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## TENDENCIES FOR INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN THE CONTEMPORARY KATHAK DANCE TEACHING SCENE

The article looks deeper into the recent situation for Kathak, with a special emphasis on knowledge transmission. It is partly based on field work conducted in various Kathak communities in 2017 and 2018 and my own experience as a dancer, teacher and student of Kathak. The participant observation, interviews, stories of teachers and students in various places are used to survey the "ethnographic presence" and trajectories of inclusion/exclusion, in this field of transmission of dance knowledge.

**Keywords:** North Indian dance Kathak, *guru-śiṣya parampara*, contemporary tradition, inclusion and exclusion

### Introduction

Kathak<sup>1</sup> is one of the neoclassical dance styles currently recognized and practiced in India and beyond. This dance style has developed from performing traditions of northern central India. Kathak dance, being part of a syncretic North Indian cultural environment, which could not avoid different historical, social, political influences and developed as an extremely versatile, synthetic performative practice, revealing a mosaic of worldviews, identities, ethnicities and belongings.

The classical<sup>2</sup> form of the dance was revived, institutionalised, nationalised, "purified" and "sanitised" along with the other music and dance forms in the processes of reforms and freedom movement, while searching for authenticity and national identity in the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century (Morcom 2013:112). A few "chosen" hereditary performers and their narrative entireties now represent the dance, leaving behind unsuitable traditions, marginalised in the turns and twists of cultural politics, power, and status shifts.

Recently, while India continues on the path of rapid development, globalization, mass media dissemination, and the spread of consumerism culture, with a drastically changed patronage system, and the dance field becoming very competitive and business-oriented, the Kathak scenario has become even more complicated.

In all of these transformations the main factor for defining the relationships between the tradition and diverse communities, historically, was and continues to be the patronage system and so called "socio-artistic organization" (Neuman 1990) of the Kathak community. Traditional knowledge transmission or *guru-śiṣya parampara*, along with the phenomena of stylistic variations and everyday practices, served as the pillars of this "socio-artistic organization".

The object of this paper is the traditional system of knowledge transmission, as one of the main aspects that form the trajectories of inclusion and exclusion. It provides an overview of the phenomenon generally and details it in the period when it was appropriated and adapted by dance teachers and dance scholars and projected back to the past, becoming an act of politics of representation. In the beginning of 20th century, along with *gharānās* and *riyāz*, it provided an illusion of authenticity and ancient roots for members of the Kathak community and served as warrant of authority and financial sustainability in the changing conditions of patronage system and spectatorship.

### From the field notes

It's the usual morning class at Kathak Kendra – one of the largest state-supported Kathak institutes in India.<sup>3</sup> Many students of different ages are gathered here. Although the class has already started and the atmosphere is charged with eagerness and anticipation, the teacher is still not present. Finally, when the guru appears, all the students hurry to greet him by touching his feet. After blessing all the students one by one, the teacher slowly proceeds to the far corner of the classroom, where the altar for the gods is placed. Multiple portraits of late senior gurus are also here. A short prayer is sung, blessings of great masters are received and the students follow the teacher in prayer. After this small ritual, all students return to their places. The teacher settles down near the musicians. One of his senior disciples hands him a bowl of sprouted chickpeas for reinforcement. It is his honorable daily duty and a gesture of dedication to the guru. The teacher goes on by blessing each student's ankle-bells – the *ghuṅgharū*. The same thing is done for the musicians, while students approach and touch the instruments. After this brief welcome, the actual lesson begins.

While the musicians start playing a rhythmic cycle, I think over and reflect on the beginning of the class that I just observed. I have many questions. The initial part of the lesson was not like a regular lecture or a practice session in the dance education environment which I am familiar with. It was more like a ritualized act, transferring the participants into some ritualistic reality, a mytho-religious space. The teacher looked more like an elder family member or friend and was very respected, almost having divine status.

Throughout the time of my own Kathak dance studies and practice in India, I always felt that unbreakable connection with my guru, being asked the same question again and again: Who is your guru? As Stacey Prickett rightly puts it in her article:

Yet the answer to the inevitable question of "Who is your *guru*?" continues to shape dancer's identity, their genealogical heritage locating them in relation to dominant power structures of the stylistic schools, the *gharanas* (Kathak) or *banis* (Bharatanatyam). (Prickett 2007:25)

### Research questions

The situations and learning experience described above prove the importance of this phenomenon in the cultural entirety of the region and provoke us to look deeper into the *guru-śiṣya* tradition in general as well as into the recent situation for performing arts knowledge transmission, including Kathak in particular. The paper raises the questions:

- What is the significance of the *guru-śiṣya* tradition, apart from it being the main mode of knowledge transmission?
- How are the hierarchy and power dynamics implied in these *guru-śiṣya* relations instrumental in building community belonging?
- How does the traditional *guru-śiṣya parampara* fit into the institutionalized model of teaching, whether state-supported institutions or individual enterprises?
- How does this tradition adapt to the global market and consumer culture?

The study is based on material from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in various periods throughout 2017 and 2020 in various Kathak communities in the central northern territories of India and my own experiences as a Kathak student and practitioner in Delhi from 2003 till 2010. I continue my study and practise of Kathak traveling between India and Lithuania and, recently, online.

The research is grounded in the discourses of critical theory and historiography. The concepts developed by Michael Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu serve as the theoretical background

and methodological tools to delve into the subject.<sup>4</sup> Postcolonial theory is also important here, as it sheds light on some historiographical details, scrutinizes the concepts of "tradition" and "authenticity" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and explains some particularities of the modern and global world (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995).

### ***Guru-śiṣya parampara*: overview**

According to available oral and written sources, as well as the observed ethnographic reality, theoretical and applied knowledge in South Asia in general and in India in particular has been transmitted through the *guru-śiṣya parampara*, the traditional one-to-one teaching model. The tradition is important in the present too, though sometimes in a much-modified way. At one extreme, it preserves some of the region's vanishing practices or crafts. However, at the other extreme, we may observe a clear caricature of the *guru-śiṣya* pattern. Most explicitly, it occurs in "new age" spiritual movements in the form of such phenomena as "guruism", where the guru acts more like a sales manager or broker for the divine.

The notion of *guru-śiṣya parampara* can be found in a variety of primary and secondary texts. Primary textual sources, such as the *veda*,<sup>5</sup> *upaniṣad*<sup>6</sup> or *purāṇa*<sup>7</sup> mostly speak about the *guru-śiṣya parampara* as the main model of imparting of spiritual knowledge and sustaining different lineages. From these texts we can understand the general importance of the phenomenon and place it among other cultural and social features. However, the language of these primary sources is highly metaphorical and the explanations must rely on wider historical and cultural contexts.

The late medieval period is richer in historiographical evidence. Courtly patronage brings many changes to the organization of performing communities. Specifically, in the northern regions of India, with the establishment of Moghul rule we can trace the process of the professionalization of performers. Knowledge becomes a commodity and it is kept in the rather small and closed circles of stylistic schools. The knowledge transmission is institutionalised and obtains "guild-like qualities" and the knowledge authority rests on a person rather than on written text or tradition. The socio-artistic organization of performing communities served as a management system of performing knowledge and property. *Guru-śiṣya parampara* was an important factor in handing over the exclusive musical property of particular lineages, which was usually secret, unavailable, or only partly available for non-family disciples, traditionally given only in the form of gift exchange after marriage. In today's terms, we would call this phenomenon intellectual property, protected by copyright laws.

In colonial times and the period of reforms leading to India's independence, the main religious and socio-cultural concepts were highly influenced by the intellectual interaction between East and West, processes of knowledge translation, and the individual vision of some thinkers/translators, such as Swami Vivekananda and Ananda Coomaraswamy. A romanticized and mystified approach was used to rewrite dance history and aesthetics in accordance with a nationalist agenda. This resulted in highlighting certain concepts, such as the connection to temple ritual as well as the spirituality, authenticity, and ancient origins of the dance. *Guru-śiṣya parampara* also found importance as an assurance of the "unbroken continuity of the system of oral transmission which was systematized with mathematical precision" (Vatsyayan 1992:2).

Along with the other concepts, the phenomenon of traditional knowledge transmission was fitted into a particular ideologically defined framework without considering problematic issues or the contemporary situation. The lack of evidence and gaps in the discourse were filled with speculative and abstract presumptions, thus creating a history of *guru-śiṣya parampara* on the fringes of mythology.

### ***Guru-śiṣya parampara* in the performing arts: the Kathak dance situation**

*Guru-śiṣya parampara* is still very alive as a knowledge transmission model in the performing arts, where the relationship between teacher and student is intimate. Gurus are important, unquestioned, and respected, and striving students are dedicated and initiated (often from the same extended family or community).

Huib Schippers lists the main concepts related to and frequently emerging from the context of *guru-śiṣya parampara*: tradition, authenticity, context, orality, holistic learning, and intangible aspects of Indian music (Schippers 2007:3).<sup>8</sup> All kinds of knowledge were and are mainly transmitted in an oral mode. The orality of knowledge leads to contextual and holistic modes of transmission. The "in-body transmission" is readily incorporated in the teaching/learning process and leads to the embodied corporeal consciousness of the practitioner (Zarrilli 1984:192).

We can clearly observe three stages of the process. *Shravana*, literally the "act of hearing", refers to learning by means of watching the teacher and senior disciples practicing, hearing the rhythmical and musical patterns, and observing the context of teaching and performing. Observing slowly grows into the more advanced stage – mimicking and practicing or *manana*. Usually, these two stages take years of rigorous practice and dedication. Throughout this period, actual dance or music knowledge is transmitted to the student along with the context of the performative tradition.

After the stages of *sramana* and *manana*, the time for realization, mediation, and transformation of knowledge comes, when the technique is finally embodied by the practitioner and tradition and culture are inscribed in their body and consciousness. The disciple becomes part of the "socio-artistic organization" and is ready to use the "performance knowledge" or learned "codified strips of behavior" in "either structured or improvised performance" (Zarrilli 1984:191).



Figure 1. The students following the movements of the late Pt. Birju Maharaj during his 80th birthday celebration in Lucknow on 4 February 2018. Author's personal archive. Photo credit: Jovita Ambrazaitė.

The necessary conditions of such holistic knowledge transmission are the long period of time dedicated to learning and the personal bond between teacher and student. Traditionally, the student would stay in a *gurukul* or *asram*<sup>9</sup> for a certain period. In the case of absence of a structured institution such as a *gurukul*, the student would simply stay with the guru in their family. The teacher and disciple develop an intimate and caring relationship, from one side supported by ultimate acceptance and dedication and from the other side total trust and readiness to share the knowledge without holding back. In conversations with both teachers and students about their learning or teaching experience, this deep connection is always highlighted as a major condition for knowledge transmission. On the contrary, if the bond from both sides is not evolving, the guru refuses to teach or the student looks for another teacher. This proves that the connection required for knowledge dissemination involves a very personal human factor.

Traditionally, the consolidation of the *guru-śiṣya* relationship in society happens through the ritual *ganḍābandhan*.<sup>10</sup> This ritual is an initiation ceremony for the disciple and formal recognition of the particular hierarchical pattern in the given system. From this moment onwards, the personal relationship becomes socially active and the performing life of the student becomes interrelated with that of the teacher.

Another important concept implicit in *guru-śiṣya parampara* is *guru dakṣiṇā*.<sup>11</sup> Simply put, it is what the disciple can offer in exchange for the knowledge obtained from his teacher. This concept is portrayed in quite a few episodes in literature and mythology, such as the story of *Ekalavya*<sup>12</sup> depicted in the epic *Mahābhārata*.<sup>13</sup> Traditionally it is a symbolic concept and can be performed in a variety of modes. One of the most common acts of the *guru dakṣiṇā* is service to the teacher.

So, the knowledge transmission system, along with the factors of practice and stylistic variation, form the basis of this "socio-artistic organization", directly influencing the image and performance of its members. Through the vigorous dedicated practice and commitment to the authority of the guru, who is actually the embodiment of a certain stylistic school, the notions of continuity, lineage, tradition, authenticity, and preservation of intangible aspects of the culture are highlighted. Thus, the identity of the performer is established. It correlates with a particular community and is expressed explicitly in patterns of hierarchy, social status, and performance. The construction of this certain identity is achieved through mind and body discipline.

As observed by Pallabi Chakravorty, "dances were based on a model of durable and reproducible practice (inculcated through terms such as *guru*, *riyaz*, *parampara*), that created a sense of place or a habitus" (Chakravorty 2010:169–170).

"Habitus" is a very fluid term, depicting the web of "dispositions", which acts as the "organizing action" and "designates a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination" (from *Outline of Theory of Practice*; cited in Grenfell 2008:51). Habitus is both a structured and structuring system: structured by a person's upbringing and educational experiences and the structuring of such factors as practices, beliefs, perceptions, and feelings. It always acts in a relationship with the "field" and "capital". Used in the field of performing practices in India, particularly with respect to traditional knowledge transmission, the tools developed by Pierre Bourdieu evoke the following picture. A particular practice, stated identity, or "way of being" results from performers' dispositions acquired through the *guru-śiṣya parampara* (habitus) and the performers' position in the performing field (capital, both economic and cultural) in the current state of the socio-artistic organization or context of performing community (field). In this way, the habitus here stands for ways of performance, feeling, thinking, and being in particular ways in the spaces of the everyday practice, stage performances, and social activities of the performer. It also captures the way the performer carries the history or lineage/tradition into the present circumstances and makes certain choices.

The concepts developed by Bourdieu serve as tools to understand how the *guru-śiṣya parampara*, with its notion of authority and authenticity, actively influences the performance practices and shapes the relationship between the performer's identity and the socio-artistic organization.

This further leads us to ground the traditional knowledge transmission practices in the realm of theoretical discourse developed by Michel Foucault. One of Foucault's most important ideas is the relationship between knowledge and power. *Guru-śiṣya parampara* – an educational institution through the authority of the guru and notions of tradition and authenticity – constantly exercises power. For Foucault, the main arena of power is the body. Dance and other performative traditions are inseparable from the body as the main medium of performance, so the connection between knowledge and power revealed through the body becomes very explicit in the scenario of transmitting dance knowledge. The discipline of the body and, through the body, the discipline

of the mind, becomes a method of control. It keeps the performer vulnerable and entangled in a web of anxiety and responsibility. It draws the borders of aesthetic, social, and bodily norms and places the subject in a particular position in the hierarchical system or socio-artistic organization of the performative community.

As mentioned, the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century brought a wave of important historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural changes to India, which led to important transformations in the performing arts environment. This period well illustrates how the aspects of socio-artistic organization were used aggressively and resulted in exclusion and replacement. Throughout the Mughal rule in the northern and central regions of India, Kathak in the courts was mainly performed by hereditary women dancers but accompanied and taught by male *gurus/ustāds*. The musical profession was mainly occupied by Muslim hereditary performers. In British Raj, dance was degraded almost to the point of vanishing under the influence of Victorian anti-nautch<sup>14</sup> policies, when *devadāsī*<sup>15</sup> in the south and *tawāif*<sup>16</sup> in the north were deprived of their traditional performing occupation, marginalized and treated as simple prostitutes. These British ideas and policies were picked up and continued by reformists and freedom fighters. Along with the freedom movement, and later while building a new independent nation, Kathak and other performative traditions became an important field for searching for national identity, authenticity, and a great, lost, ancient culture. Under these ideological influences, some important shifts happened in gender, caste, and religious community in the field of the performing arts. Dance and music traditions were revived, institutionalized, and nationalized. They were taken through the process of "sanskritization".<sup>17</sup> As noted by Urmimala Sarkar Munsī:

There are a number of examples of SANSKRITIZATION of dance forms before and after Indian independence, in an effort to 'save' dance forms from disrepute, or extinction, to move them from their small world of 'little tradition' to the urban 'great tradition', and to give a new legitimacy for survival by identifying and projecting their links with the historical past by linking the movement patterns to the temple sculptures. [...] Sanskritization in the context of dance also means establishing a strong link with the predominantly Hindu historical past. (Munsi 2010:204–205)

Sanskritization went hand in hand with purification, which

has been sanctioned and backed by the cultural bureaucracy and brought into practice by the urban high caste/class elite practitioners, whose principal agenda was to create and establish forms which projected an 'acceptable' image of clean, aesthetically appealing body, which needed its distance in history and in actual projection from the impure nautch or the dance for private patrons that it came to be associated with in the nineteenth century. (Munsi 2010:205)

The best tool for smoothing these processes was the revisited *guru-śiṣya parampara*. With state and private initiatives and support, a number of educational institutions were established, of course, using the Western model of education. The newly built institutional bodies for music and dance were filled with predominantly male *gurus/ustāds* and upper or middle class-educated śiṣyas (predominantly women), motivated reformers/reinventors, and dance visionaries. Concepts of tradition and authenticity were and are carried forwards in these institutions, along with the "upholding of codes of conduct (both gender specific and otherwise)" through the authority of the teacher/master, who is the embodiment of *parampara*, and the "unquestioned submission" to the guru from generation to generation (Munsi 2010:173).

### Knowledge transmission in the current Kathak scenario

In the contemporary context of public modernity and market-driven society, with its fast development track, spread of consumerist culture, and mass media dissemination, the dance field also becomes more global and available for all sections of society. However, along with the tendencies of democratization, the performing arts continue to retain an elitist attitude. Retaining the concepts of "tradition", "authenticity", and "purity", the overall situation of dance and other arts nonetheless becomes business oriented and competition driven. In this atmosphere, dance transmission seems to be even more complicated, as it faces challenges accommodating the authority and power dynamics from one side and the democratization of teaching processes from the other.

### Conclusion

My own experience of learning dance in India has been very positive. I have been very lucky to become acquainted with very dedicated and knowledgeable teachers, sharing, caring, and loving with motivation and vision. I would say it was rather inclusive in my case, but most so after I was able to understand and submit myself to a tradition requiring so much dedication and commitment. The system itself has many tendencies that may appear positive or negative from different perspectives. Some aspects can be really misused from both sides. The main features, like the system being holistic, contextual, oral, intuitive, and intimate, are helpful in reaching the deepest layers of traditional performance knowledge, and to passing them to generations to come. These features can be labeled as positively inclusive. However, without reflection, and in its corrupted form, the system may incubate questionable values created by hidden hierarchical structures and power relations, identity and body politics, religious and socio-cultural dogmas, and economic factors. All these factors construct a cage of hegemony, stagnation of tradition, unquestionability, and authority that many dancers in India and elsewhere find themselves locked in – unable to be flexible, to be able to reflect and question, to create their own language of expression. Holding on to empty terminologies, sham and fictive rituals, and damaging relationships that increase "otherness", exotify, and separateness are definitely exclusive.

### Endnotes

- 1 In Sanskrit word *kathā*, meaning "story", "narrative".
- 2 The use of the term classical is controversial in the context of Indian dance traditions. In the treatise on performing arts *Nāṭyaśāstra* (5th century BCE – 5th century CE), we can find terms *desi* and *mārgī*, which can be considered having approximate meaning of folk and classical. In addition, the term *śāstrīy* can be used, meaning "related to valid treatises on performing arts".
- 3 Originally the department of Shree Ram Bhārtiya Kalā Kendra, taken over by the government in 1964. SBKK was founded as Jhankar Music Circle in 1947 by Mrs. Sumitra Charat Ram and acquired its recent name in 1976. A very important institution, which directly influenced the revival of Kathak dance and Hindustani music.
- 4 More in: Rabinow 1984; Grenfell 2008.
- 5 *Veda* – a large body of religious texts, composed in Vedic Sanskrit and constituting the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature and the oldest scriptures of Hinduism.
- 6 Later commentary, part of the Vedic canon. An ancient Sanskrit text that contains some of the central philosophical concepts and ideas of Hinduism, some of which are shared with religious traditions like Buddhism and Jainism.
- 7 A vast body of literature of different genres (myths, legends, etc.) composed between the 3rd and 10th centuries CE. It covers a wide range of topics and belongs to the *smṛiti* (literally "which is remembered") tradition.
- 8 Musicians and dance performers in North India are very much interrelated, usually originating from the same families/communities. However, a strict hierarchy between them exists, based on the caste system (like in the case of vocalists and sarangi or tabla players).
- 9 A professional guild like an educational environment or residential school, where the student typically lives near

or with the teacher at his home or a particular place for learning (*kul*— "family").

- 10 Literally means the "tying of the sacred thread".
- 11 Means any donation, fee, or honorarium given to a cause, monastery, temple, spiritual guide, or after a ritual. Also, an honorarium given to a guru for education, training, or guidance.
- 12 Ekalavya was asked to cut his own right thumb as a *guru dakṣiṇā* by the authoritative Droṇāchārya.
- 13 One of the two major Sanskrit epics. Along with the second epic, Rāmāyaṇa, it forms the Itihasa or mythology.
- 14 *Nautch* literary means "dance, dancing".
- 15 Community of hereditary female performers of South India who used to perform in temple and court settings.
- 16 Hereditary community of North Indian female dancers – courtesans – usually related to the Mughal court.
- 17 The term was introduced by the Indian sociologist Mysore Narasimhachar Shrinivas in the 1950s. In the sphere of the performing arts, it was accurately and purposefully used by U.A. Coorlawala and others in their writings.

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