



Kathak Gharanas as Pathways of Cultural Exchange through Religion and Trade in North India

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ABSTRACT

Kathak is one of the classical dance forms of India which shows how religion and trade routes helped in cultural exchange. Kathak began in Uttar Pradesh with kathakars, who were temple storytellers. They used dance, rhythm, and gesture to tell stories from Hindu religious texts such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In its early stage, Kathak was closely connected with religious practice and devotion. With the growth of trade routes, pilgrimage networks, and royal courts across North India, Kathak moved beyond temple spaces. Dancers travelled from one region to another in search of patronage, which led to the development of different Kathak gharanas. The Lucknow, Jaipur, Banaras and Raigad gharanas show how regional culture, religion, and economy shaped the dance form in different ways. The Lucknow gharana developed under Mughal patronage and reflects strong Persian and Islamic influence. Its style focuses on grace, expression, and poetic storytelling, and it absorbed elements of Urdu language and Sufi culture. The Jaipur gharana, supported by Rajput rulers and temple traditions, gave importance to powerful footwork, rhythm, and devotional themes. The Raigad gharana emerged later with institutional support and helped preserve and organise Kathak in modern times. This paper studies Kathak gharanas Primarily Lucknow Gharana as cultural spaces created through travel, trade, and religious interaction. The paper also studies



how different Gharanas have its unique features shaped through cultural Exchange. It shows how Kathak became a shared cultural tradition by combining Hindu, Islamic, and Persian influences through continuous cultural exchange.

Introduction – Kathak is among the eight classical dance forms of India (Bharatnatyam, kathak kathakali, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Manipuri, mohiniyattam, sattriya and the only classical dance form from the northern part of India. The word kathak is derived from the Sanskrit word “katha” which means story. “*katha kahe so kathak kahalave*” which means the one who narrates the story is kathakar (Kothari 1989). These Kathakars wandered around the countryside narrating the mythological stories to the people True Dance Music and poetry. In the early stage, kathak was closely linked with temple traditions and devotional practices. Over time, kathak moved into courts and different parts of India and came in contact with new audiences and new forms of patronage. This shift played a significant role in shaping the dance form.

The word Gharana is derived from the Hindi word Ghar or Sanskrit Word Griha which means house or home. The suffix Anna denotes belonging or association Thus Gharana literally means Belonging to a house Or a particular family or lineage. Over a period of time many schools of Kathak called Gharanas have emerged. There have been three prominent Gharanas namely Lucknow, Jaipur and Banaras These branches of Kathak Are named after the cities in which they took shape and flourished. The recently developed fourth Gharana is the Raigarh Gharana in Chhattisgarh. These schools Or Gharanas Have their own distinct Characteristics Imparted By different gurus. The tradition of Gharanas Were sustained by succeeding generations of the same family.

This paper focuses on the Lucknow Gharana which developed under Nawabi patronage, And argues That it represents an important stage in the cultural transformation of Kathak. The paper treats the Gharana not just as a style but as a result of historical and cultural interaction.

Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative and historical approach. It is based on secondary sources such as books, scholarly studies, and historical accounts of Kathak. The study uses a descriptive and analytical method to understand how the Lucknow gharana developed through cultural exchange. By examining existing literature on Kathak, court culture, and performance traditions, the paper analyses how religion and trade functioned as pathways of interaction in North India.



Lucknow Gharana- The Lucknow gharana attained prominence during the nineteenth century under the patronage of the Nawabs of Awadh, particularly Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. It was during this period that Kathak evolved into a refined court art, marked by delicacy, expressive storytelling, and emphasis on abhinaya. The origins of this gharana are traced to Ishwari Prasadji of Chulabula village in Uttar Pradesh. According to traditional accounts, Ishwari Prasadji systematised dance knowledge and he trained his three sons—Aduji, Khadguji, and Tularamji. Following Ishwari Prasadji’s death, Aduji alone continued the dance tradition, as his brothers withdrew from the art. Aduji trained his sons Prakashji, Dayalji, and Harilalji. Prakashji later moved to Lucknow and served as a court dancer under Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula. His sons—Durgaprasadji, Thakurprasadji, and Maanji—played an important role in further developing the gharana. Thakurprasadji, in particular, served as a dance instructor in the court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and contributed significantly to shaping Kathak into its classical form. Durgaprasadji’s sons Bindadin Maharaj and Kalkaprasad Maharaj were among the most influential contributors to Kathak repertoire. Bindadin Maharaj composed numerous thumris and dance compositions that continue to be performed today. Kalkaprasad Maharaj’s sons—Achhan Maharaj, Lachhu Maharaj, and Shambhu Maharaj—were major figures in the twentieth century and helped establish Kathak on public and institutional platforms. Achhan Maharaj’s son, Pandit Birju Maharaj, later emerged as a leading exponent of Kathak and, as Director of Kathak Kendra In Delhi, played a crucial role in training future generations of dancers (Deo, 2017).

Comparative study of differences between Gharanas

subject	Lucknow Gharana	Jaipur Gharana	Banaras Gharana
Cultural Influence	Persian influences on the style	Rajputana influence on the style	Hindu tradition is preserved
Costume	Male dancer: - <i>AngarKha, Salwar</i> Jacket and cap. Female dancer: - <i>Anarkali, Salwar,</i> jacket, cap and Dupatta.	Male Dancer: - <i>Angarkha, Feta</i> with Waist band. Female Dancer: - Saree, Lehenga choli and Dupatta.	Male Dancer: - Traditional Dhoti With bare chest and Janau. Female Dancer: - Saree, Traditional attire.



Salutation	Muslim type of salutation called " <i>salami</i> ".	Hindu type of salutation called " <i>Rangmanch Pranam</i> ".	Similar Namaskar like Jaipur Gharana.
Compositions	Small <i>Tukdas</i> based on syllables of extensive use of <i>natwari</i> syllables <i>Parans</i> of: Kidtak thun" Are more famous in this school.	Complex, difficult And variety of <i>Pakshi Primalus, Jatti parans, Pakhwaj</i> And <i>Lamchad Bandish</i> is the distinct feature of this school.	Small <i>Tukdas</i> but the emphasis given on perfection of the syllables is executed with clarity.

Source- (Dudhe, 2015)

Influence of Persian and courtly culture:- The influence of Persian and courtly culture on Lucknow gharana can be understood when we see It in relation to trade networks and religious interaction in North India From the mediaeval. North India was part of wider cultural roots that connected it to Central Asia and Persia through trade and migration These roots Did not only carry goods but also ideas artistic practises and cultural values.

With the establishment of Mughal and later Nawabi courts these influences became more visible in artistic forms like Kathak. When Kathak moved from temple spaces to courtly settings it came into contact with Indo-Persian culture which had itself developed through long histories of exchange across trade routes. In Lucknow Gharana This influence can be seen in the shift towards movement and controlled expression. The dance piece such as "Aamad" which means to enter is performed at the beginning of the performance which is a Persian word. The concept of "*Nazakat*" and "*Ada*" Reflect courtly values where we see a sensual aspect which is being introduced Different From the other gharanas of Kathak. Religion also played an important role for example Hindu devotional traditions and Islamic cultural practises Were both practised Stories from the Krishna tradition continue to be performed, They were often expressed through gestures and Mudras Influenced by the courtly culture.

Contribution of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah:- Nawab Wajid-Ali-Shah belonged to the princely state of Awadh in Uttar Pradesh, India Mohammed Wajid- Ali-Shah Bahadur was born on 13 February 1822 in



Lucknow, was the tenth and last Nawab of Awadh. He began his reign as a ruler of Awadh after ascending the throne in 1847. He continued to rule for nine years. His extreme contribution to the field of fine arts gave name and fame to him (Dudhe, 2015).

He not only provided royal patronage for music, dance, drama and poetry but was himself a gifted composer and eminent Kathak dancer. He learnt singing from great ustads like Basit Khan, Piyar Khan and Jaffer Khan. He received Kathak training from Thakur Prasadji and Bindadin Maharaj. The Lucknow gharana matured into a unique and extra-ordinary style in the time of Wajid-Ali-Shah. Lucknow became synonymous to elegant and aesthetic genre of dancing. Being a passionate art lover, Wajid -Ali Shah built the spectacular Kaisarbagh Bardari palace, which came alive in evening due to music, dance-dramas, rahas, jogiya Jashan and Kathak performances. It was during his period that many efficient musicians, poets, composers and dancers contributed to the Indian culture. Wajid Ali Shah's palace always echoed with the sounds of music and dancing. he himself organised many productions of Rahas which were based on Indian themes of Raasleela in Persian backgrounds. On each birthday, the nawab would dress up as a yogi in the saffron robes, ash of pearls smeared on his face and body, necklace of pearl around his neck and rosary in his hand and walk pompously into the court with two of his pareas dressed up as jogans. Gradually he transformed this into a spectacular event known as *jogni Jashan*, in which anyone could participate, dressed as yogis irrespective of their caste and creed (Dudhe, 2015).

We also see a combination that reflects how religion and cultural exchange work together rather than in separate compartments for example a performance would depict Krishna's story but there would be a use of music and gestures shaped by Indo Persian Culture. Kapila Vatsyayan points out that courts like that of Awadh created spaces where "art forms could absorb multiple influences through sustained interaction" (Vatsyayan,2001,34). Wajid Ali Shah's patronage was therefore not just about supporting art, but it also enabled cultural blending through cultural exchange. The formation of Raigarh Gharana is also an example how the processes of cultural exchange continued beyond the earlier centres of Kathak such as Lucknow, Jaipur and Banaras. Raigarh Gharana which developed in the early 20th century under the patronage of maharaja chakradhar Singh. Artists trained in both Lucknow Gharana and Jaipur Gharana were invited to the Raigarh court, where they contributed to the creation of a new Gharana(Kothari 1989). It incorporates Expressive and graceful elements of Lucknow Gharana and strong footwork and rhythmic complexity of the Jaipur Gharana.

The Guru Shishya Parampara also plays an important role in continuing the process of cultural exchange within the Lucknow Gharana. In Guru Shishya Parampara Knowledge's past directly from the teacher to



the student Through long term practice. For example, when a student learns abhinaya in Lucknow Gharana, They are not just learning How to express emotion but also how to interpret the themes that come from Religions like Hindu devotional traditions and courtly culture. Which makes the body itself a site of cultural exchange.

Conclusion :- The paper explored how kathak and primarily Lucknow Gharana developed through cultural interactions in North India. Rather than emerging as isolated or fixed tradition kathak evolved through the Gharana lineage, court patronage, migration of Artists. Trade routes and travel created opportunities for artists to engage with different cultures. The elements of Hindu storytelling continued but they were reshaped through elements of court culture, including Persian influence and the use of Urdu poetry. The systems of guru shishya Parampara helped in carry these influences forward. Proper technique was passed from one generation to another. The Lucknow Gharana, in particular, shows how religion, trade and patronage helped to shape kathak in different ways to evolve and Translate

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