

Kathak's Journey: Evolution Through Devotion Dynasty and Modernity

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INTRODUCTION

A historical exploration of Kathak often reveals contradictory perspectives and points of contention about its evolution, as there is much in its history that continues to divide opinion. Meanwhile these contentions have been widened recently in the light of jarring political differences.

Now while this dance form's historical journey is very well documented, the real debate lies in how its present form is understood in relation to its origins. The beginning of Kathak from what it is today is believed to have been very much different. Though modern-day Kathak is very different from what it was during the Bhakti movement, the question remains whether it gained or lost in this transformation. As Stoltenberg (2019) argues, Kathak once served as a sacred movement – an “axis mundi” – connecting the dancer to the divine, which makes this transformation even more significant. Purists may view these changes as a dilution of its spiritual roots, while others, who see art as dynamic and ever evolving, may consider Kathak a true beneficiary of historical transitions.

This paper aims to explore the evolution of Kathak, with a special focus on the influence of Mughal patronage. It does not attempt to judge whether these changes were good or bad. Rather, it critically examines how Kathak transformed in terms of style, purpose and presentation as it moved from temples to royal courts (Chakravorty, 2000). The study highlights shift in technique, costume, themes and audience, offering a balanced view of Kathak's growth through cultural exchange and historical change.

Recognized as one of India's eight major classical dance forms, Kathak is the only one that originated in North India. In its earliest form, Kathak was not just a dance but a sacred storytelling tradition. The word ‘Kathak’ comes from *katha*, meaning “story” in Sanskrit. Its performers, called Kathakars, used expressive gestures, facial movements and rhythmic footwork to narrate episodes from Hindu epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. These performances took place in temple spaces carefully adapted for intimate engagement with the divine, reinforcing the dance's ritualistic and sacred identity (Mudgerikar, 2020). They were seen not as entertainment, but as acts of devotion.

This temple tradition laid the spiritual and emotional foundation of Kathak. The dancer was not just a performer but also a devotee and storyteller. The rituals were simple but deeply emotional and the music was devotional in nature. Kathak was not intended for entertainment – it was a sacred offering.

Over time, Kathak evolved. It moved beyond temple courtyards and entered royal courts, especially during the Mughal era (Williams, 2023). This journey brought new elements into the dance – from costumes and musical styles to themes and techniques. Today, Kathak is known for its intricate footwork, graceful spins, expressive abhinaya and emotional storytelling. What makes it unique is its ability to balance two worlds – the devotional and the performative – and to bridge tradition with transformation.

This paper will explore these dimensions in depth, tracing the phases of Kathak's development and examining how Mughal patronage shaped its journey into a refined classical art form.

Origins of Kathak

The origins of Kathak can be traced back into the temples of northern India, where it began as a devotional and narrative tradition. As mentioned before also, Kathak was derived from the Sanskrit word *katha*, meaning “story”. It was the form was practiced by *Kathakars* – temple priests and wandering bards – who used expressive gestures, rhythmic footwork, mime and music to narrate episodes from Hindu epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These stories were rich in moral and spiritual contexts and thus were conveyed as part of temple rituals with Kathak functioning as both a pedagogical and devotional practice. Performances were generally conducted in temple courtyards and the dancer's role was to act as a spiritual intermediary who brought mythological tales to life in a way that emotionally engaged the audience and deepened their connection to the divine.

The Bhakti movement, which existed from the 8th to the 17th century, brought a profound transformation in Kathak's thematic and emotional expression. Emphasizing personal devotion over ritual formalism, the Bhakti saints encouraged a direct, emotional relationship with deities, especially Lord Krishna. As a result, Kathak performances began to incorporate poetry, music and narratives centered on Krishna's divine play (*leela*), with compositions by poets such as Meerabai and Surdas becoming part of the dance repertoire. This period introduced a more expressive and emotionally charged style of abhinaya (expression), where dancers portrayed various moods of love, longing and devotion, especially between Radha and Krishna.

During this phase, Kathak evolved from a ritualistic performance into a powerful tool for emotional and spiritual expression. It retained its narrative function but became more personalized and intimate in tone. The sacred temple space and the performer's role merged, making the dance both a form of worship and a shared communal experience. The Bhakti era, therefore, laid the emotional and spiritual foundation of Kathak, shaping its identity as a form deeply rooted in devotion, storytelling and artistic interpretation.

Transition from Temple to Court

The transition of Kathak from sacred temple grounds to the opulent spaces of royal courts marks a defining moment in its historical trajectory. This shift was not merely artistic, but deeply political and cultural. With the onset of medieval invasions and the widespread destruction of temples, particularly during the early Muslim conquests in North India, Kathakars lost their traditional platforms of performance and patronage. Many of them, displaced and marginalized, were forced to seek new venues for survival. As noted in the literature, this phase marked a significant rupture, where “kathaks lost their shelter, began to scatter and eventually found refuge in the courts of kings or nawabs” (*North Indian classical dance styles: Kathak, temples and royal courts*, p. 4). In the absence of religious institutions to support them, the performers turned to secular courts for sustenance.

The royal courts of the Mughals and other regional rulers provided an alternative space that not only revived Kathak but also redefined its identity. However, entry into this new domain required more than just displacement – it demanded adaptation. The dance had to evolve in both form and function to align with the aesthetic preferences, cultural codes and entertainment values of courtly life. As Natavar (1997) explains, the emergence of new audiences and new cultural spaces led to a reshaping of Kathak's rhythm, content and performance style. Devotional narratives gave way to romantic and sensual themes and performances shifted from spiritual offerings to spectacles designed to entertain the aristocracy. As such, the purpose of Kathak transformed – from an act of devotion to a performance of display and delight. This transition also involved a visual and technical reinvention, including changes in costume, musical accompaniment and even movement vocabulary (Walker, 2009).

Critically, this shift raises questions about the negotiation between survival and authenticity. On one hand, court patronage ensured the continuity of the form; on the other, it introduced a dependence on

elite tastes, often at the cost of spiritual depth. As the dance adapted to courtly norms, some argue that it lost its original essence, becoming more ornamental and less devotional. Others, however, view this evolution as a natural progression of an art form responding to its socio-political context, emphasizing the resilience and versatility of Kathak as it traversed different cultural landscapes. Thus, the migration from temple to court was not just a physical movement but a profound cultural transformation – one that reshaped Kathak's identity, purpose and place in Indian heritage.

Mughal Patronage and Influence: Akbar's Era – The Golden Age of Fusion

The reign of Emperor Akbar (1542–1605) is often regarded as the golden period of Kathak's transformation under Mughal patronage. His court marked a turning point not only for Kathak but for Indian art and culture more broadly (Mehrotra, n.d.). Akbar's systematic support for music, dance, painting and architecture was not merely a reflection of personal taste but part of a larger political strategy to consolidate his empire. By embracing and integrating diverse cultural practices, Akbar sought to create a composite Indo-Islamic identity that reinforced imperial legitimacy and promoted loyalty among his multi-ethnic and multi-religious subjects (Kathak During Mughal Period, p. 2).

In this context, Kathak emerged as a significant cultural symbol, redefined from its temple origins into a refined courtly art. The Mughal court, under Akbar, was known for its elaborate artistic ecosystem, which included poets, musicians, painters and dancers. The *Ain-i-Akbari*, a detailed 16th-century record compiled by Akbar's court historian Abu'l-Fazl, mentions the presence of a renowned Kathak dancer named Vallabhdas, indicating Kathak's elevated status in the royal court. The inclusion of Kathak into courtly entertainment marked both a legitimization and transformation of the form – it was no longer a sacred offering, but a sophisticated performance aligned with the aesthetics and sensibilities of elite Muslim audiences.

What is particularly notable about Akbar's era is the fusion of Persian artistic elements with Indian traditions. This fusion shaped the visual and performative aspects of Kathak. Elements such as geometric design in choreography, Mughal-inspired costumes and themes of romantic courtship began to replace the earlier devotional focus. Persian terms like *aamad* (stylized entrance) and *salaami* (salutation to the audience) became embedded in Kathak's vocabulary, illustrating the extent of this cross-cultural exchange (Kathak Dance - Origin, History, Costumes, & Dancers, p. 5). The dance form adopted a more linear aesthetic, influenced by Mughal miniature painting and introduced stylized pirouettes (*chakkars*) that echoed the whirling movements of Sufi dervishes.

However, this cultural synthesis was not without tension. While the courtly version of Kathak gained popularity and royal endorsement, it also became distanced from its original spiritual roots. The transformation raises critical questions: Did Kathak, in gaining artistic recognition, lose its devotional soul? Or did it evolve to reflect the realities of its time, proving its adaptability? These questions underline the duality of Akbar's influence – it was both a moment of flourishing and of redefinition. The dance form was undeniably enriched in technique, expression and reach, but also became shaped by the demands of courtly display rather than temple ritual.

Jahangir and Shah Jahan's Era: Refinement of Form and Aesthetic Opulence

The reigns of Emperor Jahangir (1569–1627) and Emperor Shah Jahan (1592–1666) marked the continuation and intensification of Mughal cultural patronage initiated by Akbar, but with a distinct emphasis on aesthetic refinement and visual elegance. These emperors inherited Akbar's commitment to the arts but infused it with their personal tastes, leading to more sophisticated and ornate artistic developments. For Kathak, this period was crucial in shaping its visual presentation, technical brilliance and choreographic structure.

One of the most significant influences during this period came from the Mughal miniature painting tradition, which flourished especially under Jahangir. Known for its intricate detail, symmetry and two-dimensional linearity, miniature art reflected a visual culture of precision and order and these characteristics were translated into the grammar of Kathak. “Kathak also developed as a linear dance form as opposed to other circular Indian classical dance styles,” reflecting the visual aesthetics of miniature painting. Just as miniature paintings filled every space with fine patterns and detailed ornamentation, Kathak performances began to emphasize refined postures, controlled gestures and symmetrical movement. The focus shifted to angular body lines and precise spatial patterns, making Kathak unique among classical dance forms for its strong linearity.

This artistic ethos also influenced the costume and stage aesthetics of Kathak. During Shah Jahan’s reign, known for architectural grandeur and design excellence (as evident in the construction of the Taj Mahal), dance costumes became more lavish, layered and geometrically styled. The Mughal aesthetic preferred elaborate textures, delicate embroidery and pastel color palettes. These features found expression in the churidars, angarkhas and flared skirts worn by Kathak performers, often complemented by accessories such as sequined caps, turbans and light jewelry (Kathak Dance - Origin, History, Costumes, & Dancers, p. 5). The costumes were not merely decorative; they were choreographed into the performance, enhancing the visibility of spins (chakkars) and allowing dancers to create a visual spectacle of movement, much like the swirling forms found in Persian-inspired miniature art.

Technically, Kathak reached new levels of brilliance during this era. The Mughal court’s taste for virtuosity and complexity encouraged the development of high-speed chakkars, intricate footwork (tatkaar) and subtle rhythmic variations. Dancers began performing pirouettes with increasing speed and balance, often timed to match complex tala (rhythmic cycles), pushing the boundaries of stamina and precision. As noted in the PDF, dancers showcased their skill with movements performed at “double speed, four times faster, eight times faster,” marking a significant technical elevation of the form (Kathak During Mughal Period, p. 2). This emphasis on mathematical rhythm, symmetry and control reflected not only the Mughal taste for perfection but also the cross-cultural exchange with Persian and Central Asian dance vocabularies.

However, these transformations raise critical reflections about the changing purpose and perception of Kathak. While the dance form undoubtedly gained in sophistication and performance appeal, it also became increasingly removed from its devotional origins. The shift from spiritual storytelling to stylized entertainment altered not just its aesthetic but its very identity and audience. Kathak was now a courtly spectacle, appreciated for its technical mastery and visual grandeur rather than its spiritual depth. This invites a broader question: Did the Mughal refinement elevate Kathak to a higher art form, or did it dilute its original expressive and emotional core?

In sum, the era of Jahangir and Shah Jahan represents a critical moment of aesthetic crystallization in Kathak’s evolution. It was a time when the dance form was carefully sculpted into an art of elegance, symmetry and virtuosity – deeply influenced by Mughal visual culture. Yet, this evolution also posed challenges of continuity and identity that Kathak continues to navigate in its modern form.

Aesthetic and Technical Transformations: Redefining the Language of Kathak

The Mughal period did not merely provide patronage to Kathak; it transformed its aesthetic language, technical grammar and cultural context. The dance, originally embedded in devotional storytelling, was restructured to suit the tastes and expectations of aristocratic courts. These changes were not superficial; they marked a deep shift in how the dance was performed, perceived and preserved. Aesthetic refinements, technical advancements and thematic shifts collectively contributed to a redefinition of Kathak’s identity – from sacred ritual to sophisticated art.

One of the most visible changes was in costuming. The traditional sari worn by temple dancers gave way to the more formal and structured Mughal-style attire, including churidars, angarkhas, flared skirts and sequined caps. These garments were not only influenced by Persian fashion but were also functional within the performance – allowing dancers to accentuate the newly developed chakkars (whirling spins) through flowing silhouettes (Kathak Dance - Origin, History, Costumes, & Dancers, p. 5). The rich fabrics, pastel tones and embroidered designs reflected the grandeur and visual subtlety of the Mughal court. The transition from religious attire to regal dress signified a larger ideological shift – from worship to performance, from temple to theatre.

Alongside these aesthetic shifts came linguistic and structural changes in performance. Kathak began to incorporate Persian terminology, reflecting the cultural blending of the era. Two notable additions to Kathak's vocabulary were *aamad* and *salaami* – stylized sequences that marked the dancer's entrance and salutation in court settings. These terms, while foreign in origin, became fully assimilated into Kathak's structure, to the point where they now appear inseparable from the classical tradition itself (Kathak Dance - Origin, History, Costumes, & Dancers, p. 5). This adoption of Persian court etiquette and structure illustrates how the dance form adapted linguistically and ceremonially to its new socio-political environment.

Technically, the Mughal era saw an intensification of rhythm and movement. The hallmark *chakkars* – inspired in part by the Sufi whirling tradition – became more prominent, complex and rapid. Dancers now performed multiple uninterrupted spins with balance and grace, often adorned with over 100 ghungroos (ankle bells) to accentuate footwork. These spins were accompanied by intricate *tatkaar* (foot rhythms) that explored double, quadruple and even eightfold time cycles, reflecting an increasing mathematization and formalization of rhythm in Kathak (Kathak During Mughal Period, p. 2). This shift towards technical virtuosity made Kathak an art form that required years of training, not just emotional expression or narrative skill.

However, this transformation was not purely technical. It also reflected a shift in thematic and emotional focus, particularly under the influence of courtesan culture. As Kathak became associated with *tawaifs* or female court performers, its thematic palette expanded to include sensuality, romantic longing and emotional suggestion. Concepts such as *ched-chad* and *kasak-masak* – describing playful gestures and subtle body movements – became key expressive tools (Kathak Through the Ages, p. 3). The dance moved away from the spiritual solemnity of temple performances to embrace themes of romantic *Nayika-Nayak* relationships, as codified in classical *Nayika-Bheda* frameworks. While this evolution enriched Kathak's expressive scope, it also blurred the lines between classical art and entertainment, leading to future tensions in its reception – particularly during colonial times, when associations with courtesan culture were used to delegitimize Kathak's classical status.

This shift in mood and theme also had a gendered side. As Chakravorty (2008) notes, many of the women performing Kathak during this time worked within male-dominated spaces, but they also pushed boundaries. Her study of the guru-shishya system shows how tradition was kept alive but also challenged. She explores how female dancers like Kumudini Lakhia modernized Kathak choreography and questioned the rigid rules of the *gharanas*. This shows that women in Kathak were not just following tradition – they were reshaping it.

Critically, these aesthetic and technical transformations highlight Kathak's capacity to evolve, but also raise important questions about authenticity, purity and cultural power. The Mughal court's influence led to a version of Kathak that was more visually grand, structurally complex and emotionally layered – but one that also risked alienating its devotional roots. For some, this transformation represents a loss of spiritual essence; for others, it is a testament to Kathak's adaptability and artistic resilience.

Decline under Aurangzeb: Suppression of Art and Kathak's Retreat

The flourishing of Kathak in the Mughal courts came to an abrupt halt during the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb (1618–1707), whose rule marked a dramatic departure from the cultural policies of his predecessors. Unlike Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan, who supported the arts as a tool of imperial grandeur and syncretic identity, Aurangzeb adopted a strictly orthodox interpretation of Islam and actively discouraged artistic practices, particularly those involving music and dance.

Aurangzeb's disapproval of the performing arts stemmed from his belief that such practices were morally and religiously inappropriate. As noted in the historical record, he banned musical performances at court, ordered the burial of musical instruments and dismissed dancers and artists from royal patronage (Kathak During Mughal Period, p. 2). The royal court, once a vibrant space for cultural experimentation, became hostile territory for performers. These actions were not isolated decrees but part of a larger ideological shift that sought to cleanse the empire of what he perceived as excesses and distractions from religious duty.

The consequences for Kathak were severe. Having evolved into a highly visible and court-centered art form, Kathak suddenly found itself without institutional support or protection. Many dancers who had once performed in the courts of Delhi, Agra and regional Mughal centers were forced to go underground, return to rural villages, or abandon performance altogether. As described in the PDF, they were often treated as social outcasts and had to rely on private teaching or secret gatherings to preserve their art (Kathak During Mughal Period, p. 2). This withdrawal into private and hidden spaces also contributed to the formation of family-based lineages or *gharanas*, where the tradition survived through oral transmission and tight-knit teacher-disciple bonds.

Critically, this phase in Kathak's history reflects not only the vulnerability of art forms under changing regimes but also the intersection of power, religion and cultural expression (Kothari, 1989). Aurangzeb's policy of suppressing artistic expression was a political act as much as a religious one, aimed at asserting ideological control and distancing the empire from the pluralistic culture nurtured by earlier rulers. For Kathak, this meant a forced rupture in its visibility and legitimacy, relegating it to the margins of cultural life. As Stoltenberg (2019) notes, even in urban modern India, Kathak retained its identity as a religious ritual, demonstrating its deep spiritual roots and resilience. Yet, it is also important to acknowledge that Kathak did not disappear; rather, it entered a period of quiet preservation, sustained by dedicated practitioners who ensured its continuity against all odds (Stoltenberg, 2019).

Thus, the decline under Aurangzeb was not the end of Kathak, but a moment of resilience in hiding – a test of its capacity to endure political intolerance and re-emerge in new forms in later periods.

Legacy of the Mughal Influence: Fusion, Formalization and Continuity

The Mughal period left an indelible imprint on Kathak, not only in terms of its performance style but also in its structure, vocabulary and cultural significance. While the decline of royal patronage under Aurangzeb curtailed public performances, the centuries preceding his reign fundamentally reshaped Kathak's identity. The Mughal influence is not a footnote in Kathak's history – it is a defining force that expanded its expressive possibilities, formalized its structure and embedded it with a new cultural and aesthetic grammar that persists to this day.

One of the most enduring legacies was the creation of a new movement vocabulary and performance structure. Mughal court Kathak introduced elements such as *aamad* (the stylized entrance of the dancer), *salaami* (a formal salutation to the king or audience) and choreographic forms built around precision, symmetry and musicality (Kathak Dance – Origin, History, Costumes, & Dancers, p. 5). These were not just linguistic additions, but signs of a larger shift from devotional spontaneity to structured presentation,

suited to the aesthetic and ceremonial requirements of royal entertainment. This transformation also brought greater emphasis on virtuosity – evident in complex chakkars (spins), rapid footwork (tatkaar) and rhythmic layering – all hallmarks of the Mughal-era reconfiguration of the form.

It was during and after this period that Gharanas, or stylistic schools of Kathak, began to emerge. These lineages did not exist in the same way during the temple era but were consolidated through family-based transmission in courts and private spaces, especially as royal patronage became fragmented. The Lucknow Gharana, developed under the Nawabs of Awadh, placed strong emphasis on graceful movements, subtle expressions (abhinaya) and romantic themes rooted in courtly aesthetics. In contrast, the Jaipur Gharana, shaped by Rajput court traditions, focused on powerful footwork, bold rhythmic patterns and dramatic energy – traits more aligned with martial and devotional overtones. The Banaras Gharana, emerging from the sacred city of Varanasi, integrated elements from both and is known for its versatility and spiritual undertones, reflecting a blend of tradition and innovation (Kathak History – Evolution of Kathak Dance, p. 9).

A defining feature of modern Kathak is its dual identity – as both a spiritual and a secular form. Even today, Kathak performances often begin with a vandana (invocation) and include compositions from the Bhakti tradition, yet they also carry forward court-inspired elements such as the aamad and the presentation of thumri and ghazal. This coexistence of devotional and courtly modes is one of the most unique outcomes of Kathak's journey. Rather than replacing one with the other, Kathak managed to sustain a layered identity, where sacred and sensual, emotional and technical, Indian and Persian elements live together in a delicate balance.

Perhaps the most visible remnants of Mughal influence are the musical and poetic choices in Kathak's repertoire. Mughal patronage introduced Urdu ghazals, Persian idioms and instruments like the sarangi into Kathak accompaniment. The dance continues to borrow from these traditions, often using Urdu lyrics, Mughal costume styling and even themes of romantic longing and aesthetic refinement drawn from Indo-Persian culture (Kathak Through the Ages, p. 4). These elements, while external in origin, were so deeply absorbed into Kathak's language that they now appear intrinsic to its classical identity.

Critically, the legacy of Mughal influence on Kathak is both a testament to cultural fusion and a subject of ongoing debate. Some purists argue that the courtly additions diluted the spiritual essence of the dance, while others celebrate the Mughal period as a moment of creative expansion that allowed Kathak to survive, thrive and modernize. In either view, what remains clear is that the Mughal influence gave Kathak a new aesthetic vocabulary, broadened its expressive canvas and helped shape it into a resilient, multi-dimensional classical art form that continues to evolve.

Postcolonial Redefinitions and the Politics of Purity

During colonial rule and especially in the nationalist movement, efforts were made to 'clean' Kathak of its Mughal and tawaif associations. Chakravorty (2015) discusses how Indian dance historians tried to give Kathak a mythic Hindu origin. She critiques this rewriting of history, saying it erased the Islamic and courtly roots of the dance. Walker's book, which Chakravorty reviews, also shows how Kathak's current form does not match temple sculptures, but was still framed as a temple-origin dance to fit a Brahminical idea of purity (Walker, 2012).

Similarly, Dewan (2023) highlights how courtesans – the tawaifs – were once central to Kathak but later erased from its history. These women were not just performers but also preservers of Hindustani music. Their role was dismissed during colonial and nationalist times, as dance was redefined through upper-caste and moral lenses. Dewan's *Tawaifnama* helps uncover this hidden history and shows how gender, class and morality were used to shape how Kathak was remembered.

Kathak in Modern Times: Globalization, Identity and Change

As Kathak moved into the modern era, its journey did not stop with the decline of royal patronage or the rise of nationalist narratives. Instead, it continued to evolve. In today's world, new questions shape Kathak: Who gets to perform it? What does it mean to be traditional or modern? How do dancers connect their art to their personal and social lives? Scholars like Chakravorty and Dolinina help us understand how Kathak now lives in a changing world, where culture is both global and deeply personal.

Chakravorty (2006) explores how Kathak has changed in today's global world. She calls this space "public modernity" — where different social groups use culture to express their place in society. Kathak is no longer just a dance of temples or courts. It is now used to explore identity, gender and politics. Dancers bring in new ideas, global influences and personal stories. Chakravorty explains how modern life is not only Western but global, and Kathak reflects this change. It is part of a larger conversation about what it means to be Indian in a modern world. Dolinina (2020) also explores how Kathak teaching has changed. The traditional guru-shishya system still exists, but it now works inside formal institutions. While some rituals are preserved, many teachers act more like managers. Students sometimes feel distance or pressure. Dolinina shows that power, discipline and learning are all linked in Kathak training. She says that the system needs to be preserved, but also reformed — so it can empower dancers, not just control them.

These studies show that Kathak today is not just about preserving the past — it is also about rethinking the present (Massey, 1999). Dancers, teachers and scholars are constantly shaping and reshaping the form to reflect new values, identities and struggles (Walker, 2020). As Kathak moves forward, it carries the weight of its history but also opens space for new voices. This ongoing change keeps the dance form alive, relevant and meaningful for new generations.

CONCLUSION

Kathak stands today as a powerful example of how art can evolve through the layered experiences of history, religion and politics. Its journey from temple courtyards to Mughal courts reflects not a loss of identity, but a dynamic process of adaptation and transformation. Rooted in Hindu devotional storytelling, Kathak once served as a spiritual offering, expressing the emotional and philosophical depths of the Bhakti movement. Over time, with the patronage of the Mughals, it absorbed Persian aesthetics, courtly etiquette and sophisticated performance structures, emerging as a highly stylized classical dance form.

What makes Kathak unique is not that it was shaped by two seemingly different worlds, but that it continues to carry both within it. The devotional and the dramatic, the spiritual and the sensual, the ritualistic and the performative—each coexist in the form as it is practiced and performed today. Neither the Hindu roots nor the Mughal refinements cancel each other out; rather, they complement and enrich one another, making Kathak a deeply pluralistic art form.

As Chakravorty (2008) and Dewan (2023) show, Kathak's journey has always been shaped by more than just kings and temples. It includes women, courtesans, middle-class dancers and everyday performers who continue to use the form to speak about themselves. Their stories are just as important. These voices help us see Kathak as a living, breathing tradition — one that belongs to many and reflects India's complex cultural identity. Kathak's survival through shifts in patronage, cultural suppression and colonial stereotyping is also a testament to the resilience of Indian classical arts. It has not only endured but adapted—preserving its core while remaining open to change. In its present form, Kathak is more than a dance; it is a living archive of cultural negotiation, bearing witness to centuries of religious dialogue, artistic exchange and historical transformation. As Kathak continues to evolve in contemporary spaces—on global stages, in cinematic expressions and through modern choreography—it serves as a reminder that cultural forms need not be static to be authentic. Kathak's strength lies in its ability to change without losing its essence, making it not just a dance of the past, but a living tradition for the future.

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