it absorbed elements of Persian aesthetics, leading to a unique amalgamation of sacred narrative and refined artistry.

At the heart of Kathak lies the symbiotic relationship between movement and music. The performance is typically accompanied by a live musical ensemble that may include tabla, pakhawaj, harmonium, sarangi, vocalists, and melodic instruments like the bansuri (Indian bamboo flute). Music in Kathak is not merely a background element; it is a living, breathing partner that guides the dancer's tempo, energy, and emotional depth. The interaction between the dancer and the musicians often occurs spontaneously, allowing for improvisation and creative exchange during the performance.

Among all melodic instruments used in Kathak, the bansuri holds a distinct and revered place. Known for its ethereal, breathy tone and its deep connection with Lord Krishna—a divine figure often celebrated in Kathak compositions—the bansuri evokes an immediate sense of devotion, romance, and nostalgia. It possesses the unique ability to mimic the human voice in both range and expression, making it an ideal instrument for complementing the emotional subtleties of Kathak.

This paper aims to explore the nuanced interplay between the Kathak dancer and the flautist, with a particular emphasis on how the bansuri functions not just as an accompaniment but as a co-narrator in the storytelling process. By examining historical developments, aesthetic theory, and real-world performance practices, this study seeks to highlight the flute's role in intensifying the narrative arc and enhancing the emotional resonance of Kathak performances.



2. Historical and Cultural Context of the Bansuri: The bansuri, or Indian bamboo flute, is one of the most ancient and revered melodic instruments in Indian culture. Its origins trace back to the earliest periods of Indian civilization, where it was used in both pastoral life and spiritual practice. More than just a musical instrument, the bansuri occupies a sacred space in Indian mythology and iconography, particularly through its association with Lord Krishna—one of the most beloved deities in Hinduism. Krishna is almost always depicted playing the flute, his melodies said to have the power to enchant animals, trees, rivers, and most profoundly, the gopis (cowherd maidens) of Vrindavan. This image of Krishna symbolizes divine love, longing, and bliss—emotions that resonate deeply with the themes often portrayed in Kathak.[1]

The flute's symbolism of pure, selfless, and often unfulfilled love has made it an enduring presence in the devotional and romantic compositions of Indian classical dance and music. In the context of Kathak, which frequently draws upon bhakti (devotion) and shringara (romantic) rasas, the bansuri serves as a perfect musical counterpart to the dancer's emotive storytelling. The soft, flowing quality of the bansuri aligns seamlessly with the nuanced expressions of yearning, joy, and surrender often depicted through abhinaya in Kathak.

Historically, the bansuri began as a folk instrument used in rural celebrations and storytelling. However, it saw a significant transformation during the 20th century when maestros such as Pandit Pannalal Ghosh revolutionized its status. He introduced a longer version of the flute that could accommodate the intricate demands of Hindustani classical ragas, thereby establishing the bansuri as a legitimate and expressive classical instrument. This legacy was further advanced by Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia, who brought global recognition to the bansuri through his emotionally rich and technically brilliant performances.

As the Kathak tradition transitioned from its origins in temple rituals to the opulence of Mughal court performances, and eventually onto contemporary proscenium stages, the musical accompaniment also evolved. Initially dominated by percussion and vocal music, the inclusion of melodic instruments like the bansuri grew over time, adding a new dimension to Kathak's expressive range. The bansuri's entry into Kathak ensembles was not just musical—it was philosophical. It brought with it centuries of cultural resonance and emotive depth, enriching the dance's capacity for storytelling.

In today's Kathak, especially in the Lucknow gharana, which emphasizes abhinaya and romantic themes, the bansuri is often featured in compositions like thumri, dadra, and bhajans, where the dancer portrays emotional subtleties. In these performances, the flute is more than an accompaniment—it becomes the



voice of the divine, the lover, or the inner self, engaging in a call-and-response with the dancer's body and soul.

3. Music in Kathak: Structure and Components: Music serves as the lifeblood of Kathak, shaping its rhythm, mood, and emotional trajectory. A traditional Kathak performance is an intricate interplay between rhythmic and melodic elements, both of which work together to create a compelling sensory and spiritual experience for the audience. This integration is guided by two foundational components of Indian classical music: *tāla* (rhythmic cycle) and *rāga* (melodic framework).[2]

The *tāla* system provides the temporal structure around which the dancer and musicians align their improvisations and compositions. Percussion instruments, primarily the tabla or pakhawaj, articulate this rhythmic framework. The Kathak dancer's footwork, enhanced with ankle bells (ghungroos), enters into a highly synchronized dialogue with these percussion elements, producing complex rhythmic patterns known as tukras, parans, and tihāis. Complementing this rhythmic aspect is the melodic dimension, rooted in the *rāga* system of Hindustani classical music. Here, instruments such as the harmonium, sarangi, and bansuri play a central role. The bansuri, in particular, lends a distinctive lyrical and emotive quality to the performance. Unlike the more percussive or harmonically grounded instruments, the bansuri's breathy, flowing sound mirrors the subtleties of the human voice, making it ideally suited for expressive dance.

- The musical ensemble accompanying a Kathak dancer traditionally consists of:
- Tabla or Pakhawaj: Responsible for the rhythmic backbone.
- Harmonium or Sarangi: Provides harmonic support and often follows the vocalist's lead.
- Vocalist: Especially important in abhinaya items like thumri, bhajan, or dadra, where lyrics carry narrative meaning.

Bansuri (Flute): Introduces melodic improvisation, establishes the *rāga*, and interacts emotionally with the dancer.

In performance, the bansuri does not merely establish the *rāga* at the beginning; it continues to respond to and influence the dancer's movements throughout the piece. In technical sections (like *nritta*), the flute may offer short melodic interludes, giving contrast to the rhythmic complexity. In expressive sections (*nritya*), particularly during abhinaya, the bansuri plays a more dominant role—extending emotional lines, heightening dramatic tension, or offering gentle closure to an emotional phrase.



For instance, in a thumri that depicts Radha's longing for Krishna, the bansuri may echo the sentiment of yearning through its gentle, wavering notes. This creates an emotional atmosphere that supports the dancer's portrayal of *śringāra rasa* (romantic love). Similarly, in a bhajan, the flute can deepen the spiritual essence by imitating the meditative quality of prayer and surrender, enriching the portrayal of *bhakti rasa* (devotion).

Thus, the role of the bansuri in Kathak's musical ensemble extends beyond ornamentation—it helps set the emotional tone, guides the pace of expression, and enters into an unspoken conversation with the dancer. This interaction between melody and movement enhances the viewer's experience of both the technical brilliance and the emotional depth that defines Kathak.

4. Emotional Expression: Bhava, Rasa, and Abhinaya: At the heart of Indian classical performance lies a philosophical and aesthetic foundation that prioritizes emotional experience and transformation. According to the *Natyashastra*—an ancient Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts attributed to Bharata—*bhava* (emotion or mood) and *rasa* (aesthetic essence or flavor) are fundamental to the art of storytelling through dance, drama, and music. The *Natyashastra* delineates a comprehensive system of eight core *rasas*—*śringāra* (love), *hāsya* (laughter), *karuṇa* (compassion), *raudra* (anger), *vīra* (heroism), *bhayānaka* (fear), *bībhatsa* (disgust), and *adbhuta* (wonder)—later expanded to nine with the addition of *śānta* (peace). These *rasas* are experienced by the audience when the performer successfully expresses *bhavas*, or emotional states, through gesture, movement, music, and expression.[3]

Among all Indian classical dance forms, Kathak—particularly the Lucknow Gharana—places exceptional emphasis on *abhinaya*, or the expressive aspect of performance. *Abhinaya* involves the use of facial expressions (*mukhaja abhinaya*), body gestures (*angika*), vocal or lyrical interpretation (*vachika*), and emotional-intellectual resonance (*sattvika*), all working together to convey stories, characters, and inner emotions. The *gat bhava*, thumri, bhajan, and *padavali* segments in Kathak are especially rich in *abhinaya*, offering the dancer a platform to portray intricate emotional states ranging from flirtation and jealousy to divine ecstasy and spiritual surrender.

It is in this emotionally charged atmosphere that the bansuri—with its smooth, breath-like tonal quality—becomes a natural and evocative musical partner. The bansuri's sound, produced by breath and devoid of harsh attack, lends itself beautifully to fluid melodic lines, slow glides (*meend*), and emotional phrasing that resonates deeply with the *bhava* being portrayed. For instance, in a scene depicting *śringāra rasa* (romantic love), the flute's soft caresses, ornamented notes (*gamak*), and playful slides can suggest



flirtation, longing, or joy. In *karuṇa rasa* (compassion or sorrow), slow, low-pitched notes with extended silences can reflect grief or lament. And in *bhakti rasa* (devotion), the bansuri's serene and meditative tone invokes a sense of surrender and spiritual peace.

What sets the bansuri apart in this context is its ability to mirror, enhance, or even gently contrast the dancer's emotional language. In a performance where the dancer embodies Radha's longing for Krishna, the flautist may extend certain notes to mirror a gaze or sigh, effectively becoming Krishna's unseen voice. Alternatively, a sudden melodic twist might signal a change in mood—teasing or tension—which the dancer then interprets through movement or expression. This dynamic conversation between the dancer and the flautist creates a layered emotional experience, pulling the audience deeper into the narrative.

Moreover, the spontaneity allowed by live flute accompaniment enables performers to explore improvisation in *abhinaya*, adjusting facial expressions or gestures in response to the music's mood shifts. This live synergy enhances the *sattvika abhinaya*—the inner, involuntary emotional expressions—that form the most subtle and profound aspect of performance.

The emotional expression in Kathak is not complete without its melodic partner, and the bansuri, with its intimate, human-like voice, plays a vital role in this expressive journey. It becomes not just a musical instrument but an emotional interlocutor, capable of evoking *rasas* with great subtlety and depth, and thereby enriching the aesthetic experience of both performer and audience alike.

5. Performance Analysis and Case Studies: The collaborative nature of Kathak and live music finds one of its most profound expressions in performances that incorporate the bansuri as a central melodic voice. This section examines how eminent Kathak exponents have integrated the bansuri into their choreographic vocabulary, highlighting the instrument's role in enriching both narrative and emotional resonance.

Pt. Birju Maharaj, considered one of the greatest Kathak artists of the 20th century, often emphasized the importance of live music in Kathak, particularly the dialogic relationship between the dancer and melodic instruments. In his iconic *gat bhav* sequences—short narrative vignettes often without lyrics—the bansuri frequently served as the voice of Krishna, his divine persona evoked through playful and lyrical improvisations. One of his most celebrated compositions, “Radha-Krishna Gat Bhav,” showcases the depth of this relationship. The bansuri represents Krishna's unseen yet ever-present character, with delicate phrases that reflect his teasing, elusive nature. Radha, portrayed by the dancer, responds with expressive *abhinaya*, guided by the musical cues of the flautist. The fluid conversation between the dancer



and the bansuri allows for the embodiment of longing, playfulness, and devotion—all central themes in the Radha-Krishna narrative.[4]

Saswati Sen, a senior disciple of Birju Maharaj, has continued this tradition, placing emphasis on spontaneous improvisation and musical sensitivity. In her performances, the bansuri is often used to introduce a rāga or to underline key emotional transitions within a piece. During expressive segments such as thumri or bhajan, Sen is known to cue the flautist with subtle gestures or changes in gaze, prompting melodic shifts that mirror or contrast the mood she portrays. This level of responsiveness exemplifies the deep artistic understanding between the dancer and the musician, resulting in performances that are never identical, but always emotionally rich.

Shovana Narayan, another leading figure in Kathak, has incorporated the bansuri in both traditional and contemporary narratives. In her thematic productions that deal with modern subjects such as women's empowerment or environmental consciousness, the bansuri provides a timeless emotional thread, bridging classical technique with contemporary themes. In one of her performances centered around the Ganga river, the bansuri mimicked the sound of flowing water and lament, supporting a narrative that expressed both reverence and sorrow.

Beyond these prominent artists, interviews with seasoned flautists who regularly accompany Kathak dancers reveal an equally nuanced understanding of this collaboration. Many describe the experience as “reading a dancer’s emotion through movement.” As one flautist noted, “When the dancer raises her eyebrow to show Radha’s anger, I soften my note to suggest Krishna’s regret. It’s like a silent script we write together.” These artists often rehearse only loosely, preferring the energy and spontaneity of live interaction. This improvisational freedom allows the flautist to shape the melodic phrases in real-time, responding to subtle shifts in body language, rhythm, and emotional expression.

These case studies demonstrate that the bansuri, far from being a passive background instrument, actively shapes the narrative, emotional, and aesthetic quality of a Kathak performance. Whether portraying mythological love stories, devotional themes, or socially relevant concepts, the flute becomes a melodic voice that not only complements but co-creates the artistic vision on stage.

6. Contemporary Use of Flute in Kathak: As Kathak continues to evolve in the 21st century, it increasingly engages with modern aesthetics, global sensibilities, and multimedia platforms. In this dynamic landscape, the bansuri has not only retained its relevance but has found new and innovative applications within contemporary choreographic narratives. The instrument’s sonic versatility, emotional



depth, and symbolic heritage make it a natural bridge between traditional storytelling and modern artistic experimentation.

Many contemporary Kathak dancers and choreographers are moving beyond the confines of purely mythological or devotional themes to explore social, environmental, and psychological subjects. In these thematic performances, the bansuri continues to serve as a powerful emotive anchor, capable of conveying a wide range of feelings—grief, hope, nostalgia, resistance, and transcendence—without the need for lyrical elaboration. Its ability to evoke mood through subtle melodic shifts makes it particularly suited for such nuanced storytelling.[5]

For instance, in productions centered on women's empowerment, choreographers have used the flute's soft timbre to underscore the emotional vulnerability of female characters, while sharp, piercing notes have been used to express anger or defiance. In performances dealing with climate change or water conservation, the bansuri has been used to mimic the sounds of nature—flowing rivers, gentle winds, or a sense of emptiness and loss—adding a layer of ecological sensitivity to the dance.

Additionally, fusion performances—which combine Kathak with global dance forms or music traditions—often position the bansuri as a key melodic instrument. Its tonal compatibility with Western instruments such as the piano, violin, or guitar allows it to seamlessly blend into experimental soundscapes. Dancers like Aditi Mangaldas and Vidha Lal have incorporated bansuri-based compositions into contemporary ensemble works, pairing Kathak's intricate movements with electronically layered bansuri tracks or cross-cultural live ensembles.

Another significant development is the use of pre-recorded bansuri tracks, which are increasingly employed in digital and stage performances, especially when live musicians are not available. While this reduces the spontaneity of interaction between dancer and flautist, it offers precise control over tempo, mood, and timing—factors that are especially useful in choreographed group performances or film-based dance productions.

Furthermore, advancements in stage design and sound technology have greatly enhanced the acoustic and spatial presence of the bansuri in live shows. Surround sound systems, directional microphones, and digital looping allow flautists to interact dynamically with dancers across the performance space. In immersive theater setups, bansuri melodies can be diffused from different directions, symbolizing divine or unseen presences that guide or affect the narrative journey of the dancer.[6]



Educational institutions and dance festivals are also embracing these innovations. Workshops and residencies now frequently include musician-dancer collaborations, encouraging emerging artists to explore the co-creative potential of bansuri in Kathak. These interactions are fostering a new generation of performers who value both tradition and experimentation.

The bansuri's role in Kathak today is not confined to tradition—it is a living, adaptive force that continues to inspire and shape the expressive possibilities of the art form. Whether in classical solo recitals, cross-genre collaborations, or contemporary stage productions, the flute remains a melodic voice of emotion, innovation, and cultural continuity.

7. Conclusion: The present study affirms that the bansuri holds a place of unique significance in the world of Kathak, not as a mere supporting instrument, but as a melodic collaborator and co-narrator in the unfolding of expressive and narrative content. Its fluid and soulful tonal quality, deeply rooted in Indian spiritual and artistic traditions, gives the bansuri a special ability to enhance the emotional depth and aesthetic richness of Kathak performances. Whether portraying divine love, human longing, devotion, or philosophical introspection, the bansuri's voice resonates with the same emotional textures that the dancer expresses through abhinaya, mudras, and rhythm.

Throughout the historical evolution of Kathak—from its origins in temple storytelling, through its refinement in Mughal courts, to its emergence on contemporary stages—the bansuri has consistently played a role in intensifying rasa (aesthetic experience) and articulating bhava (emotion). Its ability to mirror the dancer's inner world and to suggest moods without the use of lyrics makes it an especially potent tool in storytelling, both in classical and thematic contexts.

What distinguishes the flute's role in Kathak is its capacity for real-time, responsive dialogue. Unlike many pre-composed musical accompaniments, the bansuri allows for spontaneous emotional interaction, enabling a performance that is both technically refined and deeply human. This living interplay between dancer and flautist breathes life into each recital, ensuring that no two performances are alike.

In the modern context, the bansuri has proven adaptable to new themes, global influences, and technological innovations. Its relevance in contemporary choreographies, fusion collaborations, and multimedia performances reflects its enduring power to communicate across artistic and cultural boundaries.



This research underscores the need for ongoing collaboration between dancers and flautists— not just in performance, but in the choreographic and creative process. By engaging more deeply with live musicians, Kathak practitioners can access a broader spectrum of expression

and revitalized performance energy. Furthermore, there is scope for more interdisciplinary research, exploring how sound and movement co-create meaning across classical and contemporary frameworks.

In essence, the bansuri in Kathak is not only a vehicle of melody but a spiritual and emotional companion to the dancer. It speaks without words, moves without feet, and yet, through its breath, it shapes the very soul of the performance. As Kathak continues to evolve, so too must our appreciation of the bansuri's vital role within it—both as a timeless presence and a progressive artistic force.

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