



Unrehearsed Grace: The Role of Spontaneous Improvisation in the Kathak Tradition of Ācharya Sukhdev Maharaj Banaras Gharana

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ABSTRACT

Kathak, a highly expressive classical dance form, traces its roots from tradition of Katha Vāchan - the art of narrating stories. Traditionally, it brought mythological tales to life through the blending of song, dance, and impromptu gestures, along with adding a flavour of spontaneous improvisation to present it in a captivating narrative form. Following this innovative tradition of narrating stories, an eminent vocalist and a litterateur Ācharya Sukhdev Maharaj established Banaras Gharana of Kathak renowned for its emphasis on spontaneous improvisation which made it one of the most creative branches of this Kathak tradition. This raises the question that how has this Banaras Gharana's emphasis on spontaneous improvisation, as opposed to trend of pre-set choreography, contributed to the uniqueness and artistic vibrancy of its performances. This research aims to understand the process of utilising the concept of spontaneous improvisation by combining qualitative, ethnographic, and historical-analytical approach in the performances of the great artists belonging to this branch of Banaras Gharana, whose performances were characterized by on-the-spot creation and presentation of compositions, impromptu selection of songs tailored to audience moods, incorporation of unique gymnastic elements while performing a particular composition, and of course the dynamic jugalbandi with accompanists leading to high-level synchronization.

Introduction

The word Kathak is derived from the word *Katha*, meaning "story" or "narrative. This art is deeply rooted in the popular saying “*Katha Kahe so Kathak Kahave*” meaning “*one who tells stories is Kathak.*” This description of the word Kathak can be traced back into various texts that provide valuable insight into its deeper meaning and cultural significance. The classical Sanskrit text *Shabdakalpadruma* explains *Kathaka* as “*one who narrates a story,*” highlighting its connection to storytelling and performance. In accordance with Pāṇini's in *Siddhānta Kaumudī*, the etymology of *Kathaka* comes from the sutra *Kathādibhyashthak*, referring to “*one who is adept at the art of narration.*” In Jain texts, lexicons such as *Abhidhānarājendra* and *Kalpadrakosha* refer to the word *Kahuga* as the synonym of the Sanskrit word Kathak, with the same meaning of a narrator or storyteller. The *Manusmṛiti* recognizes Kathakas as one of the communities of artists, highlighting their established position in the cultural and artistic scene of the period. Within performance arts, Kathak also follows the idea of *ekapātra* (single-role) performance, mentioned in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, whereby a single player performs several characters in a play. Likewise, in Pali and Nepali lexicons, the word *Kathiko* is employed to refer to a preacher, narrator, or reciter, indicating the common cultural importance of narration across Indian linguistic traditions. (Kothari, 1989, p. 1). These diverse references across Sanskrit, Jain, and other Indian traditions highlight the core concept behind the word Kathak, i.e., the art of narrating stories. An effective way of narrating a story demands a strong command of spontaneous improvisation, which not only enhances the aesthetics of the art form but also captures and connects with a diverse range of audiences. It also reflects the artist's ability to present the same stories repeatedly, each time with a fresh perspective and unique interpretation, showcasing their creative depth and versatility.

Over time, diverse cultural influences from various regions of the world infused their distinct elements into Kathak, enriching its repertoire and expanding its expressive range. That is the reason we have the concept of Salāmi, Tihāi, Upaj, Tukadā, Āamad, Farmāishi, Kamāli, Paran and so on, each of which, when presented on stage, relies heavily on spontaneity to elevate its artistic impact. The choreographic precision required to synchronize intricate body movements with the rhythmic bol phrases set to distinct structures of various concepts requires spontaneity. This directs us to a point that spontaneous improvisation is an essential factor that an artist must possess to enhance the beauty of his/her



performance. Despite the rich legacy of spontaneous improvisation in Kathak, the prevailing trend of pre-set choreography has increasingly overshadowed its essence. While this shift began during the era of Wajid Ali Shah, when large-scale group performances necessitated structured choreography and repeated rehearsals to ensure synchrony, it permeated solo recitals as well. This transition, though essential for ensemble precision, has inadvertently limited the scope for individual artistic freedom, diminishing the effectiveness and vitality of spontaneous improvisation in solo performances.

When the Kathak was going through this major shifting, there came a revolution by eminent vocalist of Banaras and a great litterateur Ācharya Sukhdev Maharaj who established a distinct branch of Banaras gharana of Kathak dance by implementing various factors. (Sunkara, 2021). But there is one such factor which was never documented was on-the-spot execution of intricate body movements on any composition as opposed to the trend of pre-set choreography. Today the essence of spontaneous improvisation which can be witnessed in the kathak presentations of artists belonging to Ācharya Sukhdev Maharaj Banaras Gharana, is a gift by Ācharya ji which he taught to three daughters Alaknanda Devi, Tara Devi, Sitara Devi (Kathak Queen). (Azad, 2022 p. 415-417). This spontaneous art was prominently carried forward by Sitara Devi, Alaknanda Devi, and Gopi Krishna and was passed onto next generation consisting of Jayanti Mala, Pandit Mata Prasad Mishra, Pandit Ravi Shankar Mishra, which is now executed by the younger generations consisting of Shri Vishal Krishna, Shri Rudra Shankar Mishra, and Shri Saurav-Gaurav Mishra. Subsequently, these artists began to explore and refine the concept of spontaneous improvisation through many ways like the impromptu selection of songs during live performances complemented by on-the-spot abhinaya (expressive interpretation), the incorporation of distinctive gymnastic elements within specific compositions, and dynamic jugalbandi with percussionists, resulting in remarkably synchronized and engaging presentations.

The aim of my research work is to understand the utilisation of concept of spontaneous improvisation in various concepts of Kathak dance such as on-the-spot creation and presentation of compositions, impromptu selection of songs tailored to audience moods, incorporation of unique gymnastic elements while performance a particular composition and of course the dynamic jugalbandi with accompanists leading to high-level synchronization, which was initiated by Ācharya Sukhdev Maharaj ji.

Literature review



The literature review offers an overview of scholarly perspectives emphasizing that spontaneous improvisation is a fundamental and integral aspect of Kathak performance. This can be proved by analysing following points:-

1. Narrating story demands a strong command of spontaneous improvisation

Since the word Kathak etymologically originates from Katha, which translates to "story," and signifies "one who recites a story" (Dadheech, 2012, p. 25), the very essence of this classical dance form lies in expressive narration. In order to narrate a diverse array of stories—mythological, devotional, or even romantic—the artist must have a cultivated skill of being able to improvise spontaneously. This improvisation is not merely a trick to attract the audience but an essential ability that enables the dancer to interpret and reinterpret the same narratives for different audiences, adding freshness and emotional depth to each performance.

2. On-the-spot creation and presentation of compositions

One of the most remarkable features of spontaneity in the Banaras Gharana of Kathak is the dancer's capacity to generate and perform compositions live on stage. While some compositions in Kathak are pre-choreographed, they often create new pieces spontaneously on stage. Further, they skillfully align movements suitable on the rhythmic bol phrases to enhance their expressive impact. This directs that the artist does not rely solely on pre-composed pieces or rehearsed sequences but instead crafts rhythmic patterns (of Salāmi, Tihāi, Upaj, Tukadā, Āamad, Farmāishi, Kamāli, Paran) in real time, responding to the tala (rhythmic cycle), the accompanying music, and the mood of the audience that involves deep understanding of rhythm. According to M. Mishra (personal communication, April 30, 2025), the training given by him through late Smt. Alaknanda Devi (Ācharya Sukhdev Maharaj's eldest daughter), laid more stress upon innovative exploration of the set of compositions and less on rote memorization of a set of compositions. He also said that the training was upon the creation of the art of producing many varieties from one set of composition, along with the creation of different modes of gesticulation for the same composition. When a tabla accompanist plays a composition, the dancer on the spot prepares and presents a spontaneous variation of his composition and present it with tailored hand gestures and footwork, showcasing deep rhythmic awareness and creative agility. (R. Mishra, personal communication, April 28, 2025).

3. Impromptu selection of songs tailored to audience moods

The impromptu selection of songs according to audience moods is a hallmark of the Kathak tradition in the Banaras Gharana, particularly as practiced by disciples of Ācharya Sukhdev Maharaj. In this

approach, the dancer assesses the energy and cultural demand of the audience in real time and intuitively chooses songs that align with the atmosphere and sentiment of the spectators. This spontaneity allows the performance to become a living dialogue between artist and audience, rather than a one-sided presentation. Even as the song is selected impromptu so the abhinaya is also created on the stage only. This improvisation is very rare to watch now a days in contrast to pre-set choreography. This can be evident from the video of Smt. Jayanti Mala (Daughter of Pandit Chaubey Maharaj), when she called the young Vishal Krishna (Grandson of Pandit Pandey Maharaj) to perform on Dadra which was purely spontaneous. (Jayanti Movie, 2021)

4. Incorporation of unique gymnastic elements

In this branch of Banaras Gharana tradition, the utilisation of unique gymnastic elements is a distinct feature that makes it unique among other gharanas. Nurtured from the Shaivite school, this gharana has taken pride in featuring the strong Tandav style and is defined through dynamic and forceful movements. Dancers often perform some acrobatic feats such as :-

- Sliding on the floor, (Captain Music, 2020).
- Dancing on plates (Vishal Krishna, 2014).
- Executing splits (Vishal Krishna, 2015).
- Performing jumps, (Captain Music, 2020). & (Acharya Sukhdev Maharaj Banaras Gharana, 2024).
- Spinning in air (Acharya Sukhdev Maharaj Banaras Gharana, 2023).

These components not only highlight the dancer's physical strength but also give the performance a distinctive touch, which improves the audience's visual experience. One of the most distinctive features of this Gharana is the impromptu improvisation when the dancer typically runs quickly or glides on both knees to reach near the Tabla accompanist and present the beautiful sync on Sam (1st matra of Tala) by shaking hands as a sign of mutual respect (Acharya Sukhdev Maharaj Banaras Gharana, 2022) & (Kathak unplugged, 2024)

5. Dynamic Jugalbandi with accompanists leading to high-level synchronization

Within this branch of Banaras Gharana tradition, spirited jugalbandi with accompanists, particularly with the Tabla player, is among the most engrossing features of performance. Jugalbandi is a light, sometimes improvisational, musical exchange between the percussionist and the dancer. What is



exciting about these jugalbandi is that they are unpredictable and spontaneous: the tabla player might execute a complicated tihāi or relā, and the dancer responds immediately with a similar complicated movement or rhythmic recitation (padhant) and answering footwork. This spontaneous communication generates an exciting energy on stage by engaging the audience in live innovation.

Methodology

This research aims to understand the process of utilising the concept of spontaneous improvisation by combining *qualitative, ethnographic, and historical-analytical approach* in the performances of the great artists belonging to this branch of Banaras Gharana.

The **qualitative component** involves conducting in-depth interviews with senior Gurus of this gharana. Further various video archives of artists belonging to this gharana have been surfed on various platforms. These interviews offer insights into their personal experiences, about the creative decision-making that occurs on the spot during performance.

The **ethnographic approach** guided to immerse in the cultural context of the Banaras Gharana. Data has also been collected and analysed by witnessing various concerts, classes, and workshops, and interaction with the artistic community of this gharana. Ethnography approach helped in understanding the process of transmitting this concept of spontaneous improvisation through the Guru-Shishya Parampara. This approach also facilitates an understanding of how the younger generation perceives and responds to the tradition of spontaneous improvisation within the Banaras Gharana.

The **historical-analytical approach** helped in tracing the development of spontaneous improvisation within this tradition by studying various archival materials, old performance recordings, biographical texts, and treatises. Further it also helped in identifying how improvisational practices evolved under the influence of legendary artists like Ācharya Sukhdev Maharaj, Sitara Devi, and Gopi Krishna and passed to the next generation including Jayanti Mala, Pandit Mata Prasad Mishra and Pandit Ravi Shankar Mishra.

Conclusion



This branch of the Banaras Gharana, instituted by Ācharya Sukhdev Maharaj ji, represents the best application of spontaneous improvisation to the vibrant and expressive performance of Kathak dance. Whether the on-the-spot creation and presentation of compositions, the impromptu selection of songs in response to the mood and energy of the audience, the seamless incorporation of gymnastic elements within a particular piece, or the electrifying jugalbandi with tabla accompanists, the training in this Banaras Gharana of Kathak is so much entrenched in creativity and responsiveness that such spontaneous aspects come naturally as aesthetically evolved and engrossing. The passing on of the legacy of spontaneity from gurus to their followers and down through generations in an unbroken chain, has served to evolve the distinctive identity of this Banaras Gharana which can be witnessed from the performances of artists of this gharana. This cross-generational transfer of knowledge is not a simple handover of technique, but an intensely absorptive process that fostered intuitive artistry, emotional sensitivity, and creative autonomy. It is through the carefully passed-down tradition of spontaneous improvisation, kept alive by the respected Guru-Shishya Parampara, that this Gharana continues to shine in the world of Kathak. This shows that the special skills of spontaneity and creativity in Kathak are best learned through close, personal training between a guru and disciple, something that formal institutions may find harder to teach with the same depth and feeling.

Discussion

This Banaras gharana of Kathak is an example to the strength of Guru-Shishya Parampara, a time-honored pedagogical system that not only teaches the technical skill but also the necessary thought process involved for spontaneous improvisation. Where institutionalized education systems tend to prioritize the standardized curriculum, the Guru-Shishya Parampara provides a well-rounded learning environment where the disciple undergoes an absorptive process, watching and imitating the guru's techniques, expressions, and improvisational decisions in the moment. The focus on spontaneous improvisation in the Banaras gharana is an expression of its pedagogical philosophy where the disciples are encouraged to respond to the live situation of performance. Responding effectively can only be possible through intense training that emphasizes flexibility and on-the-spot creativity, which is difficult to be taught and understood within formal institutional frameworks. Summing up, the artists developed through the Guru-Shishya Parampara who are keeping the rich tradition of spontaneous improvisation alive are the lifeblood of this gharana. This pedagogical system not only preserves the purity of Gharana's tradition towards spontaneous improvisation but also allows every successive generation of artists to add his efforts towards the dynamic evolution, keeping Kathak relevant in every period.



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