

## ***Ancient Tradition as Ongoing Creation: The Kathavacaks of Uttar Pradesh***

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In the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh live rural folk performers who identify themselves as *Kathavacaks*. These artists present a form of story-telling they call *kathavacan*, which combines song, speech, and gestures punctuated by rhythmic interludes. Part of a larger clan of hereditary musicians and dancers, they connect themselves most closely to a family of dancers who perform the classical stage dance called *kathak*. These urban relatives and some scholars now identify *kathavacan* as the ancient and devotional root of the classical dance. After providing a description of *kathavacan* performance, this article examines the various claims of ancient origins and temple performance in the context of insider agency and activism. In this case, there is considerable evidence of an ongoing endeavour by these hereditary musicians to disseminate a chosen identity as ancient tradition largely through documentation by cultural outsiders.

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We are *kathavacaks*. We do *katha*. *Kathavacan* – this is my pure thing...We take a *dupatta* [scarf], and if there is the *bhav* [expressive mood] of a man, we show that with the *dupatta*. With that *dupatta*, in ladies' *bhav*, we use it for a veil. We do all that and explain it to everyone. This is our legacy, which we have been doing not only today, but for many years.

Ashok paused, and his younger brother, Tripurari interjected:

In this Sultanpur *gharana* of ours, we meet good artists. There are many good artists that come here; just as you people are here today. This is our good luck that Margaretji has also come (Interview with *kathavacaks* Ashok Tripathi and Tripurari Maharaj, Village of Raghav Pandit, India, 26 March 2003).<sup>1</sup>

In calling themselves *kathavacaks*, Ashok and Tripurari were simply announcing that they were story-tellers, part of a tradition as widespread in rural India as in many other parts of the world. The word *katha* in Hindi means story or tale, and it is visible in the names of a multitude of performing arts forms throughout the subcontinent including *kathakali* dance drama from Kerala in the south and *kathputli* puppetry from Rajasthan in the west. *Kathavacan*, the type of story-telling the Maharaj brothers present and the ways in which they promote it, however, are parts of a larger story. Two particularly interesting issues arose from my encounters with these *kathavacaks*, which will be explored in this paper. The first concerns the relation of this rural tradition to the highly polished urban dance style called *kathak*; current common knowledge connects the two and suggests that *kathavacan* is an ancestor of the stage dance. The second is more broad ranging and concerns the relationship between scholar and performer; in this particular situation, the artists saw my interest in them as a key opportunity to reinforce and publicize a chosen identity.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on two fieldwork trips to India in 2003 and 2005, the first of which was generously funded through a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada Doctoral Fellowship.

I had not come to India with any intention of researching rural story-telling traditions. My doctorate focused on the history of *kathak*,<sup>2</sup> the classical dance of North India mentioned above, and I had concentrated on dancers and dance schools in urban centres. In the course of my research, however, I had from time to time come across references to a rural version of *kathak*. Several of my informants in Delhi suggested that if I travelled into the states of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, I would find folk musicians performing a type of devotional story-telling that they called *kathavacan* and identified as one of the roots of their dance.

### **Kathak and Kathavacan**

*Kathak* dance today shows little connection to North Indian rural performing arts. It is a sophisticated urban stage dance that is performed in large concert halls and enhanced by the work of professional costumers and light and sound technicians. It combines rhythmic repertoire closely related to North Indian drumming traditions with sections of expressive pantomime, and can take the form of either a virtuosic solo or a choreographed group performance. Dancers undergo years of specialized training in private or government-operated dance schools, which combine class work teaching repertoire and building stamina with private sessions where small details concerning body alignment, hand position, and eye contact are refined. *Kathak* is categorized as one of the six Classical Dances of India, and achieved a certain international recognition in the second half of the twentieth century.

The name “*kathak*,” however, suggests a connection to the word *katha* (story or tale) and thus to the tradition of story-telling referred to above. Popular history claims that *kathak* thus must have originated as a devotional story-telling form in Hindu temples. In the Medieval Period, India experienced a series of invasions from West Asia, which began in the tenth century and culminated in the formation of the Mughal Empire in the 1500s. In response to this change in governance, the story-tellers supposedly sought new patronage in the courts and changed their presentation into a dance. Finally, with Indian Independence in 1947 and subsequent government patronage of the arts, this dance, now called *kathak*, moved one last time onto the urban stage.

My research has largely refuted this progression, finding *kathak* to be an early-twentieth-century fusion of a number of North Indian dance forms including courtesan song and dance, embodied drum repertoire, and rural theatrical traditions (see Walker 2004). My dissertation, although informed by participant observation, largely focused on analysing historical information from iconography, census reports, Indian treatises, and Colonial travelogues. For me, therefore, the invitation to visit the village of Raghav Pandit was a fortuitous event – an opportunity to add a chapter of intriguing, although brief, fieldwork to an already detailed argument. For the *kathavacaks*, however, my visits and interest in them provided much more tangible opportunities: documentation by a foreign scholar suggested status, importance, and a type of external validation of their tradition that they might use to further advantage.

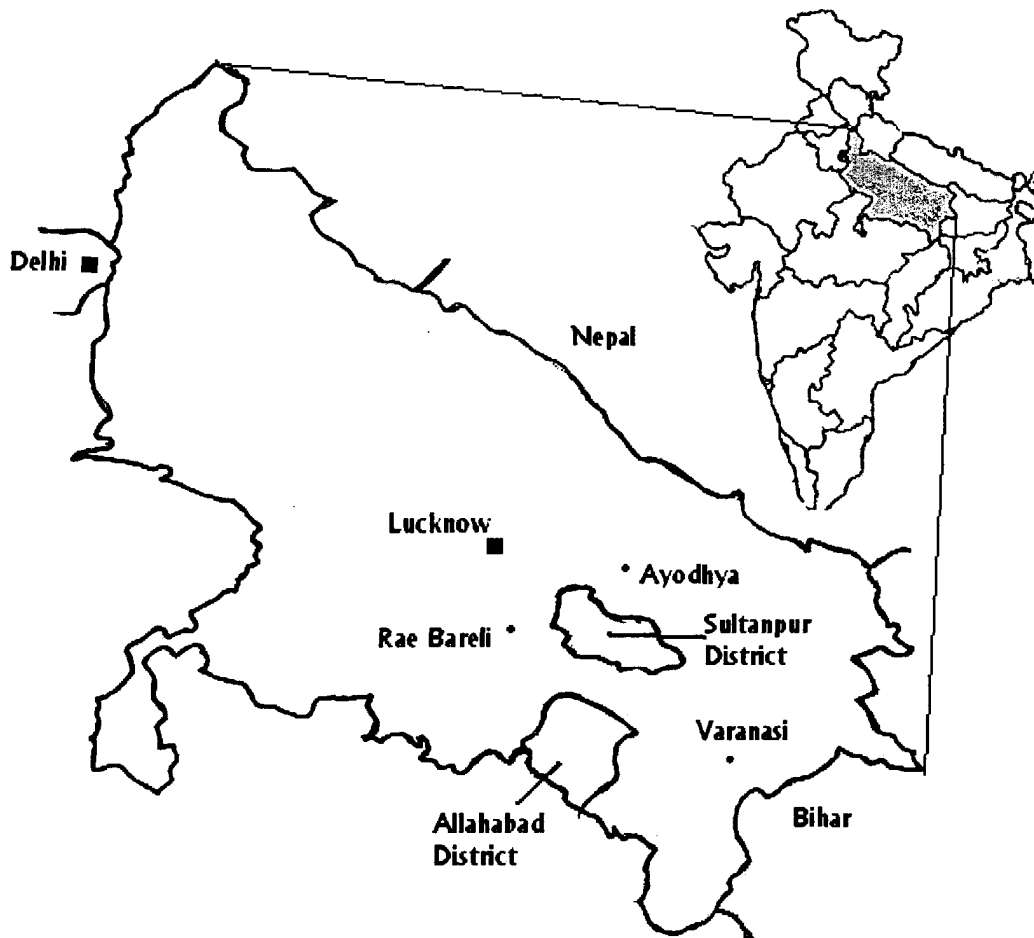
Ashok Tripathi and Tripurari Maharaj identify themselves as *kathavacaks* or story-tellers, but they are in fact members of a larger endogamous clan, a brotherhood or *biradari*, of performing artists who generally call themselves Kathaks. Members of this hereditary group most commonly use the surname Misra, although it is occasionally upgraded to the honourific “Maharaj”; the group is therefore also often referred to as the

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<sup>2</sup> As the term “*kathak*” can refer equally to a dance or to a community of hereditary performing artists, I am following a convention I used in my dissertation: *Kathak* refers to the community, and *kathak* refers to the dance itself.

Kathak-Misras (see, for example, Kalidas 1998). Spread across the north-central Indian state of Uttar Pradesh and into the neighbouring state of Bihar, this vast set of related performers includes the Varanasi *gharana* or stylistic school of tabla players, the Lucknow *gharana* of *kathak* dancers, yet another *gharana* of vocalists, plus hundreds of less visible musicians and dancers performing in both urban and rural settings.

**Figure 1: Map of the state of Uttar Pradesh, North India**  
 Adapted from [www.travel-uttarpradesh.com/mapup2.jpg](http://www.travel-uttarpradesh.com/mapup2.jpg) and  
[www.eholidaysindia.com/maps.htm](http://www.eholidaysindia.com/maps.htm)



Historically, they have been centred around Varanasi (or Benares) at least since the early 1830s (Princep 1832: 495), and there are still many performing artists who reside there. There are also, however, numerous Kathak-Misras active in the performing arts in the large urban centres like Delhi, Lucknow, and Kolkata.

Ashok and Tripurari's family lives in the Sultanpur District, which is southeast of Lucknow about halfway to Varanasi. Sultanpur is also roughly equidistant between the

temple town of Ayodhya to the north and the Allahabad District to the south (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> Members of the *biradari* in this area take a certain pride in being the holders of a specific tradition of rural folk music and dance they call *kathavacan*. Many of the male members of the extended family perform, but Ashok and Tripurari seem to have been particularly successful in obtaining government funding for their activities. They have established two folk music schools through their own initiative and government grants: one in their home village of Raghav Pandit and a second in the neighbouring village of Ram Nagar. They are also decisively seeking to augment the artistic options of the next generation and have sent their sons and nephews to study stage *kathak* at the New Delhi Kathak Kendra.

Ashok and Tripurari were eager to receive me at the school in Raghav Pandit, a large one-story building with several classrooms and a central performance hall (see Figure 2). After some food and a formal interview about their art form, I was invited to set up my video camera in the classroom where the performances would take place. The first artist was Tripurari. He came to the centre of the room, raised his hands in *pranam* and began to sing “*Krishna bhagwan ki jai*” (Hail to Lord Krishna). With closed eyes and a full, projected voice, he chanted his prayer, which was then echoed by his brother Ashok on the harmonium. After that, he directly addressed the audience, made up of relatives, school employees, wives, and a few students, announcing his performance of “*ek kavita*” (a poem) on the subject of Radha and Krishna. He thereafter alternated singing in prose rhythm accompanied only by the harmonium, with heightened speech directed at the captive watchers. He illustrated his song and story-telling with mimetic gestures, often using his orange gauze *dupatta* (scarf) as a prop. The *kavita* itself consisted of four phrases which were related melodically to the initial prayer, but used a smaller range, and both prayer and *kavita* used frequent repetition of a single note in the manner of a chant or a recitation. Tripurari’s free combination of speech, song, and gestures was punctuated by instrumental interludes where the tabla would join in with a version of the folk *tal keherva* (an eight-beat pattern). During this Ashok chose one of the song phrases to repeat on the harmonium as a cyclic melody or *lahra*, and Tripurari walked around the performance space, executing a type of dance step by tapping the toes of each foot as he moved. He frequently interacted with the small audience, who responded enthusiastically to his stories and gestures with shouts of “*Jai!*” (Field video, 26 March 2003).

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<sup>3</sup> The family of Birju Maharaj, the current leader of the pre-eminent urban dance family, is said to have migrated to Lucknow from Handiya, a town in the Allahabad District.

**Figure 2: In front of the Kalika-Bindadin School in the village of Raghav Pandit, 2003. Front row from left: Ilyas Husain Khan, Tripurari Maharaj, Ram Sevak, Ashok Tripathi Maharaj. Photo taken by author.**



This combination of song, speech, movements, and gestures was the *kathavacan* I had heard about. After Tripurari's performance, two younger family members, Satish Svar and Kuldeep Misra, each presented his individual routine. Two years later, when I had another chance to view further performances arranged by Ashok and Tripurari, I saw three more mature *kathavacaks* also perform *kathavacan*: Nanda Lal Misra, Harinand Misra, and Daya Shankar Pande. Tripurari's thirteen-year-old son, Abhay, also performed, accompanied on *tabla* by his cousin Krishan Dutt. To augment to my own observations of live performances, I consulted video documentation of a performance by a much younger Ashok and Tripurari and their elderly relative, Ram Sevak, at the New Delhi Kathak Kendra in 1986, and a more recent recording of another *kathavacak*, Shitala Prasad, in a temple in Ayodhya in 2005 (Eisler 1986 and Natavar 2005).<sup>4</sup> The following descriptions and generalizations about this art form are therefore based on about thirteen performances by nine different artists documented between 1986 and 2005.

This type of *kathavacan* is specialized – not everyone in the villages or even in the immediate family performs – and is gender specific, since the women do not perform. The presentation is flexible both in content and form. The artists punctuate segments of song, gesture, and heightened speech with musical interludes during which they perform some sort of rhythmic movement. None of the performances I saw had any fixed order or predictable length for their various items. The subject matter, type of song, type of rhythm, and the length of the performance, were all tailored to the context and audience. During various performances I heard a variety of rhythmic cycles – *dadra*, *keherva*, and

<sup>4</sup> Both Eisler's and Natavar's documentations are available in the American Institute for Indian Studies archive in Gurgaon just south of Delhi.

*tal tin* – and a number of different vocal forms – *bhajan*, *kavita*, and even a *ghazal*. The topic of song and speech, however, was predominantly devotional, Hindu, and often connected to an upcoming Hindu holiday. Along with telling or singing the actual tale, the *kathavacaks* usually presented verbal elaborations on both story and topic, and often included interjections which commented on current events or local politics, even on occasion offering moral advice. The performers I saw dressed simply in white *pajama* and pressed *kurta* (long shirt), but all wore a long *dupatta*, which they hung around their necks, knotted around their waists with a type of slip knot, or used as a prop in their story-telling, bundling it up to show a baby, draping it coyly to become a woman's veil, or twisting it around the head as a turban (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Kulpreet Misra performing *kathavacan* in the Kalika-Bindadin School classroom, 2003. Photo taken by Ilyas Husain Khan**



The flexibility of the form was not only tailored to the audience and context – each *kathavacak* seemed to have the freedom to execute a performance that showed his strengths and experience. Ashok Tripathi Maharaj, Tripurari Maharaj, Shitala Prasad, and Nanda Lal Misra spoke, recited and preached as a significant part of their performances. The two elder performers, Shitala Prasad and Nanda Lal Misra, were particularly verbal, addressing the audience directly, referring to current issues, offering advice, and even in one instance criticizing the other participants. The younger performers, Kuldeep, Satish, and Abhay, on the other hand, spoke solely to introduce their material, and then proceeded to present only songs, gestures, and rhythmic movement.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly it was the rhythmic or dance element in the performances that varied the most. Some of the

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<sup>5</sup> This is undoubtedly a reflection of the performers' youth rather than an indication of ongoing change in performance style. It would be unacceptable for a teenager to advise and lecture an audience of his elders in the manner of the older *kathavacaks*.

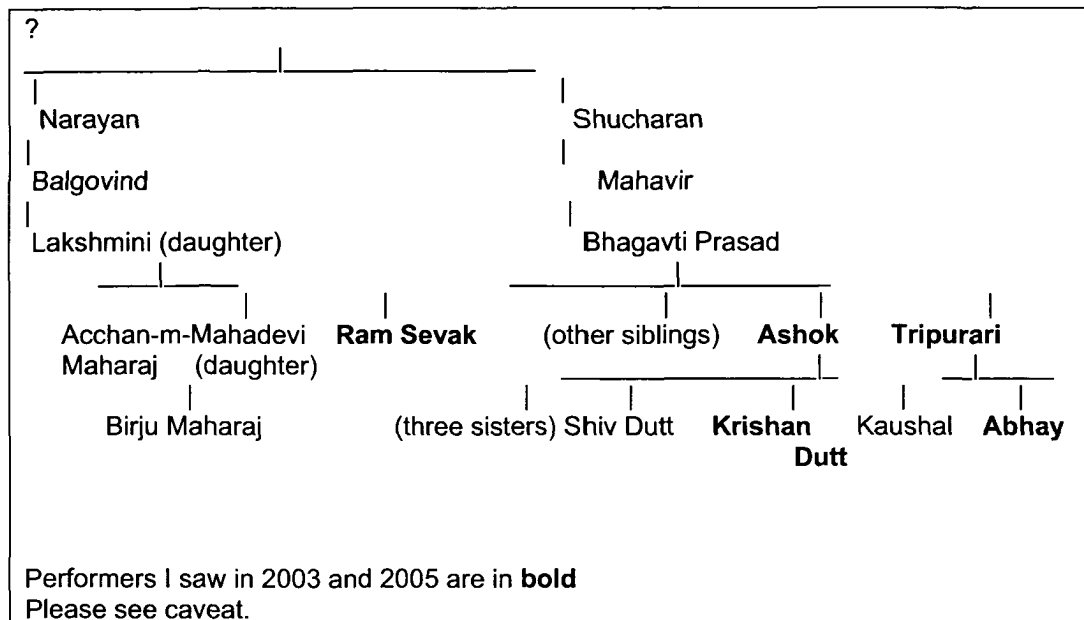
younger performers had actually studied stage *kathak* in New Delhi and not only performed *kathak* dance items during the instrumental interludes but integrated the more “classical” gestures they had learned in the city into their renditions of *kavita* and *bhajan*. Some of the older *kathavacaks*, like Shitala Prasad and Ram Sevak, knew simple dance *tukras* that seemed less refined versions of some of today’s stage repertoire. Among the other performers, Kuldeep Misra and Nanda Lal performed no actual dances but presented only short bursts of footwork, and Tripurari simply performed his toe-tapping walk during the instrumental interludes.

### ***Kathavacan* in Perspective**

The question of whether this type of story-telling is indeed the long-lost devotional root of urban *kathak* dance has only recently begun to concern scholars. Although one can find many accounts of story-tellers and reciters, there is a somewhat curious lack of documentation in the literature of folk musicians called or calling themselves *kathavacaks*. In the literature specifically on *kathak* dance, one finds only a few sentences in Susheela Misra’s book on music in Lucknow (1991: 2) and another sentence or two and one photograph in Sunil Kothari’s lavishly illustrated book on *kathak* dance (1989: 2 and 9). Books on North Indian folk music offer even less; Banerji (1959), Khokar (1987) and Sinha (1990) included any number of well-known groups of hereditary performers and their specialties, but *kathavacaks* are not among them. Only Norvin Hein wrote of story-tellers in his study from the 1950s, but he seemed purposely to distance them from the current practice of *kathak* dance: “This type of lecturer-expounder is well known in India, but not by the ancient name of *kathak*. He is called a *kathavacak*... [*Kathak* is] a related profession but one which is clearly distinguishable from these reciters and expounders” (Hein 1972: 32). This was, interestingly, echoed in the words of Tripurari, who emphasized in one conversation that *kathavacan* is folk dance and “whatever *kathak* [is done in the cities] is separate” (Tripurari Maharaj, 26 March 2003). Yet, other recent beliefs connect the two. A number of scholars now identify *kathavacan* as the story-telling root of the modern stage dance (Jones 1998, see also Khanam 2001 and Swarnamanjri 2002) and some of the urban *Kathaks* show interest in presenting the *kathavacaks* as part of larger “history of *kathak*” programmes in Delhi and abroad. Furthermore, although absent in most of the literature, the concept of *kathak* descending from *kathavacan* seems to have recently entered common knowledge; by 2006, any number of dancers and students at the New Delhi *Kathak* Kendra confidently explained the origins of their dance to me by connecting it to these rural artists.

The connection between rural and urban performance forms is further emphasized in the case of Ashok and Tripurari by their uncontested blood relationship with Birju Maharaj, the publicly acclaimed authority of *kathak* dance, and the leader of the most eminent urban dance family (known as the Lucknow *gharana*). This association is one of the most powerful cards the brothers have to play. Although Birju Maharaj’s father, Acchan Maharaj, was the descendant of court dancers and musicians based in Lucknow, his mother, Mahadevi, came from the same village of Raghav Pandit. Her brother, Ram Sevak, was one of the performers I saw in 2003, and their maternal great-grandfather was the brother (or perhaps cousin) of Ashok and Tripurari’s paternal great-grandfather (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Genealogies of Kathak performers**



Rural and urban branches of the family recognize the relationship, although it is a little difficult to document accurately. Hindi kinship terms differentiate between elder and younger brothers, but they do not differentiate between “real” brother and “cousin” brother. Furthermore, what Western genealogists term first or second cousins may also not be differentiated in oral dissemination. My study of genealogies in *kathak* families (see Walker 2004) leads me to be suspicious of the straight lines of descent from an unknown ancestor. Nonetheless, even if the exact lineage may have been manipulated in some way, to my knowledge there is no controversy which questions the relationship.

The two sides of the family make much of both the kinship and the supposed connections between the two art forms. The urban Kathaks point to the rural, devotional, story-telling form as the root of their art, a heritage which provides much needed evidence for the dance form’s claim to ancient Hindu origins. Birju Maharaj, during the 1986 programme at the New Delhi Kathak Kendra, introduced the group from Sultanpur by asserting, “They remind one of the ancestors – the way we were” (Eisler 1986). In a more recent interview with Sandhya Swarnamanjri he described the traditional performing arts of the Kathaks of Handiya (his paternal ancestral home in the Allahabad District, see Figure 1) in terms that can be directly connected to the present-day activities of his mother’s relatives (cited in Swarnamanjri 2002: 85). The rural family members, on the other hand, use the connection to procure funding and give status to their art form. Both schools have long names which link the folk forms to *kathak*. The “Kalika-Bindadin Paramparik Kathak Natvari Lok Nritya Kala Kendra” (Kalka [Prasad] and Bindadin Traditional Kathak Natvari Folk Dance Art Centre) in Raghav Pandit uses the names of Birju Maharaj’s grandfather and great-uncle who are connected to dance in the court in Lucknow. The “Ashok and Tripurari Maharaj Shiksha Paramparik Kathak Natya Sanskritik Kendra” (Ashok and Tripurari Maharaj Educational Traditional Kathak Drama Sanskrit Centre) in Ram Nagar seeks to legitimize the forms even further by suggesting some sort of Sanskrit connection.



## Identity and Innovation

Legitimacy, status, and even caste identity are ongoing issues among Kathaks, not only in Ashok and Tripurari's family but also between the members of the larger hereditary group. While there is no question that the "Kathak-Misras" are musicians and performers whose traditions and legacy reach far back into history, exactly what those traditions were and what that legacy might be are far from clear. My investigation into the origins of *kathak* dance showed a curious lack of documentation of a dance called *kathak* before the early twentieth century. My search for people called or calling themselves Kathaks uncovered slightly earlier sources, but still nothing dating much before the turn of the nineteenth century. Following Daniel Neuman's hypothesis that certain accompanying castes of lower status had at times changed their names and attempted to create various new identities with higher status (see Neuman 1990), I suggested that the "Kathaks" had accomplished a similar alteration in identity. Such shifts, sometimes known as "sanskritization," have been documented in various communities and include the adoption of higher caste rituals, customs, and lifestyles, and a revision of the group's oral history. Caste shifts usually occur when a group has increased its relevant wealth or land, but also seem to have an interesting connection to documentation by Colonial census takers and Western (or Westernized) scholars (see Pandian 1995, Srinivas 1966, Srivastava 1974, and Walker 2004). Historically, there is much evidence in the British Colonial Census Reports supporting the assertion that a lower caste group of performing artists assumed the new, and arguably Sanskritized, name of "Kathak" (i.e., story-teller) sometime in the late-1700s and began an ascent from being enumerated as Shudra or serving caste in the 1832 census (Princep 1832) to being "regarded" as Brahmin or priestly caste by 1900 (Crooke 1896). The transformation, however, is not entirely complete, and questions regarding caste, status, and identity hover, largely unexamined, around the edges of the *kathak* world.

This raises a number of significant questions, not only about status, caste, and category climbing, but also about tradition and change, representation, and the role of "outsiders," whether scholars or census officials, in facilitating change. For several decades now, researchers using fieldwork have recognized their own impact on the situations they are documenting. Recognizing the inevitability of their influence, some scholars have moved to dialogic processes, working with cultural "insiders" as colleagues rather than informants (see for example Kippen 1987 and 2002, and Maciszewski 2001a and 2001b). Furthermore, as power and wealth imbalances in the world frequently place Western researchers in a position of influence and seeming authority, some scholars are increasingly calling for attempts to lessen the inequities through activism and advocacy. Advocacy is not necessarily a one-way street, however, and there is current discussion regarding activism in the face of competing priorities and agendas (Sherinian et al. 2004).<sup>6</sup> Researching the rise of the Kathaks through the census reports, I became acutely aware of the opportunities such official documentation by cultural outsiders offer both groups and individuals wishing to alter their identities in some way. My contact with Ashok and Tripurari indicated that this type of insider activism, a purposeful and not ineffective agency in creating and disseminating a chosen identity, is ongoing.

During my first visit to the school in Raghav Pandit, I was treated with great respect and care. Although the village context precluded many of the amenities we take for granted in the West – there was no electricity or running water – I was constantly offered chairs to sit on and tea to drink even when I had no real wish for such things. I was considered not only a guest, but also, I discovered, a fellow performing artist, and in the evening the brothers politely requested that I dance for them. Interestingly, they

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<sup>6</sup> For further inquiry on fieldwork and its impacts see, among others, Barz and Cooley 1997 and Coffee 1999.

asked me if I might perform *gat nikas*, a stage *kathak* item that I have argued elsewhere originated in courtesan (that is, women's) dance (Walker 2004). After my dance, the request came to sing. "Canada *ki log git gaiye*" – "Please sing a Canadian folksong," my hosts asked. I complied, giving a brief rendition of "Farewell to Nova Scotia" by the light of the propane lamps.

In spite of our artistic exchange, I was dissatisfied with the context of the performances I had documented. The entire programme I viewed in March 2003 had been arranged especially for my visit in a large classroom in the Kalika-Bindadin school. Although the musicians presented a wide variety of performing arts, including *kathavacan*, folk dances, and a short theatre piece, I was keen to see a show in an "authentic" setting, performed for a rural Indian audience rather than a Canadian ethnomusicologist. I asked if I could be informed of any programmes Ashok and Tripurari might be presenting in February or March of 2005, the dates of my next planned visit to India, and I was eventually invited to attend shows in Ram Nagar and again at the school in Raghav Pandit in late March. The evening show in Ram Nagar was on a makeshift stage in the town bazaar, and the programme at the school the following afternoon had a local politician as the guest of honour. I discovered, however, somewhat into the proceedings, that both shows had again been arranged because of my presence. I had been asked to write letters – one to the *Panchayat* or village council in Ram Nagar and another to the school in Raghav Pandit, announcing my interest and upcoming visit. In Ram Nagar, I managed to take up a fairly invisible position on a narrow balcony across the village square from the stage, but at the school I was brought up on stage and garlanded with the other guests and dignitaries. In spite of my request to attend a "traditional" performance, I once again unwittingly found myself in the role of patron.

The exact context for traditional or authentic *kathavacan* performance is still unclear to me. In the course of our conversations, Ashok and Tripurari told me that *kathavacan* is performed in "big big temples" including Kanak Bhawan in Ayodhya during the *Jhula Mela* when the idols are placed on swings. Other contexts they identified included Hindu ceremonies such as the first haircutting (tonsure) and the final, or thirteenth, day of mourning after a death. Natavar's video footage from Ayodhya indeed shows Shitala Prasad performing *kathavacan* in a temple in front of idols on swings during *Jhula Mela* (Natavar 2005). Her own research reveals that it is his "duty to perform nightly for the entire month" with his relatives accompanying him on *tabla*, harmonium, and vocals. In return, the entourage is given a room with straw mats on the floor in which to sleep, and some basic grains for food. As Natavar and her colleague had arrived in Ayodhya before the majority of the pilgrims, they decided to sponsor performances in two temples so they could film during the daytime and offer the *kathavacaks* better compensation than they might normally receive (Mekhala Natavar, personal communication, 2006). Nevertheless, there was something about the context that struck me as odd. Sponsored or not, the dynamic process of interaction between audience and *kathavacak* that I had observed in other performances, was largely absent in this recording. Although I do not question Prasad's claim to Natavar that he had been offering such performances for decades and that he regularly performs in Kanak Bhawan and other temples (especially since Ashok had mentioned it also), there seems to me a curious disconnection between the interactive performance practice of this art form and its supposed function in temples. Perhaps the communicative purpose of *kathavacan* would emerge in front of a larger audience of pilgrims and devotees, but I have yet to find any first-hand documentation of such a performance.

Whether or not *kathavacan* was historically performed in temples, the claim that it is the devotional ancestor of urban *kathak* dance is further compromised by a number of factors. There is little in most *kathavacan* beyond the spurts of rhythmic footwork that can

be connected directly with *kathak* dance as it is performed today. Some *kathavacaks*, like Shitala Prasad, do perform small dance compositions as part of their musical interludes, but it is unclear whether these *tukras* and the footwork are original to the folk form, have been adopted through contact with the urban form, or have been integrated into this type of *kathavacan* from other parts of the family tradition. Furthermore, the instrumental interludes in *kathavacan* during which the rhythmic movements are performed are by and large less important than the speech, song, and mimetic actions. Granted, many stage *kathak* performers, particularly hereditary dancers, speak to their audience between items, but one can present a *kathak* programme consisting entirely of rhythmic dance, without speech or even expressive items. On the other hand, speech, singing and especially gestures are central to *kathavacan*, whereas the footwork and other rhythmic items are entertaining but unnecessary. Moreover, in spite of the emphasis on “ancient roots” on the part of the urban dancers, there is no reciprocity in training – Tripurari and Ashok have sent their sons to the city to learn *kathak* dance, but there are no Kathak Kendra students making field trips to the village to learn *kathavacan*.<sup>7</sup> *Kathak* and *kathavacan* share a Krishna theme, and perhaps more importantly, an extended family. Yet, other than a flexible, improvised structure the two seem to share little as performance forms.

### Music, Dance, and Drama

If *kathavacan* cannot be irrefutably connected to temple performance, and does not seem to be the choreographic antecedent to today's *kathak* dance, then what is it and how does it fit into North Indian performing art traditions? There is no question regarding the family affiliation. The rural performers are part of the same *biradari* or endogamous clan as the urban dancers, and although the actual relations are not clearly documented I have found no indication anywhere that they may have been falsified. There were additional performing arts forms, however, presented with the *kathavacan* I documented in 2003.

After Tripurari, Satish and Kuldeep had performed, I was treated to a long presentation identified as folk dance and “*kathak-natvari*.” Two pre-adolescent girls dressed in colourful costumes portrayed Radha and Krishna while Srimati Singh, one of the female teachers at the school, sang a long folk song accompanied by *nal* and *naqqara* drums rather than *tabla*. The dance then shifted seamlessly into a dramatic episode, complete with animated dialogue, slapstick play, and humour as two men, one quite elderly, joined the performance. “Krishna” remained standing in the centre while the other two cavorted around. The elderly man, Ram Sevak, had a clay pot of butter or yoghurt, which he, between eating the contents and smearing them on his chin, swung at the younger man. There are many stories about Krishna and his friends stealing butter; this was obviously one of them. The participants eventually began to dance, not in set patterns, but freely moving to another rhythmic folk song accompanied by *naqqara*. The men's movements were rough, even vulgar, consisting of thrusting pelvic movements and short rhythmic steps, and they sang in a boisterous style which bordered on shouting (Field video, 26 March 2003).

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<sup>7</sup> In some ways this is hardly surprising; students learning “classical” traditions in most parts of the world do not generally include folk forms in their training. Yet, one must ask if this devotional story-telling form is indeed the original form of the stage dance, why does it form no part of the *kathak* curriculum?

In spite of its being identified as “*kathak-natvari*,” a name which associates it both with the urban dance and with *Krishna Lila*,<sup>8</sup> I could connect none of the musical or choreographic material in this short excerpt to stage *kathak*. If one were to see this type of folk theatre without any introduction, one would most likely call it some form of *bhand* or *bhagat*.<sup>9</sup> Yet, one of the main actors was Ram Sevak, who as Birju Maharaj’s maternal uncle is the direct blood connection between the two families (see figure 4). In his opening remarks to the 1986 programme in Delhi, Birju Maharaj introduced Ram Sevak as head of a drama company that presented plays with singing (Eisler 1986). Furthermore, in Natavar’s documentation of the festival in Ayodhya in 2005, Tripurari, Ashok and their company were performing *Ram Lila*, another type folk dance-drama about the life of the God Ram, rather than pure *kathavacan*. Natavar’s subsequent interview with Ashok and Tripurari contained a discussion about the ways in which *nautanki* (yet another form of folk theatre) is different from *kathak* and *kathavacan*.

What this indicates is that the family tradition is at least as close to theatre as it is to music and dance. Of course, in the Indian performing arts, particularly the rural folk arts, this seems meaningless. Yet, the emphasis placed on the connection to *kathak*, today inarguably a dance, demands some comparison and analysis. “Kathaks” (in the broadest sense of the clan of performers) sing, dance, and play drums and *sarangi*, but clearly also perform *kathavacan*, *Ram Lila*, and take part in rough country theatrics like *bhand*, *bhagat*, *naqqal* and perhaps *nautanki*. I have argued previously that the Kathaks engineered a caste shift that probably began during the late-eighteenth century. It is highly possible that they originally were a clan of lower-caste entertainers similar to *bhands* or *bhagats*, rather than Brahmin story-tellers as is so often claimed (see Walker 2004). The variety of performing arts in the repertoire of the *kathavacaks* from the village of Raghav Pandit actually corroborates this hypothesis, rather than presenting a link to ancient temple dance through the *kathavacan* presentations. Interestingly, Tripurari further supported the family link to drama through his explanation of their “Krishna expression:”

We even show the scenes with butter stealing, shepherd boys and *qabbadi* [wrestling]. We show yoghurt and butter stealing and what not, and associate it with Lord Krishna. We combine these scenes, whatever they are, and present them. This is known as our traditional *kathak-natvari*. ... Since my aunt [father’s sister/cousin – i.e. Birju Maharaj’s mother] was there, we have called it *kathak-natvari* folk dance (Tripurari Maharaj, 26 March 2003).

This use of the term “*natvari*” is particularly interesting as it indicates that certain facets of the family art are not only being specially promoted, but also being renamed. One often reads that *kathak* is “*Natvari Nrtya*,” the dance of Lord Krishna, because certain syllables used to represent dance steps were originally derived from the sounds of Krishna’s feet dancing on the hoods of Kaliya, a multi-headed serpent whom he

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<sup>8</sup> *Krishna Lila* encompasses various forms of folk drama about the life of the Hindu God Krishna, particularly his childhood. *Natvar* is often used a name for Krishna as “lord of the dance.”

<sup>9</sup> *Bhand* and *bhagat* are names for lower class entertainers who perform mimicry, music, dance, and drama including plays about Krishna, and simultaneously the names of their performances. Another name associated with similar mimicry is *naqqal*. These performers are documented in North India at least as far back as the 1500s (see Walker 2004 and Brown 2003).

defeated (see for example Swarnamanjri 2002). The rough theatrics I saw in the village were also called *natvari*, but although the material and performance style would seem indeed a part of the family's artistic legacy, Tripurari's explanation suggests that referring to this form as "*kathak-natvari*" is a change still in recent memory. Tripurari and Ashok were unwavering in their claim of *kathavacan* and *kathak-natvari* as their ancient family traditions and in their identity as *kathavacaks*. While it must be emphasized that this identification is in no way inaccurate and that there is no evidence to suggest that the style of *kathavacan* performed by members of the Kathak clan is a recent invention, the way it is being promoted as central to the family art seems to be something new. Furthermore, calling the folk theatre *kathak-natvari* appears to be a type of gentrification of a form that perhaps also used to be central to the family art. The name change also serves to separate it from genres like *bhand*, *bhagat*, and *nautanki* to which it is undoubtedly related. How long these performing arts have existed in the forms I observed is impossible to tell, and probably not important. The presentation of *kathavacan* and *natvari* as principal parts of the clan's hereditary performance style, and the linking of both forms to stage *kathak* dance, however, seem recent endeavours.<sup>10</sup>

### Story-tellers and Scholars

History suggests that this promotion of certain styles and the adoption of new names for others is nothing new but rather one recent step in the upwardly mobile journey of the Kathaks. There is a fascinating and surprisingly visible trail consisting of various members of this hereditary group taking canny advantage of "outsider" documentation to control their own representation. Through this process they have been able to portray themselves with slightly higher status, slightly more refined art forms, and slightly different family relations than their fellow "insiders" would ever accept them as having. The census reports show the Kathaks' steady climb as they adopted a new identity and eventually a new ancient tradition as temple dancers by gradually identifying themselves differently to successive generations of ignorant census-takers. By the time the census reports shifted their focus from caste identity to economics and industry in the early twentieth century, the dancers from Lucknow, now the Lucknow *gharana* (see above), had found another avenue. Throughout the twentieth century, the family of Birju Maharaj has maintained its climb through actively representing itself to scholars and musicologists (both Indian and Western) as high caste and priestly. To what extent the educated Indian writers are or were complicit in this process may be difficult to learn, but it seems fairly clear that the Western scholars who dutifully documented the devotional origins of the Kathaks and their dance were both as innocent and ignorant as the Colonial census takers before them.

My initial visit to rural Uttar Pradesh seemed, as I said above, a stroke of incredibly good luck. I was thrilled that the *kathavacaks* had invited me, and was touched after I arrived that they seemed to have gone to so much trouble to arrange so many performances for me. When I returned to the Sultanpur District two years later, and realized that once again the programmes depended to a large extent on my presence, I began to wonder whether this form ever existed without external patronage in any kind of authentic "folk" setting at all. I have yet to find the answer to that question, but began eventually to wonder if it mattered. The concept of folk culture as unchanging and existing without funding or patronage is idealistic – certainly the performing arts of the Kathak-Misras seem ever changing. Much more interesting is the process of active agency, in which the Ashok and Tripurari seem consciously involved, promoting a certain

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<sup>10</sup> One should also note that the name of the school in Raghav Pandit includes the word *natvari* (see above).

identity intent on raising the status of both artists and art forms. The brothers seemed very aware of the expediency of attracting the attention of scholars, foreign or Indian. My initial indication of interest in *kathavacan* quickly, and without any real effort on my part, developed into a day and a half of performances arranged solely for my benefit. My second visit provided a reason and an opportunity for the brothers to stage both a public concert raising their profile in the village where they had recently built a second school and a private programme in the original school with local dignitaries as guests of honour. Furthermore, in Natavar's conversation with the brothers regarding *nautanki*, Ashok made a point of informing her that a scholar from Canada had visited their school, and suggested strongly that she should also. From the beginning, the brothers seemed to have seen a clear advantage in attracting the interest of a scholar, to serve both as an additional source of patronage and a means of promoting and endorsing their art forms.

Should one see this as a type of reciprocity even though, in a way, neither of our agendas complements the other? I am indeed promoting the art of *kathavacan* and the village performers' relationship with the more famous dance families simply by writing about them, but I am also analyzing the performance forms critically rather than simply accepting what was presented to me. I am happily validating their tradition and heritage, but not necessarily in the way that they, or their urban relatives, would want me to. The brothers, on the other hand, have certainly assisted me in my search for the origins of *kathak*, but more through their short play, whether one calls it *bhand* or *kathak-natvari*, than through their *kathavacan* performances. Much of the data I have from my rural experiences was largely gleaned from the sub-text of our conversations – what was not said, or quickly passed over – rather than what was overtly presented. Is it thus more accurate to look at our association as a type of mutual exploitation? Or is it kinder to see it simply as mutually advantageous? Furthermore, how does recognizing agency and covert agendas among our “informants” render our ethics reviews, post-colonial soul-searching, and dialogic processes? I do not have immediate or easy answers to these questions, only perhaps the recommendation that they ought to form part of our framework for research.

I am in the process of editing the video footage, but choosing what to present and represent will have to be undertaken in light of these questions. I intend to send what will hopefully be a useful version to Ashok and Tripurari Maharaj, which they can use for educational purposes, further funding applications, or whatever they please. It would be ideal to let the music, dance, and drama speak for itself, rather than to promote either of our ideas of what *kathavacan* may or may not be, but that may be impossible. Although the brothers certainly had an agenda, one cannot really claim they were *misrepresenting* themselves, only choosing carefully *how* they wished to be represented. Yet, if I present them exactly as they wish, without placing their performing arts in the social and historical context of North Indian music, dance, and drama, I will become consciously complicit in this ongoing process of artistic change and shifting identities.

Change, of course, is inevitable, and perhaps so is the effect of the researcher, as much as we would like to be invisibly objective. Although *kathavacan* is probably not the ancient devotional form of stage *kathak* dance, the two forms are clearly part of the same heritage. They share a flexible structure, a Krishna theme, and most importantly, an extended family. But the performance tradition of the Kathak clan *is* flexible; these hereditary entertainers seem to have constantly adapted and evolved throughout recorded history as circumstances demanded it. Even the divisions of the Kathak-Misras into various *gharanas* and specialties are not absolute, and performers seem to shift their specialties and allegiances as job opportunities, economics, or family politics advise. Furthermore, outsider documentation of North Indian performing arts has been part of the

socio-musical environment at least since the 1500s. Perhaps insider manipulation of that documentation has been going on for just as long. The process by which *kathavacan* is now being promoted as a pious antecedent to the stage dance through outsider endorsement is possibly as much a part of the ancient and ongoing family tradition as the art forms themselves.

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