

Revival and Reinvention in India's *Kathak* Dance

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Abstract: Although Euro-American musical revivals are usually connected to folk music, the postcolonial Indian revival privileged "classical" music and dance as objects of priceless national heritage. Yet, the revival in India was not a straightforward process of cultural recovery in the wake of occupation. Issues of authority, authenticity and appropriation are woven into the process of reclamation. Through a comparison of this period in Indian dance history with themes in current theories of revival, this article moves towards a model of "revival" as a global phenomenon seeking to broaden our understanding of cultural continuity and change.

There is by now no controversy surrounding the statement that India went through a cultural revival in the years leading up to and away from independence from the British Empire in 1947. Literature on Indian music and dance frequently and openly makes reference to a twentieth-century "renaissance" or "reclamation" of cultural heritage after centuries of foreign control. Furthermore, a growing body of scholarship including work on South Indian music (Subramaniam 2006; Allen 2008; Weidman 2006), North Indian music (Bakhle 2005; Kippen 2006; Qureshi 1997), and various genres of classical dance (Chakravorty 2008; Lopez y Royo 2007; Meduri 2005 and 2008; O'Shea 2006 and 2007; Soneji 2004 and 2008; and Walker 2004) has begun to offer substantial critical analysis regarding the revival's effects in creating revised histories and identities in the performing arts. Yet, in musicological scholarship, performing arts revivals have been largely researched in the context of Euro-American folk music, and theories of revival, such as those suggested by Livingston (1999), Ronström (1996), and to some extent Rosenberg (1993), concern themselves almost exclusively with folk contexts. This paper presents an examination of the Indian revival with particular focus on the classical dance genre *kathak*, and then moves to an exploration of the applicability of current theories of musical revival to circumstances in India. I am

interested in seeing whether I can bridge these bodies of knowledge, identify common ground and discrepancies, and begin to move toward a model of “revival” as a global phenomenon.

All of India’s so-called “classical” performing arts went through some sort of revival or reinvention in the twentieth century. Through two centuries of social and political flux, music and dance had already adjusted to a series of shifts in patronage as the feudal contexts of the Mughal Imperial court in North India and regional royal courts in South India were gradually undermined and annexed by emergent British colonial rule. During the nineteenth century, venues for performance became even more varied. Private house parties given by both elite Indians and “Indianized” Britons almost always included entertainment by professional musicians and dancers, and the formal state-sponsored “Darbars,” which reinforced princely and eventually British Imperial power, provided extravagant displays including music and dance performance as well as lavish parades of elephants, soldiers, and marching bands. During the same years, private establishments, presided over by the hereditary women performers we now call courtesans, presented more intimate genres including poetry recitation and songs illustrated with evocative gestures and dances. Yet, the performing arts’ association with Imperialism (both Mughal and British), the effete and decadent courts, and especially the courtesans and thus the sex trade made them problematic to the evolving Independence movement. A key feature of the nationalist sentiment that accompanied the movement was the intentional repossession of an exclusively Indian culture as a source of national pride; music, dance, architecture, and literature needed to be celebrated as the rich inheritance of a people worthy of equality, autonomy, and self-government. The revival of Indian music and dance thus involved not only a further shift in patronage as urban institutions and middle class artists replaced both courts and courtesans, but also a reclamation and attendant gentrification of performing arts that distanced them from their seemingly dissolute recent past, allowing them to become quintessential symbols of the new and ancient nation.

The story of reclamation and revival in Indian music and dance is the story of all the genres that today are identified as “classical.” Indeed, it was arguably the process of urbanization and institutionalization that created the present canon of Indian art music and dance. Hindustani Sangit, the classical music of North India, Karnataka Sangeeta, the classical music of South India, and each of the six or so classical dances, *manipuri*, *kathakali*, *bharatanatyam*, *kathak*, *kuchipudi* or *odissi*, were all to some extent reinvented in the half century straddling Independence in 1947. Any one of these would serve as a worthwhile case study for this examination of revival, and excellent work is

ongoing particularly in *bharatanatyam* (Meduri 2008; O'Shea 2007) and *odissi* (Lopez y Royo 2007). *Kathak*, the classical dance of North India and my particular field of expertise, however, not only provides a useful and illustrative example of how performing arts and particularly dance were affected by the revival, but also offers some uniquely non-Western perspectives on questions of authenticity, hybridity, and cultural change.

Placing *Kathak* Dance in the Indian Revival

Kathak today is a virtuosic stage dance performed by trained artists as a professional production for an audience. Characteristic *kathak* dance vocabulary includes

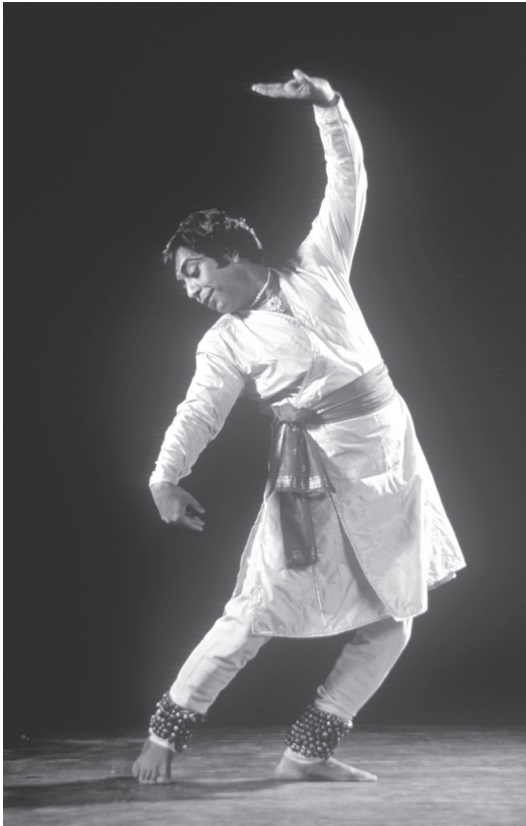


Figure 1: Pandit Birju Maharaj, hereditary Kathak dancer and current authority of *kathak* dance (specifically the style from the city of Lucknow). Source - The Times of India Group © BCCL. Used with permission.

rhythmic footwork, which is often improvised and enhanced by ankle bells called *ghunguru*, and dizzying sequences of spins called *chakkars*. This energetic side is contrasted by flowing, sensual gestures used predominantly in expressive or narrative dances and contained for the most part in the arms, hands, and upper body. *Kathak* dancers' gestures and facial expressions are subtle and contrast with the more exaggerated, theatrical movements of other Indian dances. In what is considered its most traditional form, this distinctive vocabulary (energetic and sensual) finds expression through a performance practice consisting of a solo presentation of a series of short dance pieces that unfold over a gradually increasing tempo. The

individual items or “numbers” range from the aforementioned expressive or narrative sections illustrating poetry or telling stories from Hindu mythology to complex composed rhythmic pieces closely related to North Indian drumming. *Kathak* dance repertoire thus seems to comprise a number of dichotomies – rhythmic versus narrative, energetic versus flowing, devotional versus secular, and improvised versus pre-composed – that are witness to its syncretic development.

Kathak's origins are multiple and varied. The most widely disseminated belief is that *kathak* originated in the Hindu temple, where priestly story-tellers called Kathakas performed devotional songs and dances. With the advent of Muslim rule in North India, these performers are said to have sought employment in the courts and changed the aesthetic of *kathak* dance from devotional to virtuosic in order to please their non-Hindu patrons (for further information see among many others Devi 1972, Banerji 1982, Khokar 1984, Natavar 2000, and Sinha 2000). I have investigated this claim of *kathak's* supposed temple origins at length (Walker 2004 and 2009/2010), and have found little, if any, substantial documentation to support it. Indeed, before the 1920s or 1930s, there is no mention at all in either the indigenous treatises or colonial travel writings of dance called *kathak*. There are references to performers called Kathaks¹ in the census reports from the 1800s (see below), but sources from the 1700s make no mention of them. As one looks through past centuries for the dance's elements rather than the name, however, one can find evidence of a number of semi-related performance traditions scattered across North India from Benares to Rajasthan that are indeed the historical roots of today's dance. These include the performance practice of the hereditary women performers we now call courtesans or *tavayafs*, the rhythmic dances of the hereditary male performers variously called Kathaks, Bhands, or Bhagatiya, and a range of devotional and secular rural theatrical genres including *Ras Lila*, *Ram Lila*, and *Nautanki* (Walker 2004). The shifts in patronage, location, venue, and context that fused these elements into a dance that became *kathak* are the processes of the revival itself, and are best examined in some detail.

In the last decades of the 1800s, just a short time after the formal inauguration of British Imperial rule or Raj, in 1858, new political winds were already blowing. More than a century of European control seemed to have robbed India of its fabled wealth, cultural pride, and political autonomy, yet new opportunities for education and employment in combination with indigenous intellectual traditions had empowered an increasingly influential middle class. Hand-in-hand with the burgeoning Independence movement came a gradual reclamation of a sense of Indian identity and cultural pride stemming from the Bengali literary renaissance in the 1800s and culminating in the

founding of national institutions after independence in 1947. The creation of national, “classical” music and dance genres was fundamental to this cultural repossession. Central to the revival was the need to link contemporary culture to an indigenous past, one that was, in Janet O’Shea’s words, “pure, distinctive, and unaltered by colonial hybridity” (2008:169). This involved a range of means from artistic recreations using source material from the recently rediscovered Sanskrit treatises to explanations of all current performance practice through connection with elite Hindu devotional traditions. Yet, in North India, music and dance’s association with the supposedly decadent Muslim courts and the sensuous world of the courtesans clashed with this view of the arts, not to mention with the Victorian sensibilities of both British occupiers and the British-educated middle class Indians, and resulted, by the late 1800s, in widespread disdain for the performing arts. The most visible and best known manifestation of this contempt was the “anti-Nautch” movement which sought to ban the performances of hereditary women both in the temple (where girls were still symbolically “married” to the deities) and in the courtesan’s salon. Public performance, especially dance performance by hereditary women, became symbolic of the social ills that had supposedly made occupation possible in the first place (see Forbes 1996, Rao 1996, and Sundar 1995 among others). The music of a “pure” Indian culture, although offering much needed national esteem in the wake of colonial repression, could thus only be reclaimed through the removal or marginalization of the “impure” elements in contemporary music and simultaneous connection to the ancient past.

In the case of the dance that became *kathak*, it was the hereditary male performers, the Kathaks, who played a key role in the reclamation. In the courts and *kothas* (or courtesans’ salons), the Kathaks had been the teachers and accompanists of the courtesans and should have had to struggle, by association, with the same level of repression and contempt as that afforded the women. Unlike most other professional musicians in North India, however, they were (and are) Hindus. Through the 1800s, the Kathaks had effected what is called a caste shift, where a group of lower status people gain some sort of advantage (usually financial), adopt a new name that separates them from their original group, cultivate behaviours that reinforce their ameliorated status, and create a new history supporting the new identity and denying any association with the group from which they split off (Pandian 1995). Identifying what name the “Kathaks” went by before 1800 is a matter of speculation, but the shift itself is visible through the British census reports. In the 1832 “Census of Population of the City of Benares,” 118 Kathaks described as “Music and Dancing Masters” are included in the category of Shudra, the lowest ranking or servant caste (Princep 1832:495). By 1885, however, in the “Tribes and

Castes" volume interpreting the 1881 census of the Northwest Provinces and Oudh (the area now comprising the province of Uttar Pradesh), the Kathaks are identified as Brahmins, the highest ranking, priestly caste, and described as the descendents of ancient temple performers now forced to accompany dancing girls (Nesfield 1885:44-45). Subsequent census reports (Risley 1981 [1891]; Crooke 1896) and early scholars (Coomaraswamy 1913:124) also identify Kathaks as Brahmins, although the census reports emphasize that they rank "very low" (Risley 1981 [1891]:433).

This new identity and its connection to Hindu devotion and ritual allowed the Kathaks fifty years later to ride the wave of the revival, so to speak. It was no coincidence that during the same decades as hereditary female performers were being pushed to the margins of society, the music and dance revival was gaining momentum. Indeed, it can be argued that the revival of dance in particular was made possible in large part through the disenfranchisement of the hereditary women. As the hereditary women were marginalized and eventually legislated off the stage, their former accompanists, the Kathaks, became the expert "owners" of both male and female repertoire. As Hindu men whose official identity connected them, not with the women performers middle class society disdained, but with the pure dance of the temples everyone now revered, the Kathaks could perform almost any genre with impunity. Through the early decades of the twentieth century, they gradually migrated to the urban centres where new patronage was available from the nationalist middle class in the process of creating Independent India. The separation of their dance from courts and courtesans and its connection with devotional practice not only made it an appropriate cultural treasure, but the resultant separation of dancing from sexuality allowed it gradually to become an acceptable activity for "respectable" girls and young women. This in turn made it possible for women from the middle and upper classes first to learn in the new music schools, then to perform it in public. The "dance of the Kathaks" was thus gentrified as it was revived, and as it was recreated as "*kathak*" dance, non-hereditary women became its primary supporters, artists, and choreographers.

It was these educated, middle-class women who led the way in the classicization, gentrification, and partial Sanskritization of *kathak*. From the advent of the first *kathak* schools founded in the 1930s and 1940s, young women from respectable families were trained by hereditary Kathak men. The material they learned was a combination of rhythmic footwork, devotional storytelling, and the dance songs of the courtesans cleansed of their more unseemly movements and gestures. As these young women became substantial dancers, choreographers and teachers in their own right, they continued the process of

change, creating their own choreographies, developing curricula and exams, and searching for the supposedly ancient origins of the dance they were learning and teaching (Joshi 1989; Khokar 2004; Walker 2010). Although *kathak* was not choreographically reconstructed from ancient treatises, as *bharatanatyam* and *odissi* were, the revival had seen its reinvention as an ancient temple dance originating in the story-telling traditions of people called Kathakas and this history needed to be validated.

Thus, by the middle of the twentieth century the dance of the Kathaks, itself a hybrid combination of a number of earlier performance genres, had acquired a name, a history, an institutionalised curriculum complete with exams and diplomas, and a respectable identity as a classical dance originating in Hindu devotional practice. The male hereditary dancers, through the association of their adopted caste name with the dance and with the ancient story-tellers, have remained the dance's authorities through the process of urbanization and institutionalization, and the dance's adoption by the middle class. The resultant performance practice, although the product of a series of fusions, could then be disseminated as an intact and purely Indian tradition rooted deeply in the past.

Kathak, India, and Theories of Revival

Connection to an Indian past that is not only pre-Colonial, but also pre-Mughal was crucial in the process of nation building in which the Indian music and dance revival took place. Nationalism, of course, was one of the characteristic features of the Euro-American folk revivals of the early twentieth century, and it is here we turn to the question of theories of revival and their applicability to the Indian context. As Neil Rosenberg points out, "the idea of national cultural rebirth...was at the very roots of folklore studies in their late-eighteenth-century nascence" (1993:17) when European nationalists began to see a people's "ancient heritage [as a foundation] upon which a modern nation could grow (1993:11; see also Ronström 1996:7). Tamara Livingstone also draws attention to the importance in the early revivals of finding "national essence" or "purity" and "the true music of a nation" (1999:75). The centrality to the Indian nationalist movement of finding and reviving India's "true" music and dance has, of course, a rather direct connection to the European intellectual context as many of the early "discoveries" of Sanskrit texts on ancient music were made by British Orientalists like Sir William Jones (1882 [1784]) and the emergent middle class who drove the Independence movements and were the key players in the cultural revival.

Nevertheless, the role of the Indian middle class in the revival is certainly worthy of examination. British-educated or not, it was the Indian bourgeois who founded the urban music and dance institutions, codified the aurally disseminated repertoire through recording, collecting and transcribing it, and then organized this material into the progressive curricula taught in these institutions. Having reclaimed the performing arts as a form of national wealth and the property of all Indians, the middle class then became its main consumers, sponsoring and attending public concerts and festivals and sending its children to lessons and classes. This needs to be seen as more than simply a shift in patronage as the older feudal performance opportunities disappeared. The middle class patrons intentionally interrupted the centuries-old relationship between aristocracy and artist, delegitimizing both context and continuity in order to “reclaim” musical product and people as national commodities. The cultural reformers can thus be seen as the “mediators, agents, and entrepreneurs” identified by Ronström, and the list he provides of “researchers and intellectuals; museums and universities; schools, seminars and workshops; festivals, competitions and the media ... [that] produce traditions by identifying them” applies tidily to India (Ronström 1996:10). Livingstone also identifies music revivals as “middle class phenomena” involving, among other things, the commodification of culture and nation (1999:66; see also Rosenberg 1993:5).

Part of the commodification in revivals is the movement of musical material “from the margins to the centre” that Rosenberg observed (1993:5). This can also be seen in the Indian context, and a parallel can be seen between the activities of the urban and suburban middle class collectors of Euro-American folk material and the appropriation of music and dance traditions in India from hereditary practitioners by revivalists like collector and educator Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande (see Bakhle 2005) and *bharatanatyam* dancer Rukmini Devi (see Allen 1997). Among Bhatkhande and Devi’s goals, however, was the eventual redundancy of the hereditary practitioners as the graduates of the newly established musical institutes became expert performers and teachers in turn. If music and dance were to be the cultural inheritance of all Indians, then they, like treatises, sculptures, and architectural monuments, should not be considered the property of insular hereditary clans. Yet, as I clarified above, *kathak* dance was never recreated from the postures found in treatises or sculptures and one of *kathak*’s unique features is the fact that the male hereditary dancers, the Kathaks, through the association of their adopted caste name with the dance and with the ancient story-tellers, have remained the dance’s authorities, a situation quite different from other dances such as *Bharatanatyam*. When cultural reformer Nirmala Joshi started setting up music and dance institutions in Delhi beginning in the mid-1930s, she needed the

hereditary practitioners themselves to teach. So the Kathaks, as the authentic source of the dance, were “collected,” like songs or dances or ancient treatises, and moved from the historical periphery of regional cultural centres like Lucknow and Jaipur to the national centre, the capital city of Delhi.

This idea of embodied authority rather than textual authority, although a recognized part of North Indian musical culture (Neuman 1977), offers an interesting spin on the questions of tradition and historical continuity in revived practices, particularly in non-Western contexts. What is or is not authentically *kathak* rests with the family leaders, and often seems to change in order to make sure that power remains in the family. Theoretically, this throws the question of “authentic” performance practice into a type of turmoil. If the authority of the ancient tradition is found in a contemporary person rather than a document or a treatise, then whatever that person says is authentic or ancient and must therefore be accepted without question or challenge. The revived tradition thus becomes an affirmation of the right to create, rather than a reclamation of older choreography or a post-Colonial recovery of stolen culture. This is further complicated in the case of *kathak*, because it is the revised history that supports the embodied authority, yet it was the assumed authenticity of the Kathaks that gave rise to the revised history in the first place. Suddenly, some of the seemingly straightforward observations of marginal traditions and middle class canonization are less applicable.

Conclusions

There are a host of other intriguing and enlightening comparisons to be made, but I’m going to move to one last characteristic emphasized by Livingston and attempt to manipulate it towards postcolonial and even post-revival contexts. Livingston’s model defines revival’s goals as twofold. The first is “to serve as cultural opposition and an alternative to mainstream culture” and the second, “to improve existing culture through the values based on historical value and authenticity expressed by the revivalists” (1999:68). The latter goal seems most easily connected with the Indian cultural revival especially if one reads “existing culture” as colonial occupation. Independence and self-government are certainly an improvement over foreign rule, and the revival sought to create a new national culture based on perceived historical values and an ancient “Indian” authenticity.

The first characteristic, “cultural opposition,” however, deserves a bit more examination. The obvious starting place is a similar interpretation to the one suggested by the second goal: the Indian revival served as “cultural

opposition” to the Raj, offering a tangible way to reclaim national self-esteem while fighting for political and geographical autonomy. Yet, the mainstream versus authentic equals colonial versus indigenous breaks down fairly quickly as, in the Indian context, the revival soon became the mainstream and indeed had that goal from the beginning. Classical *kathak*, particularly as represented and taught through the leaders of the hereditary families and their immediate disciples, has now itself become hegemonic and forms a seemingly unassailable core of authenticity and authority. Yet, it is too simplistic to see the alterations of centre as an uncomplicated series of status exchanges because the revival, originally the marginalized tradition during colonialism, itself became the mainstream. Subsequently, the middle class women dancers central to the process of revival became in some ways marginalized in turn as the hereditary men were established as authorities. Now, in what might be called the post-revival context, those who dare to claim that *kathak* (the dance) should move beyond what the authorities teach as authentic are the new margin. But such oppositions and changes in authority and control seem characteristic of North Indian dance long before its appearance as *kathak* in the 1930s. Transformations in identity, status, and ownership, not to mention the divisions and fusions of male and female performance practice, rhythmic and narrative repertoire, and secular and sacred intent, point towards an artistic context where change and shifts in power have long seemed the most reliable constants.

One answer surely lies in moving beyond the concept of opposition, and this is where postcolonial theory perhaps has something to offer. Although, as Jefferess (2008) points out, the framework of resistance (occupied versus occupier) is central to postcolonial criticism, he and other scholars such as Roy (2007) and Gandhi (1998) also emphasize the unavoidable hybridity arising from enforced and ongoing cultural interaction. Embracing hybridity as a central consequence of cultural exchange can mean moving beyond diversity or multiculturalism and their attendant qualities of exoticism and otherness. It also means moving beyond conceptions of cultural purity or authenticity and their attendant assertions of superiority. I am not sure if embracing an “ethics of hybridity” will lead to the type of global human understanding that scholars like Bhabha (1994) and Gandhi (1998) tentatively suggest it could, but the idea itself certainly offers a way out of the “totalizing binaries” that focus only on opposition and difference. A postcolonial theory of revival would have to conceptualize the revival and the post-revival contexts as inextricably woven into ongoing socio-political process, hybrid rather than oppositional, and simultaneously transforming and transformed by the mainstream like the “mutual transformation of colonizer and colonized” (Gandhi 1998:40). This is undoubtedly the process of the Indian cultural revival, and perhaps should

be applied, not only to other revival contexts, but also to the ongoing global process of cultural change and exchange.

The multiple oppositions in today's *kathak* dance need to be seen, therefore, not only as historical witnesses to the dance's syncretism, or as manifestations of colonial and postcolonial hybridity, but potentially characteristic of the process of revivals themselves. The role of the Indian dance revival in institutionalizing, gentrifying, and legitimizing *kathak* as a national treasure and classical performing art was significant; indeed, one could argue that there would not have been a *kathak* dance without it. Yet the revival also created a mononarrative for North Indian dance, one that privileged a male, Hindu, and devotional tradition and largely succeeded in masking the dance's ongoing syncretism. Such belief in the purity and authenticity of traditions certainly seems part of most revivalist ideologies, but should one see the adoption of the revivalist discourse as the dominant, hegemonic narrative as characteristic primarily of postcolonial settings? Or is the reinsertion of revivalist values into the mainstream a subtle part of the ongoing culture in post-revival contexts around the world? The Indian reclamation of culture and national pride, however, began over one-hundred years ago and the revivalist vision was embraced with Independence over sixty years ago. In spite of a dominant narrative that in some ways attempts to freeze tradition, the Indian performing arts, *kathak* included, are nevertheless globalized art forms with international followings. India's music and dance cultures have arguably never been stronger, and the revival's role in building a nation has given way to a vigorously creative period that will surely shape the future. 🌸

Notes

1. The use of the same word, "kathak," for both a dance and a group of hereditary performers can be confusing. For clarity, I am using "Kathak" (capitalized) to refer to the people and *kathak* (in italics) to refer to the dance. Kathaka is the Sanskrit term for story-teller or narrator, and may or may not refer directly to the hereditary performers who today use the name Kathak.

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