

EVERY tuesday

One Week in One Day

A Weekly dedicated to Art, Culture & Entertainment

3 Gharana Sammelan 4 Ashok Bhowmick 8 Jaipur Literature Festival

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Dance like a man

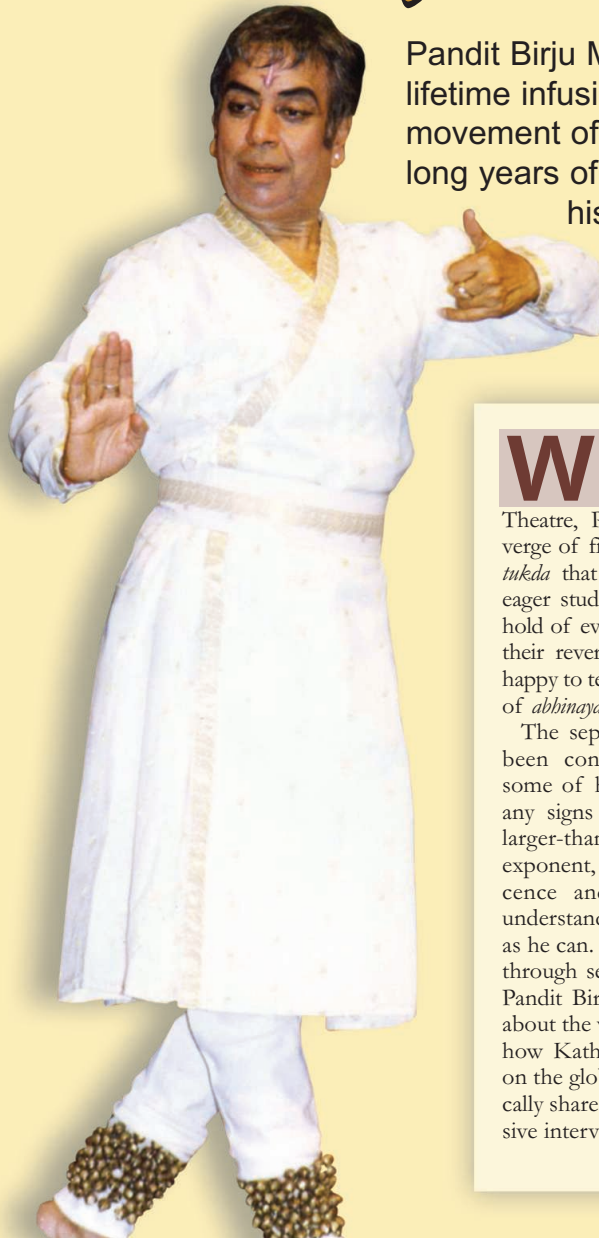
Aditya Vyas

The origins of Kathak are obscure but the originality of Pandit Birju Maharaj is beyond doubt. Kathak as it is known today is a synthesis caused by Persian and Indian traditions. The word originates from the word "katha" in Sanskrit, meaning story. Even though the stream of North Indian dancing to a major extent was influenced by the opulence of the Mughal kings and nawabs, the personality of Krishna is never out of sight even in a modern Kathak concert.

The greatest living exponent of Kathak is Pandit Birju Maharaj. To see him perform is an experience in itself. The actual embodiment of art can be seen through his feet, hands and eyes. One does not perceive any difference between the art and artiste at all. It seems as though art is flowing through his veins, so much immersed is he in the tempo (laya) that it is apparent that he has understood what is beautiful movement, and probably everything that is beautiful in Indian art. Not only that, he is a very good thumri singer and has a treasure trove of authentic Benarasi thumris and also a mellifluous voice to present them.

The new generation looks up to him as a beacon of the age-old tradition and learns from him in both the Gurukul tradition and also from his live concerts, and numerous workshops he conducts in the country and abroad. He has done for Kathak what Bismillah Khan has done for the shehnai, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi has done for vocal music, Pandit Ravi Shankar has done for the sitar and what Ustad Allarakha has done for tabla. He has placed Kathak on the global map. He has also ensured that the tradition lives on by teaching many worthy disciples. He is not only an artiste but also an institution in himself.

Dance of devotion



Pandit Birju Maharaj has spent a lifetime infusing beauty in every movement of his dance through long years of devotion. He shares his heart-felt views on the dance form with Archana Sinha

Well protected from noise and distraction outside the NCPA Experimental Theatre, Pt. Birju Maharaj is on the verge of finishing his discussion on the *tukda* that he wanted to teach to his eager students who are ready to catch hold of every single bit of wisdom that their revered guru imparts. He too is happy to tell them about the importance of *abhinaya* in the Kathak dance style.

The septuagenarian Guru, who has been conducting a workshop with some of his disciples, does not show any signs of fatigue and despite his larger-than-life stature as a Kathak exponent, he has this child-like innocence and curiosity to know and understand more, and to give as much as he can. Having seen India changing through several decades of his career, Pandit Birju Maharaj has a lot to say about the way things have changed and how Kathak has attained its position on the global platform. He enthusiastically shares his views here in this exclusive interview.

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In your long career as an exponent of Kathak dance, you have witnessed India's changing cultural ethos, its interaction with the global audience and finally the fact that it has carved a niche for itself on the global platform. How have your experiences been? How does the audience react to the Indian dance presentations? How do you break the barriers of language and culture?

I started very early in life with my father and *mama* and *chacha*. Those were very significant years that gave me a solid grounding. *Unhone mujhe, movements, aur abhinaya par gaur karne ko kaha*. That was important. Then I went to Sangeet Bharati where they taught Kathak on a set pattern, as solo dance performance... *tukdon par movements*.

When I started teaching in Bharatiya Kala Kendra Delhi, and Kathak Kendra I came across the works of Kumar Sambhav, Malati Madhav, Mirza Ghalib and then I started expanding my work. *Mujhe bamesha lagta tha ki Kathak to bhagwan Krishna ki gatha hai... vaban katha boni chahiye*. There should be group dances ... *roothna-manana, vatsalya, krodh ye sab hum dikha sakte hain*. It is re-living the times of Krishna and indeed bringing him to life - that is what Kathak does and there are many ways through which an artiste expresses... *Krishna ko hamne dekha nahi hai par bachhon se seekhte hain hum unka natkhatpan*. You need to feel his presence in everything, every emotion. *Wohi hai saccha nritya. Mujhe har jagah Krishna hi nazar aate hain. Krishna hai to ras hai, ras hai toh nritya sundar hai*.

Then we started presenting dance dramas in full costume. It is from there that I started bringing the changes and making it easy for the audience and they started appreciating and demanding more shows. *Kathak ki charcha sundar dhang se hone lagi*.

Before that my father Shri Achhan Maharaj and uncles were performing in the *Raj gharnas*. It was all during the British raj, when the performances were restricted to small audiences, among the knowledgeable crowd. *Asal charcha to Swaraj ke baad hi shuru hui*.

Later when I started travelling to Mumbai, Kolkata, Benaras and other places, students started coming to me from these places. *Tab aur bhi badlav aaye . Ab to San Francisco aur New York, China aur Mauritius me bhi shagird hain jo ki Kathak ki garima ko badba rabe hain*, I am happy.. *pitaji aur chacha, mama ki di hui cheez itni aage badh chuki hai*.

But in today's world how relevant are these stories?

These stories are universal, stories of love between Radha and Krishna, *unka abbisaar, abhimaan, ye sab aaj bhi utne hi mayne rakhte hain*. What happened in Mumbai was exactly how Kans behaved and the other evil demons behaved in the earlier era... people relate to these stories.

What about the foreigners relating to our stories, our culture, our language? You have experimented a lot with the dance form, tell us about that.

Oh, we translate the story and sometimes even the script. They love to know about our culture, our mythology, our Puranas. Moreover the non-verbal language, *isbaron ki bhasha to har man samajhta hai, aur yeh katbak ki mool bhasha hai, jo ki hum abhinaya se samajhta dete hain. Bhave, laya, gati and music with lyrics in sab ko sanjo kar ek naye tareeke se pesh karte hain...* You know it is like taking the colours from nature, which are always present and mixing them in a way that the outcome is magical, beautiful, heartening and sublime, not something ghastly. It needs skill, experience and, of course, observation. It is something I learned from my gurus and added my own vision. It is where I started my experiments.

During the Moghul period, Kathak moved away from its original form, of telling a story or katha through beautiful dance movements. How did you bring it back?

I was always conscious of infusing beauty in my dance composition. I studied the movements of the animals, of people in different moods and invented new *bastak (mudras)*. *Keval laya nahi deki, usme chipi sundarta ko sanjone ki koshish ki. Sadhna ki hai uski*.

I started understanding *laya*, how it changes when a person comes to you in speed. *Vaban uski gati drut ho jati hai, uske bhav bhi jyada ekatrit hote hain. Ab jab koi vyakti paan kha kar aaram se aa raha hai to hum kabte hain vilambit gati se aa raha hai*. In this way every living being has its *laya* and *gati*. I have presented many dances on these things also, like the story of the peacock, the story of a lion and the deer... and then some complex composition like *Kalia daman, Raghuvir katha* and more where there is a lot of scope to play with sound effect, changes of *laya* through changes of rhythm or *taal* to depict various moods and stages of life. Every movement has to be beautiful, perfect. *Yeh sirf sadhana se hi sambhav hai*.

How did you manage to adapt the English story of Romeo and Juliet to the pure form of Kathak?

You won't believe, many of the movements and steps in the western dances are very similar to Kathak. This dance form is universal, very easy and almost natural like we walk and act in real life, so it is easy to adapt it to foreign stories. *Aur, ghaghre ki jagah skirt ne le li. Nazukta se chalna, haav bhav, ye sab bahut aasan hogaya, hamare students mein bahut acchi samajh hai. Aur phir music ka effect...* Louiz Banks did a great job of mixing the two sets of music. The set and the costume all made a great impact; nobody really felt that they were watching something unfamiliar, foreign.

Panditji, tell us about your trust with Indian Cinema.

Voh to maine jyada nabin ki. My values and sensibilities do not permit me to see those kind of dances which are more like acrobatics, jumping and screaming, in very little



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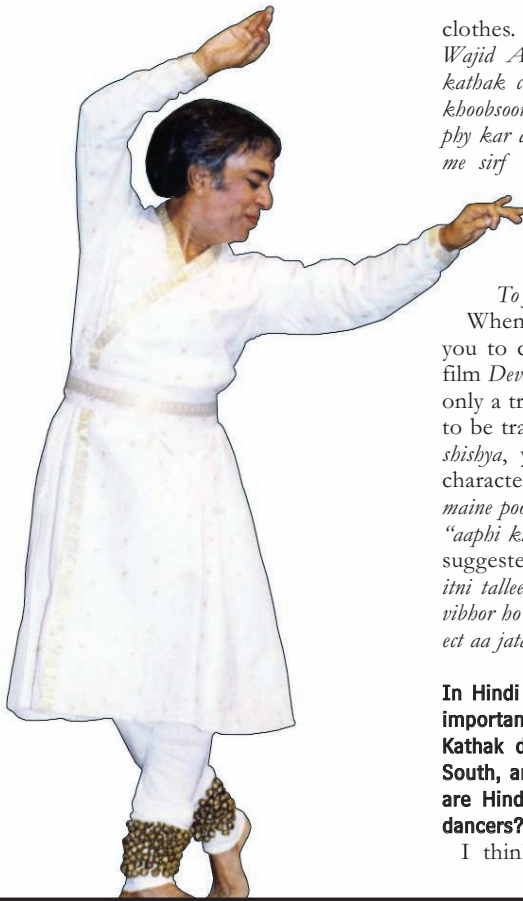
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clothes. *Lekin jab Satyajit Ray ne kaha ki Wajid Ali Sabah ke darbaar me ekdam pure kathak chhaiye to mujhe accha laga. Hamne ek kboobsoorat thumri par vo kathak ki choreography kar di. Pbir Yash ji ne Dil to Paagal Hai me sirf bol par movements banane ko kaha, Madhuri ke liye to Madhuri ka nirtya ke prati lagav aur smarpan dekh kar maine use vo tukda sikhaye. Unhone baquada seekha bhi.*

To yahi thodi babut kaam ki hai.

When Sanjay Leela Bhasali said I need you to compose a dance for Madhuri for film *Devdas*, then I told him that I could do only a traditional one, the costume too has to be traditional. He then said, "I am your *shishya*, you do whatever you please, the character has to play *Chandramukhi*". *Pbir maine poocha, bol kya honge bhai, to kabne lage, "aapki ki banai hui koi thumri lenge".* Then I suggested '*kaun gali gayo shaam*'. *Madhuri ne itni talleenta se uspar naacha hai ki mera man vibhor ho gaya. Aise hi jab kabhi koi accha project aa jata hai to lelete hain.*

In Hindi films, Kathak has always played an important role, yet most heroines are not Kathak dancers, but those who come from South, are good Bharatnatyam dancers. Why are Hindi film actresses not trained Kathak dancers?

I think this has a lot to do with the

culture down south, where every girl and every boy learns something traditional, either classical dance or music. Up north, being adept in classical music or dance is not an essential part of upbringing. So most of the heroines who come from south are trained dancers and they train in the dance forms, which are popular there. So you will find them trained in Bharatnatyam or Kuchipudi.

You conduct many workshops. How much do the students learn in one or two classes?

You can't learn Kathak in two days. *Yeh to sadbna hai, jitna seekho utna hi nikhar ayege. Workshop me hum bareekiyon ko batate hain, kai shagird hain jo hamse seekhna chahate hain, lekin Dilli nabin aa sakte, to unhe jo sikhate hain, vo hume amantrit karte hain. Isme thode samay ke liye hi shai, barikekiyon ko seekhne ka mauka milta hai, taleem ko pucca karne ka. Acche logon ke pravachan sunna bhi apne aapko shudhh karna hai. Aur nazuk adayen, chhaal, barikiyan bade mayne rakhti hain, jaise ghungroo bolen, paun nahi.*

It is necessary to beautify your movement. After every successful performance I kiss my own feet in gratitude *jaise ki khud Bhagwan hi unme samaye hain. Unhone hi mujhme itni shakti di, bunar diya ki main romance create kar sakoon. Ek sama bandh sakoon.*

A unique musical tribute to Bharat Ratna awardee and living legend Pt Bhimsen Joshi, as he is a firm believer in the *Gharana* concept, is being organised on January 28, 29 and 30, at Bandra Fort, from 6:30 a.m. on all three days. Entry is free.

North-Indian classical music evolved and was enriched by many creative souls with distinct styles, yet adhering to the authenticity and the



who still adhere to tradition. The opening artiste, Shrinivasa Joshi, is the son and disciple of Pt Bhimsen Joshi, followed by Raghunandan Panshikar of Jaipur *Gharana*, disciple of Ganasaraswati Kishori Amonkar.

The second day features Rattan Mohan Sharma of Mewati *Gharana*, whose guru is Pandit Jasraj and Ustad Raja Miyan of Agra *Gharana*, disciple of Late Ustad

A tribute to a living legend

The *Gharana Sammelan* will display the various *Gharanas* on a single stage

basics of each '*Raag*'. These artists found a great following and the concept of *Gharanas* was born.

This is now fading away due to the new generation of musicians embracing distinct elements of different *Gharanas* in their performances and defying the rules of adhering to one *Gharana* concept. This is due to various factors, mainly the wide exposure and technological revolution. This festival is to showcase the young and veteran talent of different *Gharanas*

Khadim Hussain Khan.

On the final day Shripad Paradkar from the Gwalior *Gharana*, disciple of Pt C.R.Vyas and the concluding artiste of the festival, Pt Jagdish Prasad, disciple of Late Ustad Bade Gulam Ali Khan and the seniormost vocalist of Patiala *Gharana* will perform. He is a favourite of Panditji.

Pancham Nishad salutes Pt Bhimsen Joshi on being conferred the highest civilian award 'Bharat Ratna' with this three-day festival of voice.



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