

SOAS Musicology Series

ROUTLEDGE

India's *Kathak* Dance in Historical Perspective

Margaret E. Walker



An **Ashgate** Book

INDIA'S *KATHAK* DANCE IN
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

This page has been left blank intentionally

India's *Kathak* Dance in Historical Perspective

MARGARET E. WALKER

Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2014 by Ashgate Publishing

Published 2016 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Copyright © Margaret E. Walker 2014

Margaret E. Walker has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the printed edition as follows:

Walker, Margaret E.

India's kathak dance in historical perspective / by Margaret E. Walker.

pages cm. – (Series: soas musicology series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4094-4950-8 (hardcover : alk. paper) – ISBN 978-1-4094-4951-5 (ebook) – ISBN 978-1-4724-0393-3 (epub)

1. Kathak (Dance) – History. I. Title.

GV1796.K38W35 2014

793.3'1954 –dc23

2014005012

ISBN 9781409449508 (hbk)

ISBN 9781315588322 (ebk)

Contents

<i>List of Figures and Maps</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>A Note on Citations, Diacriticals and Italics</i>	<i>xiii</i>
1 <i>Kathak</i> Dance Today	1
2 Colonialism and Nationalism	9
3 The Kathaks	17
4 In Search of an Ancient Kathak	35
5 Voices from the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries	51
6 Hereditary Performing Communities in North India	75
7 More Hereditary Performers: The Women	89
8 Nationalism and Revival: The Dance of the Kathaks	99
9 Classicization and Curriculum: <i>Kathak</i> Dance	117
10 Conclusion: A History of <i>Kathak</i>	131
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>137</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>153</i>

This page has been left blank intentionally

List of Figures and Maps

Figures

- 1.1 Jaipur *kathak* exponent Durga Lal with accompanying ensemble.
© Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, India 3
- 3.1 Birju Maharaj, leader of the Lucknow *gharānā* of *kathak* dance.
© Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, India 18
- 3.2 Family tree showing relationships between Birju Maharaj and
Kathavacak performers (constructed from oral testimony) 28
- 3.3 Performers at Raghav Pandit village, 2002 with Tripurari Maharaj
front row right and Ram Sevak front row left. Photographed by
Ilyas Husain Khan 29
- 3.4 Ashok Tripathi playing harmonium at Raghav Pandit village, 2002.
Photographed by Ilyas Husain Khan 29
- 5.1 A nobleman and his guests watching a nautch, ca. 1830, India,
Delhi. Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, University of East
Anglia, UK. Photographer: James Austin 53
- 5.2 ‘A Nautch’ from *Charles d’Oyly’s Scrapbook*, 1828–1831.
© The British Library Board. Shelfmark P2481 54
- 5.3 ‘Nautch or Dancing Girls’ from *The Delhie Book*, 1844.
© The British Library Board. Shelfmark Add.Or 5475 55
- 5.4 ‘Three Dancing Girls of Hindostan’ by Mrs Belnos, 1832.
© The British Library Board. Shelfmark LD.31.b.1758 55
- 5.5 ‘Nautch at Cawnpoor’ from *Captain Smith’s Journal*, 1830.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London 56
- 5.6 Raja Ajit Singh of Bundi, ca. 1780. © Victoria and Albert Museum,
London 58
- 5.7 A group of dancing-girls and musicians performing beneath a
canopy, ca. 1830. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London 59
- 5.8 *Janaśin ki gat* from *Sarmāya-yi Īsrat*, 1875: 165. © The British
Library Board. Shelfmark MS 14119.f.27 68
- 5.9 *Ghūnghaṭ ki gat* from *Sarmāya-yi Īsrat*, 1875: 171. © The British
Library Board. Shelfmark MS 14119.f.27 69
- 8.1 Lucknow *gharānā* family tree adapted from *Classical and Folk
Dances of India, Part III*: 18 101
- 8.2 Ruth St. Denis in *Radha*, 1906. Jerome Robbins Dance Division,
The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor,
Lenox and Tilden Foundations 112

- 9.1 Reba Vidyarthi and her students in 1993. © Sangeet Natak Akademi,
New Delhi 124

Maps

- 1.1 Map of South Asia showing important locations mentioned in the text 8
3.1 Map of Uttar Pradesh showing Sultanpur District 23

Preface

I saw my first performance of *kathak* dance in the spring of 1995. University of Toronto Professor James Kippen, who eventually became my doctoral supervisor, had invited Toronto *kathak* dancer Joanna Das to give a lecture-demonstration in his North Indian Music class. I was fascinated. The combination of grace and energy in *kathak*, its lightning-quick spins and particularly the dancer's embodiment of the complex rhythms played on the accompanying *tablā* drums attracted me so much that I enrolled in a dance class a year later and firmly chose *kathak* as my field of research as I began my master's degree in 1997. Ten years of dance training in Canada and India combined with ongoing ethnographic, bibliographic and archival research has led me through a kaleidoscope of intersecting people and places, and their stories and histories. Although its centres of advanced training are in India, *kathak* is today a thriving, globalized, contemporary dance that can be studied all over the Indian diaspora and experienced even more widely through touring professional productions. The multiple manifestations of *kathak* dance in traditional, innovative and cross-cultural performances are characteristic of the dance's syncretic past and hybrid character. It is this very syncretism and hybridity that give *kathak* its vibrancy, creativity and ability to sustain itself in today's transnational world.

Kathak is today identified as a 'classical' dance. Classical Indian dance, as connoisseurs will explain, comprises at least six styles linked with various regions and traditions, but all commanding respected positions on today's concert stage. *Kathak* is the style associated with North India and is today an international artistic genre. Made up of a multiplicity of repertoire items, it is not uncommonly presented in fusion numbers with other dances and lends itself easily to experimental choreographies exploring current themes accompanied by contemporary music. Mathematical calculations combine with lightning-fast footwork and spins to explore tricky patterns with off-beats, cross-rhythms and surprise endings. Equally characteristic, however, are graceful gestures, expressive use of the eyes and mimetic sequences. Like other Indian classical dance forms, *kathak* also lays claim to ancient roots and a genesis as a temple dance or religious storytelling method, and many dancers both in India and the diaspora will explain their art form in its purest state as a devotional activity, a type of *sādhnā* or spiritual practice.

These sorts of dichotomies (mathematics or meditation – ancient or innovative) are a central part of *kathak*'s character and manifest themselves in multiple ways. Clearly, this is one of the reasons the dance lends itself so well to fusions and experiments, but this also seems to have created or fuelled a type of identity crisis among its exponents. 'What is *kathak*?' is not an uncommon

topic for symposium and festival seminars, and participants argue energetically about what the quintessential attributes of their dance might be. Although *kathak* dance is an established dance genre, with fans, students and experts around the globe, it simultaneously remains a source of some mystery to many of its most central practitioners.

The question so hotly discussed by seminar participants – ‘What is *kathak*?’ – might be more usefully rephrased as ‘What was *kathak*?’ On the surface, there seems to be little confusion as the story that places *kathak*'s origins in the activities of Vedic storytellers has become so widely disseminated that it is cited without any need for references or evidence. I assert, however, that it has been in the quest for ancient origins that much of the uncertainty has arisen. Furthermore, this immensely embedded narrative functions to undermine critical thinking about *kathak*'s power structures, gender issues, transnational presence, and a host of other topics. This book thus seeks to enable discussion through a careful investigation of the various claims of origins, documentary sources and historical descriptions. In the process, I hope to open up topics that have seemed off-limits and to encourage further research in the multitude of subject areas connected to this performing art. There are many crucial issues that need to be addressed, and I believe that only after a thorough examination, even dismantling, of *kathak*'s ‘temple narrative’, will it be possible to move towards an accurate picture of the history of North Indian dance, a better understanding of its role in the present, and an acceptance of what its future may hold.

Margaret E. Walker
Kingston

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the European Research Council, the Pandit Jasraj Endowment Fund, the University of Toronto and Queen's University for generous support of my doctoral, post-doctoral and more current research contributing to this book. I also thank the British Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Sangeet Natak Akademi, and New York Public Library for access to images, and am particularly appreciative of the help I received from their imaging and permissions departments. I am immensely grateful to the Kathak Kendras in New Delhi and Lucknow, the Sangeet Natak Akademi in New Delhi and the Archive for Research in Ethnomusicology in Gurgaon for aiding me in my research and even more so to the many dancers and musicians in India and beyond who have allowed me to visit their classes and talk to them and their students. This list is long and certainly prestigious: Rohini Bhati, Manjushri Chatterjee, Lalita Devi, Sitara Devi, Chitresh Das, Rajendra Gangani, Rita Ganguli, Geetanjali Lal, Birju Maharaj, Jai Kishan Maharaj, Tripurari Maharaj, Krishan Mohan Misra, Ram Mohan Misra, Viswanath Misra, Urmila Nagar, Munna Shukla, Bandana Sen, Saswati Sen, Uma Sharma, Veena Singh, Rina Singha and Ashok Tripathi all found time to meet with me. Maya Rao, Kumudini Lakhia and the late Reba Vidyarthi were particularly kind and generous and I have warm memories of my visits to their homes. A particular thank you needs to go to my own *kathak* dance teachers, Joanna da Souza, Deepti Gupta, Ashok Chakravorty and Saveeta Sharma, each of whom gave me important skills that contributed to my development as dancer and scholar. I am also grateful for my contact and conversations with scholars around the world, and thank Matthew Allan, Carol Babiracki, Joep Bor, Mandakranta Bose, Pallabi Chakravorty, Joan Erdman, Bharat Gupt, Philip Lutgendorf, Lowell Lybarger, Peter Manuel, Allyn Miner, Lalita du Perron, Regula Qureshi, Purnima Shah, Davesh Soneji and Richard Widdess for their input and encouragement. Finally, special recognition needs to go to James Kippen, who has remained an inspiration long after ceasing to be my supervisor, Probir Kumar Mitra for his indefatigable help during my trips to Delhi, Katherine Schofield for her unwavering faith in my work, and my husband, Stephen Robinson, whose love and friendship sustain me.

This page has been left blank intentionally

A Note on Citations, Diacriticals and Italics

I am grateful to Katherine Schofield and David Lunn for their assistance with diacriticals for Hindi, Sanskrit, Urdu and Persian words, and to Daves Soneji for Telugu. I nevertheless take full responsibility for any errors. I have chosen not to use diacriticals for the names of castes or communities but rather to capitalize them, in particular because the use of the term 'kathak' for both a dance genre and for a community of hereditary performers can cause confusion. I will therefore be using *kathak* (in italics) to refer to the dance and Kathak (capitalized and without italics) to refer to the community. I have dealt with the multiple variations in the spellings, particularly in the historical documents, by adopting a single, consistent version for my own use, but conforming to the spellings and use of italics or diacriticals by other writers when directly citing their work.

This page has been left blank intentionally

Chapter 1

Kathak Dance Today

Today, experiencing India's *kathak* dance as a spectator is as close as the click of a mouse. Multiple video examples posted on the internet, from children's classes to excerpts of professional performances, provide an easily accessible introduction. One professional example is an excerpt of a *tarānā* duet performed by renowned *kathak gurū* and dancer Rajendra Gangani and Sharmila Sharma, a former student of his now dancing professionally, and even a brief glance at this performance shows many characteristic features of *kathak*. The video begins as Gangani and Sharma, accompanied by the distinctive sounds of the *tablā* and *sāraṅgī*, execute a succession of simultaneous *palṭās* or single turns in alternate directions. Reaching the centre of the stage, they enter into a short choreographic 'conversation', exchanging a few brief sequences that combine flowing arms with rhythmic footwork augmented by the sounds of their *ghuṅgrū* or ankle bells. Their movements are energetic, yet contained – crisp, yet graceful. The final exchange shifts seamlessly into a series of electrifying spins that finish suddenly in matching motionless stances. A singer's voice joins the musical accompaniment as a pantomimed story begins; Gangani moves to the side of the stage, and Sharma sinks to the floor, gracefully gesturing as if she were adorning herself with jewellery ('Tarana – A Technical Piece of Kathak', *YouTube*, accessed 6 July 2012).

The Dance Itself

A tarānā, like the one performed by Gangani and Sharma in 2007, is a precomposed and choreographed showpiece that combines typical movements and postures with short rhythmic dances from the solo *kathak* repertoire in an exciting and virtuosic display of skill. Although many *kathak* performances today present such new creations and combinations, these productions are almost always based on the solo dance repertoire, the 'traditional' material that makes up most of a *kathak* dancer's training. I do not intend to describe contemporary *kathak* dance here in great detail – not only would such an attempt necessarily fall far short of experience but this book is about history after all. Nevertheless, an outline of the solo performance structure and repertoire may be useful to some readers in contextualizing the investigation of historical performance practice that forms the large part of this study. Live performance, however, obviously surpasses any written description and I encourage readers who have not seen a *kathak* performance to seek out local or visiting dancers or browse their libraries and the internet for the many examples of video documentation.

What is often called 'the traditional *kathak* solo' is a stream of dance items that includes fixed compositions, improvisation, dialogue with the accompanying musicians and expressive pantomime. Even in large halls and formal settings, many dancers interact with the audience, announcing or explaining items, reciting compositions and even providing short anecdotes. The *kathak* solo generally begins in a slow tempo (*vilambit lay*) and gradually increases in speed and energy. Eventually the tempo doubles (medium speed or *madhya lay*) and finally quadruples (fast speed or *drut lay*). A similar progression of tempo occurs in Hindustani instrumental and vocal performances, and solo drumming concerts also share related repertoire types in their combination of genres that use improvisation and ones that are precomposed. In its expressive repertoire, on the other hand, *kathak* has more in common with North Indian vocal music, and especially the themes and aesthetics found in what are called 'light classical' genres such as *thumrī* and *ghazal*. Most performances include at least one piece of *abhinaya*, expressive gestures and pantomime that illustrate the lyrics of a song or outline the plot of a well-known story.

Music and movement thus achieve a thrilling synthesis in *kathak* especially when accompanied by accomplished musicians trained in Hindustani classical music. The links between music and dance are significant, as *kathak* dance shares many musical features with its accompanying music and Hindustani traditions at large and its typical ensemble in particular reflects shared social and historical roots between musicians and dancers. Chief among *kathak*'s accompanying instruments is the *tablā*, the pair of tuned hand-drums now ubiquitous in North India, which not only plays the same rhythms as the dancer's feet, but also uses its wide range of sounds to reflect the qualities and moods of the dancer's movements. The other crucial instrumental part is the *lahrā* or *naghma*, a repeated melody that outlines the *tāl* or rhythmic cycle, thus keeping it clear for both drummer and dancer. *Lahrā* is most often played on the bowed *sāraṅgī* or the harmonium. Often both *sāraṅgī* and harmonium are present, however, and with the addition of other drums such as the *pakhāvaj* and further melodic instruments, the number of accompanying musicians in an important performance may swell up to 10 or 12. Although necessity sometimes forces *kathak* dancers to use recorded music, especially in the diaspora where experienced musicians may be too costly or simply not available, the structural and historical links between music and dance in *kathak* make skilled, live accompaniment an ideal part of performance practice.

The first item in a contemporary solo *kathak* performance is sometimes a *vandanā*, a choreographed evocation of a Sanskrit prayer in which the dancer strikes iconic postures and performs gestures that evoke the Hindu deity addressed in the poem. The performance may not begin with this initial expression of reverence, however, but instead start with short patterns of footwork. This brief introduction then blends smoothly into the improvised stream of graceful postures and rhythmic swaying called *thāṭh*, which is interspersed with compositions in *vilambit lay*. The first is usually an *āmad* or entry piece but could also be the now rare *salāmi*, which features the Muslim *salām* or salutation. The rest of the performance follows,



Figure 1.1 Jaipur *kathak* exponent Durga Lal with accompanying ensemble.
© Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, India

alternating between danced compositions and footwork and shifting into *madhya lay* then finally into *drut lay* with its spectacular series of *tukrās* and *parans*. *Gat nikās*, cameo characterizations that include striking a graceful posture and then moving in a gliding walk called a *cāl*, and *kavitā*, a rhythmic poem illustrated through dance movements, are in *drut lay* and may come near the end of this section, which ends with a virtuosic and often lengthy display of footwork and spins called *cakkars*. *Gat bhāv*, a pantomimed telling of a story from a legend or epic, is also usually accompanied in *drut lay*, but often presented separately, after the flashy footwork sequence. Similarly, any renditions of dance-songs such as *thumrī* or *ghazal* most often occur after the rhythmic section is completed.

This particular performance sequence originated in the 1950s, but many dancers are unaware of this and simply accept it as an unquestioned part of ‘traditional’ performance practice. There is a physical logic to beginning slowly, but there is also a musical logic and cultural connection as vocal and instrumental performances follow a similar progression from slow and meditative to fast and exciting. Nevertheless, individual dancers can and do modify the sequence and content in their performances. Particular repertoire items within a given *lay* can be done in any order, expanded or omitted as the dancer wishes. Dancers will also step back occasionally to offer their *tablā* accompanist a chance for a solo, marking the rhythmic cycle with their hands while catching their breath.