

A North Indian Classical Dance Form: Lucknow Kathak

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The word 'Kathak' now refers to a school of dancing and 'Kathak dancer' to a practitioner of that school. The old word *kathak* (story-telling, composition) is a Sanskrit word, as is *kathaka*, which means 'narrator' or 'one who recites'. Both words refer to a tradition of dramatic recitation, utilizing gestures and musical accompaniment, of religious teachings still practiced in the temples of India.¹ The main schools of Kathak originated in Lucknow, Benares, Jaipur and (later on), Lahore. These schools have a general form in common, but they differ in emphasis of some facet of the dance form. Lucknow Kathak is noted for its development of the pantomimic part of the dance and for its balance between storytelling and more abstract aspects of the dance having no stories attached to them.

It would be difficult to trace the history of Lucknow Kathak with any accuracy beyond the past one hundred fifty years. It is known that in the early nineteenth century, two brothers, Thakur and Durga Prasad, migrated to Lucknow from Rajasthan or Jodhpur (from Khokar 1959 and Birju Maharaj²). The then ruler of Lucknow, Wajid Ali Shah, was a great patron of the arts who, recognizing Durga Prasad's mastery as a dancer and musician, invited him to be his court musician and dance teacher.

According to Birju Marharaj, Durga Prasad taught the dance to his own sons, Kalkadin and Bindadin. The brothers were devoted, together deciding that only one of them would marry so that the other, free from the economic responsibilities of marriage, could spend his life in the practice and teaching of Kathak. Kalkadin married, and his three sons became the disciples of Bindadin.

It is said that Bindadin practiced Kathak as a religious devotion and had visions of Krishna while he danced. He is spoken of with reverence by Kathak dancers, and his songs about Krishna are favorite subjects of pantomime in Lucknow Kathak repertory today.

Kalkadin's sons; Aachhan, Lachhu and Shambhu Nath, acquired renown as dancers in the twentieth century. The respectful title, 'Maharaj' came to be attached to their names by lovers of the art. Aachhan Maharaj taught in Lucknow, Shambhu Marharaj in Lucknow and New Delhi and Lachhu Maharaj in Bombay. Aachhan Maharaj's son, Birju Mohan (Birju Maharaj) is the principal exponent of Lucknow Kathak today. Birju taught at the Kathak Kendra in New Delhi for several years, but is now teaching in his own school.

Originally, Kathak is believed to have been a religious dance similar in character to the other classical dance styles of India which are still closely associated with religious ritual. However, because of the patronage of rulers of the Moghul courts, Kathak has undergone extensive development into a

more secular form that emphasizes lyrical pure dance designs, *virtuosi* footwork and sensuous expressions of love themes.

Although Kathak today is a theater art, it draws its themes and inspiration from the literature of Vaishnavism (that branch of Hinduism devoted to Vishnu as an all-encompassing god), including the two great epic dramas, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. It also draws from the Puranas (ancient stories of the gods) and from the devotional love-poetry of medieval India. The sacred and human loves of Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu) and his beloved disciple (the milkmaid, Radha), are inextricably woven into the fabric of the Kathak dance.

The antiquity of Kathak can be appreciated with regard to its use of hand gestures (*hastas* or *mudras*) that are described in the *Bharata Natya Shastra*, a treatise dating from the second century BCE, although in Kathak, the hand-gestures are less stylized, being somewhat more 'naturalistic' than their descriptions in the *Natya Sastra*. The dance is also influenced by the literary works of medieval scholars that finely depict different types of heroes, heroines and their relationships. This type of literature was at first secular, later on developing religious overtones when the hero-figure was identified with Krishna. The first poetic work of this kind to show Krishna as hero was the *Rasika Priya* of Keshava Das, written in 1591 (see Coomeraswamy 1914).

The Krishna of the medieval period took on a curious ambivalence of character, combining superhuman characteristics of a spiritual teacher and god with a human lover, which is reflected in the figure of Krishna in the Kathak dance. Archer (1957: 92) might well be describing the essence of Lucknow Kathak when he says, "Adoration of God acquires the grace and charm of courtly loving, passionate sensuality and all the refinement and nobility of a spiritual religion."

Another possible source of inspiration for Kathak is the ecstatic songs and dances performed by the devotees of Krishna, the *Bhaktas* (people who practice devotional love of Krishna) of North India. Their songs of the divine lovers are similar in content and feeling to the mimed episodes of Radha and Krishna depicted in Kathak dancing. Jnanadas, a Bengali poet of the fifteenth century, describes in a song a scene which is depicted with many variations in Lucknow Kathak:

What a lovely figure I saw underneath the tree—
the figure of dark Kanu (Krishna).

I tell thee, friend! I shall tell thee sooth, of the beauty I saw.
It was such that I forgot to dip the pitcher in water.

It was the bank of the dark-colored Jumna and it was
in the shade of a tree with three bends, that I saw the
figure, dark-blue as the rain cloud.

While returning with the pitcher, full of water, I could not
but cast longing glances upon him.

I emptied the pitcher, and returned to dip again but was afraid

of disgrace. I am at a loss, friend! I do not know what to do, nor what to desire.

Jnandas says, "It is better, I do opine, to go and worship the lotus feet" (Das 1954: 19).

The Aesthetic Theory of Lucknow Kathak

As in other forms of classical Indian dance, the Lucknow Kathak dance form can be divided into two parts: 'abstract' or 'pure' dance movements called *nritta* (dancing that is devoid of flavor) and *nriya*—dancing that possesses flavor, mood and suggestion (see Coomeraswamy and Gopalakrishnayya 1936: 32). Although there are items in a Kathak dance suite that belong distinctly to one type of movement or the other (as between *tatkar* (*nritta*) and *gats* (*nriya*), there is also an area where the two subtly blend. For example, in the midst of a 'pure' rhythmic figure, Krishna might momentarily appear holding his flute to his lips, or wearing a peacock crown. Perhaps he holds Mount Govardhan on his little finger. Or, Radha appears, turning away from an unseen, but approaching, Krishna, or she looks for him from behind her veil. Radha, the milkmaid, and Krishna, the divine flute player, like dream images instantaneously take shape, then vanish. They move in and out of the abstract figures of the dance. They are reminders of the masculine and feminine elements of the dance that are seen now separately, now fused into a single abstraction of vigorous footwork and flowing bodily movements. These momentary poses of Radha and Krishna fit naturally into the flow of the dancing, thus enhancing the unity and singleness of emotional mood that suffuses all the parts of a Kathak suite.

Among traditional theories of aesthetics in India is the idea of *rasa*: that is, any single work of art must be united in all its parts by a pervading emotion called *sthayi-bhava*, which in turn gives rise to a particular mood in spectators. It is this intense aesthetic mood that is called *rasa*. In the *Natya Shastra* (Ghosh 1950: 31-33), the experience of *rasa* is likened to the tasting of well-prepared food (hence the word *rasa*, i.e. flavor), the 'food' in this case, is the sustained emotion (*sthayi-bhava*) of the actor-dancer. The purpose of watching a dance or looking at a painting is to experience a mood, "a kind of enjoyment which is self-forgetful and transporting" (see Coomerswamy 1952, and Hiriyana 1954).

Eight principal emotions (*stayi-bhava*) and the moods or flavors from them are categorized in the *Natya Shastra*:

from Love (*Rati*) arises the erotic (*Sringara*)
 from Mirth (*Hasya*) arises the Comic (*Hasya*)
 from Anger (*Krodha*), the Furious (*Raudra*)
 from Astonishment (*Vismaya*), the Marvelous (*Adbhuta*)
 from Energy (*Utsaha*), the Heroic (*Vira*)
 from Disgust (*Jugupsa*), the Odious (*Bibhatsa*)
 from Sorrow (*Soka*), the Pathetic (*Karuna*)
 from Fear (*Bhaya*), the Terrible (*Bhayanaka*).

Added to these moods by later aestheticians is a ninth *rasa*, the Serene (*Shanti*), arising from Dispassion (*Nirveda*) (see Raghavan 1937a: 16).

The *Natya Shastra* describes in great detail how only one *sthayi-bhava* (emotion) should occupy the stage at any one time, but that one is almost always colored by other lesser emotions, or transitory states (*bhava*), thus is capable of infinite variation and nuance. Kathak can be said supremely to reflect the idea of *rasa* as the goal of art.

The Kathak suite is a continuous dance by a single dancer with no stopping point from beginning to end of its performance, however, for contemporary sensibilities, the performance is usually divided halfway by an intermission. The musical accompaniment may be the melody of one or two *ragas* (musical modes), played for the entire suite, with an occasional brief excursion into playing a song that deals with the Radha-Krishna theme.

The items of dancing, though showing more or less brilliance of movement, also increase in complexity and speed as the performance progresses. The dance items show a variety of subtle emotional shadings, meant to reflect a single emotional or mental state. A complex movement—or a moment of repose—is supposed to project the same mood. Even the mimed episodes between Radha and Krishna are characterized by a naturalness of expression and understatement which, although clearly delineating moods of love, devotion, sadness, annoyance and such, remain within the whole as adornments of a general mood.

What is the general mood that will prevail in the expression of a Kathak dancer throughout a whole dance suite? Each dancer learns the traditional expression but may color it with his or her own temperament, so that there is a range of moods. For example, one dancer might be 'extrovert' and smile a lot. Another dancer may be more reserved and hardly smile at all, being more undemonstrative and formal.

There are those dancers who strive to preserve the mood of the court dance of old Lucknow, described as follows: The eyes are slightly closed, as if seeing some image in the mind. The mouth is closed and slightly curved upward at the corners. The eyes gaze steadily straight ahead at eye level, but not contacting any person in the audience. One of the great teachers, Pandit Vikram Singh, called this look of the face, "dreamy, grave."

Between dance pieces the dancer's eyes will look straight ahead, but as soon as the hands are moved the eyes follow whichever hand has the predominant movement. When the hands come back to rest at the center of the chest, the eyes return to their forward gaze. This practice follows the traditional teaching in classical Indian dance forms. That is, where the hand goes, the eye goes; where the eye goes, the mind goes; where the mind goes, there is the meaning.

The Lucknow Kathak Dance Costume

Kathak is traditionally danced by a soloist, either man or woman. They may dress in Moghul or Rajput costume. The Moghul costume consists of a coat having long, fitted sleeves that is fitted to the waist, and is extremely full and flaring from waist to knee. With this coat are worn tight-fitting trousers. In the

Rajput mode, a man may wear a *dhoti* (*lit.* cloth wrapped around the waist and legs to resemble pajamas) with no upper garment, but with elaborate necklaces, bracelets and arm bands. A woman may wear a variety of long, flaring skirts with fitted trousers and a *choli* (a short, tight-fitting blouse, and a scarf draped over the left shoulder, tied at the waist. Jeweled earrings, necklaces, bangles and rings will be added according to taste. Alternate costumes for female Kathak dancers consist of a long, flaring coat or a six-yard *sari*, draped to look like pajamas. The costumes are richly ornamented and are made of bright colored silk or cotton with gold-embroidered designs.

The dancer wears a large number of small, pitched bells (at least one hundred) around each ankle. The lower-pitched (male) bells are worn on the right, the higher-pitched (female) bells on the left ankle. The bells (with their weight), keep the center of gravity of the dancer's body low, in order to facilitate rapid turning movements. The feet operate close to the floor to aid in achieving the loud, clear slap of the forefoot, characteristic of Kathak.

Musical Accompaniment

The musical instruments accompanying Kathak are called *tabla-baya*; two drums, each played with one hand (*tabla* is played with the right and *baya* with the left hand). They are high-pitched and sharp in sound, being capable of great brilliance and shading of tone. A third drum and drummer may be added—the *paqawaj*—the old court drum that was used before the invention of the *tabla-baya*. The *paqawaj* is a barrel-shaped drum played on both ends. It emits both sharp ringing tones and booming, thunderous tones.

Melody is played on the *sarangi*, a three-stringed, bowed, instrument with many resonating strings on the back of the instrument, giving it an ethereal, delicate sound. The only other essential instrument is the *tanpura*, whose open strings are plucked continuously all evening, providing an organ-like background. Sometimes a flute or a clarinet is added to the musical ensemble and a singer will also be onstage to sing the story-telling dance-songs.

The musicians sit on rugs downstage right (seen at the audience's left). The stage is bare except for an image of a god at stage left (the audience's right). The image may be that of Shiva Nataraja (Shiva in a dance pose) or Ganesha, the Elephant God, patron of artists. There may be incense burning near the image and flowers strewn before it.

Added to this is the modern addition of a standing microphone placed near the musicians close to the audience. The dancer is expected to come to the microphone to recite the *bol* (mnemonic syllables) of each rhythmic piece before showing it in danced movements. These are spoken: "ta tai tai tat, ah tai tai tat, ta tai tai tat, ah tai tai tat, SAM."³ This is a single 16 beat (*trital*) measure, with its final beat. It is counted thus: touch the thumb tip of the right hand to the root of the index finger, then move up, touching each joint and the tip, repeating with the second, third and fourth fingers, completing the measure with the *sam* beat at the base of the index finger.⁴

Besides *trital*, other popular time-measures are *rupak* (7 beats), *jhaptal* (10 beats) and *ektaal* (12 beats). Apart from the “ta tai tai tat” syllables, other, faster syllables may be used, as for instance, in a typical *tukra*:

digida digidi tai –
 digida digidi tai –
 digida digidi digida digidi
 Tat tat tat tat
 – tat tat tai
 – tat tat tai
 – tat tat DHA!

More will be said about these rhythmic structures and their complexity later on. For now, it is well to remember that there are 108 possible time measures that can be used by Kathak dancers.

The recitation of *bol* (the syllables) is valued more and more highly, as the dancer displays finesse and extended knowledge of them. Good performances will yield sounds of approval from Indian audiences. At the end of a recitation or a danced figure that is well-executed, the audience may shout “Wawa” or “Savash”—both meaning “Bravo” in Euro-American terms. If a dance figure or recitation is extraordinarily beautiful, one might hear “Kya bat?” (What word?) meaning that there is no word. It is beyond words!

A Lucknow Kathak Dance Suite

It is important to remember that danced items are divided into two types: abstract, “pure” dance figures (*nritta*) and the story-telling dance figures (*bhavanritya*).⁵ The dancer is free to arrange these items in any order, however, the performance will usually begin with items in a slow tempo, gradually increasing in speed as the evening progresses. The following is a substantial, but by no means exhaustive, description of a typical performance:

Vandana or Slokam

A prayer in Sanskrit addressing a god or goddess, sung slowly with no time measure, sometimes followed by a rhythmic section adding the drums, danced with slow lyrical movements. A salutation to the goddess Saraswati (Saraswati Vandana) might be sung thus: “With face like the full moon, with long, flowing hair, wearing white robes, seated on a lotus flower, playing the *vina*, all worship thee, O Saraswati, for with your music and learning, you remove all sorrows from the world.”

Chanchal

The drummer plays a slow measure—usually the *trital* (16 beat) measure, and the dancer stands with hands folded, echoing the beats of the drum with his or her feet. As the measures continue, the dancer begins to add flourishes and variations of footwork (*tatkar*), embroidering on the beats of the drum. This is done in a relaxed, playful manner—a kind of ‘sauntering along’ to the beat of the drum.

That

The dancer stands erect with body slightly turned from the audience, one foot crossed behind the other, hands folded at the chest and the head turned squarely toward the audience. The eyes look straight ahead at their own level, with eyelids partly closed. The eyes seem to gaze penetratingly at the audience, but are actually gazing *through* them toward a far distant point. At the same time the dancer seems inwardly to 'dream'. The first pose of *That* (pronounced 'tut') is meant to emanate authority, strength and composure. The dancer's face is calm and at the same time, imminent change and temperament is suggested by the inscrutable expression of the eyes.

With the first sharp rapping of the *tabla baya* and the sonorous strains of the *sarangi*, the dancer stands in a pose. *That* is always done in a very slow time-measure. During the measure there are slight movements of hands, neck and eyes. Just before the end of the measure, in a flurry of arm moves, footwork and show of temperament, the dancer beats a syncopated phrase and comes to rest in a different pose—one arm extended overhead, the other stretched to the side or forward, always stopping with a glance toward the audience on the first beat of the next measure. This continues for several slow measures, while the drummer tries to match rhythms or suggest a new rhythm for the dancer to follow. The arrival in a new pose on the first beat of the next measure is always the climactic moment and it is performed with a maximum of subtlety and finesse. A beginning dancer may memorize an entire *That* piece, but an experienced, seasoned dancer often improvises the whole section.

Amaad

At a signal from the dancer, the tempo increases but it is still quite slow. The dancer bends and sways, arms describing circles and figure-eights. These simple flowing movements are performed symmetrically, to the right, then to the left. They fill up the whole measure, but again end in a pose on the *sam* beat. A typical *amaad* figure, shown here through its mnemonic syllables is: ta tai tat --/ ta tai tat --/ tai - tai - tai --/ tat tat DHA.

Between the ending pose and the next figure, the dancer uses the feet and bells in time to the music, either 'in place' or moving around the stage. These might be called 'rest-measures' that connect the various rhythmic figures all through the performance, for the dance as a whole is continuous.

Tukra

Here, the tempo increases to a medium speed: the dance figures take on an energetic aspect. The arms become whip-like, the hands seem to strike at invisible walls. There are many fast-stepping or pivoting turns at the end of a danced figure, ending in a pose on the *sam* beat. These figures always end in a rhythm repeated three times, called a *tihai*. A typical *tukra* is shown on p. 105 above.

Paran (or Torah)

In this section, the internal substance of the dance figures become more syncopated and complex and the dance syllables used here are the drum syllables of the *paqawaj*—the old court drum. Many *parans* are old, time-honored pieces reverently handed down by teacher to pupil who learns the original but then is expected to choreograph variations of each piece. The dance syllables used here are the drum syllables of the *paqawaj*, the old court drum. The dancer imitates the sound of the *bol* with his or her feet by beating with dynamics of loud and soft, slapping the whole foot or brushing a heel, or drawing the toes across the floor, making the bells 'whirr'. There is variety in the inner tempo of the footwork, sometimes beating seven beats against the eight beats of the drummer; nine against eight and so on. The dancer's torso may bend forward or back, and here, we see a characteristic movement that distinguishes Kathak from other classical Indian dance forms: a gradual 'twist' or spiraling movement of the spine. The gradual twist of the body may be likened to certain movements in nature, such as that of a vine winding itself around a tree. The *parans* are filled with an abundance of these spiraling movements, executed with lightness and speed. Sometimes, within an abstract figure, the dancer will enact a meeting of Radha and Krishna. A typical *paran* might have this form:

Dha titadhatita
 dha dha ti ta kru dha ti ta
 dumakitataka dumakitataka
 gedigananagadhet gedigananagadhet
 dhu ma ki ta
 dha -- ti ta dha -- ti ta
 kru dha ti ta kru dha ti ta
 dhet -- ta dhet -- ta dhet --
 dhet -- ta -- titakata gedigana DHA.

Kavita

An ingenious dance piece combining rhythmic footwork with a story. The drum *bol* corresponds to words and is thus danced with syncopated footwork and mimed at the same time. An example of this (with approximate English translation) is:

tata tita krita Ra -- dha
 On the river-bank speaks Radha,
dhina, dhina nata krita dhya -- na
 daily, daily, of Krishna she speaks and meditates,
krita kritata kritata dhina ja -- ta
 saying, saying, saying as days pass,
tina drigana base driga driga driga Ra -- dha
 to these two eyes come, come, come to Radha.

Paramelu

Pure dance pieces having a mixture of syllables, some from the drum, some from dance syllables, some from sounds of nature, such as bird sounds. An example might be written thus:

taguna tirakita jikita naga dher --
 kir--ra jitakita taguna jai --
 dhumuka dhumu dhumu
 dhumuka dhumu dhumu
 dhimaka dhima dhima
 dhimaka nagadhet tai --
 dhimaka nagadhet tai --
 dhimaka nagadhet tai

Bhav Nritya

A *thumri* (song) is sung describing the thoughts of Radha or Krishna and rendered in mime by the dancer; "How can I go to the Jamuna river today to fetch water? It is Holi festival⁶ and Krishna is waiting there to play some prank on me. He will try to embrace me or steal a kiss. He will be playing there with many other milkmaids."⁷

There is an initial set choreography taught for this section, but any verse may be a basis for improvising further actions of Radha, as she wakes in the morning, puts on clothing, jewelry and make-up, and walks anxiously to the river. Then we see Krishna as he throws colored powder at the milkmaids, engaging in the merrymaking of the Holi festival, or pursues Radha to embrace her, or, surrounded by the milkmaids, he plays his flute.

Ashtapadi

Ashtapadi is a verse from the Gita Govinda (Song of the Cowherd) by Jayadeva (see Keyt 1956: 274), an inspired poet who is believed to have received this poem from a vision of Krishna. It was written in Sanskrit and tells the love story of Radha and Krishna:

Wearing sandal paste, the yellow silk and lotus garlands
 on his blue-colored body,
 His long jeweled earrings swaying as he dances,
 Krishna is at play with the charming women given
 to love. . . .
 One woman looks with ardor on Krishna's lotus face.
 With playful eyes and sidelong glances
 Another pretends to whisper in his ear,
 And drawing close to him,
 She kisses him on the cheek. . . .
 May prosperity come to all from hearing this,
 Shri Jayadeva's delightful song of
 Wonderful Keshava's (Krishna's) secret play
 in the forest of Vrindavan!
 Krishna dances with the charming women given to love.

Gat and Gat-Bhav

The tempo of the dancing quickens, but the dancer moves lightly on the surface of it, unhurried and composed (*Gat* means 'walk', and is pronounced "gut"). The dancer may begin with pure-dance walks toward the audience, because it is an opportunity to display the charm and feminine wiles of the court dancer: seductive poses, subtle use of eyes and gliding neck movements and the swirl of the costume. Each walk ends with a retreating step, although eventually, the story element is added. For example, Radha is seen walking down a road, raising and lowering her veil with small movements of her fingers, her eyes looking dreamily ahead or lowered in a moment of shyness. Then she vanishes, and it is again the Kathak dancer retreating from the audience with fast, syncopated steps. Then Krishna appears holding his flute to his lips. He advances with a steady gaze, looking for Radha, or, Krishna (the archer) appears, with bow drawn taut, advancing with bold steps.

Stories of the meetings of Radha and Krishna are added: now, he catches sight of her and accosts her. She turns away, upset by his teasing, but she quickly turns back again, looking at him. Her expression changes from annoyance to questioning, then her expression becomes soft and loving. Finally, she expresses her true feelings: devotional love and adoration. Each encounter between the pair ends in some variation of the mood of love. Stepping from one role to the other with ease, the dancer's expression changes instantly from Krishna's playfulness to Radha's annoyance, disappointment, fear or sadness, then to her recognition and her love and worship of him. It is this part of Kathak that draws directly from the Bhagavata Purana:

Once, having gone to the river as usual, placing their clothes on the river-bank, [the milkmaids] passed the time playing in the water and singing of Krishna.

Krishna gathered their robes, quickly climbing a tree. He said, with much humor, "Come here, maidens, and each take her own garments as she wishes."

Seeing his prank, the milkmaids, immersed in affection for him, looked at one another smiling bashfully and did not come out of the water.

"Since you, with firm religious resolutions, have nakedly entered the water, you have shown your carelessness of the gods. In due respect, place your hands over your heads in *anjali* (salute), lower your heads and bow down, then take your clothes."

Seeing them thus bowed down, the blessed son of Devaki was pleased, and, with compassion, gave them back their garments (Bhagavata Purana 1937: 299).

In another story from this book, the mood is heroic, for Krishna raises Mount Govardhan on his little finger to save the milkmaids and cowherds from a terrible storm. The solo dancer portrays all the characters, and it is danced exactly as it is written:

Indra (the sky god) in anger, whipped up a body of death-dealing clouds called *samvartaka*.⁸ The clouds now let loose, fell upon the village of Nanda, oppressing it with their force.

Because of the pouring rain and gusty winds, the cows began to shiver. The shepherds and shepherdesses, distressed with the cold, sought Krishna for refuge.

Krishna, with one hand, plucked Mount Goverdhana and held it up with great ease, as a child might a mushroom.

Then they entered a hollow beneath the mountain with all their possessions and people. Gazed on by all, Krishna held up the mountain for seven days and nights without moving (Bhagavata Purana 1937: 303).

Tatkar

Tatkar denotes making the sound of *tat* (the sound of the slapping foot). Standing in one place with hands folded together at chest height, the dancer displays variations of footwork alone. These variations are entirely rhythmic phrases heard throughout the performance. The interplay between dancer and drummer is great, as the drummer may instantly grasp the rhythm of the feet and reproduce it on the drum. The ending figure of a *tatkar* sequence is a phrase repeated three times (*tihai*). It may show the mathematical dexterity of dancer and drummer as they create complex ending phrases.

Birju Maharaj (the present genius of Lucknow Kathak) has created a new category of *tatkar*: these are "tone-poems" he has developed with footwork alone. These may be a rainstorm, a horseman going on a hunt, or a railroad train starting, moving along and coming to a stop. The dancer and drummer may challenge each other to see who can dance or play faster. There is heightening of excitement for the audience as the speed limit is reached and sustained by both. Here, the dancer becomes as though bodiless and made of pure sound.

The Role of the Lucknow Kathak Dancer

The Kathak dancer is a creative artist who may start a performance at any point in the above-described suite and juxtapose figures of different types in any order he or she pleases, but usually ending with the *gat-bhav* and *tatkar*. The particular audience, the musicians, the mood and personality of the individual dancer gives a unique character to each performance. The teacher has handed down time-honored patterns that distinguish a *tukra* from a *paran* and Radha from Krishna. When the student has mastered these patterns and learned how to create from them, then, and only then, is he or she ready to perform.

The performance, even of one *amaad* or *tukra* demands a series of inventions from the dancer showing fresh nuances of movement and rhythm based on the original pattern. At the same time, the dancer keeps within the musical rules and ends an improvisation after symmetrically filling it in on the *sam* beat.

When in rapport with the dancer, the drummer plays the improvised rhythm pattern as if it were his own invention. This rapport assumes major importance and interest in the *tatkar* section at the end of the performance when both dancer and drummer improvise flights of rhythm together as one musician. The ideal Kathak dancer is likened to the poet: "In the limitless world of the poet's creation, the poet himself is the creator. It lives and moves and has its being as it pleases him" (Ramaswami-Sastri 1951: 109).

With so many unpredictable elements going into the creation of a performance, how can it be said to evoke a single, pervading mood (*rasa*)? In the very form of the dance and the structure of the dance suite, there are certain constant elements: between the dance figures the dance steps in time to the underlying beat of the music: the eyes gaze steadily ahead, the body is erect and poised, the face calm. All dance figures come out of and resolve into this composed form. In its small, subtle movements of the wrist and neck, pulsating to the beat of the feet, there is a feeling of "coming-to-rest" with the passage of time. In contrast, there is the temperamental, restless, syncopated beating against time of the dance figures themselves. Yet, whether engaged in dazzling movements or motionless in moments of repose, or during the stories, it is the dancer's eyes that sustain the dance.

The eyes seem to express a life independent of movement. They are often likened to a steady flame which is apparently still, ever renewing itself from within. It is this compelling gaze that makes all other changes of temperament, however striking, seem merely passing, like sparks quickly vanishing, as they come out of the flame. "Thus these transitory mental movements follow one another, threaded on the thread of the permanent mental state. They rise and set an infinity of times (Gnoli 1956: 92).

The dance movements themselves (sometimes predominantly straight lines in the arms and body) suggest the masculine, the heroic: the presence of Krishna. The bending, falling, curving, lyrical lines imply the feminine, acquiescing presence of Radha. The dance technique itself suggests constant meditation on the separation and union of masculine and feminine: the longing of Radha to join with Krishna. The eyes, although following the movements of the arms and hands, also gaze inward contemplating the union of the divine lovers. The eyes seem to remember the eternal beauty of Radha and Krishna. When the dancer focuses his or her mind on this, both dancer and audience may be transported to a plane of aesthetic beauty, where they all can taste the *rasa* of Lucknow Kathak.

Endnotes:

¹ 'Lucknow Kathak' and 'Kathak' are used interchangeably in this essay, always referring to the school of Kathak that originated in Lucknow in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

² See the website <<http://www.pathcom.com/~ericp/kathak.html>> for an account by Birju Maharaj.

³ These syllables are pronounced "tah tay tay tut, ah tay tay tut, tah tay tay tut, ah tay tay tut, soom." The final syllable for the measure is the first beat of the next measure and denoted by the syllable 'sam' (soom) or 'dha' (dah). The *tukra* syllables are pronounced thus: "digidah digidee tay --, digidah digidee tay --, digidah digidee digidah digidee tut, tut, tut, tut, digidah digidee digidah digidee tut, tut, tut, tut, -- tut tut tay, -- tut tut tay, -- tut tut dha."

⁴ Students begin learning Kathak beats and rhythms by counting the measures on their fingers as described. The *trital* measure is usually the first one taught because it is easier than the 7, 10, and 12 beat measures. The beats are always counted with the right hand, never with the left.

⁵ The abstract figures include *chanchal*, *that*, *amaad*, *tukra*, *paran* (or *torah*), *paramelu*, *gat* and *tatkar*. The story-telling figures include *kavita*, *thumri*, *slokam*, *vandana*, *ashtapadi* and *gat bhav*.

⁶ The Holi Festival is celebrated on the full Moon of March welcoming the beginning of spring and the re-enacting of the play between Radha and Krishna. During this Festival, people throw bright-colored powders at one another and (nowadays) spray each other with paint-filled water guns.

⁷ The languages used in the dance-songs are usually the older languages of Brij Bhashya, Maithili and Avadhi.

⁸ This refers to a group of devastating clouds that appear at the end of an aeon to deluge the universe.

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