American Kathaks: Embodying Memory and Tradition in New Contexts

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American Kathaks: Embodying Memory and Tradition in New Contexts

by

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Naman: Bow
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Chapter 1

Utpatti: Origin
Introduction and Key Questions

Today, Kathak, a classical Indian dance form, is practiced across major cities in the US by hundreds of students, teachers and practitioners. Through the course of its own history and location in Indian history, it has come to stand as a symbol, even an artifact of Indian nationhood. How do American Kathak practitioners remember the history of Kathak dance through oral and embodied memory? How does nostalgia, authenticity, tradition, and gender meet within their performance of Kathak? Is the narrative of India’s glorious past pervasive, or is there space to recognize, and give voice to the marginalized women that kept the dance alive after the loss of royal patronage? What does the study and performance of Kathak symbolize within the American context? How are relationships, such as guru shishya parampara, the traditional, structured relationship between a teacher and student, recreated or re-interpreted in the American context? How has the flow of Indians to the US, and with it, Kathak, shaped Indian American Kathaks’ narratives of culture and origin?

In Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India (2008), Pallabi Chakravorty argues that Kathak is an everyday tool used by ordinary women to shape their lives and selfhood. She and other scholars have done significant work in unearthing the role that art plays in practitioners’ lives, as well as the creation of gendered national and cultural identities through Kathak (Chakravorty 2004; Mankekar 1999; Ram 2000; Walker 2014). Researchers have studied music and film to understand their implications to diasporic communities (Desai 2003). However, what happens when Kathak, from India, traditionally performed for Indians by Indians, travels to the US? With a community that is still taking shape—the earliest teachers and
practitioners arrived or permanently established institutes from 1970 to 1980, the same rigor of research hasn’t been done to understand Kathak’s practitioners in this new context. How do they understand, negotiate, recreate, reject, or remake their memories and identities?

As a student and practitioner of Kathak over the past 18 years, I have a foundation in theory, as well as the norms surrounding its study and performance—within the classroom or workshop, as a performer and as part of the viewing audience. The first 10 years of my training was in New York, under Satya Narayana Charka, a male dancer trained in India in both Lucknow and Jaipur traditions. During this time, I learned classroom rituals, behaviors and how to interact with my guru (teacher), gurubehen and gurubhai (classmates, more accurately translated as sisters and brothers, connected through our guru). I frequently performed for diaspora audiences at cultural events, as a visiting performer for communities with limited Indian classical resources, and in India, as a representative of the diaspora, keeping the tradition alive.

During this time, I was introduced to the most eminent Kathak dancer alive today, Birju Maharaj. In addition to attending workshops in New York over several years to learn dance compositions, I gained a nuanced understanding of how students traditionally serve their guru, and forged a personal relationship with him and his troupe as a trusted student in America. Near native fluency in Hindi opened the door to engage deeply with these dancers and musicians in both formal and informal settings.

From there, I traveled to New Delhi to attend classes directly under Maharaj and his disciple Saswati Sen at his institute Kalashram, where I performed with his company, viewed performances and soaked in norms of the classical audience. Upon returning to the US, I began working with Janaki Patrik, who had trained in India under Maharaj in the 1960s but unlike
Charka, is not of Indian heritage. Notably, all of my teachers have studied at, or, in the case of Maharaj, taught at Kathak Kendra, the National Institute for Kathak dance in New Delhi.

_Dhaat: Stance_  
Research Design

Dance is a means for human expression, bearing meaning based on sociocultural context, is reflective of identity, is symbolic, and tied to ritual, embodying the values and characteristics of its practitioners. (Pusnik 2010, 5). Chakravorty (2008) notes that “Although the study of dance is somewhat subjugated in the discipline of anthropology in North America, dance is a vital aspect of culture, and notions of culture, identity and history are continually reinvented through dance” (173). Thus, dance, and the ways that it is learned, remembered, and performed is a useful tool to understand tradition, memory, and gender within the American Kathak community, particularly the second generation Indian Americans that comprise both a significant part of this study’s sample, and eventually, a sizable portion of the broader American Kathak community within the coming years. In order to explore the question of whether American Kathak practitioners remember the history and traditions of Kathak dance, I draw from relevant frameworks within the broader fields of anthropology, ethnomusicology, and performance studies. I rely most heavily on Pallabi Chakravorty’s research, particularly _Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India_ (2008), a critical work for the study of Kathak, which sheds light on women’s contributions to the dance form, whilst also giving voice to contemporary female dancers in Calcutta, who are remaking and reshaping Kathak in their new context as active agents. This study is an exploration of what has been referred to as the “dominant narrative of Kathak,” a phrase coined by Chakravorty, referring to the narrative
constructed by the Indian nation-state upon its independence from British colonization. By examining tradition, memory, and gender I will explore its reproduction within the American Kathak community in the 21st century.

Does Kathak give voice to its American practitioners, or is it a means for those who already have voice to continue to remember selective histories? Following Indian independence, the classical arts were elevated as markers of a rich, ancient heritage, and I hypothesize that middle and upper class American Kathak practitioners embody this particular history and tradition through the transmission of Kathak. Tomie Hahn’s research on the Japanese dance nihon buyo in Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture through Japanese Dance (2007) explores how culture is embodied through sensory transmission. I use her work as a lens to see my own observation and training experiences through, decoding the way the body is used through the traditional mode of learning, for example, marking Kathak as a spiritual/devotional practice through repeated rituals such as touching the guru’s feet, and completing the pranaam (a bow) before and after dancing. Hahn also helps frame the question of what is ultimately remembered by practitioners. Do Kathak dancers in America inadvertently silence marginal voices through omission, or create space for them within their oral and embodied memories?

According to Ragland (2009), due to migration, scholars look at music as belonging to more than just one place, associated with both home and host countries, “being associated with both here and there” (15). Music, as well as dance, particularly within migrant communities, is instrumental in defining culture and identity in relation to space, or as Ragland states “neither here nor there” (15). This surfaces in an interesting tension for the American Kathak community which remembers the pre-colonial period of court patronage, specifically in Lucknow, with
nostalgia as an undivided India in which the arts flourished, as a defining point of their culture. In *Performing Al-Andalus: Music and Nostalgia Across the Mediterranean* (2015), Shannon explores how Al-Andalus is remembered, how nostalgia influences memory, and what this means for understanding culture and identity. “Al-Andalus therefore serves as an important leg sustaining the project of a modern Morocco because of its links to a prestigious past, a refined high culture, and a hoped-for (utopian) future” (87). How might the memory of Lucknow be similar to Al-Andalus, nostalgically remembered as the location of the high art and refinement of Kathak dance in the Mughal courts?

Finally, I use Sunaina Marr Maira’s *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* (2002) which explores hip hop remix culture in 1990s New York City as a starting point to assess the tension between tradition and new contexts faced by second generation dancers. How these practitioners negotiate “authentic” Indian culture, aligning with what is viewed as traditional, is useful in exploring how notions of collectivity, identity, and belonging are imagined and splintered at particular moments embedded within specific narratives.

This paper is organized into five chapters. The first chapter provides a foundational understanding of the key questions of this research and their theoretical context, followed by a brief, but inclusive history of Kathak, background around the South Asian diaspora in America, as well as the establishment of Kathak within the United States. Chapter 2 examines traditions within teaching and learning Kathak, particularly the revered *guru shishya parampara* (master disciple tradition). Findings around the complex relationships between students and their teachers are discussed, as well as the impetus for learning the dance in the US A brief
observation of a classroom experience closes this chapter, helping to illuminate some of the rituals and behaviors that are commonly seen. Chapter 3 focuses on oral and embodied memory. This chapter begins with oral memories of Kathak’s origin stories, including what practitioners verbally remember of its history. This is followed by a section exploring embodied memory, namely what is remembered through practice and performance of the dance, followed by storytelling and what that tells us about collective memory and reproduction of the dominant narrative. Returning the to traditions within learning Kathak, lineage through a guru and gharana (house/style) in explored next as a salient concept within oral and embodied memory. Finally, chapter 3 concludes with a discussion around the nostalgia with which Kathak, particularly amongst Lucknow gharana practitioners is remembered, and how three films, Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje (1955), Shatranj Ke Khilari (1977), and Devdas (2002), contribute to collective memory and nostalgia, whilst featuring three female characters: a dancing girl, a court dancer, and a courtesan. Although not completely absent, the histories of Kathak’s marginalized women have largely been forgotten, due to omission within the dominant narrative of Kathak. Chapter 4 explores the role that gender plays in the dance: including ideas of ideal femininity and nationalism, a discussion around women within history, lineage, tradition, and repertoire, and closes with Krishna in Kathak. The final chapter begins with the multicultural context that American Kathaks must mediate, simultaneously maintaining tradition whilst exploring new applications of the dance, and closes with conclusions based on learnings from this study. Lastly, sections within each chapter are titled with a term that is relevant to Kathak’s repertoire and is indicative of the major theme of the section, moving in a similar progression to a current-day solo performance.
Throughout this paper, I use the term “Kathak” to refer to the dance form that is practiced. However, I also use the term to refer to practitioners of the dance, as reflected in the title “American Kathaks.” Kathak dancers often can be referred to as *kathakaar, kathavachak, kathak* or *kathaka*, all deriving from the word *katha* or story (Narayan 2004; Kothari 1989). The use of *kathak* to refer to practitioners over the aforementioned options is simply a personal choice, though other possibilities are equally valid and understood.

My observations in this section are based on a number of performances attended in the New York area spanning the April 2017 to March 2018. Additionally, as a member of the group that this thesis studies, I also draw from my past experiences as a performer and an audience member of Indian classical dance and music. In order to answer these questions, I designed a research study including the following key components: (1) in-depth, one-on-one interviews, (2) classroom observation, and (3) performance observation. There are a few instances where I reference performances or workshops prior to 2017 as they are relevant, which is possible due to membership in this group. Additionally, I also reference publicly available video footage of performances salient for this research. One-on-one interviews took place over time, including many conversations that transpired in pieces over days and weeks, as well as some more focused conversations with participants who lived across the country via FaceTime video or phone calls. It is worth noting that this study design skews towards east coast, Tri-State area Kathak practitioners, due to my own residence in that area, and the ability to travel with relative ease to visit teachers and performances. In order to counterbalance this bias, I attempted to recruit more interview participants from those outside the Tri-State area, and also with those practitioners.
whom I did not already know through the Kathak social network to ensure greater diversity in perspective.

Classroom observation entailed visiting temples, owned and rented studios in the Tri-State area, and conducting unobtrusive observation—to the extent possible, however this was often challenging with teachers involving me in class conversations. When possible, I sat on the floor, off to one side, watching teachers as they physically demonstrated, or called out the movements and corrections from their seat at the front. I also observed students as they completed movements and choreography, trying to avoid distracting them or making them conscious as they tried things in class. However, it was inevitable that I might catch them watching me, as I watched them, and as such, it was difficult to be completely unobtrusive. A future study might include a longer period of field research, where I could visit classrooms repeatedly over months, and eventually become a more routine presence, as parents and family members sometimes are. However, my membership in the Kathak community could hinder the possibility of carrying this out as well—teachers are very welcoming to visitors, but might become uncomfortable with an active dancer of another teacher or style watching all of their choreographic decisions.

Finally, performance observation included close viewings of Kathak performances within the Tri-State area. These performances included formal presentations in auditoriums with stages by a soloist or ensemble, with and sometimes without accompanying musicians. Sometimes Kathak was one of many disparate acts in one performance. Performance observation also included smaller studio showings by visiting practitioners. While there is some overlap between performers and interviewees due to a chance performance occurring at the time of research, and
because the interview sample is more robust, I discuss individual performances with more depth around specific artistic and choreographic decisions whereas interview findings are mentioned in a more aggregate way.

The research sample includes three primary groups, (1) teachers, (2) dancers, and (3) students, all of whom are referred to as “American Kathaks” and “Kathak practitioners” as a collective throughout this paper. The term “American” is used here to foreground the disparate connections this group has to the United States. Whereas many might not identify as American, due to connotations of citizenship, many have permanently settled in the country and are invested in how the dance grows in the US, either as teachers training students who would otherwise have limited access to study the form, or as dancers who are shaping a Kathak-viewing audience. Others certainly would identify as Americans—regardless of their ethnicity—as they were born and raised in the United States, and their exposure to Kathak has been limited to, or primarily within the country. A small minority are exposed to the dance in the US and travel back to India, either due to their desire to continue intensive training with senior artists or due to personal/professional decisions, for example, if a spouse received a job offer in India.

Returning to the groups that comprise the sample, the term guru can sometimes be problematic, as I explain later. Instead I refer to “teachers” as a group including some individuals who may use the title guru, as well as others who do not, but invest a significant portion of their time in training students. The second group, dancers, includes those individuals who are performing artists and devote the majority of their effort to presenting Kathak to the public, and most frequently at a professional level. The majority earn a living this way, however there are some who supplement their income in other ways, which also may include teaching, albeit not
over the extensive period of time as the first group. Finally, the last group within the sample is students. The students group comprises individuals who are serious in their study of Kathak, with deep training over five or more years, and a desire to present the performing art publicly and perhaps eventually training other students. While there are hundreds, if not thousands, of students who have trained in the style for this period of time under the age of eighteen, due to the high dropout rate of students once they leave for college, this sample does not include them. Furthermore, including young adults in the sample would certainly skew some of the findings, given the sensitive nature of some of Kathak’s history. Many individuals within the the student group actually trained in Kathak over ten or more years—they self-identified as students due to their attachment to their teacher or guru, and continued desire to train with them, versus seriously teaching students, and they dropped out of the dancers group as they were not currently presenting Kathak professionally.

It is worth noting that while all were given the option to speak through a pseudonym, not one individual wished to. All requested to have their own names used, perhaps because of the nature of the subject, a performing art, presented for public consumption. However, at the request of a few, and due to the nature of some of the findings, I have used discretion in directly citing some learnings out of respect for individuals and their relationships within the Kathak community. As a member of this community, I am aware that it takes several years to form trusting relationships, and hearsay and disrespect can cast doubt on relationships that have been nurtured slowly over time. Thus, certain comments and findings remain anonymous.

My own membership in this sample significantly improved access and even an awareness of some individuals to recruit for this study. For example, I did not need to rely on an
intermediary to help me gain access or determine which individuals to speak to. However, it also made one-on-one interviews challenging at points. American Kathaks tend to be loyal to their teachers and institutes, and don’t often have opportunities to work together across styles and groups. As such, many practitioners don’t know each other well, or may only know of each other. This is particularly true of students. Teachers are often acquaintances, but again, infrequently work together, partially also due to geographic location. As such, I had to share my own background in Kathak in a distinct way to each individual. For example, for some I leaned in more to my position as a graduate student conducting research on Kathak in the United States, and my own Kathak experience was not relevant nor discussed beyond establishing status as a member of the dance community. For others, they were more interested in who I trained with before they spoke, and some became more curious about my training after deeper discussion around the art form. Due to a range of perspectives that American Kathaks hold, in certain instances, my training immediately gave me credibility, and in others that was not a point of discussion.

Informants were recruited through a variety of methods. First, through direct outreach to those who are a part of my network—those I have known for years, as peers, teachers, friends, and acquaintances. Secondly, through direct outreach to many practitioners who are known within this group as teachers and students. This was supplemented by internet searches and scouring listings on websites dedicated to either the arts or the Indian community residing in specific regions within the US with the attempt of securing a more diverse sample. Finally, the last method consisted of using social media as a means to reach out to a broader swath of practitioners. I posted in multiple Facebook groups for Indian classical dancers and musicians.
Facebook as well as other social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube are emerging as relevant tools for Kathak dancers internationally to promote their work, stay in touch, and as a canvas to document milestones such as meeting a famous artist, participating in or teaching a workshop, and capturing backstage and green room experiences. Although outside the scope of this paper, a future study might delve deeply into how Kathak practitioners are using technology. Within this study, Facebook was a particularly useful tool.

While knowledge of American Kathaks greatly helped identify and recruit participants for research, it is important to note that it did not alleviate all challenges to access. Firstly, practitioners are geographically spread out, and even amongst followers of the same guru in India or gharana (style), there are not pre-existing means of communication or other natural points of connection that allow for easy access and outreach. Additionally, there were other challenges as well. A significant hurdle was the timing of this study. In depth interviews began in late November, with the majority occurring between late December and March, when many practitioners travel to India to attend or participate in the festival/performance season there. Furthermore, some of the more established practitioners were harder to access. They had greater difficulty in making the time for research, unless of course we had met previously or had a relationship, in which case they were creative about making time to meet and were encouraging around this particular research topic. Before we contextualize Kathak as it is practiced within the US, we must first locate it historically.
Kathak is a style of classical dance that originated and developed in North India. It is known for delicate storytelling, rapid spins, and intricate footwork. Kathak derives from the Sanskrit word *katha*, or story (Kothari 1989). The earliest performers were bards who travelled from village to village recounting Hindu mythological stories from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* through gesture. They also danced in temples. Then, upon the Mughal invasion of the subcontinent, and the influence of Islamic culture, Kathak transformed. It moved to the courts. Dancers began to perform for kings, who became their new patrons. The dance shifted from storytelling towards technique. Dancers began playing with rhythm, creating and performing layered, complex compositions within the designated *taal*, or time cycle. They began including the signature pirouettes and footwork patterns within the repertoire, and the expressive elements of the dance were based in Urdu poetry, and were about romantic love, versus stories from the epics. Even the costumes changed. Kathak dancers during the Mughal era began covering more—only their face, hands, and feet were visible, and women covered their hair with a veil. Notably the fascination with showing the *ghunghat* (veil) in the dance itself is also traced to the Mughal period, “the practice of women being in purdah, thus resorting to drawing the veil (ghunhat), was a result of frequent invasions. In order to save the women folk from being ravaged by the invaders, it was convenient for the local population to adopt this custom of the invaders” (Narayan 2004, 22). Then, the British colonized India, and with it, denigrated Kathak as nautch dance. Nautch is an Anglicized corruption of the Hindi word *naach*, derivative of the Sanskrit *nritya*, referring to dance (Adnan 2014). Nautch was low and cheap, performed by dancing girls. It became a blanket term for all women who danced, making no distinction.
between highly skilled courtesans and “street walkers” (Walker 2014, 99). However, after Indian independence from colonization, the government formed *Kathak Kendra*, the National Institute of Kathak Dance, and Kathak was restored to its former glory, and recognized as a classical dance. And so the story goes. This is the ‘dominant narrative’ of Kathak (Chakravorty 2008), and although all of it is not grounded in historical evidence and is lacking nuance, Kathak dancers and students have steeped in this particular telling of Kathak’s story. It is outside the scope of this paper to provide a deep, evidence-backed history of Kathak, furthermore, others have critically examined its history already (Chakravorty 2008; Walker 2014). However, a basic grounding in its history, what it is, where it comes from (to the best of existing academic knowledge), and how it is performed is necessary in order to make sense of Kathak as it is practiced in the United States today and consider questions of what is remembered. I draw more heavily from Margaret Walker’s work *India’s Kathak Dance in Historical Perspective* (2014) than other sources; while it is not a dominant reading of Kathak’s history, Walker is thorough and bases her claims on texts and evidence-based research, rather than other dominant readings that do not cite references.

Kathak is recognized as one of the eight major forms of Indian classical dance, including Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Kathakali, Manipuri, Mohiniyattam, and Sattriya. Of all of these styles, it is the only one indigenous to North India, which is salient for its history and development. Of the other styles, many are from South India: Bharatanatyam (Tamil Nadu), Kathakali (Kerala), Kuchipudi (Andhra Pradesh), Mohiniyattam (Kerala), whereas others are from the east: Odissi (Odisha), Manipuri (Manipur), and Sattriya (Assam). Due to Kathak’s
geographic origin in Northern India, the dance and its practitioners have been physically located at the site of a significant amount of movement and migration.

Kathak originated and developed in Northern India, particularly in the present-day states of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Texts promoting the dominant narrative, including educational literature distributed by dance institutes, locate the earliest dancers as traveling bards who told stories: “Katha kahe so kathak kahave,” or “he who tells a story is a Kathak” (Narayan 2004; Kothari 1989) Walker (2014) questions the historicity of this narrative, tracing references to ancient and Medieval texts. She posits that while there are references to bards that told stories through music and drama that are mentioned in texts such as the Mahabharata, formally written down in 300 CE, there is no link connecting those bards to modern Kathak. Similarly, the Natyashastra, the ancient Sanskrit text on performing arts, is frequently mentioned within Kathak literature (Narayan 2004), however there isn’t a clear connection between the mudra (gestures) described and modern Kathak (Walker 2014, 41).

On the other hand, there are other Sanskrit texts, such as Sangitaratnakara or Nartananirnaya—authored by Pandarika Vitthala somewhere in the 15th to 16th centuries, while at Mughal Emperor Akbar’s court—that aren’t commonly mentioned as relevant to Kathak’s history, although the latter text does describe a mix of local forms with Persian influence, including footwork, different types of pirouettes, and stylized gaits, called gat within modern Kathak (43). Walker describes this location of Kathak within ancient Sanskrit texts as “fruitless and based on the Orientalist need for ancient origins, but that the identification of spins, footwork and other choreographic fragments does indeed show some roots of the dances that became kathak” (48). Thus we see that although the dominant narrative traces Kathak as a
distinct named art form to the *Natyashastra*, there are other, later texts that describe various elements present in what is now modern Kathak.

As mentioned earlier, with the arrival and rise of the Mughals in the 16th century, Kathak dancers found new patrons. It is my conjecture that “Mughal” is used as a blanket term to indicate Muslim rule, and to draw up visions of opulence, courts, luxury, and high art within this study. The Mughals were indeed Muslim, however, they were not the first Muslims in South Asia. Arabs were the first to raid in the 600-700s CE (Pletcher 2010, 115), and disparate Turkic/Central Asian groups collectively classified as the Delhi Sultanate were the next Muslims to come to India, beginning in the late 1100s. The Mughals were successful in taking control from the Delhi Sultanate, establishing the Mughal Empire from 1526-1748 (162). Although they were Chaghta’i Turks (Alam 1998), after the second Mughal emperor Humayun, the Mughals increasingly became an ethnic mix of Rajput and Persian through intermarriage. The Mughal Empire began to decline after the reign of Aurangzeb ended in 1707. In the north, the rise of the Indian princely states began in 1721 and ended in 1949 (Collier 2016, 16-19).

While a detailed history of this period is outside the scope of this paper, it is important to note that the influx of migrants brought a mix of “West Asian music and dance traditions” (Walker 2014, 57). Mughal courts played an important role in broadening the Kathak repertoire at the time, patronizing artists who began introducing expressive elements and compositions. Massey (2004) explains that importance of Vaishnav texts prior to the establishment of the Mughal empire, including works by Jayadeva, Tulsidas, Mirabai, Chandidas, and Vidhyapati. He posits that because the arts, such as music and dance, are not part of Islamic ritual, early Muslim rulers did not wish to patronize the established “Vaishnav-dominated Kathak,” yet were not
opposed to patronizing secular arts, and as such, “they sent for musicians and dancers from Persia and Central Asia. These dancing girls were known as domnis, hansinis, lolonis and hourkinis,” each unique in their own right (148-149). Furthermore, “Muslim royalty did not change the basic aesthetic concepts associated with Hindu ritual practices of music and dance such as rasa, bhava and darshan (gaze), but secularized them and added technical complexity” (Chakravorty 2008, 36-37). Upon the demise of the Mughal Empire, dancers and musicians migrated to Hindu and Muslim North Indian princely courts, seeking new patrons (Walker 2014, 57). One of the courts that emerged as important was Lucknow, the capital of Awadh, ruled by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, famous as a fervent patron of the arts. Notably, an important expressive part of the Kathak repertoire, thumri (a semi-classical style of vocal music and type of Kathak composition), is often traced back to his court, though others suggest that it existed prior (Hunt 2000). Although it is based on classical music, it is considered semi-classical because of the expressive way it is sung, with greater ornamentation than other vocal styles such as dhrupad or khayal, as well as its content, which has been described as “romantic” as well as “erotic” (Manuel 1989, 8). Courtesans, also known as tawaiif, often sang thumri (Hunt 2000, 88). Most agree that thumri and Kathak have an inextricable connection, and it is plausible that this connection to thumri and its romantic themes eventually became challenging for the dancers who presented them. “The thumris that continued to be taught and sung were the ones that could claim spiritual meaning—the descriptions of yearning or joy at meeting the beloved were considered metaphors for the soul’s love for the Paramatma…Thumri cannot be tied down, bound to a single intellectual interpretation” (Subramanyam 2001, 91) Thus, as the sanitization of the form took place, thumri was split into two—separating music and dance, which had a
profound impact on the form which relied on song and movement to communicate emotions and ideas (91).

The *tawaiif* “remains an ahistorical figure” within Kathak’s history (Chakravorty 2017). While this community of women was diverse, “the complex identity of the tawaiif is emblematic of the mosaic culture of India with its bewildering social hierarchies and communal and religious identities,” the word itself connotes prostitute (Tharu and Lalita 1991, 121). This association is in stark contrast to their mastery of high arts. Rita Ganguly, a noted *thumri* singer explained in her talk at the Society of Ethnomusicology in Pennsylvania in 2014:

‘Tawaifs’ were the elite female community influential in music, dance, theatre, film, literature, and etiquette. In the process of creating an official ‘classical’ culture in post-independence India, several such art forms fell into neglect, forcing many Tawaifs, their teachers, and their accompanists underground. Tawaifs became popularly perceived as prostitutes, a perception legitimized by the ultimate new music patron, All India Radio, who banned their performance. This confluence of puritanical Hindu state, Victorian morality, and colluding ‘Ustads’ annulled Tawaifs’ creative expression and economic freedom, negating that their accomplishment benefited the entire musician community.

Her identity as an artist, poet, dancer, and composer is lost, and she is instead remembered in simplistic ways, complicated by both gender and Muslim religion, in contrast to privileged, brahminical patrilineages (Chakravorty 2017).

As the colonial British Raj rose to power in the mid-1800s, the art form continued to shift in new contexts—practitioners, often courtesans, were denigrated under the British Raj. Kathak was considered low in status, as ‘nautch dance,’ vulgar, crude, and antithetical to ideals of civilized morality. Many accounts suggest that the British colonialists were very curious about the courtesans, however due to challenges in other parts of the empire, they began to run colonized India with more aggression. Namely, they limited their patronage of local arts, and set a number of measures that led to a loss of status of female dancers. Many of the British patrons
were only interested in prostitution, not the arts. Furthermore, the activities of a few other
groups, in addition to the British and their victorian ideals of morality eventually led to the

Women performers had to adapt as a result—some became musicians and actresses,
whereas others fell in even more deeply into prostitution. However, what is notable is that the
Anti-Nautch Movement targeted the separation of music and dance. In the past, the two had been
deeply intertwined, and in order for music to ascend in status as a great marker of culture as
espoused by the nationalists, it had to be separated from dance and the dancing girls (Walker
2014, 96). Thus, the dominant narrative of Kathak silences many of the female voices that were
instrumental in keeping Kathak alive at this time, despite the significant challenges caused by
colonization, namely the loss of patronage, as well as the British Anti-Nautch Movement\(^1\).

Interestingly, there are references that suggest that this period moved the art away from
its classicism, and turned it into mere entertainment. For example, Banerji in *Kathak Dance
Through Ages* (1982) states that, “Kathak of today, like so many other branches of our art and
culture, originated as a new form of dance from Indo-Moghul culture fusion, an origin which has
left its birth marks to the disadvantage of the style” (16). Banerji goes on to explain that while
dance is an art of the highest order, dancers “since the time it came to be considered as a
profession, perhaps lived as an outcaste, often indulging in promiscuous activities themselves, or
if the artists are females—came to be the object of amorous attention of those who could pay the
price” (17). He states that this was exacerbated by the fact that Kathak flowered within the
Indo-Mughal courts, causing a splintering of the classical form, “Kathak even slipped into the

\(^1\) Kathak as representative of deep Indian historicity, coinciding with the erasure of its original female
practitioners is not a unique phenomenon. The *devadasi* dancers of *sadir*, presently known as Bharatanatyam,
followed a similar postcolonial trajectory as Kathak (Hubel 2005, 134).
rapid precincts of houses of ill fame and degenerated steadily till it caused the emergence of a new form of dance, the ‘Nautch dance’ or the ‘Bazar Dance’” (18). According to this narrative, Kathak remained underground, but alive as a classical, high art, distinct from the degenerate nautch preserved by “gifted and loyal devotees...mainly the families of Kalka, Bindadin of Lucknow, and their talented descendants” (18). According to Banerji, the primary contribution of the Mughals to Indian art was of geometric patterns, and this surfaces in Kathak dance as well, which puzzlingly is later described as a “glorious fusion of Hindu and Muslim genius in arts” (20).

Kathak has a long history, spanning several hundred—or thousands, depending on who you ask—years, both witnessing and reflecting shifts in cultural influence from Hindus, Mughals, the British and finally, the newly formed Indian nation state (Narayan 2004, 18). While Kathak as a performing art adapted meaningfully from each context, the moment of the creation of India as a sovereign nation was a significant one for the perceived history and practice of this dance. In _The Nation and Its Fragments_ (1993), Partha Chatterjee explores postcolonial conditions and the development of nationalism in relation to, and sometimes in conflict with, unique social conditions that are not restricted to a specific Western typology or model of development. Teachers and immigrant parents of students in this study were young children or born shortly after Indian independence in 1947, and so this moment in history marking the transformation of colonial subjects into citizens of a nation-state is potent.

Previously, from the 13th century onwards, patronage was linked to Hindu and Mughal courts (Narayan 2004). Immediately following Indian independence, the state became its new patron (Chakravorty, 2008, 66). This is critical for two reasons. The first is that the British
greatly demeaned this art form, and their steady takeover of sovereign princely states led to the loss of patronage, pushing several dancers from artists to entertainer-sex workers. This also coincided with a migration out of the princely states in India (42). The establishment of the Indian nation-state as a patron of Kathak, and the creation of a National Institute of Kathak Dance, the Kathak Kendra, signaled the means by which this art form emerged as a symbol of national identity. Furthermore, the finding of the Natyashastra, the Sanskrit text on Indian classical performing arts in 1856 also contributed to the nationalist ways that classical dance began to be viewed, scrubbed of the women that did not fit the narrative of a pure, ancient Hindu tradition (Chakravorty 2008, 48).

In the postcolonial period, India imagined itself in a particular way in response to the specter of colonization: the priority was to assert that India was no longer a colony, and Indians were not colonial subjects. Instead, as part of the Indian national project, classical dance was framed as pre-British and pre-Mughal in order to hark back to an imagined India of culture and refinement. “The histories of music and dance that were written in this period connected the arts with the far past, but consequently omitted or marginalized what was considered unsavoury from more recent centuries” (Walker 2014, 14). In Painting Culture (2003), Myers explains that Aboriginal cultures “were seen as impediments to progress—too collective, too kinship oriented, too attached to place” (129). Notably, we see both the same and the opposite with Kathak. Whereas Kathak as nautch dance in the colonial period was certainly seen as an impediment to progress, debasing Indian culture; Kathak as a marker of Indian civilization draws its authenticity from being collective, kinship (gharana) oriented, and attached to particular places. The style was exalted as a marker of the nation’s deep heritage and ancient culture. The new state began
sending artists abroad as cultural ambassadors. It would be remiss not to mention Birju Maharaj, who came to the fore as a prominent classical dancer and teacher at this time, as he has become so well-known and synonymous with Kathak. Since partition and independence in 1947 to date, Maharaj has traveled extensively within India and across the world, communicating not only what Kathak dance is, but also a specific history of India and Indianness (Team Greycell 2018).

Maharaj was born in 1938 into the Kalka-Bindadin gharana (house) of Kathak dance, Maharaj’s family was entrenched and influential in the Kathak world. His grandfather and grand-uncle, the namesakes of this gharana, were known in their day as outstanding performers within the courts of Lucknow and Raigarh, in Uttar Pradesh, the northern state of India, patronized by the nawab. This distinction of being born into a specific lineage is particularly relevant, as in other princely states that were under the rule of Hindu royalty, Kathak dancers also found patronage, but the content of their performances were somewhat different, and thematically took on a more Hindu tone and maintained this type of content. While the colloquial story of Kathak that makes this distinction between the religion of the patron and the content is somewhat incongruous, these stylistic differences are important to the type of Kathak that Maharaj has fashioned as a result, and that has gained popularity world over. Maharaj’s father Acchan Maharaj trained several dancers but unfortunately died young, when Maharaj was just a child. While he was not officially initiated into this style by his father, he has told several stories via personal communication, as well as public interviews, where he mentions that he used to watch his father in class, and mimic the motions privately. After his father’s death, Maharaj’s mother, untrained in Kathak, would tell him of the types of movements she recalled seeing, that he could then use to create his own version of Kathak dance. He was also partially trained by his
uncles, before he took to teaching at the age of fourteen in 1952, due to financial need. Notably, by this time, the court system that had sustained his family previously no longer existed, and teaching was his only option to earn a living. Also of note, performers belonging to the Lucknow Kalka-Bindadin tradition trained by Maharaj’s uncles learned a style of Kathak that is distinct from his own, the demand for which exists to this day, despite his age of 80.

Maharaj is not the only dancer that came into prominence at this time. Stepping back, it is important to note there were others, including women, who played an important role in paving the path for Kathak’s move from nautch to high art. Ruth St. Denis came to India in the 1920s looking for oriental dance, drawn by ideas of Hindu spirituality. However, because the Anti-Nautch movement was already underway, she found that local dances were already being suppressed and stigmatized. She eventually was able to meet Bachwa Jan, a famous Calcutta dancer. This exchange proved to be influential, as St. Denis’ depictions of nautch shifted from an exotic “romanticized, spiritual heroine” to more realistic “showing the girls as street performers” (Chakravorty 2008, 49). Despite her contribution, St. Denis is not popularly remembered, “Perhaps it was because of this later representation of the nautch dancers as secular, professional performers and not as sacred Hindu priestesses that St. Denis’ contributions towards reviving Kathak as a respectable dance form remains unnoticed” (49). On the other hand, Madame Menaka, born Leila Sokhey, is credited with removing the stigma from nautch.

Born to an upper class family and of mixed English and Indian parentage, Madame Menaka was exposed to nautch, and was attracted to it as it was more flexible than other forms, and less grounded in text. Notably, she experimented with it, changing and even omitting traditional elements, such as the repeating rhythmic cycle and thumri and ghazal compositions
that were so closely tied to courtesans. Additionally, her productions referenced Sanskrit texts, thus she was able to disassociate nautch from the nautch dancers whilst using only their dance vocabulary but replacing their repertoire (50-52). This was true of the institute that she went on to establish as well. Chakravorty explains that male students were *gharanedaar* (belonging to a traditional Kathak family) dancers, while the female students were from the middle class, and “Madame Menaka’s selective appropriation of the traditional practice of nautch and her distancing of it from the tawaif culture and the secular court traditions imbued Kathak with ‘spirituality’ and an ‘essential’ Indian identity” (53).

Thus, we see the historical shift around ways of viewing nautch, and the moment at which it became acceptable for upper and middle class women to learn the dance, based on selective memory and omission of the traditional practitioners such as *baiji* and *tawaif*. This made it possible for other respected female dancers such as Damyanti Joshi, the Pooviah sisters, Maya Rao, and Kumudini Lakhia—a very respected and influential artist amongst the American Kathak community today—amongst others, to take on Kathak. While I will explore the oral memory of Kathak’s history in chapter 3, it is important to note that despite her significant contributions to Kathak in the late 1930s and 1940s, Madame Menaka is also not well-remembered. Chakravorty cites a few reasons for this, but states that this was “largely due to the fact that Kathak was firmly institutionalized as the centre (Delhi) as a patrilineal and patriarchal practice of *gharanedar* gurus who never acknowledged women practitioners of the past as gurus, teachers, co-creators or pioneers” (54). We see these patrilineal and patriarchal attitudes continue to the present day, and remain pervasive in the diasporic Kathak community as well.
With these shifts in the repertoire, practitioners, and perspectives around the dance, the manner in which Kathak is presented also shifted. Kathak was presented on stages with proscenia to larger audiences, moving away from the more intimate settings it was previously presented in. Today, we see a mix of solo and group performances in Kathak. Although understood commonly as a solo art form, there is a proliferation of group choreographies presented within India as well as in the US. Solo performances typically are set to live music and begin with a devotional invocation. Dancers usually do not speak to the audience directly until after that piece, first paying their respects to the spiritual/religious, before welcoming their audience and extending their gratitude to their patrons/program organizers. Next, dancers present rhythmic elements of the repertoire, beginning in *vilambit laya* (slow speed) with *upaj* (improvised footwork), *thaat* (slow, stylized stances establishing the space within which s/he dances), then moves on to compositions such as *aamad* (Persian for “arrival,” but marked by the use of the dance syllables *ta thei tat*), and *utaan* (to rise, a composition that raises the tempo), before shifting into *madhya laya* (medium speed) in which they present *layakari* (rhythmic play), demonstrating their command over rhythm with short compositions such as *tihai*, *tore*, *tukre*, *paran*, *parmelu*, etc. Other punctuated expressive elements may be included, such as *gat nikas* and *gat bhaav* (stylized gaits and storytelling), as well as longer expressive compositions such as *thumri*, *ghazal*, etc., which can vary from five to thirty minutes. Performances conclude in *drut laya* (fast speed), marked by additional rhythmic work in a time cycle, including footwork. The climax of the performance may be an energetic musical piece such as *tarana*, which is sung, or it may continue with increasingly difficult and fast compositions demonstrating

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2 Music and dance are deeply intertwined. This significant overlap is made apparent through the same terms/elements appearing in Hindustani classical music and Kathak performances, although sometimes defined in different ways. For example, *tihai*, *thaat*, *layakari*, *gat*, *utaan*, *tarana*, *ghazal*, *thumri*, to name a few.
the dancers ability to do speedy footwork and spins in the midst of complex patterns. The audience, as well as musicians, are encouraged to vocalize their appreciation, with exclamations such as *wah!* or *kya baat hai!* when the dancer or the musicians present a piece that is difficult, nuanced, or simply flawlessly executed. Notably, these exclamations are almost always heard during rhythmic work, and less so during expressive dance. In *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (1986), Lila Abu-Lughod states “improvisational talent and ability to play with linguistic forms are highly valued in Bedouin culture. Even if the women were repeating poems everyone had heard, their ability to summon them up at the appropriate time was still admirable” (173). We see this appreciation in Kathak as well, but in reference to improvisation of both rhythmic patterns as well the expressive interpretation of stories, signaling that a practitioner is skilled.

Through the ‘official’ narrative of Kathak’s history taught to students world over, including my research sample, the memory of India’s glorious past is invoked and reinvoked. Although this history is largely exclusive, omitting the contribution of ‘nautch girls’ during colonization, it draws upon the image of a pristine, undivided India, characterized by high art and culture. While a robust study of perspectives of India held by the first-generation is outside of the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that scholars have identified the nostalgia, as well as the disconnect experienced by first-generation migrants in their notions around Indian culture based on, as Salman Rushdie refers to it, their imagined homelands’ (1982).
As a relatively new burgeoning immigrant group, South Asians are often viewed as ethnic “others” within the United States. However, members of the South Asian diaspora have had a longer history within the US, and more broadly, North America, than is commonly known. I use the terms “Indian” and “South Asian” interchangeably here, as at the time of their first arrival to North America, three nations with a sizeable diaspora—India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—were undivided and all part of India.

During the late 1800s, Indians from the northern state of Punjab began to migrate to the United States, specifically northern California, as agricultural workers. Originally, they had planned to come to the United States for a limited amount of time to earn money, and eventually to return to their homes in Punjab. However, they ended up settling in America, and many of them married Mexican women due to anti-miscegenation laws in place preventing them from bringing family members and permanently migrating. Over time, they found their niche, and even grew to compare the landscape of rural California to that of Punjab. Karen Leonard in *Making Ethnic Choices: California’s Punjabi Mexican Americans* (1992) states that “Punjabi laborers and farmers fit into California’s regional economies at several levels, although they had to battle ethnic stereotypes to do so” (21). While it was difficult for many of these immigrants to come to the US, it was necessary given obstacles at home: population pressure, subdivision of land, rural debt, a quest for status, as well as adventure were all reasons that many young Punjabi men ventured to the United States (29). The social role played by these immigrants was purely economic; they were strongly discouraged from settling in the United States, primarily through
laws preventing them from bringing their families with them or even marrying across ethnic lines.

There were also a small number of other migrants from India in California, including a small group of college students, comprised mostly of Hindus, as well as some Muslims and Sikhs. Additionally, there were some migrants from rural Bengal, however they were a relatively small group who eventually returned and did not develop into a distinct community as the Punjabis in California. Whereas prior to 1882 immigration to the US was open, general xenophobia led to Asians being barred by 1917, and ultimately, the 1924 immigration law which limited migration from anywhere besides Northern Europe (Chakravorty, Kapur, and Singh 2017, 3-6). In 1923, a man named Bhagat Singh Thind pursued a court trial which sought to open immigration channels for South Asians as well as attain citizenship on the basis of membership in the Caucasian race, despite differences in skin color and ethnicity. This case failed, and Indian immigration patterns subsequently plunged.

Perhaps, one of the most important frames of thought that hindered South Asians from being recognized within mainstream American society at the time was Edward Said’s pioneering theory on Orientalism. This concept fueled and perpetuated ethnic division, but is also a useful tool when examining the colonial past, race, and even Kathak within the US. In Orientalism (1978), Edward Said asserts that “Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). This sets up a dichotomy of familiarity versus otherness, local versus foreign, normal versus exotic, and east versus west. This mode of seeing paints everything in the Orient as different—and thus the same, by virtue of
difference—mystical, mysterious, and reducible to the features that make it distinct from the Occident.

This idea was not limited to colonial dominance. It spread to various institutions and greatly influenced the way the Occident viewed itself and its relationship to the Orient; furthermore, the Orient itself appropriated these ideas in a significant way, which we can currently see, through the ways in which they portray themselves. Thus, as Said says, it is not sufficient to examine Orientalism in terms of power and dominance, or simply culture. Orientalism goes beyond the political, and is not a conspiracy or practice enacted by the West against the Orient. Rather, it is a way of seeing, based on the understanding that the world is essentially comprised of two parts: the Orient and the Occident. This way of seeing produces or strips power, and rests on the desire to “understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, and even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world” (12). Orientalism manifests through different types of power: political, intellectual, cultural, and moral, each of which are produced, influenced, and exchanged in an unbalanced way.

This idea is complex, with with far-reaching influence, often making it difficult for even those who are part of the so-called Orient to break out of this mode of thought due to its deep-rooted historicity. Thus, Indians, and more broadly other minority groups as well, have difficulty breaking out of this framework even when they are representing themselves, or negotiating their relationship with society. It is relevant to note however, that there is a distinct difference in the way Orientalism comes into play when minority groups project this upon themselves as a means of mediating their own identities. However, that doesn’t mean that Indians—or other minorities—halted migration to the United States.
Forty two years after the Bhagat Singh Thind case which prohibited Indians from acquiring citizenship, the 1965 Immigration Act was issued with a special skills provision. This favored those immigrants that were educated and/or professionals. Vijay Prashad, in *The Karma of Brown Folk* (2000) explains that this act led to an uneven demography which “is now only being corrected as nonprofessionals migrate to join families, as economic, and/or political refugees; as workers in the transportation, lodging, and other trades; and as small businessmen” (4). Thus, Indians were permitted into the United States on the basis of their education and professional status. While the social conditions for this were intrinsically linked to race relations between blacks and whites in the US, which is beyond the scope of this paper, it is most relevant to know that this group of immigrants was filtered into the United States through the Immigration and Naturalization Services’ selection process (6). The immigrants that came to the US were part of a specific subset of South Asian society. In *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (2001), Arvind Rajagopal asserts that:

> Simultaneously avowing origin and denying location, “NRI” symbolizes the disjunct power of its referent. Their education and affluence, coupled with their claims of identity as Indians, rendered NRIs an apotheosis of the Indian middle class, exemplifying what “Indians” could achieve if they were not hampered by an underdeveloped society and an inefficient government. (241)

The 1965 professionals were economic migrants, seeking new opportunities and welcomed selectively by the United States, and their subsequent success was representative of the ability of Indians as a people.

This significant, yet infrequently mentioned detail that they were selected, is the basis for the Model Minority Myth which is so often used as a tool of benevolent racism alongside a means to inform Indians, and more broadly, South Asians of their place in society. The myth
plays a part in understanding the cultural nuances of South Asian Americans and furthermore, is valuable in interpreting representations of South Asian Americans. This myth presupposes that structural inequalities have never existed within America. Instead, certain minorities, specifically Asians, are better suited, both biologically and culturally, to be better workers and excel in certain fields over other ethnic minorities, particularly black Americans. While this is used to make a statement to both minority groups, it urges South Asians against being more socially and politically active (or even aware, in some cases) and encourages detachment from these issues in order to be lauded by the white majority. This is incredibly dangerous, because while it simply does not take different conditions of structural violence into account and encourages disunity between ethnic minorities within the United States, it also dissuades South Asians from taking an active role in American society, or at minimum, one that breaks away from conventional, established roles.

These frames of thought interact with minorities and their roles in society and often point in the direction of co-opting difference. Any kind of representation is often considered a great milestone for minorities, as this signifies to everyone—especially white America—that they exist, and yes, they are here to stay. But this raises an important question of whether or not any kind of representation is good representation. For example, Ed Koch’s statement regarding the role of South Asian Americans is telling: “They give us their culture and their taxes—and their wonderful restaurants” (Prashad 2000, 3). South Asians work hard and pay their taxes, preserve markers of their distinct cultural identity, and sometimes commodify their own culture, but they are never political or social threats to the United States. This is continually reflected in all types of media that include elements of South Asian culture. Complacency is perpetuated, and even
extended within the South Asian diaspora. Winant (1997) contends that “the political center cannot hold against this tide of racialized plurality” (6). However, this struggle ensures that the center attempts to maintain its hold through strategic forms of hegemony. In this case, the center’s hold is preserved by lauding those members of the diaspora that give us culture, taxes, and food. He goes on to say that due to the increase of immigrants as well as political diversity within their populations, governments have reworked social policies “to control immigration flows, to distinguish among desirable and undesirable migrant workers…to reconceptualize themes of national identity and the logic of the nation state” (7).

Through a focus on the alignment of conservative values as a means to success, the center is able to extend its hold into the racialized plurality as well, in this case, through South Asian immigrants who uphold the political center. It is pertinent to note that there is no one political center that is absolute. There are multiple centers at work within any given context, and they are in constant conversation with each other. Specifically, South Asian immigrants live within a diverse context with multiple groups operating within it: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Bhutan all constitute South Asia, and there is a plethora of ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity within. Additionally, the South Asian diaspora also has its own center, which is largely influenced by various American and South Asian political centers. This center, faced with the prospect of change, an inherent feature of diaspora, works in a similar fashion as the governments Winant refers to; that is, they also distinguish between the most desirable and undesirable members of the diaspora, and seek to establish national identity—in fact, restricting association with the larger group, prolonging conflict and redrawing lines of difference. In this instance, the Indian identity becomes salient.
The 1965 Immigration Act which brought a huge wave of Indian professionals also brought waves of traditions, senses of culture and preservation, social exclusivity and distinction. Shamita Das Dasgupta cites Bhattacharjee in “Gender Roles and Cultural Continuity in the Asian Indian Immigrant Community in the U.S.” on these cultural ties, “…however well adjusted in the United States, Asian Indian immigrants seem to insist on keeping their ties with their heritage vital,” by physically visiting their homeland, and maintaining psychological ties “by reinventing “Indian culture” on foreign soil” (1992).

The movement of Indian immigrants to the United States called new cultural and social identities into question, significant here for considering the emergence of performing arts in the Indian American population. Notably, the form and content is divergent from concurrent performing arts within India (Mukhi 2000,154). Kathak dance as it is practiced within the United States is influenced by these perspectives and discourses. Practitioners make choices in repertoire and storytelling that are indicative of their positionality. In The Other One Percent: Indians in America (2017), Chakravorty, Kapur, and Singh map the Indian community in the US, noting the factors that led to successful outcomes for the first and second generations of Indian Americans, generally protected from structurally inequality. They state that whereas many second generation communities do not see the same upward mobility that the first generation does due to “reactive ethnicity” in opposition to mainstream American institutions, for Indian Americans, embracing their ethnic and cultural identity does not pose a conflict: “Immigrants strive for success through both mainstream American institutions and association with “ethnic” or religious associations that celebrate their unique identity” (169). This is reflective within the sample of this study with a significant number of second generation Indian women, for whom
their practice of Kathak dance, if termed part of their ethnic or cultural identity, is not in conflict with mainstream American institutions. Furthermore, we see that US states and counties with significant Indian populations and organizations (140), settled in those locations specifically due to professional reasons—not necessarily the presence of existing ethnic enclaves (128), also happen to be where we see a concentration of Kathak classes and institutes, suggesting that there may be a relationship between the dance as a symbol of culture and/or identity that is not in conflict with desired outcomes for second generation upward mobility.

In Negotiating Ethnicity: Second-Generation South Asian Americans Traverse a Transnational World (2005), Purkayastha explains that the descendants of immigrants don’t recreate the culture of their ancestors, instead the find their niche within it—negotiating their identity and culture within their specific context, and books, fashion, movies, and art serve as different ways of “doing culture” (139). Yet within Maira’s (2002) study of second generation Indian American youth in New York, she found that there is a “cultural fossilization” within this diasporic group that is “socially and ideologically more conservative that the community of origin” (85), with an “ethnic orthodoxy...based on a definition of culture filtered through the socialization of immigrant parents, whose desire to preserve an “authentic” culture overseas has led to the selective importing of elements and agents of Indian culture” which includes classical musicians and dancers (55). Thus, the growth in Kathak’s popularity within the United States is tied closely to the preservation of Indian culture, as well as the second generation’s adoption of the dance as a cultural practice, colored with “a collective nostalgia for India as a site of revered “tradition” and authentic identity” (12).
**Uthaan: Rise**  
**Kathak in America**

In this section, I provide a brief background on how Kathak arrived in the US in order to contextualize the American Kathak community today. There is less information readily available regarding some of the earliest dancers, and so I present here what is known through reliable sources, as well as what I was able to learn through interviews. There are three key trajectories through which Kathak took hold in the US: (1) early non-Indian dancers, (2) the first wave from India post-1965, and (3) second wave from India late 1980s-1990s onwards.

**Figure 1: Early non-Indian dancers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>First exposure to Indian dance</th>
<th>First trip to India</th>
<th>Teacher in India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nala Najan(^3)</td>
<td>Ruth St. Denis, Uday Shankar</td>
<td>Prior to 1949</td>
<td>Kundanlal Gangani (Jaipur) Sundarlal Gangani (Jaipur)(^4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina Lalli(^5)</td>
<td>Uday Shankar</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Vikram Singh (Lucknow) Sundar Prasad Birju Maharaj (Lucknow)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shala Mattingly</td>
<td>Ram Gopal, Kumudini Lakhia(^6)</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Lachhu Maharaj (Lucknow) Shambhu Maharaj (Lucknow)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raja</td>
<td></td>
<td>Late 1950s(^7)</td>
<td>Lachhu Maharaj (Lucknow) Shambhu Maharaj (Lucknow)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janaki Patrik</td>
<td>Birju Maharaj</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Birju Maharaj (Lucknow)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorothy Krauss-Eisenpress(^8)</td>
<td>In India (through fellowship)</td>
<td>Late 1960s/70s</td>
<td>Maya Rao (Lucknow &amp; Jaipur)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^4\) Khokar 2002.  
\(^5\) Gina Lalli, personal communication, March 4, 2018.  
\(^6\) Shah 2005.  
\(^7\) Patrik 2011.  
\(^8\) Dorothy Krauss Eisenpress, personal communication, January 31, 2018.
The earliest dancers to bring Kathak to the US were not of Indian background. They learned of Kathak by chance, attending an Indian dance performance within the US and feeling a pull towards Kathak through this exposure. Many also did not simply learn Kathak, they trained in other styles of classical dance, or eventually came to Kathak by way of Bharatanatyam, and also learned music and Hindi. In Figure 1, the practitioners that were mentioned through the course of this research are listed, along with details around their training, highlighting the commonalities in this group. This is not an exhaustive list. These American Kathaks were the earliest performers and teachers of this style, giving Kathak its roots in the US before a significant population of South Asians migrated and became teachers, performers, and audience members.

As many educated professionals from India migrated to the United States beginning in 1965, Kathak eventually came to America as well. In some instances, skilled professionals had also trained in Kathak, and brought that deeply revered training with them, however the first wave from India post-1965 was comprised of many American Kathaks who were already established career dancers, including some women who migrated with their spouses. This group was of course made up of individuals of Indian origin, and so unlike the first group, they did not have an added barrier of needing to learn about the culture. However, migration from India to the US resulted in culture shock to be navigated, and they had to continue to cultivate local audiences, comprised of non-Indians and new South Asian professional migrants alike. Figure 2 lists some of the most prominents dancers and teachers amongst participants in this study, and again, is not comprehensive.
The third major group to arrive was the second wave of dancers and teachers from India, arriving in the late 1980s through to the 1990s. These practitioners, along with the first wave group that came before them are the primary teachers of most American Kathak students today. They established their institutions, student base, as well as relationships with their local communities, Indian and American alike. While Figures 2 and 3 are by no means exhaustive or inclusive they do illuminate some patterns around centers of learning within the American Kathak community, with New York in particular being an important area for this group. In addition to being the home of each of the early non-Indian group listed in Figure 1 at some point within their dance careers, as well as home to a sizeable diaspora, and a thriving local arts community, it follows that New York has emerged as a center of learning for American Kathaks.

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9 National Endowment for the Arts 2004.
11 Patrik 2011.
12 Patrik 2011.
13 Satya Narayana Charka, personal communication, December 27, 2017.
That’s not to imply that it was easy for these individuals to establish themselves and their dance schools. “Everyone was far away from me…it was a lonely time” (Rachna Ramya Agrawal, personal communication, December 26, 2017). Due to the concentration of American Kathaks in certain places, those that were outside those areas had to struggle to create a community. Other practitioners had to actively negotiate racist sentiments that were directed at them by fearful, insular groups (Hasita Oza, personal communication, March 28, 2018), a situation that those that lived in the New York/New Jersey also had to navigate as nonwhites (Marriott 1987).

**Figure 3: Second wave from India late 1980s-1990s**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year of migration to US or establishment of school</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rita Mustaphi</td>
<td>1987(^{14})</td>
<td>Minneapolis</td>
<td>Lucknow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hasita Oza</td>
<td>1988(^{15})</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>Jaipur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abha Roy</td>
<td>1992(^{16})</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Jaipur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachna Ramya Agrawal</td>
<td>1990(^{17})</td>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>Jaipur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anuradha Nag</td>
<td>1992(^{18})</td>
<td>San Jose, California</td>
<td>Lucknow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archana Joglekar</td>
<td>1999(^{19})</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>Jaipur</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, there are a few talented dancers who arrived in the 2000s, for example Kiran Chouhan in Chicago, Prachi Dalal in Washington D.C., and Prashant Shah in New York, entering into an established community of American Kathaks. In addition to training local students they also are full-time dancers, and serve as an example of taking on careers in dance.

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\(^{14}\) Ritu Mustaphi, personal communication, March 20, 2018.  
\(^{15}\) Hasita Oza, personal communication, March 28, 2018.  
\(^{16}\) Srijan Dance 2017.  
\(^{17}\) Rachna Ramya Agrawal, personal communication, December 26, 2017.  
\(^{18}\) Tarangini School of Dance 2017.  
\(^{19}\) Wikipedia 2017.
It’s also important to note that Figures 2 and 3 capture the influx of many of today’s American Kathaks to the US that have invested a significant amount of time in teaching. It does not include the flow of individuals in the other direction, for example, Mekhala Natavar, an academic and dancer who traveled to India in 1975 (Patrik 2011, 124); Pallabi Chakravorty, an academic and dancer who trained in India, migrated to the US for professional reasons, however traveled back to India for her research studying Kathak (Swarthmore 2017; Courtyard Dancers 2017); Parul Shah, a student of Satya Narayana Charka in New York who then traveled to India to study with Kumudini Lakhia in the 1990s and 2000s; or Natalia Hildner a student in Madison, Wisconsin who trained under Birju Maharaj in the 2000s, launching her career in Kathak.

In summary, each of the groups that led to the foundation of Kathak in the US faced certain challenges as well as opportunities. The earliest dancers had to build an audience from scratch, however there was limited competition for them. The first wave post-1965 had the benefit of access to a burgeoning diasporic population, however this community was still taking shape and they faced culture shock upon migration, including a sense of displacement upon leaving their guru. The second wave in the 1980s and 1990s enjoyed a larger community to source students, yet they had to navigate racism, and also experienced difficulty leaving their guru and a rich environment for dance. Practitioners who are newer to the US, or are second generation South Asian Americans benefit from the audience-building done by earlier groups, and a richer environment for dance versus earlier generations, but are challenged to carve a niche for themselves where there are many established teachers, schools, and dancers already.
Chapter 2

Guru Shishya Parampara: The Master-Disciple Succession
Romanticized Traditions

Guru shishya parampara, roughly translated as the master-disciple tradition, is a deeply revered concept amongst Indian classical artists. However it is not unique to Indian, or even South Asian arts. In Sensational Knowledge (2007), Hahn states that “a social structure referred to as the iemoto “headmaster” system governs many of the traditional arts in Japan, in which the headmaster has formative control of the definitive transmission of the genre. This hierarchical structure both preserves and regulates the transmission of the art form” (32-33). There is a clear similarity between the power that the iemoto system and the guru shishya parampara both enjoy.

The guru shishya parampara was a close, traditional method of teaching classical music and dance in India, including the student living with the teacher, in his or her home, and along with close, one-on-one lessons, serving the teacher with more mundane tasks (Morelli 2010, 79). This tradition is in contrast to the methods by which Kathak is currently taught in the United States. New dance schools, in India and abroad are structured more similarly to traditional Western schools, or even Indian academic schools, where students learn lessons from their teachers in a classroom environment (79).

Before exploring how American Kathaks teach and learn the dance, it is first useful to identify frequently used honorific titles. The term guru is used to refer to some Kathak teachers, particularly those who enjoy seniority in teaching, and are respected for what they have accomplished in their dance careers, however in certain instances the title, similarly to pandit, which translates to Hindu priest or scholar, is bestowed on individuals and can become problematic. Guru is defined as “venerable, honored, a spiritual guide, mentor, teacher”
The definition one hears from Kathak students over and over, and sees in classroom literature is that the *guru* is one who removes ignorance—*gu* means ignorance, *ru* means remover. There is truly no exact translation of *guru* in English, with “teacher” often being insufficient in conveying the status and authority that *guru* connotes. In the classical music and dance context, the best translation is perhaps “expert” or “master.”

Often, males within the classical arts tend to be referred to as *guruji, ji* with the suffix denoting respect, and can be added to anyone’s name or title. On the other hand, women are less frequently referred in this way. Albeit a qualitative observation, it is worth noting that women are more often referred to as *didi* (older sister), or “aunty” by their students, or simply by their first name, with the respectful *ji* suffix, with relatively fewer students and their family members referring to them as *guruji*. Similarly, *pandit* is more likely to precede a male Kathak teacher’s name, versus *pandita*, (a female Hindu priest and scholar) which is not attached to a female Kathak teacher’s name within the American Kathak community. Amongst accomplished Muslim artists, *ustad* is used similarly, without an equivalent for females (Palisetty 2018). Instead, accomplished female artists are more likely to referred to by their marital status, e.g., *kumari, shrimati*, though in the US, they are likely to not have an honorific title, outside of the rare *guru*, preceding their name.

While the state of *guru shishya parampara* in India today is outside of the scope of this thesis, I rely on my informants to describe *guru shishya parampara* as they remember it. Many of the teachers and senior dancers interviewed for this study trained in India—some as early as the 1950s. As such, each individual’s memory is a snapshot in time, however due to the broad
range in time, my hope is that changing elements within the *guru shishya parampara* system are represented here.

The earliest dancers, as mentioned in chapter 1, were not of Indian origin and had to travel to India in order to learn Kathak, as there were no resident instructors in the US in the 1950s and 1960s. Many of these dancers had the benefit of one-on-one interactions with senior artists and *gurus* from India as they were touring in the United States, and so when they landed in India they didn’t have local families nor friends, but in some instances they did have other artists that could provide guidance to them. However, they indicated that they questioned whether their teachers would even agree to teach them. For example, Gina Lalli explained during personal communication that she was uncertain, even after returning to study during a second or third trip. Similarly, other dancers, Shala Mattingly, Janaki Patrik, and Dorothy Krauss Eisenpress first traveled to India and then wondered whether they would be accepted as dance students (Patrik 2017; Dorothy Krauss Eisenpress, personal communication, January 31, 2018). In some instances they had to rely on an intermediary to facilitate a connection with the *guru*. This is in stark contrast to students seeking out teachers in the United States, which I will return to later in this chapter. However, the uncertainty does continue to be an aspect of training in India, existing to some extent even today.

Many American Kathaks who studied dance in India indicated that once they were accepted as students, their teachers were exceptionally generous—providing enough *taalim*, defined as education or nurturing (McGregor 1997, 450), during their brief but intensive trips, ranging from 3 to 18 months, to carry them forward in careers in dance. Notably, none of the dancers in this study lived with their *guru* in the traditional *guru shishya parampara* style.
However, there was a deep connection and closeness that marked their relationships. For example, Eisenpress commented on her relationship with the late Maya Rao, “she was very good to me...she treated me like a daughter” (Dorothy Krauss Eisenpress, personal communication, January 31, 2018). Rao, although pregnant at the time Eisenpress sought her out, agreed to teach her, taught many elements of the Kathak repertoire, and also took her to local gatherings to immerse her fully into the culture and the art.

Later dancers that were part of the post-1965 wave of immigration to the US, had similar experiences despite being of Indian origin and immersed in the culture by birth. They studied intensively over a period of several years with their gurus, often in formal training programs offered by institutes such as Kathak Kendra in New Delhi. Again, they did not live with their guru nor did they report serving them through mundane tasks, such as household chores. However they did express a deep reverence, even in instances where they trained under more than one individual. For them, class was a “second home” (Hasita Oza, personal communication, March 28, 2018). Many maintained this relationship after they moved to the United States as well, despite the physical distance.

In contrast, some of the younger, more recent American Kathaks who trained in India, either to supplement their American training or because their foundational training was in India due to birth, reported learning within the traditional system. There was an intense immersion into Kathak, through more frequent classes, occurring anywhere from 2 to 6 times per week, for a few hours at a time, accompanied by live music. Again, students did not live with their guru nor

20 When I say “mundane tasks” I refer to the most frequently mentioned chores conjured up through the Kathak collective memory, such as sweeping the floor. It is important to note that the nuance here. Students do cook for their teachers (in India and the US) and help them with tasks and errands, ranging from personal help to Kathak-related work; because students learn in a fundamentally different way today and in the recent past, their learning is not marked by the exchange of training for household chores.
did they serve them with mundane tasks, however their gurus were deeply demanding and exacting. Some students and dancers expressed challenges within the system, acknowledging that it gave rise to difficulties in their relationships with their teachers. While extreme strictness and focus on repetition, perfection, and discipline was embraced by some, others felt that it introduced feelings of restriction, and even a lack of creativity—one of the reasons they were attracted to dance to begin with.

Another conflict surfaced for those with extensive training in the US, who traveled back to India. As students are considered a reflection of their teachers and what those teachers have learned, asking questions or expressing a lack of knowledge around a particular concept or element within the repertoire could result in Indian gurus looking down on both the student, as well as their American teacher and training. Notably, this is more true of nritta technique, dance movement without meaning, versus abhinaya, or expressive dance and storytelling.

The guru shishya parampara is remembered with great respect and nostalgia, as a better method of learning Kathak by this group. The idea of selfless service to a master is thought of as more authentic by the participants of this study, although even those who studied in the system in India did not train in the ways that typify guru shishya parampara, particularly the element of service through mundane chores and tasks. Notably, some of the abuse that was, and possibly is, common by some gurus (Chakravorty 2008, 140) is often glossed over, and rarely mentioned. In fact, some of the American Kathaks in this study were not even aware of abuse through this system of training in various types of music and dance. The few that did speak of it, were tight-lipped and hesitant to describe it openly, for example, only making a reference to abuse once the interview was clearly completed. Only one individual spoke about the problem of
exploitation in a straightforward way (Lori Clark, personal communication, April 1, 2018). Certainly, exploitation is a greater issue within India than it is within the US, however with flows of practitioners from India to the US and vice versa likely to grow, or at minimum continue, this problem is important to acknowledge. It is also possible that practitioners did not mention exploitation because they did not experience it themselves within the US, or did not want to spread hearsay.

Does *guru shishya parampara* exist in the US? Most American Kathaks agreed that it does not and it never really did, and as *guru shishya parampara* is remembered as an authentic system of training, they look at this absence in the US negatively, as a lack in training, and a loss of tradition, “generally there is no preservation of ancient teachings” (Pooja Bhardwaj, personal communication, March 9, 2018). However, I posit that this tradition is remembered with great reverence and nostalgia, and exists in an altered form in the US. Teachers must work with newer challenges, and those in this study stated that students don’t have the same discipline that they once did, nor the patience to develop their skill slowly over years; however the greatest challenge is the lack of time. Students are busy, and Kathak is one of the many activities competing for their attention. Teachers progress each class with unique pacing, depending on their mood and attendees, however, needing to ensure they start and end at particular, fixed times, stifles the organic nature of Kathak training. Furthermore, many state that the relationship outside the classroom is critical in cultivating a complete, artistically-grounded student. While this is endemic to the generation that today’s American Kathak students belong to, it was often attributed to a lack of single-minded focus towards the dance. Additionally, students are thought of as being less willing to suspend their own judgment to unquestioning believe what their
teacher think is right, a quality that those trained in India had to have—fully entrusting themselves to their guru.

Students in this study explained that “gurus are secretive, first you have to build a relationship” and further down the line, one could still experience “conflicts with their American mentality…[students] crave space and fairness” and that often was called into question as students advanced in their training (personal communication). Many find it problematic to even refer to just any teacher as a guru, as Bhardwaj stated, “the average teacher is not a guru…a guru comes from a lineage of individuals who are fully dedicated to the art form as their life mission and passion…it’s a different level of commitment.” Through the guru shishya parampara, their training is holistic, versus a teacher teaching a curriculum (Vimmi Surti, personal communication, March 4, 2018). Their training goes beyond simply teaching, and reflects a commitment the guru made to their own guru, that they would pass on their learning (Maithili Patel, personal communication, February 9, 2018). The relationship can be transformative, however this is true for the student more so than the guru, “my guru changed the way I perceive the rest of my life” (Mohini Ahmed, personal communication, February 9, 2018) and “[my] gurus taught me about how to live a full life” (Nidhika Tuli, personal communication, March 23, 2018). Conversely, almost no students were referred to, nor referred to themselves as shishya or even “disciple,” opting instead for “student,” gently indicating that the relationship is distinct due to the ways of seeing both the guru and the shishya.

Furthermore, the very concept of guru for non-Indians/Indian Americans and non-Hindus is a challenging one, as they don’t idolize the guru, however they are deeply respected, like family members (Nidhika Tuli, personal communication, March 23, 2018). The distinction
between a traditional guru and respected family member being the suspension of judgement—one unwaveringly respects an elder family member, however “a family member can be wrong.” Their humanness is emphasized, whereas many gurus in India are viewed with great admiration and dedication, frequently regarded as more than normal human beings (Gulmina Mahmud, personal communication, January 29, 2018). Despite this, students do tend to be quite loyal to their teachers and the institutes to which they belong. While there is some movement of students to different teachers, most often due to geographic relocation associated with higher education or professional opportunities. Students exhibit a great deal of reverence and loyalty towards their teachers.

Some students in this study do refer to their teachers as their guru in the full sense of the concept, and described their teachers as truly typifying that relationship. Two examples that came up a number of times, and as such warrant mention are Satya Narayana Charka and Chitresh Das, two male teachers who established their institutes in the US and are part of the first wave of Kathak practitioners post-1965. A number of individuals commented on the unique relationship Charka has with his students, spanning the Tri-State area. He became the Director of the East-West School of Dance in 1981, based at the Ananda Ashram in Monroe, New York, “a Yoga retreat and spiritual-educational center” (Ananda Ashram 2018). While he travels beyond the Ananda Ashram to hold regular classes, he resides there, and contributes significantly to concert programming with dance dramas, which are discussed further in chapter 3. Because his association with the Ananda Ashram, a personal draw towards spirituality, and his perspective that Kathak is a deeply spiritual practice, his approach to teaching dance is distinct (Satya Narayana Charka, personal communication, December 27, 2017). One of his senior students,
who continues her training with him, spanning 22 years, explains, “Guruji is not driven by the monetary aspect…[he is] unlike other teachers where you take class, pay tuition, and learn..he looks at students as possibilities to disseminate his knowledge” (Pooja Bhardwaj, personal communication, March 9, 2018). Indeed, because the exchange of money for training is so typical of most classes, it is possible that students, and their parents who are so influential in their training, treat their Kathak taalim (training) as a service they pay for and must be regularly satisfied by. However, because Charka is famous for not foregrounding tuition and fees, and eagerly encouraging promising students to freely push ahead in their dance journeys, even if towards a route of experimentation with different styles and traditions, his students and their parents unanimously perceive him as being fair and generous, and even “saintly.” As he does not treat his relationships with students as a source of income, but rather, centers around their potential to learn, his students reported viewing him as a true guru. They also tended to have long-term relationships as a result, because their Kathak taalim is not framed as an exchange of service for money, but an opportunity to experience his influence as a positive one on their lives. While Charka teaches students traditional dance, spirituality, and ways of thinking, his students show their dedication in a variety of ways, from assistant teaching to planning rehearsals in advance of a performance to digitizing music to keeping websites and social media profiles up to date.

The second individual regularly referred to as a true guru by participants in this study was the late Chitresh Das. Similar to Charka, informants expressed that Das was generous with his time. Some were exposed to him through a college course, not knowing much about Indian dance, but quickly latched onto Das’ charisma and personality, and realized that they had to
pursue learning Kathak. His senior students trained with him over several years, attending multiple classes with him in a week. This intensive, in-depth education is unique amongst the participants of this study, with no other individuals primarily trained in the US reporting attending class with their teacher more than two times a week. Das’ generosity also extended beyond his time; he was freely giving of his own learning as well as of himself. “If you commit, there was an endless opportunity to learn” (Charlotte Moraga, personal communication, March 22, 2018). Some of the time spent with his students that was the most appreciated was outside of the classroom, whilst cooking in his home or traveling, when Das would share experiences from his life openly, providing context to his students around his training, performances, as well as his ways of thinking around his own identity. For example, Das referred to himself as a “Bengali Rajput Californian,” giving students a window into his multivalent approach towards identity and contextualizing himself within his journey in dance. “Guruji was very old school...great masters embibe tradition on and off the dance floor” (Farah Yasmeen Shaikh, personal communication, December 26, 2017), and his focus on tradition while acknowledging his American context provided a model for his students to understand their own identity and lineage in a more nuanced way.

Furthermore, Das created opportunities for students to learn about other facets of being a dancer, outside of the dance itself. As his senior-most students continued in their training of Kathak, they also got involved with Das’ organization, Chhandam. Shaikh explained, “It’s not just what you are receiving from it [Kathak], but also what you can give back,” and so, by becoming involved in administration and marketing aspects of the organization, “I got a window into...the life of an artist...through my exposure to Guruji.” Thus, one of Das’ significant
contributions to Kathak in the US was shedding light on the path towards a career as a professional performing artist.

It is also relevant to note that the guru shishya parampara continues to evolve in the US in other ways. There are new models for teaching and learning, shaped by the introduction of technology. Some individuals are able to remain with their guru, regardless of where they were located, via Skype lessons. Others are able to supplement their training with dancers in India who can discreetly teach them about dance theory and history in the same way. Additionally, Chhandam, the late Chitresh Das’ institute is also experimenting with new ways of teaching. Although based in the Bay Area in California, they have established a long distance foothold in New York by training a small cohort of students in short but intensive spurts throughout the year by visiting teachers, with those students maintaining their training through self-led riyaaz, or practice.

Although the guru shishya parampara is remembered differently, when it is believed to be the system of training in the United States, it is identified as a guru’s holistic involvement in their disciple’s life, beyond solely dance training, and opening up their own lives to their students. Disciples reciprocate through a dedication to their guru and by assisting them in teaching, administrative, and marketing tasks. The methods by which Kathak dance is taught, including the traditional guru shishya parampara, is not a static, regimented, one-way flow of education via strict classes and lessons. Rather, student reciprocity is relevant in the ways Kathak is taught and learned (Morelli 2010, 78). This reciprocity is built on a promise of shared knowledge between the guru and the student (Maithili Patel, personal communication, February
However, *guru shishya parampara*, as a tradition of Kathak, is remembered in a specific, almost static way with a great deal of nostalgia.

**Ghungroo: Bells**

*Music in Kathak*

Why do American Kathaks study this dance? Overwhelmingly, informants reported that their mothers had a strong influence in beginning their training, regardless of whether their foundational training was in the US, India, or elsewhere, and regardless of their ethnic background. In some instances where the informant’s mother lived in India, they were restricted from learning dance due to negative perspectives around the *naachnewali*, or the woman who dances for a living. Note that *naach* and *nautch* are the same word and the negative connotation of the British Anti-Nautch Movement permeates here. As such, many wished to dance and were not allowed to, and so when they had children, they encouraged them to fulfill their own wish to learn. While a handful had a strong preference for Kathak, many did not, and due to easier access to Bharatanatyam teachers, enrolled in those classes first. There were two primary challenges for the American Kathaks in studying this South Indian dance form: the first was connecting to the music, a topic I will return to in the next section, and the second was the strong structure and discipline typical to the Bharatanatyam and its study.

Bharatanatyam, in comparison to Kathak, is a much more structured dance form. A great deal of precision is associated with Kathak around rhythm, which enables improvisation. There are many slight variations, even within a *gharana* that are accepted as correct. For example, a basic hand movement can be done at slightly different angles, and each of those are correct. Similarly, one possibility for *sam* (the first beat of a time cycle and the finishing pose within a
composition, see Figure 4), can be done with the right or left arm straight up, slightly curved, or even deeply curved, and each is correct, until it’s considered wrong by a practitioner, straying too far from a particular lineage or movement aesthetic. In generally, there are several variations and possibilities within Kathak’s vocabulary. Whereas as there is a great deal of nuance and variation in Bharatanatyam, by and large, particular basic movements are either done in the right way, or they are wrong (Sonya Devi, personal communication, February 21, 2018; Anuradha Maharaj, personal communication, March 9, 2018). This ambiguity in Kathak creates a challenge for many students who look for feedback on whether something is correct or not, yet it also allows for great flexibility and freedom in movement for students once the range of possibilities has been explored and defined. Just as Bharatanatyam’s movements are clearly and precisely defined, so is the curriculum. The progression in Bharatanatyam training in the US is clearly structured and communicated, whereas this is less true for Kathak, which has greater variation in syllabus (Henna Khanijou, personal communication, February 2, 2018; Rahul Banerji, personal communication, March 4, 2018; Rashi Verma, personal communication, January 28, 2018).

Furthermore, many stated that the structure found in what is taught was also found in how it is taught. For many of the American Kathaks who began first with Bharatanatyam, the classroom discipline was simply too intense\(^{21}\), with constant corrections and even shouting or scolding. In contrast, many Kathak classes are much more relaxed, where teachers provide corrections, however less regularly shout or scold their students—though that does also exist.

\(^{21}\) In general, this study’s informants indicated that they didn’t like too much structure and discipline; however I have had subsequent conversations with practitioners struggling and seeking some structure in Kathak whilst maintaining the flexibility in movement vocabulary as well as the personal, close relationships they currently enjoy with their teachers.
In addition to this more structured approach to both movement and training, the preference for Kathak by many students is also rooted in music. So many participants in this study mentioned that they resonated more with Kathak versus other styles of classical dance because they were of north Indian background, and they understood the Hindustani music used in Kathak far better than Carnatic music used in Bharatanatyam, in terms of both the language as well as the overall texture and musicality of compositions. “I’m North Indian, so I don’t relate or understand the language…[Hindustani] temple music draws me to dance…it’s primordial sound and it makes me want to dance” (Rahul Banerji, personal communication, March 4, 2018). However this draw to learn Kathak via the music is not limited to those practitioners that belong
to the culture through their heritage. Lalli, a member of the early non-Indian Kathak dancers in the US explained that the first time she heard raag music (Hindustani and Carnatic musical traditions which use melodic modes), she felt “it was transcendental, exalted, [it] turned everything to gold.”

Music plays an important role in training students to be good audience members as well. For example, through music, students learn about the taal (time cycle structure) that is so critical for a live solo performance. While most will not perform Kathak this way, it does make them more equipped to appreciate rhythmic complexity in a Kathak performance, but also other classical dance and music forms. Music is of course also relevant to storytelling. For example, Rachna Sarang’s choreographic work titled Hanuman Chalisa22, which depicts the story of Hanuman, a principal character within the epic Ramayana, is set to the Hanuman Chalisa, a popular 40-verse hymn in praise of Hanuman. This work uses Kathak technique and patterns, as well as many creative and derivative movements, and is particularly impactful because the words of the hymn are so well known. Participating in or experiencing these types of choreographic works help American Kathak students develop into well-rounded audience members, who are aware of music, rhythm, poetry, and mythological stories. In “The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes” (2002), Jacques Ranciere establishes that the aesthetic is not merely art as an autonomous endeavor, as the adage ‘art for art’s sake’ suggests. Rather, the aesthetic is defined by sensibilities that are socially grounded (133). Similarly, American Kathaks view the dance form as art, and in specific ways that are defined by their training and the sociocultural context

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within which it occurs. They are socialized into viewing and appreciating different classical art forms in particular ways as a result.

Music, for participants within this study, plays an important role in defining what is and is not traditional and what is referred to as “fusion” by practitioners. It’s important to note that music isn’t solely indicative of traditionality, as movement technique of course is the primary point of demarcation. However music does influence movement possibilities, and is significant for continuing elements of the repertoire that are understood to be traditional. For example, the simple act of practicing Kathak with ghungroo (bells) creates an aurally traditional environment.

**Figure 5: The author tying ghungroo (bells), used as a percussive instrument in Kathak**

The American Kathaks that are part of this study also expressed that they learned Kathak because it kept them so connected to their culture. In the instance of Indian Americans and South Asian Americans, many of their parents enrolled them in classes as a way to understand more about the culture and religion of their heritage. As a result, I heard again and again that many enjoyed Kathak because it helped them truly understand their heritage in a deeper way than their peers, and they also cultivated close bonds with their classmates, developing a sisterhood of sorts.
that went beyond classrooms and rehearsals (Sonya Devi, personal communication, February 21, 2018).

While understanding the culture and context from which an artform originates and evolves is important, for many Kathak teachers, this foundational training in culture has to be done by them, and few come in with an understanding of the culture. For example, in an interview on “Chai with Manju,” Das has said,

Indians who come from the classical background or they are culturally aware, they behave differently. Americans, they have no idea. So, when you have to teach them, you have to go way deep into history, philosophy and everything. Now I find that Indians you have to teach history, philosophy. They don’t have it! They do pooja. But why are you doing pooja? Why are you touching the feet? There’s nothing there. Only the family is very strict, but over-strict…you can’t be with modern children like that…you have to give them reasons. (INE News & Multimedia 2014)

As the focus on Kathak training in the US is so frequently tied to cultural education, often times teachers focus more on productions and performances as a forum for students to demonstrate what they know. There is often a lack of interest in layakari (rhythmic play). This is a significant tension as layakari is foundational to the study of the dance, however is best demonstrated as a soloist, and requires sizeable taalim (training) and riyaaaz (practice). Instead, because many students and their parents are eager to demonstrate their learning, students frequently end up performing in group choreographies before they have truly mastered rhythm.

The reasons that drive the American Kathaks within this study to train in dance also have implications for the current state of the guru shishya parampara. While many teachers embraced dance as a career, so many of their students have been discouraged from doing so, in overt or covert ways. For example, one informant said, “I didn’t even know being a Kathak dancer was an option.” As such, blame for the departure or evolution of the traditional system does not
reside with the students, nor the teachers, but rather the context within which they learn, which so strongly shapes possible outcomes. Furthermore, it is important to note that not all of the teachers within this study are full-time instructors. Some of them have other full time jobs that provide them a steady source of income and fuels their ability to teach the dance form, but is also important to them as individuals with higher degrees (Baishali Kanjilal, personal communication, December 14, 2017; Anindita Sen, personal communication, February 4, 2018). This also shapes their students' perspectives around their ability to take on Kathak as a career.

**Taalim: Nurture Learning Kathak**

While earlier in this chapter Kathak was contrasted with Bharatanatyam as a less structured and disciplined form, Kathak is a classical dance, and as such is governed by clear principles. Classroom training reflects this, as there are norms, rituals, and discipline that are part of the American Kathak learning experience. In January 2018, I visited Abha Roy’s class to observe these very rituals.

Abha Roy teaches class within a Hindu temple in Jamaica, New York, a neighborhood with a significant Indo-Caribbean community. Roy’s classes on Sunday afternoons begin with a children’s class, progressively getting more and more advanced, until they culminate in a senior’s class very early afternoon. Whereas I planned to be a quiet, barely-noticed participant observer in her classes, Roy asked one of her students to get another chair, and invited me to sit next to her, facing the direct center of the class. Based on the unspoken but well-understood principles of respect for teachers and senior artists, this particular invitation felt simultaneously warm and welcoming, but also shed light on the complex dynamics of respect at play—sitting
directly next to and in the same type of seating as the teacher, conferred undeserved respect to me as a visitor within this context. This experience was telling, as students peered at me curiously, but also automatically showed respect typically reserved for senior artists and teachers. As each class ended, students came to the front of the room to pay their respect to their guru, touching her feet to seek her blessings. Many of them also came to me to touch my feet for blessings—a gesture I was unprepared for, knowing my status in the Kathak community did not warrant this. This gesture of greeting the guru and touching his or her feet is highly ritualized, and is expected and practiced. As a student, I’ve witnessed several instances of my own teachers paying respects to other, more senior gurus of Kathak, as well as other classical dance and music styles in this same way.

Returning to Roy’s class, this mixup in respect was indicative of the level of faith students are taught to have in their teachers, and especially their guru. I was welcomed to introduce myself at an earlier class—some of the students attended all classes from the most beginner to nearly the most advanced, but some also did not overlap—during which I briefly shared that I was a resident of Queens, New York and was a student at Hunter College, completing a research project on Kathak in the United States. I did not share any of my background in dance, specifically who I’ve learned from and where, in that announcement. However Roy’s welcoming demeanor was enough communication to her students to behave in a particular way, in the absence of direction or explanation.
Roy’s style of taalim (training) was eye-opening, particularly the juxtaposition of strict discipline with an openness to other styles and practitioners. To be specific, as I arrived I was immediately struck by the visible consistency in dress—each student wore a white kurta (tunic) and most wore matching white churidar (tight fitting pants worn by Kathak dancers) along with a chunni (scarf). Every single student had tied ghungroo (ankle bells). While this may seem unremarkable, this type of discipline and decorum is sometimes not even found within formal institutes in India. One will often see that dancers and intermediate to advanced students do not wear ankle bells to class or rehearsals, despite the unquestionable importance of ghungroo as an instrument of Kathak.

As mentioned, I was not a silent observer of Roy’s class. Instead, I was invited to demonstrate something to her students while they sat in a u-shape around the front of the temple room, and then, teach them a composition. While I had not mentioned my own training in
Kathak, Roy had recognized me from a past performance, and immediately identified my lineage. As she announced that I would teach her students something, she urged her class to get up: “this is an exchange!” This was a marker of an openness that is not typical within the world of Kathak in the US—while there is a cordiality between practitioners, a true sense of exchange or openness to other styles is rare. In fact, one is more likely to see an openness to expose students to teachers and practitioners of other classical dance forms, such as Bharatanatyam or Odissi, versus other styles within Kathak.

While Roy strongly focused on rhythmic compositions within the repertoire, and building an understanding of taal (time cycle) and laya (tempo), the emphasis on the history of Kathak as a temple dance originating in India was voiced by her students. She peppered her classes with basic questions around history, along with brief definitions of compositions—for example, “what taal is this? What is this piece called?...[parmelu] What is a parmelu?” When she asked where the dance came from, students were quick to say India, and when asked where in India, rather than making a finer point about geographic origin, they shifted to temples, a point that I will return to in the next chapter.

As mentioned above, students commonly touch their guru’s feet as a means to show respect within the American Kathak community (Rhee Patkar Gawarikar, personal communication, January 22, 2018). However, it is a contested practice. Certain norms are practiced in various South Asian subcultures, to name a few: unmarried females are not supposed to touch anyone’s feet in many North Indian subcultures, within some Hindu subcultures all females do not touch others feet, and Muslims generally don’t show their respect through this gesture. These norms are factored in, but are not always adhered to amongst American Kathaks.
While in non-dance interactions, South Asians touch the feet of individuals they deeply respect and admire, for example, elder relatives or community members and spiritual masters. This can be done in a symbolic way, by simply bowing and reaching towards the individual’s feet or shins with one hand and then touching their own forehead, top of the head, or near their heart. They can also physically touch both of the individual’s feet with one or two hands, or in the deepest gesture of respect one can fully bow, setting their knees and forehead down on the ground just in front of the individual’s feet. This is certainly a physical gesture of respect for the individual’s status, but is also a request. When a student touches their guru’s feet, they are not praising their mastery in Kathak. Rather, they are seeking out a blessing from the guru to excel in their training. Common responses by the guru or the elder can be verbal, however, within the American Kathak community, they are more frequently nonverbal. As a symbol of their blessing, the guru will place their hand on the student’s head as they bow or bend down, and often, when the relationship is a long-term they may even hug their students as part of this ritual.

This practice is contested because not only are there norms around who can do this, as mentioned above, but also because of perspectives around the American Kathak community being diverse in ethnicity, religion, as well as in mindset. For some, this practice is not one that resonates with them, however they do it regularly as a token gesture even when they don’t truly wish to, because they feel the pressure to do as others do. Those individuals actively pull back from or even avoid this altogether, because they feel that the gesture is reserved for highly admired guru, and their teachers do not meet the criteria for that level of status. It is important to note that this group was a small minority within this study. On the other hand, some teachers discourage their students from the practice, as they view themselves in particular ways. One such
example is Prashant Shah, an accomplished male soloist from India, who despite training many students refrains from the practice, perhaps because of his continued relationship with his own guru in India, the legendary Kumudini Lakhia, or perhaps simply because of his relatively young age. Hasita Oza, based in North Carolina, states that teachers should ask themselves, “Am I that qualified?” confirming with their own selves if they feel to be equivalent to a guru. Still others discuss this practice with their students—this group is also within a minority—such as Janaki Patrik, as they train students of diverse backgrounds, and the practice is not simply accepted or sometimes known as it is for individuals belonging to the Indian culture. Patrik has explained that this gesture need not be done as a matter of routine, however if one experiences the feeling on their own they may do so (Gulmina Mahmud, personal communication, January 29, 2018). Younger teachers with students that belong to the Indian culture find themselves in the position of having to tell their students that this is a ritualized way to show respect, and that while their Indian American culture tells them that individuals are equals, the guru shishya parampara is a hierarchy (Ruee Patkar Gawarikar, personal communication, January 22, 2018). It is important to mention that while touching the guru’s feet is often a matter of routine when observing an American Kathak classroom, many of the subjects in this study voiced that they truly felt their teachers were worthy of the respect it implies (Sonya Devi, personal communication, February 21, 2018).

Similar to other aforementioned rituals within Kathak dance, the traditional use of space in American Kathak classrooms as sacred is maintained, however there are some important distinctions. While narratives of the guru shishya parampara indicate that in the past, students would learn the arts from their guru in their home, formalized training in India today occurs
within institutions. Many teachers do intensive one-on-one lessons with students at home, however official training typically takes place in a classroom setting, and this is true of the US as well. An in-depth survey of classrooms in India is of course outside of the scope of this paper, so this section will be limited to a description of typical features within an American Kathak class.

The spaces within which American Kathak students learn the dance form are most frequently either a community space or a dance studio. Community spaces, Hindu temples in particular, are common homes for classical artists, where they enjoy the benefit of a group already congregating from which to build a student base, or at minimum the opportunity to align with an established institution, if only in principle. This relationship is beneficial for the teacher because it draws on the premise that leads many students to learn Kathak to begin with—as a means to learn about the culture. Some families may see it as an extension of regular cultural, social, and religious activities. Performance-oriented teachers and students find a natural space to share what they’ve learned, with a temple audience in place. Finally, this affiliation is a consistent reminder to practitioners that Kathak derived from the telling of Hindu stories and for some, that it is a temple dance. Kathak’s varied history and Mughal influence is not necessarily contested or in conflict in temple classrooms, however the nature of what is taught might lean more towards particular elements of the repertoire. There is also a distinction between being in a temple hall meant for worship versus one of the community spaces within the temple building without religious deities. American Kathak classes in temples often take place in either of the two spaces—for example, Roy’s classes ran in both in the course of the same afternoon—however the latter is a bit more common. In the instance of a class taking place in the main temple area, students generally do not turn their backs towards the deities as this may be
construed as disrespectful, instead they dance whilst facing them, or they position the side of their body to them. The teacher may turn his or her back to the deities in order to instruct or demonstrate to their students.

Many classes take place in professional dance studios as well. These are rented hourly and have less of the symbolic weight that classes in temple spaces have. They are oriented more strongly around the idea of dance as art. The studios are mirrored, and teachers have the opportunity to select the type of flooring and layout that is best for the dance, versus classes in community spaces which have to work around the various type of flooring—even carpet—that the temple has chosen for the space. Although there is no natural sacred area within rented studios, the American Kathaks in this study treat their taalim and riyaaz spaces as such, regardless of location. For example, shoes are removed either outside the room, or at the door immediately upon entering. Practitioners will simply not step on the floor they are to dance on. This has a practical purpose—Kathak is danced barefoot, but also because this is considered disrespectful. Once a practitioner has tied their ghungroo, bells, they may not put their shoes on, even if they are outdoors, backstage, or in a public restroom. This is viewed as traditional, and in keeping with the respect reserved for an ancient art form.

All Kathak dancers complete a ritualized pranaam, (a bow or greeting), during which they show their respect for the ground on which they dance, remembering the divine and their guru. It is at this moment during class or rehearsals that dancers might touch their teacher’s feet before formally starting to dance. While this often done within teentaal, or a sixteen beat time cycle, as a full group, I observed that it is also sometimes done in a rushed, rote way when practitioners are quickly trying to join a group. While the gesture is “traditional,” the instances
where it is done in a rote fashion harkens back to the earlier quote cited by Das—the symbolic
gesture is simply completed as a practiced action, but why? One can do it, but why are they
really doing it? In the rote instances within this group that “why” is not interrogated.

Figure 7: Outside Archana Nrityalaya in Somerset, NJ

Archana Nrityalaya, the Kathak institution based in Somerset, New Jersey, is unique in
that it brings together many of the features of both the temple and the professional dance studio.
The school is located within its own building, and its layout is ideal for dance training. Upon
entering, there is a dedicated space for students and visitors to leave their coats and shoes,
decorated with numerous trophies and accolades before proceeding into a corridor with
classroom. One of the individual classrooms is outfitted with mirrors, a computer, radio, and
speakers to facilitate class and practice. There are images on the walls of the institute’s teacher,
Archana Joglekar, demonstrating various *sam* (finishing) positions. Lastly, there is a small shelf
towards the back with an altar including a statue of Nataraj, Shiva in his tandav dance, which symbolizes the cycle of creation and destruction within Hindu belief.

As such, Joglekar, as well as other artists who dedicate space within their homes for Kathak training, are able to meet their needs as practitioners requiring particular conditions to dance, along with establishing sacred spaces that harken back to the remembered origin of Kathak dance, creating the appropriate conditions for the rituals and behaviors associated with training.
Cultural memory is established through written and oral traditions, as well as performance (Stoller 1994, 641). Throughout the course of this study, a tension surfaced again and again between the non-dominant documented history of the dance form and what practitioners stated and performed. In this chapter, I will explore what is remembered through oral and embodied memories of Kathak dance, and the subsequent sense of nostalgia surrounding specific moments in Kathak’s history.

Oral memory refers to that which is remembered and recalled verbally by practitioners, including what they explicitly stated regarding Kathak. Das Gupta (2005) explains that “The reliance of accounts of North Indian music on anecdote has always been one of its major problems. It is well known that the transactions of knowledge in the world of North Indian music has always been dependent on oral communication and this practice has survived even in the fact of rapid technological advance” (460). Kathak, as a North Indian form, also relies heavily on oral transmission, passed on by teachers to students in the shape of early lessons. Although the repertoire itself is mostly not in written records, we do see a mirroring of oral memory around the history of the form and what appears within those written records as well. Embodied memory refers to what is remembered and maintained through the body, including performance of the repertoire, and will be explored more later in this chapter, through a performance analysis.

During in-depth interviews with American Kathaks, I found that for many, Kathak’s history was a given. It wasn’t recalled in thorough detail, as it isn’t critical for executing the dance, but was revered as tradition. The fact of its long history was recounted, although many
acknowledged that they didn’t recall all of it, and expressed trepidation around not remembering. There were a few points that were universally remembered by practitioners during these interviews, that are heard or seen commonly in classrooms, online, and sometimes written in performance program notes. Over and over, I heard “Kathak is a temple dance” and “this [the Hindu temple] is where it comes from.” Sometimes separately and other times woven into this story, practitioners insisted that Kathak began with bards telling local people stories. While we know through research that there are groups within India to this day that are bards (Walker 2014), their dance is quite distinct and does not show much connection to what is understood to be Kathak. However this isn’t remembered—for American Kathaks the idea of bards is one that harks back to the past, an old “classic” way of communicating stories of the Gods, in the absence of other ways to share that information. Bards were not remembered as entertainers. They were storytellers. Furthermore, because they told divine stories, they are remembered as simple performers who were devoted to and motivated by spirituality.

While the bards are directly associated with Kathak’s genesis through the American Kathaks’ oral memory—and written records beginning in India and traveling to the US, through early practitioners—further back, there are origin stories that lend themselves to the creation of Indian classical dance as well as Kathak. One story locates young Krishna, dancing on the hoods of the serpent Kaliya Naag, as the point of origin of Kathak specifically. This story is compelling, as Krishna continues to be a prominent character within the dance, and this particular episode is performed by practitioners of each gharana (style) versus some elements of the repertoire that are particular to a certain gharana. The second story, unsurprisingly, features Shiva as the originator of Indian dance. In his Nataraj (Lord of dance) form, he dances the
vigorous *tandav* (dance of destruction and creation, symbolizing the cyclical nature of the universe), and from that, all Indian classical dances emerge. Secondarily, and remembered through written transmission and much less via oral memory, is that Parvati, Shiva’s consort, also danced *lasya* (fluid movements) in response to *tandav*. The concept of *tandav* and *lasya*, represent a blend of masculinity and femininity, and the mixture of powerful and graceful elements of the dance, referenced when explaining the need for a balance in the repertoire, and is also seen in particular compositions such as *Ardhanareishwar*, half-masculine (Shiva), half-feminine (Shakti).

While not described in depth—I only encountered one individual who stated she was working towards serious study of the *Natya Shastra*—the connection between the Sanskrit text on Indian performing arts is one that is revered, and is yet another symbol of Kathak’s persistence over thousands of years. The existence and popularity of the ancient stories of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in the current repertoire was another connection point to India’s history and culture—the ancientness of the form resurfaced repeatedly.

On the other hand, royal courts, but in particular, the Mughal courts were remembered as an important indicator of the adaptability of Kathak dancers, and the historical moment at which the dance developed into what it is today—a storytelling form punctuated by mathematical footwork, circles/pirouettes, rhythmic patterns, and graceful movements. Some American Kathaks also attributed the shift from dance as worship to dance as entertainment at this point. However, this was not recounted as a degradation in the dance form. As mentioned, the shift to royal patronage supports the premise that Kathak dancers, and the dance, is flexible and adaptable. Interestingly, this moment was often referred to as “the Mughal Invasion(s),” which is
telling. While there is a sense of nostalgia associated with the Mughal courts, which I will return to later in this chapter, the Mughals are remembered as invaders, and the Kathak dancers of the time are remembered as artists who adapted their art to entertain royalty. Written texts (Kothari 1989; Banerji 1982; Narayan 2004) do indicate that the artists were enterprising, seeking opportunity and patronage themselves, however through their oral memory, most American Kathaks do not refer to dancers of the time as agentive, enterprising individuals, rather as artists who had to evolve due to the demands of the time. Additionally, Mughal Turkic Muslim courts, and not Rajput local Hindu, courts were remembered most often as the impetus for the shift. I posit that the rationale for this was that Kathak had to evolve from mythological storytelling to entertain Mughal royalty because they did not understand or care for these particular stories. The local Rajput royalty would be interested in these stories, but this makes for a far less compelling explanation of the need to evolve the style.

When asked about Kathak’s history, participants in this study sometimes mentioned the next milestone in the dominant narrative—British colonization. For some, the British are remembered as suppressors of Indian arts (Esha Goyal, personal communication, January 20, 2018), however, many of the young practitioners did not discuss colonial history, omitting this period when orally telling Kathak’s history. When probed, some still did not mention this time. Others discussed this period in the context of the baijis (courtesans), who were not associated with the Mughal period. “Courtesan” is certainly a less charged word than either tawaiif or baiji, however all are terms that we see evidence of American Kathaks mostly distancing themselves from. Tawaiif, derives from the Arabic word tawf, meaning to move around. Derivatives are understood in Arabic, Persian, Hindi, Urdu, amongst other Indic languages. Chatterjee (2008) in
“The Veshya, the Ganika and the Tawaifs: Representations of Prostitutes and Courtesans in Indian Language, Literature and Cinema” explains, “In Arabic, it means a band of dancing girls, and also a special kind of dancing girl. With the rise of court culture, she would come to mean a courtesan who excels in dancing, etiquette, and poetry” (283). Interestingly, one individual strongly attributed the genesis of the dance form to the courtesans, however she was very much alone in this perspective, although according to Chakravorty (2008) and Walker (2014), accurate in giving credit to the courtesans for their substantial contributions to Kathak—if not it’s very origin. “The courtesans are the real creators of this dance,” the tawaiifs weren’t prostitutes who were available for just anyone. Rather, they were attached to one patron at a time, and as they needed to entertain that patron to ensure their livelihood, they paid acute attention to the nuances of their performance (Meenakshi Lala, personal communication, February 7, 2018). Her perspective around courtesans opened up due to a transformative workshop experience, taught by Rita Ganguly, an accomplished singer trained herself by two thumri singers, Siddheshwari Devi and Begum Akhtar, “[who] had their roots in culture that is sometimes labelled tawayef or baiji, though they materially altered these images of themselves in the course of their long careers” (Das Gupta 2005: 476).

This workshop held in November 2014 was presented by the Kathak Ensemble in New York City, and is worth noting, created a stir amongst the local dance community, upset at the clear connection between Kathak—a pure, classical, high art—with tawaiif—female courtesans who entertained, and are forever associated with some form of prostitution. While this particular workshop was controversial, it was also a significant opportunity to inject new stories into the mostly uncorrupted oral memory of Kathak dance. Ganguly explained the context within which
the *tawaiif* women existed, as well as the sentiment behind their work—ultimately referring to them as agentive women who used Kathak dance within their socioeconomic milieu (Meenakshi Lala, personal communication, February 7, 2018).

**Figure 8: Flyer for Rita Ganguly’s workshop presented by the Kathak Ensemble & Friends in New York in 2014**

It is worth noting the conditions that allowed for this workshop to take place to begin with. As mentioned, the Kathak Ensemble and Friends, run by Artistic Director Janaki Patrik, presented the workshop. Patrik herself was trained in Hindustani vocal music by Siddheshwari Devi, furthermore, not of South Asian origin, she did not suffer the concepts of the *naachnewali*, 
or the “dancing girl” that many female practitioners who were raised and trained in India had to be careful to avoid. As Connecticut-based dancer and teacher Rachna Ramya Agrawal explained, “In [the] 70s...in Muzaffarpur, in Bihar, Kathak dance was basically the dance for prostitutes...And it was not ok for a girl from a good family to dance...my family was very educated...my mother had to struggle a lot for me to study Kathak.” Patrik did experience backlash due to her presenting the workshop, but did not have to worry about losing students from her own class as a result, given that the majority of her students tend to be working professionals residing in the New York metropolitan area, rather than young children brought by their parents to learn about their artistic and cultural heritage. Albeit controversial, she could speak more freely about the courtesans, and provide an opportunity for local Kathak practitioners to be exposed to marginalized voices.

Again, this perspective was largely not shared by most American Kathaks within this study. Many took its history as a given, even stating that the history was readily available to be researched online for those interested. Others, when asked about the dance’s history, referred instead to concepts that guide the technique of the repertoire, for example, *abhinaya* (expressive dance), storytelling, Krishna, or *gharana* (style/lineage), which will be explored later in this chapter. We frequently see substantial gaps within oral memory, matching the major beats of the dominant narrative. As Walker (2014) explains, the post-independence history of Kathak has gaps by design: “An ancient tradition of storytelling leaps over centuries, moving in giant steps from temple to court and finally to the concert stage...These gaps function not only as a conscious effort to distance *kathak* from the Muslim musicians and dancing girls, but also a validation of *kathak* in Orientalist terms as ancient and indigenous” (15). While these purposeful
gaps exist for American Kathaks, they are distinct. As mentioned earlier, the colonial period was simply not emphasized as a formative moment for Kathak by so many of them, including the majority who were either born in India, or are second generation Indian Americans. India as a nation state was defined only after the end of the British colonial Raj, and it should follow that this period would be of symbolic significance and pride, particularly for those who look to Kathak as representative of ancient culture and civilization. However, this indicates that for the American Kathaks, the dance is decontextualized. It does not exist as a living artifact of the sociocultural, historical conditions from which it arose and evolved. Rather, it is disconnected; although understood to not be static, it is defined as classical above all—enduring the test of time—and standing in contrast to that which is popular, namely Bollywood.

**Ghazal: Poetry**  
**Embodied Memory in Performance**

There is a significant correlation between what is transmitted and remembered orally with what is performed as embodied memory. Within India, Kathak, was primarily performed solo, however group choreographies have become increasingly more and more common. Within the US, group choreographies are far more prevalent than solo performances, due to the opportunities available for dancers. There are a handful of professional-level dancers, and many of those that moved from India to the US choose to teach rather than perform. Furthermore, some of those that do perform dance with their students, or within the context of school presentations. Thus, many performances are presented by non-professional student dancers within a group choreography.
One of the few solo performances that I attended was Rachna Nivas’ *Kathak Dialogue* presented at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center in November 2017. She was accompanied by two talented musicians, Shivalik Ghoshal on tabla (drums) and Rohan Mishra, on sarangi (bowed instrument). Notably, there was no vocal accompaniment, and Nivas was the sole speaking and sung voice heard from the stage throughout the duration of her program.

Nivas is a California-based dancer, whose training was under Chitresh Das in the Bay Area. Her presentation was introduced by the curator of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, Linda Murray, who provided a history of the relationship between the library and Indian dance, spanning back to an early curator, who recognized that as Murray stated, “Indian dance was every bit as intricate as ballet. Or even more so.” Archival footage of both India, as well as photos of early non-Indian dancers such as Madame Menaka and Ruth St. Denis were shown on the large projector. However, there was a clear absence of any hereditary South Asian dancers in this archival footage. The curator explained how the program came to be—upon her *guru*’s passing, Nivas had been in touch to add Das’ work to the library’s collection, and as part of that discussion, came to present the concert. The audience was composed of primarily non-South Asians, skewing a bit older and white. Approximately 70 were in attendance, including several young children. Kathak dancers from the local community were sparse. During the performance, Nivas also referred to her young students in the audience, who had come to see her dance.

Nivas presented what can be considered a “traditional” Kathak performance, with some key differences. I say “traditional” because the idea of what is traditional is defined differently by individuals, *gharana*, geographic groups, and also by time. However, current conceptions of
traditional Kathak define it as a solo art form performed to live music, with particular repertoire elements and technique, and so in keeping that description in mind, this program was squarely traditional. Dancers do directly address their audiences in typical solo performances. They often do so after they have presented an invocation, or religious piece, and before they move into the pure dance sections. Nivas however, began by first welcoming the audience and speaking about her joy to be presenting at the venue, where her guru danced in 2014 upon the release of Antara Bhardwaj’s film *Upaj: Improvise* (2013), based on his work with tap dancer Jason Samuel Smith. Throughout the presentation, Das was invoked often, from his style of teaching, to his preference in performance, to the fact that it was his birthday on that particular day.

*Figure 9: Program notes from Rachna Nivas’ Kathak Dialogue*
She reinforced the notion of lineage and the guru, particularly when speaking about her accompanying musicians, Ghoshal and Mishra. She noted that her guru often performed together with their gurus, Swapan Chaudhari and the late Ramesh Mishra, respectively. This indicated to the audience that this performance was in keeping with classical music and dance traditions, representing an unbroken lineage from guru to shishya (disciple), that they authentically performed as the recipients of training from accomplished masters.

Nivas formally began with a danced and sung Sanskrit invocation, *Om poornamadah poornamidam*, without any musical accompaniment. She sang the invocation through a wireless body microphone. Dancers rarely sing and dance at the same time in the present day, perhaps due to the lack of training or ability to sing Hindustani classical vocal music, but also because it is challenging physically. It can be difficult to control the breath and fully complete movements, and as modern performances are held in auditoriums with large stages, projecting the voice is a challenge. Dancers simply do not choose to wear a microphone whilst dancing to be able to sing. There are of course, exceptions23, however they are more often expressive, emotive dance pieces, and limited to dancers who also sing. Nivas kept her wireless body microphone on the entire performance, speaking to the audience, speaking the *bol* (phrases) she danced, as well as sometimes singing. The constant presence of Nivas’ voice, transmitted without the need to walk to a microphone, connoted that the performance was more of a demonstration or educational, rather than entertainment. This was reinforced by the composition of the audience, as well as the venue, a library stage, and the opening comments by the curator. Rather than using her voice to recite the technical compositions, and provide a bit of context around the compositions, Nivas

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23 Mekhala Natavar’s film *Kathak Narratives* is an excellent example of how storytelling and technique are interwoven in the living form, as well as the dancer’s use of voice—singing, reciting technical compositions, and guiding audience members through a performance.
peppered in more casual discussion with the audience, for example commenting on how the dance is traditionally taught—in-person with a guru over time, dismissing the ways that some contemporary dancers and students use technology to continue their training and connection with their gurus in India—reinforcing the concept of lineage through the guru, and also painting a picture of earlier context for the dance.

Before beginning a pure dance section, Nivas called on her audience to imagine a royal court, to imagine that there was a king sitting in this beautiful, luxuriously decorated court, watching the dance and listening to the music. In “Music and Identity” (1996), Simon Frith explores how music shapes identity and produces collectivities by creating an experience that only makes sense by taking on a particular identity as espoused by the musical piece. Meaning is created through performance, placing the audience into the social world in specific ways. Identity is not inherent or internal, rather, identity is performative in nature, and music as an aesthetic tool is closely intertwined with the ideology of particular social groups. Through her call to the audience to imagine, Nivas nudged viewers to enter into a romantic, historic world, but also to take on an identity—as a Kathak-viewing American collective.

After the performance ended, during the question and answer section, an audience member asked about the relationship between Kathak and Bollywood. She answered this question by first tracing the history of Kathak from temples to courts, where dancers were “housed, fed, and clothed by royal patrons—imagine that!” From there, the British Anti-Nautch Movement “forced [some women into] sex work.” Nivas went on to explain that Bollywood films often glamorized the lives of courtesans living in opulence, though in reality there was a juxtaposition of the highest art being performed in lowly spaces, such as brothels. “True” Kathak
was only showcased in very old movies. Nivas’ answer was salient for a number of reasons—for one, she is one of the few who mention this forgotten part of history, verbally speaking this from the stage. However, she also drew from glamorized imagery of a courtesan performing for her royal patron within her performance. Dismissing depictions of Kathak in Hindi films was also a means to distinguish the classical from that which has mass appeal, and was perhaps also making a distinction between what she presented, and some of the recent inclusions of Kathak in Bollywood.

Returning to Nivas’ performance, she presented an expressive composition after the pure dance section, Govardhan Leela, which depicts the story of Krishna lifting Govardhan Hill to protect local villagers from the anger of Indra, the king of the Gods, who is mentioned in the Rig Veda, one of the earliest Sanskrit texts. She spoke, sang, and danced this composition, portraying Krishna speaking to villagers, encouraging them not to pray and give offerings to Indra, and the latter’s subsequent wrath, expressed through heavy rainstorms and lightning. Through performance, Nivas located herself as a storyteller of ancient, Vedic stories, and created a romanticized imaginary of the royal court associated with rhythmic technique, both strong elements within the dominant narrative.

**Katha:** Story
Storytelling and Collective Memory

Paul Stoller (1994) notes that collective memory develops from stories (640), and social memory is found in commemorative, performative ceremonies, which are only established if they become habitual. Particular stories are critical to the American Kathak collective memory. For example, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, are often cited as integral to Kathak, although the
latter is typically not danced in full. Vignettes from Krishna’s life are often learned and danced compositions. The popularity of these stories are indicative of the American Kathak collective memory, and also tell us a great deal about the concepts that practitioners mediate, dancing a traditional, classical art form within a multicultural United States.

The Leela Dance Collective, of which Nivas is a member along with other students of Chitresh Das, presented *Son of the Wind* a few months later, in January 2018 at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, as part of the annual Association of Performing Arts Professionals Conference. The production was a dramatic danced telling of the mythological story of Hanuman, an important character within the epic poem *Ramayana*, and son of Vayu, or the Vedic God of the Wind. The story is of a male character, and the title emphasizes his paternal lineage. The dancers were all female, however they portrayed male characters, not only through dance, but also through costume. We know from other performances that, at a minimum, some of the dancers are aware of Kathak’s history, and the marginalization of women during the colonial period, however, the focus on myth and male protagonists is prevalent, reinforcing Kathak dance as an ancient Hindu storytelling art form. The name of this dance company does indicate the types of work presented\(^24\); within the Sanskrit context, *leela* means divine story or play, and they reinforce on their website that they present “art that is...grounded in tradition” and “evocative stories of ancient India.” The rhythmic elements of the dance are used as a technical canvas upon which these American Kathaks paint Vedic stories.

Similarly, within the New York area, Satya Narayana Charka, annually produces dance-dramas depicting the *Ramayana* and episodes from the life of Krishna within the *Krishna LeelaDanceCollective*. 2017. “Son of the Wind Trailer.” YouTube. October 12, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvvvD0jmpjA

Leela, translated to “the divine play of Krishna.” While these are often presented multiple times a year at various venues, they are consistently performed at the Ananda Ashram in Monroe, New York, where Charka resides. While both of these productions are similar in their mythological content, each has a distinct approach. The Ramayana is an epic poem that tells the story of Ram, considered to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, birthed on earth as a man. The dance-drama picks up in a garden where Sita, the female protagonist, and Ram, the story’s namesake see each other. Sita and her female friends then dance an invocation to the goddess Parvati. Next, the story cuts to the court of King Janak, at the swayamvar—an ancient ceremony during which a female of marriageable age chose her husband from a gathering of suitors—of Sita. The challenge put forth to all of the suitors is to string Shiva’s bow, which Ram is able to do. A few scenes later, Ram, his wife Sita, and his younger brother Lakshman, are exiled from their home of Ayodha into the forest, where Shurpanaka, the sister of the primary antagonist, Ravan, tries to seduce Ram. He rejects her, and ultimately, Lakshman cuts off her nose. Shurpanaka complains to her brother, Ravan, the ten-headed king of Lanka. Ravan, a devout follower of Shiva, was granted a boon that no god or demon would be able to kill him. Therefore, Ram was born as a man to defeat Ravan. Charka’s telling of the Ramayana doesn’t include this, however it is a salient detail that sets off the chain of events in this story. Charka adds a bit of dimension to Ravan’s character by including a composition describing Shiva, also giving his Kathak dancers an opportunity to demonstrate their classical training.

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25 Ayodha, and the Babri Masjid in particular, has been a contested site throughout history. In the past 25 years, it has seen significant communal violence, riots, and disputes between Hindus, who locate it as Ram Janmabhoomi (Ram’s birthplace) and Muslims who revered the mosque built by the Mughal Emperor Babur. The transmission of Ayodha as Ram Janmabhoomi within members of the South Asian American diaspora is telling of what is selected as cultural continuity; however this particular detail is not heavily emphasized within Charka’s choreography.
The story continues to unfold, with Ravan distracting and deceiving Ram and Sita, eventually kidnapping Sita. Ram and Lakshman enlist the help of others to save her, including Hanuman, and with a theatrical flair, set fire to a sizeable structure, symbolic of Lanka, Ravan’s kingdom. Following this, Ram and Ravan fight each other in a dramatic dance sequence.

Whereas Ram has consistently been played by a former Ballet dancer for the past two decades, Ravan’s role is typically not played consistently by the same artist for more than a few years at a time, and has never been played by a trained dancer. Charka uses creative movement for this,
and other scenes with non-Kathak dancers. The conclusion of this dance drama is Sita being saved by Ram, and their return back to Ayodha, where Ram is rightfully coronated as king.

There are multiple tellings of the *Ramayana*, including one in which Ram questions Sita’s chastity, and others in which Sita completes a trial-by-fire to prove her purity and another where she returns to her mother, the Earth, along with various permutations of these and alternative events. Charka’s version of the story is closest to Tulsidas’ version, the *Ramcharitramanas*, where questions regarding Sita are not posed. The story is a simple one of good and evil, presented for residents and visitors of the Ananda Ashram as well as family and friends of Charka’s students, who also imbibe this particular telling of the story. Complicated questions around Sita and expectations and perspectives around women are not posed (Sonya Devi, personal communication, February 21, 2018).

As Charka’s student, I danced in these performances regularly for ten years at various venues and had the opportunity to experience the context within which this dance-drama was presented for audiences, as well as how deeply embedded it is for Charka’s dancers as the primary telling of the *Ramayana*. In contrast to Leela Dance Collective’s *Son of the Wind*, all of the male characters in this telling of the *Ramayana* are portrayed by male performers, none of whom are Kathak artists. Sita and the dancers are all Kathak students trained by Charka, however the other female characters within the story are not typically played by Kathak dancers. There have been instances where due to the lack of additional artists, Kathak dancers have played certain antagonist roles, but they typically do not bring Kathak movement into the portrayal. The inclusion of creative movement and absence of Kathak movement by key characters, albeit untraditional, is unique primarily because it is part of Charka’s desire to bring
the story of the *Ramayana* to ethnically diverse, non-Indians, either as audience members, or as participants in the production who have an embodied experience of the epic despite the lack of Kathak training (Satya Narayana Charka, personal communication, December 27, 2017).

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**Gharana: Style**  
**Tracing lineages**

*Gharana*, which literally translates to “house,” refers to a particular style, school, or lineage within Kathak dance. It is a very salient concept that, though acknowledged as not particularly relevant as a tool to draw distinctions today (Baishali Kanjilal, personal communication, December 14, 2017), resurfaces over and over again amongst American Kathaks, in different ways. It serves as a tool to quickly orient individuals to where they belong. For example, when beginning this study, while I introduced myself to practitioners, and when they became aware that I study Kathak, were immediately curious about who I had learned from—a question that helped them quickly understand what style and lineage I belong to. However, *gharana* goes beyond being solely a tool to simply categorize practitioners.

*Gharana* ties deeply to tradition in Kathak. One might argue, that along with *guru shishya parampara*, it is one of the strongest traditions of the dance. Practitioners are reverent towards their *guru*, who as mentioned in chapter 2, are so much more than just teachers to them. Tracing back who they learned from, and then their *guru*’s *guru*, creates a sense of learning the form in an unbroken chain, and reinforces the idea that the dance was passed down from one generation to the next, orally, and largely as is. *Gharana* is symbolic of, and sometimes synonymous with, Kathak’s deep history (Ganguly). It is a concept that is understood to be ancient, “it takes 200 years to be understood as a *gharana*,” according to Patel. This reinforces
the gravitas of learning Kathak, and the consistency required over generations to be established as a *gharana*. Notably, the concept of *gharana* emerged in the 19th century (Chakravorty 2008, 140; Walker 2014, 30).

In Kathak, three primary *gharana* are remembered: Lucknow, Jaipur, and Benaras, named after cities in India. Their actual histories are a bit less clear cut. For one, there were other *gharana* besides these. Raigarh *gharana*, named after the princely state, was patronized by its ruler, Raja Chakradhar Singh, who called musicians as well as dancers from different lineages to his court (Kothari 1989). Although a great patron of Kathak, he is simply not remembered by the American Kathaks. This intermingling of dancers from different lineages resulted in a mixture of styles, which many do not recognize even in India today as a legitimate, distinct *gharana* (Rajan 2012). Another practitioner, trained in India at Bhatkhande Music Institute in Lucknow, a premier institute for the arts, made reference to the Calcutta *gharana*, founded by the eminent writer and poet Rabindranath Tagore, who called many artists to Calcutta prior to Indian independence from British colonization to ensure they had patronage. This also explains the confluence of musical and dance talent in the city (Alpana Sharma, personal communication, February 5, 2018). However, this lineage was simply not otherwise spoken about, nor did it result in a distinctive style in cultural memory. Finally, Rampur, part of the princely state of Awadh, is noted as an important center of patronage for Kathak dancers in precolonial India through the historical record (Walker 2014; Kothari 1989; Maharaj, personal communication, 2003), however was not remembered at all by American Kathak practitioners.

Bloodlines are very relevant for the concept of *gharana*. Hereditary dancers are known as *gharanedaar*, and their families are associated with a particular style of Kathak. Remarkably,
there are no *gharanedaar* Kathak dancers in the United States—and it is interesting to imagine what might happen if one did migrate—however many of them are remembered, particularly amongst dancers that identify as part of the Lucknow *gharana*. The Lucknow *gharana* is today known primarily through Birju Maharaj, the most prominent Kathak dancer of his time and alive today. As mentioned in chapter 1, Maharaj traces his family lineage to Kalka-Bindadin, two brothers who lived in the 1800s and are credited as “the founders of modern-day Kathak” (Kalashram 2018). Kalka was Maharaj’s paternal grandfather, and Bindadin, a poet whose work is prominent throughout the modern day repertoire, was Maharaj’s paternal grand-uncle. While the Lucknow *gharana* did not begin with them—there were at least four generations of dancers prior—the *gharana* is sometimes even referred to as Kalka-Bindadin *gharana*, although not by participants of this study. Similarly, the Benaras *gharana* is referred to as the Janakiprasad *gharana*, named after its founder Janakiprasad, a Jaipur *gharana* dancer originally from Rajasthan who simply moved to Benaras (Kothari 1989). Similar to the Kalka-Bindadin *gharana*, the Janakiprasad *gharana* is not remembered by by American Kathaks. Rather, Benaras *gharana* is sometimes remembered to be founded by Gopi Krishna—well-known as the protagonist of the 1955 Hindi film *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje*, with Kathak as a primary feature of the plotline—although the style had already been established with early dancers within his own family prior. Jaipur, on the other hand, has many different synchronistic lineages, but does not have a single standalone representative “founder” as Kalka-Bindadin, allowing the *gharana* to be remembered simply by geographic location. As such, the lineage of each *gharana* simultaneously exists vividly as an important marker of tradition, yet the details are not closely remembered.
Although there are gaps in the American Kathak memory around the dance’s history as a result of the dominant narrative, and possibly the lack of needing to truly know the history to perform it, we do see a meaningful splintering in history after its establishment as a high art post independence. Particularly for some with a strong sense of lineage through their guru, such as Chitresh Das’ students, US immigration laws figure into their narrative. Their guru was only able to come to the country to eventually teach them the dance because of the opening up immigration due to the 1965 laws. The earliest trajectory of dancers mentioned in chapter 1 were not of Indian origin and hence did not have this challenge, although they did not have access to a large South Asian origin population to teach or perform for either. However students of teachers who came from India remember that journey, which lead to Kathak being a part of their own lives. As such, we see that Kathak’s history is strongly tied to individual history, descending from a distinct lineage over time, rather than collective history leading to a particular overall trajectory shared by many of different lineages.

Each gharana is distinct in the collective memory, with distinguishing defining features, recounted in a nearly archetypal way. Yet, as mentioned earlier, not all of them are salient within the American Kathak imaginary. Many practitioners within the US are either fully trained in the Lucknow gharana tradition, or by teachers who were exposed to and influenced by it in India. Furthermore, many are students of the Maharaj family, particularly Birju Maharaj, who therefore enjoys a hegemonic position within the US. The Lucknow style is perceived to be graceful and delicate, with oblique movements and a great deal of attention and care given to minute details (Baishali Kanjilal, personal communication, December 14, 2017). Jaipur is representative of the intense focus on rhythm, speed, and strength, with lightning fast pirouettes and very complicated
footwork. Benares is remembered as a *gharana*, but its distinguishing features were lost on most study participants, unable to articulate what made it a distinct style. Some suggested that it was a blend of the former two. Others thought it was an offshoot of Jaipur due to the emphasis on strong movements, and still others thought it was more flamboyant, due to the association between certain practitioners such as Sitara Devi and Gopi Krishna and Bollywood films. However, the defining feature of Benares style is the inclusion of *kavits*, poetry set to rhythmic patterns. Raigarh as mentioned earlier, is not remembered at all, and I posit that it is because the artists employed there were *gharanedaar* Kathaks associated with other lineages already, and perhaps because no distinctive features emerged as a result.

While not overtly stated, it is important to note that two of the major styles, Lucknow and Jaipur, each have a particular religious undertone, the former, Mughal/Islamic culture, and the latter, Rajput/Hindu culture. This is credited to patronage associated with those areas, however the understandings of each are laced with ideas of essentialism. For example, Lucknow is associated with ideas of *nazakat* (delicacy), high culture, poetry, etiquette, and the Urdu language. On the other hand, Jaipur is prided for being a *gharana* tradition that was never conquered by foreigners, neither Mughal nor British, deeply proud, devout, embodying Rajput ideals and *vir rasa* (one of the nine *navrasa*, defined in the *Natyashastra* as the nine sentiments/moods *vir* refers to heroism). For example, noted Jaipur *gharanedaar* dancer Rajendra Gangani explains that Rajput royals even encouraged dancers to perform within temples (Rajya Sabha TV 2015). In the next section, I will explore the nostalgic memory of Kathak that many exhibited around the Lucknow *gharana* specifically.
Thumri: A Romantic Composition
Nostalgia and Forgotten Histories

I live in a fast-paced city — London — where sounds of nature, sounds that remind you of faraway places or the past are hard to come by. My ghungroos help me recreate sounds that lead me to a doorway to many memories and connections. A threshold from where I can listen to the sound that belongs to temples, to stories, to mythology. Sounds that are sacred. The bells let me fly, across time and memory zones, and be firmly grounded at the same time. (Khan 2017)

The dominant narrative of Kathak emphasizes Hindu origin, and suppresses Muslim contributions (Walker 2014,14). However, while we do see an emphasis on Hindu origin and a nationalist way of seeing and remembering the past amongst American Kathaks, we also see a strong sense of nostalgia around the Mughal period, established as a time of high art and culture, when the state patronized artists for their work. In particular, ideas of nazakat (delicacy), khubsoorati (beauty), ada (style), are particularly resonant, fueled by a romantic imaginary of court life.

This nostalgia for the Mughal period is particular to students of the Lucknow gharana, though not exhibited by all of them. We simply do not see this strong nostalgia for Jaipur courts. For those such as Verma and Kulkarni, who are less inclined towards religiosity and spirituality, who do not enjoy the devotional elements of the repertoire as much, the draw towards the Mughal period is significant. Through the dominant narrative, Mughal courts are where Kathak practitioners innovated new dance technique, incorporating rhythmic patterns, fast spins, and complicated footwork—the defining technical elements of dance today. It follows that if a Kathak practitioner does not enjoy these elements, they would likely take on another style of dance, however the distinction is that those who self-identify as less religious, and trace their lineage through Lucknow gharana teachers prefer the parts of the repertoire more heavily
associated with Mughal courts. In general, while many often prefer to perform technical items, as a community, Kathak practitioners generally tend to hold storytelling and expressive dance on a pedestal. When it comes to selecting abhinaya (expressive) compositions from the repertoire, rather than a vandana (Hindu invocation) they prefer a ghazal or thumri, which are both typically romantic in theme versus devotional. This can be false for male practitioners (Rahul Banerji, personal communication, March 4, 2018), however it is difficult to claim definitively due to the vast majority of this study’s participants being female.

Figure 11: Meenakshi Lala in Mughal costume gesturing in a salaam

The stated nostalgia around the idea of Mughal courts manifests when practitioners remember a time when the arts were recognized and patronized by the state, live musicians always accompanied dance, time was not a limiting factor for performance, audiences did not have to be built and educated to appreciate Kathak, dancers themselves were financially rewarded for their work, and had time to practice and create. In Performing Al-Andalus (2015), Shannon states, “the idea of al-Andalus as a lost paradise has engendered a form of nostalgic
remembrance of the past that deeply colors contemporary treatments of al-Andalus” (30). In the case of Kathak, nostalgic remembrance is extended to the conditions that artists, male and female alike, are thought to have enjoyed at the time through royal courts. This romantic nostalgia is starkly juxtaposed to the courtesans themselves, who are nearly forgotten in history.

Films play an influential role in furthering nostalgia, in performance and memory. Bollywood in particular, came up organically a number of times in contrast to classical dance. Hindi films are incredibly pervasive within the South Asian American diaspora, and so it follows that seeing Kathak within Bollywood is meaningful to its practitioners, as Das stated: “Bollywood can bring Kathak to large swathes of Indians” (INE News & Multimedia 2014). There are many films that have included Kathak dance, as well as some that had dancers as part of the plotline. In this section, I will describe three films that have been salient to American Kathaks, each with the dance playing a role within the plot.

The first is the aforementioned Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje (1955), which is the story of two dancers, Giridhar a classical artist played by Gopi Krishna, and the Neela, played by Sandhya, a dancing girl who learns of the richness of Kathak. Neela becomes the former’s partner in a Kathak competition to win the title of Bharat Natraj (India’s Lord of Dance). The film was not a Bollywood blockbuster, however directed by the celebrated V. Shantaram, is well-known amongst many of the post-1965 Indian immigrants and was even influential for the early Kathak practitioners that migrated to the US. For example, Charka mentioned in personal communication that when he went to his first guru, he told him that he wanted to learn the dance that Gopi Krishna did in the film. Through Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje, the idea of Kathak as dancing the sacred is reinforced, particularly through encounters with nautch. The famous “Murli
Manohar Krishna Kanhaiya” song features Gopi Krishna as Lord Krishna, dancing on the banks of the Yamuna River, and his subsequent playful dialogue with Radha, performed by Sandhya. Through kavita tora (rhythmic compositions given meaning through poetry in their phrases) Kathak as the dance of Natvar (the dancing Lord Krishna) comes to life. This is in contrast to one of the early scenes when Neela, the dancing girl, first sees Giridhar perform Kathak. She completes her performance in a local mehfil (an intimate setting) to applause, when Giridhar and his father/guru, the revered Mangal Maharaj—known by name— barge in, criticizing the audience for appreciating the bazaari (cheap) dance, that has no shastriya taal (classical rhythm). Giridhar then accepts a challenge to show his dance. He is directed by Mangal Maharaj to dance naman, a composition set at dawn, when the disciple pays respect to the guru, while dancing what it in his heart. Although pure dance technique, his stunning performance causes Neela to realize that what she was taught is cheap and transient, whereas Kathak is rich and expansive. Her turn to Kathak, although long and arduous, is transformative and redeeming—reinforcing the dominant narrative for viewers, locating Kathak dance as ancient, classical, and rich, and in contrast to dance as entertainment which is easily done by anyone. Women performing dance as entertainment can be redeemed by turning to the classical art, but it requires substantial effort and sacrifice, as well as a true guru, who teaches the disciple asli nritya (true dance). Also, a distinction is made between Neela as a practitioner of dance as entertainment, versus as a student who was mistaught dance, privileging speed in training versus true art. Through multiple overt statements by the characters, as well as the journey in dance that both Giridhar and Neela experience as part of the plotline, audiences are reminded: Kathak is a sacred dance form that must be learned and danced with that emotion and intention. Furthermore,
as this film released in 1955, when the newly formed Indian nation state was less than ten years old, audiences were given a clear perspective to adopt around the depth of the classical arts versus the dancing girls.

The next film, Devdas (2002), is set further back in time, in the early 1900s. Directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali it is based on a famous novel of the same name by Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay. Although this story has been adapted to film a few times, the 2002 version is notable, especially for participants of this study, as it featured one dance, “Kaahe Chhed Mohe” (“Why Do You Tease Me?”)\textsuperscript{26} composed and choreographed by Birju Maharaj. Background dancers included Maharaj’s students, some of whom have traveled with him to present concerts and workshops in the US. Devdas is named after the main protagonist, the well-to-do, British educated son of a family of wealthy landlords. He falls in love with his childhood neighbor, Paro. His family rejects hers, stating that they are a family of hereditary performers who do nautanki (drama) and naach (dance), here expressed with a negative connotation for the well-to-do. Disappointed, Devdas, at the behest of a friend, ends up going to a kotha (brothel). “Kaahe Chhed Mohe” is the first introduction to the character Chandramukhi, a courtesan, played by Madhuri Dixit, trained in Kathak in real life. The song itself is a spectacle. The set of the kotha is lavish, replete with all the elements of a court, not simply a brothel that one might imagine: chandeliers, candelabras, a small enthralled audience of men smoking hookah with strings of jasmine flowers tied to their wrists, live musicians, ornate costumes and jewelry for the main dancer as well as her background dancers, geometric patterned floors showcased when dancers’ skirts fan in circular patterns from the fast pirouettes, intricate pillars and columns

decorated with sheer curtains, and water fountains. As Chakravorty (2008) states, “It is overwhelming in its lavishness of costumes and sets, creating a Disneyesque fantasyland” (85). These details set the stage for the dance, but they also fuel nostalgia visually and viscerally within the viewer’s imagination. Through the camera, viewers see the courtesan Chandramukhi through a lens of romanticism in this song, and it is through the rest of the plot that we are reminded of her status.

The composition “Kaahe Chhed Mohe” is derivative of Bindadin Maharaj’s *thumri*, with Birju Maharaj reciting dance *bols* (phrases) throughout, as well as singing a few lines of the *thumri*. Dixit speaks a few lines of poetry as well before the main singer Kavita Krishnamurthy begins singing the majority of the song. Throughout, the key features and symbols of Kathak as it is understood today are highlighted: Chandramukhi embodies the *ada* (flair/style) that Lucknow *gharana* dance is so well-known for, there is storytelling through *baithaki bhav*, when the dancer sits on the floor and emotes a story, there are subtleties of expression, fast spins and flaring skirts, and tights shots of the dancers’ feet and *ghungroo* as they do rhythmic footwork. For these reasons, and because it bridges the worlds of classical and mainstream so well, this song is extremely popular amongst Kathak dancers in performance. It gives many second generation Indian American Kathaks legitimacy and appeal because it is simultaneously purely classical, bringing all the finest elements of Kathak storytelling and technique, yet mainstream Bollywood in a film with a cast of extremely famous actors and actresses, whilst being very entertaining.
The theme of the *thumri* is of course romantic, based on Krishna, yet is anything but devotional. The lyrics and translation\(^\text{27}\) are in Figure 9.

**Figure 12: “Kaahe Chhed Mohe” Lyrics and Translation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[Kathak recitation by Maharaj]</th>
<th>[Sung by Maharaj]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malti gundhai, kesh pyaar guguvare</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukh damini si damakat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chal matvari, chal matvari, chal matvari</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Recited by Dixit]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhai shyam rok lai, rok lai, rok lai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhai shyam rok lai, aur chak mukh chum lai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukh chum lai, mukh chum lai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sar se mori chunari gayi, gayi, gayi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sar se mori chunari gayi, sarak, sarak, sarak</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarak, sarak, sarak</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarak, sarak, sarak</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Sung by Krishnamurty]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaahe chhed chhed mohe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garva lagai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaahe chhed chhed mohe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garva lagai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaahe, chhed, chhed mohe?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nand ko lal aiso dheet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bar bas mori laaj lihni</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binda shyam manat nahi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ka se kahun main apne jiya ki?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunat nahi, mai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaahe chhed chhed mohe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| The fragrance of jasmine flowers from [her] curly hair |
| [Her] face shines like lightning |
| With an intoxicating gait |
| Krishna stopped me, stopped me, stopped me |
| Krishna stopped me, and suddenly kissed my face |
| Kissed my face, kissed my face |
| My veil slipped from my head, it slipped, it slipped |
| My veil slipped from my head, slipped, slipped |
| Slipped, slipped, slipped |
| Slipped, slipped, slipped |
| Why do you tease me? |
| And then embrace me |
| Why do you tease me? |
| And then embrace me |
| Why, do you tease, tease me? |
| Nand’s son is so stubborn |
| He only wants to take my modesty |
| Binda, Krishna doesn’t listen |
| To whom should I speak of what’s in my heart? |
| He doesn’t listen, o mother |
| Why do you tease me? |

\(^{27}\) Translation by the author, informed by personal communication with Birju Maharaj. Note that the translation is literal, with the intention of conveying meaning and emphasis on certain repeated words and phrases, versus recrafting the lyrics into poetic language in order to deliver the same emotional effect as the original.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recited by Dixit</th>
<th>Sung by Krishnamurty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dadh ki bhari matki, dadh ki bhari matki&lt;br&gt;Aahat suni, aahat suni&lt;br&gt;Aahat suni, jiya ra gayo&lt;br&gt;Dhadak, dhadak, dhadak&lt;br&gt;Dhadak, dhadak, dhadak&lt;br&gt;Dhadak, dhadak, dhadak</td>
<td>Kar pakarat chooriyan sabh karakeen, karakeen, karakeen&lt;br&gt;Kar pakarat chooriyan sabh karakeen, karakeen, karakeen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le jat rahie dagar beech</td>
<td>O mai...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aahat suni, aahat suni</td>
<td>Binda shyam manat nahi&lt;br&gt;Ka se kahun main apne jiya ki?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aahat suni, jiya ra gayo</td>
<td>Sunat nahi, mai&lt;br&gt;Kaahe chhed chhed mohe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhadak, dhadak, dhadak</td>
<td>[Kathak recitation by Maharaj and troupe]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhadak, dhadak, dhadak</td>
<td>A pot full of milk, a pot full of milk, a pot full of milk&lt;br&gt;I was taking down the road&lt;br&gt;I heard his footsteps, I heard his footsteps&lt;br&gt;I heard his footsteps, and my heart started&lt;br&gt;Pounding, pounding, pounding&lt;br&gt;Pounding, pounding, pounding&lt;br&gt;Pounding, pounding, pounding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhadak, dhadak, dhadak</td>
<td>He held my wrists and all my bangles broke&lt;br&gt;Broke, broke&lt;br&gt;He held my wrists and all my bangles broke&lt;br&gt;Broke, broke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhadak, dhadak, dhadak</td>
<td>O mother…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhadak, dhadak, dhadak</td>
<td>Binda, Krishna doesn’t listen&lt;br&gt;To whom should I speak of what’s in my heart?&lt;br&gt;He doesn’t listen, o mother&lt;br&gt;Why do you tease me?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite the provocative lyrics that graphically paint a picture of a romantic encounter between two young people, this composition is still viewed as pure classical dance. Its association with the *tawaiif* in the film paradoxically does not diminish this perception, nor dissuade American Kathaks from performing this piece. Remarkably, while the audience views this song from a perspective of nostalgia and romanticism, we do see a clear tie between Kathak and courtesans, albeit tinged by the idea of prostitution rather than patronage. Similar to Neela in *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje*, Chandramukhi is a victim of circumstance, but unlike Neela, she does not have the agency to change her circumstance through classical dance. Instead, her character is only given
dimension through her love for Devdas. The viewer realizes that she has fallen in love with her patron and therefore does not wish to perform for anyone else, which is assumed that she must as a tawaiif, who doesn’t have choice around who patronizes her. It is important to note that Binda, referring to Bindadin Maharaj, author of the thumri, mentions himself in his composition. This is a common practice, however due to the significant popularity of this song, is a device that reinforces lineage.

The third film, Shatranj Ke Khilari, The Chess Players (1977), by Satyajit Ray takes place further back in time, in 1856 during the historical takeover of Awadh by the British East India Company. In this film, adapted from a book by Munshi Premchand, a renowned Hindi language writer, Ray offers a critical reading of India’s past, unveiling the extravagance of the landed nobility, leading to the fall of pre-colonial Indian into the hands of the British. Notably, here Kathak is featured as part of court entertainment, and is symbolic of luxury and opulence. Although this film is not mainstream, and is less popular than the previous two films amongst the mass Bollywood-viewing public, and arguably the American Kathaks as well, it remains important and influential in remembering the dance for participants in this study.

Due to the nature of the medium, film can incorporate all categories of art including fine arts, literature, painting sculpture, dance, music and theatre, greatly complicating any understanding of where in the hierarchy it may reside. In her talk “Partition, Communalism and Indian Cinema” (2011), Ira Bhaskar noted that older forms of art such as literature, dance, and music don’t disappear. Rather, they transform and resurface in different contexts. The court scene where we see what royal patronage of Kathak dance looks like is a good example of this. Ray turns the notion of a glorious past inside out, perhaps critiquing any ‘outside’ rule, be it
Mughal or otherwise, but offering the viewer a glimpse into the malaise that prevented the ruler of Awadh, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah from fighting against British takeover.

Ray pulls us into the world of the nawab’s extravagance with a certain measure of melancholy: we see the nawab reclining, stroking his cat, as he is fanned by maidservants. Hookah is readily available and the viewer is invited to enjoy the *thumri* with, as described by a British character within the film, the “effeminate, frivolous and worthless king,” who is visibly moved by the poetry. We see the degradation of court patronage unfolding through the artistically-minded *nawab*, disinterested in matters of the state. Similar to “Kaahe Chhed Mohe” from *Devdas*, the setting for this composition is resplendent—however in contrast, is intimate and quaint versus serving as a spectacle, providing visual fuel to the nostalgic memory of the Lucknow *gharana*.

Perhaps what is most telling is that all dancers featured in this film, as well as the choreographer, Birju Maharaj, were employees of the Kathak Kendra, the National Institute of Kathak at the time of filming, reflecting its purpose, and in some ways, establishing state patronage. That is, ensuring that classical dance and dancers were available to not only showcase the art form, but also India’s past in the postcolonial context. Saswati Sen, Maharaj’s foremost disciple, plays the role of the court dancer, performing “Kanha Main Tose Hari, Chhoro Sari” (“Krishna I’ve lost to you, leave my sari”). The text is drawn from Bindadin Maharaj’s work, who is depicted as a singer and courtier by Maharaj’s student the late Pradeep Shankar. Similar to the *thumri* in *Devdas*, Bindadin Maharaj is also written into this composition, being referred to as simply “Binda.” Unlike Dixit in *Devdas*, Sen dances with picturesque poise and dignity, and far less coquettishness; her character clearly performs for the nawab’s entertainment as an artist.
in his *darbar* (court), versus Chandramukhi who danced for the pleasure of those who frequented her brothel. This distinction is subtle but plays an important role in the ways that Kathak is remembered—high art performed by a professional dancer given proper status in the Lucknow courts, versus art performed by a courtesan, lacking agency and at the whims of the males that frequent her brothel. Although so much of the setting looks similar, in the imagination influenced by the dominant narrative, it is difficult to imagine that both dancers could have belonged to the same category of artists.

**Figure 13: New-Delhi dancer Mahua Shankar in Mughal costume performing a Sufi piece**

Another striking disjuncture is the dominant narrative of Kathak at play in the film; students and enthusiasts are reminded world over that Kathak first told stories about Hindu mythological figures in its early temple stages. With the arrival of the Mughals, it was brought into a court context and the technical aspects (intricate footwork, quick pirouettes, etc.) were introduced, largely due to the fact that this audience was Muslim, but also because dancers were no longer relied upon to merely tell stories but to entertain (Narayan 2004, 22). The *thumri* in Ray’s film is confusing to viewers familiar with this narrative, should they pause to consider it,
as the poem expresses the romantic encounter between Hindu mythological figures and is largely incongruous with the dominant narrative of Kathak’s origin and development. Few stop to ask who Nawab Wajid Ali Shah actually was and how that might fit into Kathak’s dominant narrative—he was not a Mughal emperor, but rather one of the Nawabs of Awadh (Collier 2016, 16-19), who came to prominence while the Mughal Empire was in decline. However, both groups are conflated, viewed as external to India.

These films, amongst multiple others, reinforce the dominant narrative, and create a selective memory of Kathak, particularly in the period from the patronage of royal courts through to the British Raj. We see dancing girls (Neela in Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje), courtesans (Chandramukhi in Devdas), and court dancers (Sen’s character in Shatranj Ke Khilari) and learn about the appropriate ways to see them through the dominant narrative, not seeing them as artists of one contiguous group at different moments in time. We also see a privileging of certain elements in the repertoire, with two of the three films choreographed by Maharaj, featuring his grand-uncle’s compositions. The recent proliferation of choreography by Maharaj in Bollywood indicates a hegemony of one style/lineage, however it is important to consider that certain Indian dancers, representing Lucknow (Lachhu Maharaj), Jaipur (Roshan Kumari), and Benaras (Sitara Devi, Gopi Krishna) traditions in the past were regularly associated with Bollywood films. Without a doubt, it is accurate to say that his recent work in films has led to Maharaj’s incremental popularity within the US as a result.

While training imparted by the guru through oral and embodied transmission is the primary means by which American Kathak students learn about the form the repertoire, other sources are available to practitioners in order to more fully understand the history of the dance,
namely written texts (Chakravorty 2008; Walker 2014) as well as choreographic works that are less prevalent due to the ephemeral\textsuperscript{28} nature of dance. Parul Shah, a New York based choreographer and dancer, trained initially by Satya Narayana Charka in New York and the well-known innovator, Kumudini Lakhia in Ahmedabad, presented her “History of Unforgetting,” a work\textsuperscript{29} described on her website as:

Paying tribute to the devadasis, or temple dancers, of India, this piece depicts the artistry and inner lives of the women who created and preserved the classical arts (dance, music, poetry) of India for centuries. “History of Unforgetting” looks beyond the academic picture of these women, often reduced to courtesans, to reveal their importance to the classical tradition as well as recognizing how society allowed their displacement eventually leading to a life of debauchery. “History of Unforgetting” attempts to understand the plight of the devadasis’ at that time making parallels to modern day life and examining the political, social issues that are still relevant today. (Parul Shah Company 2018).

In this program description, the courtesan is conflated with the devadasi, or dancer who was fully dedicated to a specific temple, that danced within South India, a history that is important to the Bharatanatyam classical dance tradition. This dance form, originally known as sadir, experienced similar treatment to Kathak: “Revivalists focused on reconfiguring sadir, the dance form, with links to pre-colonial times and promoted the dance form as one of the nation’s cultural treasures” (Unni 2016, 140). The premise of this production is based on the assumption that Kathak was danced within temples and that due to a lack of societal engagement or responsibility, dancers were forced out of temples and into courts, which was a degradation of the form in and of itself. It is also implied that courtesans were lower in the social hierarchy

\textsuperscript{28} As practitioners become more comfortable sharing their work on traditional and social media platforms, hopefully more experimental work will also become available for others to reference around Kathak’s contested histories, interrupting the dominant narrative.

versus temple dancers, likely again because of the tension between dance as a spiritual act versus as entertainment. This reading of history, although acknowledging women, draws upon the very same imaginary of Kathak beginning in ancient, Hindu India, and eventually becoming a corrupted court dance. The subtext here, and in other tellings of history, privileges the Lucknow gharana style of the dance—where the Mughals or the Nawabs of Awadh who followed the Muslim faith patronized Kathak—versus the Jaipur gharana, patronized by the Kachwaha Rajput Maharajas.

The production premiered at Dance New Amsterdam in New York City in 2008. The choreography was comprised of the modern movement vocabulary that Shah is famous for, with simple costumes allowing for a focus on the dancer. There were no ghungroo (bells) worn and Western music was also used. The choreography showed brief glimpses of Kathak, particularly at the moment when it harkens back to the appearance of a character, dressed as a tawaiif, who appears on the stage. She sings a composition, and sits with accompanying musicians as Shah performs rhythmic compositions. Although an ambitious and innovative attempt to give voice to those who had become disenfranchised, this work doesn’t actually refer to the contributions of the tawaiifs—their repertoire—in the context that they existed in. It would be remiss to suggest that this is not challenging for artists today due to the limitations of what is readily available. However, it does paint a picture of that romanticized time through the inclusion of the sangat, (accompanying artists) who sit and watch Shah as she dances.

This is consistent across most performances of Kathak dance in the United States, whether presented by a soloist or group choreography. An inclusive history of Kathak dance is rare, often not even mentioned in the program notes, and even if it is, the repertoire presented
reinforces the dominant narrative in some way, reaching to Vedic stories, or utilizing movement vocabularies outside of the Kathak repertoire to imagine what the possible circumstances of women were.

Despite featuring in the choreography and three aforementioned films that are amongst the many that contribute to a nostalgic memory of Kathak’s past, and although they are sometimes remembered through oral memory as a stop along Kathak’s journey towards greatness, or even as women who “were poets, learned music, and could own land” (Charlotte Moraga, personal communication, March 22, 2018), I posit that the courtesans are forgotten in the collective American Kathak memory. First, they are not known by name, despite some written records in English being available. Instead, certain stars, typically male gurus of the past fifty or so years, are well-remembered as immediate connection points to their individual training in the dance. Second, the courtesans are simply not mentioned as important agents in furthering the dance form, and we see an erasure of their presence and contribution to Kathak in the pre-colonial and colonial context, with the exception of references to sex work. Even women within the royal courts in pre-colonial India are not remembered, with patrilineal family trees emphasizing male gurus and dancers. They are often not thought of as authors and poets of their own work, with some participants in this study expressing some surprise, indicating that they had never really spent much time thinking about who these women were and what they did.

It is also fitting to place my own experience as a practitioner of Kathak within this context: this research was a process of discovery, shaking my own beliefs about the courtesans, causing me to reflect on the one dimensional way that I had originally thought of them, to consider the ways in which women are viewed within the repertoire and history—as agents or
subjects, and why. Although aware that courtesans existed and continued to dance the form despite colonial oppression of the arts, the stigma around the tawaiif ran deep. For example, several years ago, I was taken aback when a friend called me “Umrao,” referring to Umrao Jaan, a popular 1981 film based on a novel Umrao Jaan Ada, telling the story of a Lucknow courtesan. The protagonist, Umrao Jaan, was played by the popular Bollywood actress Rekha, and her performance in the film was recognized as being exceptionally beautiful, sophisticated, and stylized. Teasingly being referred to as Umrao because of my training in Kathak was disorienting, and my subsequent response was indicative of the commonly-held negative perspective around this character, emblematic of the courtesans. Rather than receiving this comment as a compliment that my performance was sophisticated and polished (it was not), I was instead more concerned about the connection to a courtesan, a link that I had not even begun to understand at that time. And it continues. My training has taught me to be respectful of elder teachers, meaning that throughout the course of this research, I had difficulty overtly broaching the topic of courtesans directly with senior practitioners, unless I was able to steer the conversation in that direction gradually, or if I knew the individual would not be offended by the question.

Beyond this silence around the contribution of courtesans, and the sanitized ways of remembering Kathak’s history, courtesans are stripped of their agency. They are thought of as doing something other than Kathak, or a corrupted version of it (Banerji 1982). The “real” practice is remembered as having gone underground during the British Raj, until it was safe for them to emerge in the Indian nation state. “Certainly, the belief that kathak was for a time

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30 That my Indian American friend so effortlessly made the connection between Kathak and courtesans through the film is indicative of the immense influence and power of Hindi films in the diaspora.
distorted by ‘public women’ for immoral ends allows contemporary dancers and audiences the comfort of reinterpreting the more sensual aspects of *kathak* dance in the safe realm of Hindu mythology” (Walker 2014, 97). Thus, we see that *thumri*, although largely romantic in nature is sometimes performed as more strongly devotional, symbolic of the divine love between Krishna and Radha. On the other hand, the hereditary dancers—courtesans, amongst other groups, were part of a “degenerate period, a ‘dark age’” (14), and what they did was something distinct from the spiritual dance originating in temples and existing on today’s stages.

There is a relationship between bodily practices and cultural memory, resulting in the “production and reproduction of power” (Stoller 1994, 637). Because the repertoire of courtesans is largely lost, or is so difficult to trace the threads of, cultural forgetting continues to strip their power in history, and leads to their erasure within the American Kathak collective memory. Within subaltern groups, typically, memories are stored in stories, things, and bodies rather than in texts (639). The absence of written texts celebrating their contribution to the art form, and tracing lineage through male teachers means that so much of their individual stories, the stories and poetry they told through their repertoire, and their ways of expressing through the body, contributes to a gap in history surrounding them, despite the nostalgic ways of remembering Kathak within the royal courts, albeit through oral memory, and less so embodied within performance.
Chapter 4

*Abhinaya: Expressive Dance*

**The Female Body and Indian Nationalism**

Within her research of youth culture within the South Asian diaspora to the US, Maira (2002) notes that second generation Indian Americans reside in a ‘third place’ distinct from their parents’ perspectives and their home society’s perspective. It is “not a fixed location but an emerging set of disparate, sometimes contradictory, experiences and narratives of hybridity and nostalgia in the second generation” (87). Although the American Kathak community is not homogenous, the participants in this study do skew more heavily towards first and second generation Indian American females, and while many speak of Kathak as artistic expression, we do see language and performance reflecting the Indian nationalism of the dominant narrative within oral and embodied memory. In this section, I will look at embodied nationalism within the female body through the practice of Kathak.

The body, particularly the female body has been established through prior scholarship as significant a critical point for nationalism and its narratives and symbolism (Liu 1994; Baron 2005; Conway 1995). Ismail (2000) claims in “Constituting Nation, Contesting Nationalism: The Southern Tamil (Woman) and Separatist Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka,” that the nation does not have space for women as they are implicitly placed in a subordinate position to men (218). He goes on to explain the connection between the idea of “home” and “nation.” The nation is an extension of the home and community, it is both nurturing and violent at the same time. It promises to provide a fully safe and secure space for its subjects, drawing on the idea of home, which is understood to be the only space where one can truly be safe and secure, free of homelessness, homesickness, and perhaps even nostalgia.
Nationalism draws its power from narratives, and as such, reading texts is critical for the narrative of the nation (221). Kathak plays a role here, in extending Indian nationalism within the diaspora. By reinforcing the idea that Kathak is, at its essence, a storytelling art form originating as ancient oral memory, it perpetuates not only the stories that are presented over and over again, but also the narrative that these stories are the point of origin for the dance and its authentic practitioners, and also Indian history. When it comes to the context of the stories presented through dance, they draw on the assumption that audiences are aware of them already, to some extent, otherwise they risk being caricatural. In order for audiences and practitioners to draw multivalent interpretations, it is assumed that they are already aware of the text or that they invest time in reading the text themselves. Ismail (2000) explains that while nationalism’s narratives “present its story as the truth, as incontrovertibly and uniquely true,” however they also provide a means to uncover and rewrite history, “it is by reading that one can contest the story of nationalism, represented as self-evident, with other, less oppressive, more enabling ones” (221). This last point is critical to understanding why the project of nationalism can be problematic.

The nation, brings together and provides unity to disparate groups within itself (Ismail 2000, 223), and is perceived of as having static and unchanging boundaries (214). Female bodies become the physical borders for the nation, symbolic of the purity and honor of the nation state. Transgressions against female bodies are coded as transgressions against the nation, whereas maintaining the chastity of female bodies is representative of the chastity of the nation. Some attribute this association between the female body and the nation state to the aforementioned nationalist discourses drawing upon ideas of the family and home (Ranchod-Nilssonmary and
Tetreault 2000, 5). Following this line of thinking, female reproductive ability and child-rearing responsibilities extends to their birthing citizens for the nation and raising them into ideal subjects (6).

Conway (1995) in her “Nationalism, Revolution, and the Female Body: Charlotte Smith’s Desmond” specifies that in mid-eighteenth century England, “the eroticized and sexualized female body” was dislocated, kept away from the middle class (396). In her analysis of fictional characters, she notes that “the body [has] dangerous potential to disrupt social conventions, radical or conservative…the transgressive body appears in order that it might be re-contained and silenced” (403). Thus, the project of nationalism can be selective in associating with particular types of women, excluding groups that do not further a specific narrative of the nation. While this is done by shaping the nationalist narrative in an exclusive way, Mostov (1995) explains that myths, folktales, and music—song in particular—plays a significant role in establishing not only the naturalness of the nation’s border, but also in pulling in and connecting citizens near and far, who may be geographically separated (516-517). Ranchod-Nilssonmary and Tetreault (2000) posit that “We need to address the ways in which nationalist projects are historically and culturally embedded…we must be alert to the specific gender meanings invoked at particular times and places and the ways in which these meanings change over time” (7). Understanding how and which specific gendered meanings are steeped in the idea of the nation are relevant to contextualizing Kathak in America.

Maira (2002) explains, “Cultural fossilization creates the paradox of a community that is socially and ideologically more conservative than the community of origin, clinging to mores and beliefs that have remained static, albeit contested by their children” (85). There are a
plurality of beliefs within the American Kathak community—many of the younger practitioners
talked about what resonated with them of the expressive repertoire as well as conflicts that arose
as teachers of second or even third generation Kathak students in the United States. Yet Kathak
is certainly embraced as a living tradition, history, and culture of their ethnic point of origin. This
is expressed orally, but also is most commonly seen through the dancing body. Kathak is
regarded as the only dance that boasts both Hindu and Muslim influences by its
practitioners—symbolic of a uniquely Indian unity within the American Kathak memory; an
undivided India. The dominant narrative remembers India prior to colonization with a measure of
nostalgia, as home to natives living peacefully, despite religious difference. It’s important to note
that India continues to be home to a significant Muslim population today. The 1947 Partition of
India and Pakistan was a profoundly tragic moment in history, yet it did not purge religious
plurality. I hypothesize that the narrative that emphasizes Kathak as the only classical dance with
both Hindu and Muslim influence is potent as it draws upon nostalgia for a culturally and
artistically rich India, more or less indigenously ruled, existing before the division that was so
deply and personally catastrophic to so many. Despite not remembering the actual events of
history vividly, particularly not the colonial period, the symbol of Kathak as the culture of an
undivided India is strong within American Kathaks. Meaning is created through performance,
thus placing the audience into the social world in specific ways (Frith 1996). The audience
experiences the dominant narrative, and is placed in a specific position to understand the depth of
Indian history through a visual distinction between the Hindu temple era and Mughal court era in
performance. For example, dancers indicate what “world” they and the audience might be in
through their costuming. Although not a hard and fast rule, it is typically adhered to that
Hindu/devotional compositions are danced in ghaghra, a full-length skirt and short blouse, with a scarf, versus the angarkha, the long-sleeved empire-waist tunic worn with tight-fitting pants and a scarf, that is common for Mughal/rhythmic compositions (Lalli 2004, 27-30). The clothing worn by female dancers helps to orient viewers to the mode of the performance, visually embodying a culturally rich, diverse India. Additionally, this transition is linear, and seamless, giving practitioners an opportunity to express the deep, ancient ancient history of the Indian civilization while also relieving religious strife.

Both Hindus and Muslims respectively, are remembered as one homogenous group, despite the many ethnic and linguistic variations within each. This becomes problematic specifically for the “Muslim” part of Kathak’s history, which doesn’t speak to religion, but rather rule by invading groups that were Muslim, and came to settle in India, bringing cultural influences to the dance form along with their patronage. As mentioned in chapter 1, the Mughals were Chaghta’i Turks, and they were indeed Muslim. “Mughal culture blended Perso-Islamic and regional Indian elements into a distinctive but variegated whole” (Pletcher 2011, 162). While they were of Turkic origin, and the language was already established within India before they got there, the Mughals chose to align themselves with Persian (Alam 1998, 318). This context is relevant when considering the storytelling about Kathak by practitioners when they see it as the only form bringing together Hindu and Muslim cultures. In personal communication, Farah Yasmeen Shaikh explained that within a solo performance, with the “development to thaat, you see the introduction of the Mughal, Persian influence...It’s not religious, it’s Mughal influence—they happened to be Muslim, but it’s not religious influence.” With Hinduism in Kathak you see the clear relation to the religion, but this distinction is less true of Islam.
Indeed, with the Mughal elements within Kathak, it is difficult to see a clear connection to Islam. However, it is much easier to see the tie back to Hinduism within the repertoire, performed through the female Kathak’s body. We use our bodies to express art, perform rituals and transmit culture (Hahn 2007). Culture in particular is carried by the female body, and classical art, including painting, sculpture, music, dance are representative of national pride and tradition (Maira 2002, 36). So many of the foundational elements of training and performance in Kathak are indicative of Indian national pride—and that pride, as part of the dominant narrative, does lean more heavily towards Hindu thought and ideals. As previously mentioned, one of the first things that is taught to students, and is continually done at the beginning and end of every class, rehearsal, and performance is the \textit{pranaam} (ritualized bow). Although not specifically religious, the ways in which the body moves through the \textit{pranaam} is markedly Hindu. While done differently by all, the premise is similar. Practitioners demonstrate their respect to the space they are in and the ground they will dance on, touching the ground in a stylized way, and bring their palms together in a gesture of \textit{namaste}, at the top of the forehead and near their heart. This visually ties back to the ways that Hindus engage in prayer. Some also show respect to their bells, touching them to their head and closing their eyes in prayer, still others touch the musical instruments played by their accompanying artists and gesture with a \textit{namaste}, and as mentioned in chapter 2, individuals also touch their guru’s feet. These ritualized bodily demonstrations of respect through \textit{pranaam}, mark the dance as a devotional, spiritual practice. Notably, we see that the spiritual connotation of touching the guru’s feet is also mirrored within \textit{nihon buyo}, as explored by Hahn in \textit{Sensational Knowledge} (2007) in which her teacher (iemoto) “reveal[s] the “mindful” practice of dance and its ability to enable personal growth through a disciplining of
the body” (41-42). Regardless of what is ultimately danced, in practice, Kathak is then understood to be an expression of spirituality, not entertainment. That begs the question, would omitting the pranaam make the resulting dance secular?

When asked what the epitome of Kathak is, some American Kathaks might say mastery over rhythm. However, many others would say excellence in abhinaya: subtle, nuanced, expressive, natural storytelling. Students painstakingly spend years learning rhythmic patterns, yet abhinaya reigned supreme within this study. Given the nature of the stories told through the body, this reinforces temple origins within the dominant narrative. That is, if abhinaya, currently focused on Hindu mythological stories, is supreme, and technique is remembered as coming to the dance as a result of Muslim/Mughal invasions, this reproduces the narrative through the preference towards Hindu influence and lineage. Furthermore, this reproduction is largely by Hindu-identifying members of the American Kathak community. Purkayastha (2005) explains that it is relevant within the South Asian American diaspora to observe Hindus because they are a majority:

...the role of temples in the United States: they act as places for gathering, and for inculcating ideas about ‘your people’ to the second generation, often in gendered ways...it was normative for girls to dance. The emphasis on performance is tied to building ways of doing cultures across multilingual sub-groups that make up the Hindu community. Performances rank high on this list. (96)

The very act of encouraging girls to dance is a cultural transmission through the body. Copying and recreating a perspective through performance is part of understanding it (Stoller 1994, 643), and establishing abhinaya as the highest achievement within Kathak results in embodied experiences that trigger cultural memory. They understand and make sense of Kathak’s history, and by extension, their relationship to India through their embodied experiences.
One of the first things that students learn in their Kathak training can be traced back to the Hindu faith. *Pooja* (prayer) rituals, respect, and mythological stories are all taught to students as part of their classroom training. While a student is likely to walk into a class unaware of how to perform a traditional prayer ritual, through their dance training, they learn how to do so, along with generating the prerequisite feeling of devotion. For example, within an invocation, the practitioner may create a world in which she prepares for and completes *aarti* (prayer ritual), through gesture and mood. She picks fresh flowers as part of her offerings, or she may create a garland out of them. The dancer will light a *diya* (lamp), pick it up with great care, and complete the prayer ritual by moving the lamp in circular gestures in front of the deity, whilst ringing a bell. The dancer takes the *tilak* (the mark made by anointing one’s forehead with powder/paste) and places it on the deity, and then perhaps on herself. She gazes with *bhakti* (devotion), and then lowers her gaze in surrender. This type of teaching may not occur at home, yet through the dance, this prayer ritual is transmitted to practitioners in the diaspora.

**Figure 14: Preya Patel in ghagra (long skirt) costume, in a gesture of offering**

![Image of Preya Patel in ghagra costume](image)
Expressive elements in Kathak include *thumri, ghazal, vandana, bhajan,* and *kavit,* amongst others. All but *thumri* and *ghazal* tend to be devotional in nature. As previously discussed, *thumri* has been relevant to the Lucknow repertoire and lineage, and was of course presented by the courtesans, who often also wrote their own compositions. “The verses were about ecstatic passion, pangs of separation, jealousy, longing, anger, and playful love” (Chakravorty 2017). However, in the American Kathak community today *thumri* is not danced as romantic or erotic. Rather, it is largely performed with devotion. Even when depicting the *chhed-chhad* (teasing and flirting) between Radha and Krishna, dancers reproduce this relationship with *bhakti* (devotion). The sensuous movements that one might imagine may have been part of the courtesan repertoire are not remembered through embodied memory. This inclusion of devotion within *shringar rasa* (romantic/erotic mood) is telling of ideal womanhood and is in stark contrast to the experience of Rita Ganguly’s “Art of the Tawaiif” workshop in New York. As Lala and Verma explained, Ganguly contextualized the *tawaiif* for participants, and drilled how to walk. Not in a stylized, technical way, but rather, how to simply walk from one point to another, as they normally would. She explained that the *tawaiif* in Lucknow would have been a Muslim woman, and when going about her day, perhaps shopping in the market, would likely wear a burqa, covering her face and body. Passersby would not be able to see that she was a courtesan, however would be able to tell she was one, just by the way she walked. By drawing attention to how participants walked, and how they might look into their audience in a particular way, Ganguly focused on bringing sensuality into participants’ embodied memory, teaching them ways to evoke interest, connection, and desire with simply one individual. I posit that the current expressive movement vocabulary related to *shringar rasa* is not particularly
robust due to the loss of courtesan women’s repertoire, and the focus on Radha and Krishna as principal characters to depict romance within the US Kathak community, scrubbing away sensuality from the dance.

The act of teaching and training these aspects of Kathak is in contrast with the ideal womanhood that is espoused through the repertoire today. It is also a logistical challenge with male teachers. For example, I recall a class experience with Birju Maharaj, in which he explained how to look through the ghunghat (veil). As a second generation Indian American, this was not a concept that resonated with me to begin with, though it was familiar. In order to correct my movement, he conjured up an vignette, telling me to imagine that I was veiling shyly and suddenly, noticing that my father in-law was nearby. Rather than peering out with curiosity, instead I should transmit modesty. Again, this image did not resonate with me—this was as much a learning around differences in culture, age, and gender, as it was about Kathak as a tool to teach ideal Indian femininity.

Figure 15: Rashi Verma in the Kathak Ensemble’s Premika: Women in Love, dancing the ghazal “Aaj Jaane Ki Zid Na Karo” (“Don’t Insist on Leaving Today”) © Gustavo Mirabile Photography
The presence or absence\(^{31}\) of a physical veil (*chunni, dupatta*) in class and/or performance is viewed with strong perspectives (Lori Clark, personal communication, April 1, 2018) connoting what it means to be an ideal Indian woman, whose body is guarded with propriety and modesty. On the other hand, the concept or gesture of the *ghunghat* (veil) is a relevant part of the expressive movement vocabulary, pertinent in understanding how perspectives around womanhood show up within embodied memory. *Ghunghat* is seen frequently in compositions with Hindu goddesses/divine characters, particularly Radha, Sita, and Parvati, associated with the male gods Krishna, Ram, and Shiva respectively, and sometimes with Saraswati, goddess of education, the arts, and creativity. Saraswati is the focus of some foundational invocations. Her clothing is described in the “Saraswati Vandana” in Sanskrit as follows: “*ya shubra vastravrita*” or “wearing white clothing/garments,” in which some common gestures to express this include depicting a veil, or a sari draped at her shoulder. Compositions in praise of other goddesses are far less frequent, and when performed, are much less likely to incorporate *ghunghat* movements. Additionally, *ghunghat* movements are relevant when representing stories about non-divine female characters in relation to her male beloved. In these instances, the *ghunghat* is not simply representative of an article of clothing, but rather, it shapes the relationship between female and male characters in the dance, and by cultural transmission through the body reinforces these perspectives to the practitioners as well, even when they are in conflict with their own South Asian American womanhood. Ideal femininity is defined through

\(^{31}\) That is not to suggest that practitioners always wear a veil in classrooms or on stage as part of costume. As trends within the general Indian public make it more acceptable and fashionable to not wear a scarf/veil as even an accessory, some American Kathak practitioners do not wear the veil in class. Not including the veil as part of stage costume is more controversial, however there are some, such as the celebrated Indian artist Kumudini Lakhia, who do not include it, in order to allow performers’ movements to be unrestricted and seen more easily. American Kathaks tend to be a bit more conservative, typically wearing some type of a veil even if just for namesake.
the presence of a veil that is gazed through; symbolic of the modesty and propriety appropriate of ideal Indian (Hindu) women embodied by American Kathak practitioners, mediating their relationships to the male beloved.

Nayika: Heroine
Locating women

As Magrini (2003) states in *Music and Gender: Perspectives from the Mediterranean*, “Today one can no longer avoid investigating the role played by gender—of both the music makers and their audiences—in determining essential aspects of a musical activity and its cultural meaning” (2). In the previous sections, we saw how women are critical for nationalism, and that their bodies are symbolic of the nation state. Kathak played, and continues to play, a role as a marker of India’s pre-colonial past within the project of nation-making, and the tawaiif is absent from, or marginalized within Kathak’s history which represents and reproduces India’s history. This section seeks to locate women in Kathak’s narratives of lineage and repertoire.

Where are the women in Kathak’s past and who were they? Earlier sections have explored the forgotten courtesans, whose lineages were not traced and preserved as the male gharanedaar lineages were. Gharana is traced patrilineally, and as such besides the courtesans, the lineages of Indian post-colonial practitioners such as Sitara Devi, Maya Rao, Damayanti Joshi, Madame Menaka, Kumudini Lakhia are not traced formally either. Although these women were from respectable, upper and middle class professional households and were acknowledged as contributors to the dance form, the male-oriented gharana system erases their lineages. Some of these artists have truly established a unique style within the Kathak landscape, and yet their lineage is solely transmitted through their students’ performing bodies, rather than through
kinship ties. It remains to be seen whether a shift occurs, however at present, gharana maintains a focus on hereditary dancing families over generations, overshadowing the women who labored to maintain and innovate the Kathak repertoire.

Similarly, the repertoire locates women in very particular ways. Returning to the courtesans, we know many of them were not only skilled dancers and musicians, but were also poets and writers. For example, Gauhar Jan, a Calcutta-based tawaiif was known to be a gifted thumri singer, dancer, and also wrote her own compositions (Hunt 2000, 88). It is true that early court poets were more often male, yet there is regrettably less preservation of women’s compositions because of the diminished status of the courtesan, and thus naturally it is more difficult to draw from their texts because of a lack of accessibility. Today, there are many prolific female writers, yet American Kathaks less frequently look for new literature to interpret. When they do, they are less likely to select a text written by a contemporary female writer, and are more likely to explore the works of older male authors, privileging ancient stories. Take for example, Janaki Patrik’s Premika: Women in Love, based on Ashtanayika (eight heroines) of the Natya Shastra. This choreography was solely focused on non-divine, female characters and sought to explore how these eight heroines might map to a modern American relationship, from meeting someone online, dating, arguing and growing distant, and finally coming back together again. Premika was an interesting exploration of applying Kathak stories to new contexts in an effort to appeal to contemporary audiences and was female-centric, however was firmly grounded in the idea of romantic love.

Privileging the works of older male authors can be problematic, because these stories are seen most often within the American Kathak community and tend to have fewer agentive female
characters. The majority of practitioners are women, and yet the majority of the characters are male. This is not considered to be a limitation within performance however, as dancers are expected to be able to portray both male and female characters with ease. Yet this is worth noting because the body is gendered female in Kathak, including within thumri, ghazal, and expressive pieces, and is in contrast to the marked absence of a strong female protagonist. Frequently danced compositions with female mythological characters tend to express how they felt, whereas male mythological characters are squarely focused on what they did. For example, stories from Radha’s perspective are colored with Krishna’s aura—what he did to her, what he said, what he will do when he arrives. Bhardwaj stated, “[The female character is] the heart of the show. Stories change because of her involvement and because of what she’s feeling.” Yet where is Radha’s agency as a character? At most, we see Radha threatening Krishna, or getting together with her friends to tie Krishna up and dress him as a woman as punishment. These stories resolve with Radha realizing how hopelessly she loves Krishna and his mischief. Of course, it would be irresponsible to suggest that Radha enjoys the same status as Krishna within storytelling and religion—she does not. However, as mentioned earlier, there are other goddesses and mythological characters that are represented within the repertoire, such as Saraswati, that have resonance without a male partner.

Saraswati features within the elementary syllabus of many institutes. However, students are far less frequently taught compositions that exalt other goddesses. It is not that these compositions don’t exist—they are simply less frequent. For example, there is Devi Stuti, an invocation in honor of the feminine divine. It exists but is less frequently danced, whereas multiple Krishna vandana or Shiv-related pieces are given preference when it comes to
devotional compositions. There are stories such as *Draupadi Cheer Haran*, a vignette from the *Mahabharata*, within which Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, five brothers and important characters within the epic, is lost in a game of dice by her husband Yudishthir, after he has gambled everything away, including himself and his brothers. She is summoned, and Dushashan attempts to unravel her *sari*, which is never-ending. Some tellings suggest that she prayed to Krishna who saved her, whereas other tellings suggest that he once provided her with this boon after she had cut a piece of her *sari* to stop the bleeding when Krishna cut his finger. Draupadi is a pivotal character within the epic, and this story draws on the idea of upholding feminine honor and protecting against transgressions of the body. Although clearly traditional in its reading of the female body, this story can be potent for American Kathaks to explore, provoking questions around polygamy, violence, faith, and agency, and yet it is extremely rare—perhaps due to the frequent group performances presented versus a live solo that would customarily be best suited to tell this story.

While choreographic choices that privilege male-centric stories can be rationalized in a number of ways, foremost by denying that gender is relevant within them and the male characters are revered because of who they are, for example, Vishnu or Shiva, or what they represent; these particular ways of seeing and remembering have a profound impact on dancers. Kathak is highly meaningful as a practice for American practitioners—as art, culture, identity, expression, memory, lineage, and personal and collective history—and the content of the repertoire is unquestionably influential in shaping perspectives, regardless of whether this is obvious or subtle. For example, one participant in this study recounted a visceral, embodied experience she had during a performance of the *Ramayana*: “I became a vehicle to show the
story...movements were just happening. I was a witness to this, watching myself do this
performance. Sita showed up...she was showing the world what happened to her.” Expressive
culture is extremely powerful in reimagining history and homelands, and shaping perspectives.
thus the lack of diversity and agency within representations of female characters perpetuates
particular stereotypes to practitioners who absorb these stories, binding them to specific
ideologies.

_Chhed-chhad: Teasing
Krishna in Kathak_

As mentioned previously, Krishna plays an important role in Kathak, from origin stories
and the name of the dance (*Natwari Nritya*), to the repertoire. Whereas solo Kathak
performances today largely follow the trajectory of historical reference, Krishna is peppered in
throughout, appearing in introductory invocations as well as expressive compositions. The
inclusion of elements such as these, regardless of the identities and affinities of the performance
are important to the practice of the dance: it is necessary to contextualize the dance form
philosophically and historically, as Shaikh said, citing her *guru*, Das, “you have to honor the art
form for what it is.” Yet in this process of contextualization, we see a distinct tension surfacing
between the themes/compositions and feminist perspectives held by today’s American Kathaks,
particularly when it comes to _chhed-chhad_ (flirting/teasing) between Radha and Krishna. The
relationship between Radha and Krishna takes up a significant part of the expressive repertoire.
However, before we explore the meaning of this relationship, I first turn to Krishna in
performance.
Satya Narayana Charka’s Krishna Leela, or the divine story/play of Krishna, depicts various episodes from his life, including Kaliya Mardan in which he kills the poisonous serpent Kaliya; Makhan Chori, or when young Krishna steals butter; Govardhan Pooja, as presented by Nivas and described earlier in this thesis; Holi, the festival of colors; romantic scenes between Krishna and Radha in Vrindavan, where Krishna lived; as well as Raas Leela, a theme relevant to Kathak since the days of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah in the 19th century. Raas Leela is described by Charka in the program notes as follows, “Krishna...dances in Vrindavan and the gopis (milk maids) dance around him in the raas...absorbed in the rhythmic trance of the dance, each gopi discovers simultaneously that Lord Krishna is dancing with her. The Paramatman (Supreme Consciousness) has drawn to Himself the jiva (individual soul), eliminating the separation created by maya (illusion) and ignorance.” The majority of the characters in this production are portrayed by Charka’s students. Krishna, despite being a male character, is played by a female, as are each of the dancers who all dress as Krishna for the culminating Raas Leela. Through this dance-drama, Krishna’s relevance to Kathak is reinforced, as are Hindu philosophies and stories.

Figure 16: A still from Satya Narayana Charka’s Krishna Leela, 3 female dancers portray Krishna in the “Maha Raas”
Stories about Krishna resurface time and time again within American Kathaks’ performances. Krishna is unquestionably an important character within the overall Kathak repertoire, and so despite the fact that some American Kathaks do not have a deep affinity for Krishna and Krishna-related compositions, because they are taught these pieces, they end up performing them frequently. The strong influence of Birju Maharaj’s style and repertoire is instrumental in continuing this—Maharaj has multiple music compositions recorded and available to American practitioners, along with a book in Hindi, *Raas Gunjan: Maharaj Bindadin Ki Rachnaein* (1994) which makes many of his grand uncle, Bindadin Maharaj’s work accessible to his students and non-students alike. The prevalence of musical styles such as *thumri* and *dadra* at that time, along with Birju Maharaj’s current popularity, and the proliferation of devotional *thumri* means that Krishna is readily available within American Kathak performance.

Aditi Mangaldas, a respected Indian dancer, known for her innovative work was described in an article recently as follows: “Her dissatisfaction with the limited literature of kathak, the distaste for what she described were ‘regressive’ concepts such as “ched-chad” expressed through the dance form and a growing awareness of social issues were some of the things that prompted her to explore creative vistas outside of traditions” (The Deccan Chronicle 2017). So what is *chhed chhad* and what is the context within which it is performed? Sonia Sabri, a U.K, based dancer, presented a small studio showing at Navatman, a classical Indian music and dance collective in New York City in January 2018. She presented a few different pieces, including a technical piece with many different rhythmic patterns, an experimental composition that brought in many other movement vocabularies besides Kathak, as well as a

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32 Navatman Inc. (@navatman), “Watching Sonia Sabri Live was such a treat!” Instagram video. January 17, 2018. [https://www.instagram.com/p/BeF_EzlnCI/?taken-by=navatman](https://www.instagram.com/p/BeF_EzlnCI/?taken-by=navatman)
horī, a semi-classical musical composition, similar to thumrī, composed by Bindadin Maharaj in the 19th century, “Main To Khelungi Unhi Se Hori Guiyan” or “I Will Only Play Holi With Him [Krishna].” In this presentation, she played the role of a female character who expresses her desire to play Holi (the festival of colors) with Krishna. The connection between thumrī or horī, Holi, and Krishna is an important one for Kathak and thumrī (Manuel 1989, 41-42). She depicted traditional Holi scenes—the female character preparing for the festival by preparing colors, mixing them with water and filling a pichkari (pump) to spray the colored water with. Sabri anxiously awaits Krishna, and is overjoyed when he does arrives. The music reinforces this, repeating the sthāyi, main line/phrase, repeatedly. When Krishna does arrive, or perhaps when she imagines him, Sabri performs chhed-chhad, or teasing, that is so typical to the relationship between Krishna and Radha. She paints a picture for the audience, Krishna suddenly putting gulal (colored powder that Holi is played with) on her face. She is annoyed at the interruption, and her character tries to refocus. While this is one vignette, chhed chhad performed through the body in a variety of ways, including but not limited to: Krishna pulling Radha’s veil off her head, breaking her bangles, breaking her water pot and soaking her, stopping her physically as she walks to get water at the river, stealing her clothes as she bathes in the river, grabbing her by the wrist and twisting her arm behind her, and trying to hug her. Embodied expressions range from irritated and startled, to coy, shy and playful. If abhinaya (expressive dance) is a sort of possession—to use Stoller’s (1994) framework for understanding the embodiment of colonial memory—an embodied experience that triggers cultural memory, how could we understand chhed chhad? How is power is produced and reproduced?
The influence of embodying the *chhed chhad* between Radha and Krishna is relevant when considering the types of cultural messages that are repeatedly transmitted to students and young dancers about femininity, heteronormativity, and their relationships to and with males, due to the powerful presence of Krishna in Kathak. Some informants in this study stated that Krishna as a concept didn’t resonate with them or their lives at all, or they felt that the romantic love between Radha and Krishna that is presented so frequently did not have relevance to the contexts within which they live today. However, the romantic love was also often cited by teachers as the throughline to their students lives; in other words, teachers felt that they could use the romantic love between Radha and Krishna to help their students understand stories and concepts within Kathak’s repertoire. Romantic love is straightforward for most to understand and imagine—teachers could direct their female students to think of boys that they had a crush on as a source to draw from for movement possibilities (Antara Bhardwaj, personal communication, December 29, 2017). Teachers expressed that their teenage female students enjoyed this aspect of the dance due to its relatability; yet the teachers’ own feminist stance problematized the ways in which they thought about what they teach (Anindita Ganguly, personal communication, March 21, 2018).

This study posed a provocation to many participants, specifically non-Indians, and second generation South Asian Americans: is the concept of *chhed chhad* in Kathak misogynistic? Certainly there are significant tensions between feminism and the ways in which *chhed chhad* is embodied through performance: “The performance of authentic Indianness reveals the ways in which the surveillance of ethnic purity is inherently about the social control of purportedly transgressive sexualities” (Maira 2002, 16). While some agreed, or at minimum
engaged with the notion that *chhed chhad* normalizes misogyny and reinforces heteronormativity, still others felt this radical assertion was to simplistic. While teachers wish to teach their students *abhinaya* and Kathak’s storytelling elements in order to encourage them to express their emotions, still others explain that classical dance is much deeper than what is told at the surface. For example, Moraga pointed out, what is this *chhed chhad* actually symbolic of? Passively consuming stories for what they appear to be is somewhat pointless, and they certainly seem misogynistic on the surface. Assessing stories from the perspective of Bhakti, an important movement within Indian philosophical and spiritual thought that focused on love and devotion, and Sufism, the mystical order of Islam that is so pervasive within the South Asian American diasporic community, reveals a different reading. The female-gendered dancing body as Radha is symbolic of the individual soul, playing out spiritual love with the divine. Similarly, returning to the *ghunghat* (veil), deeply representative of ideal femininity, can be understood here as symbolic of worldly modesty, something to be transcended—removed or at least seen past—in order to merge with divinity.

Despite these two drastically different readings of *chhed chhad*, due to the consistent reproduction of certain types of stories, along with the dominant narrative reinforcing Kathak as a storytelling art, I argue that it is difficult to move beyond surface readings that *chhed chhad* normalizes misogyny and easily interpret the dance as symbolic of a spiritual journey. Unless American Kathak practitioners use the dance as a means to explore different types of stories, including those with agentive female characters, these stories will continue to be coded as ancient Indian, Hindu history, transmitting particular messages about gender norms and reinforcing heteronormativity. Furthermore, stories of these encounters largely didn’t resonate
with American students and dancers in practice. Some expressed that it felt “overdone” or that it was too predictable, and one-dimensional. Notably, most depictions of this relationship are expressed in a simple way in performance, and are at best a bit coy and coquettish.

I hypothesize that the reason that these stories don’t resonate is two-fold. The first reason is that so many students are initiated into Kathak at a very young age, often under 10 years old. Their exposure to the Kathak repertoire grows as they do, with compositions such as *thumri* being taught to them in their teenage years. For American-born Kathaks, even if they grow up listening to Hindi in their homes, they don’t typically have much exposure to Brij Bhasha, which many *thumris* are written in, outside of their Kathak training, meaning much of the text is not fully or easily available to them. Furthermore, because they are still so young, their teachers are unlikely to explain the full context of the text, or might likely select less controversial compositions. Second, teaching a *thumri* that is a bit more devotional allows teachers to maintain their role of cultural educators for their American students. Nearly all current American Kathak teachers were trained in the context of postcolonial India that subdued certain elements that existed within the repertoire, so it is also possible that their own training focused more on devotional elements.
Chapter 5

*Jugalbandi: Entwined*

*Moving Towards Multiculturalism*

While the majority of the questions in this research have been about the maintenance or evolution of traditions in new American contexts, the tension that surfaces is: what’s next? Remembering traditions to what ends? With the shift of Kathak to a new geographic location, a multicultural United States, once practitioners establish their foundations in the repertoire through traditional systems of learning, how will they democratize the dance form for diverse audiences? For many, this is not a tension. Their Kathak practice is simply for themselves, as a symbol of their identity, an expression of culture, and a bridge to classical art. However, for others, in order to be relevant within this new context, they are driven to explore how they can apply Kathak to new contexts for new audiences.

At the most basic level, Kathak is essentially understood as a form of storytelling. However, the defining element of Kathak is often its focus on rhythm. The musicality of the dance form, arising from its focus on improvisation and command over time cycles and tempo, lends itself to connections with the other styles of music and dance encountered in its new American context. In particular, we see pairings with tap, flamenco, and modern movement most frequently. In these instances, Kathak is decontextualized from its history and the stories that are so formative to collective memory in order to allow practitioners to bridge the gap between disparate styles of dance. While performances are still pregnant with ideas of an ancient oral

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33 A future study might examine the impact of Kathak on identity for diasporic Indian American practitioners: for example, how might their regional identities be emphasized or de-emphasized? Another might explore the differences in texts and themes between Indian American practitioners versus non-Indian practitioners. A qualitative, broad observation suggests that the former explore and apply Kathak to new stories and music more frequently versus the latter, who tend to concentrate on what might be termed “traditional.” This of course merits further investigation.
tradition, they are distilled to the most appreciated, universal, rhythmic elements. Kathak becomes a canvas sufficient for any type of music or story to be applied to it, a language to express any idea.

There are a few key ways that we see Kathak in multicultural contexts. First, and frequently, we see it in instances that imply one can “do” Kathak to anything—namely, any type of music. For example, as social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube continue to gain popularity and utility for dancers eager to make a name for themselves and maintain connectivity to the global Kathak community, we see high quality, beautifully produced videos demonstrating Kathak’s rhythmic elements to popular music, spanning Bollywood as well as American pop. This represents the flexibility of the form, and is an effort to expand its reach to audiences who might think that the classical form is boring or archaic. While many of these videos come out of India and boast high view counts, ranging from a few thousand to up to two million, there are also some American produced videos serving the same purpose. These videos, and the practice of applying Kathak to American pop music specifically, exists between competing tensions: they are a means for younger American Kathaks to express their multivalent identities and are wildly popular amongst viewers, yet they are also questioned as “pure” classical due to their choice of music, which allows for rhythmic play but not storytelling.

In addition to popular music, we also see dancers exploring new interpretations of what might otherwise be dubbed “traditional” Kathak, driven by explorations in music. For example,

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Coke Studio Pakistan, a music show sponsored by Coca Cola, has been influential amongst South Asian Americans, exposing them to new interpretations of traditional Pakistani music. This music has being meaningful as an exploration of mystical Sufi themes through Kathak dance, regardless of the rhythmic elements that are critical to the success of choreography to pop music. This is not unique to younger students and dancers, namely second generation Indian Americans (desis). Rather, we also see established teachers and artists exploring new ways of applying Kathak as well. For example, Minnesota’s Rita Mustaphi collaborated with gospel musicians in her “Soul to Sole” performance, using technique to bridge different artistic traditions together. Janaki Patrik on the other hand, created a choreography titled “Mozartayana” using Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony No. 41, Movement No. 4 - Molto Allegro, danced fully in Kathak technique. She explains, “This piece links the graceful classicism of Mozart’s Vienna with the elegant classicism of Lucknow” drawing a connection between the classical music of European and Indian courts (Patrik 2013).

Still others use Kathak technique to make specific rhythmic and/or cultural exchanges possible. For example, Amrapali Ambegaokar, trained by her mother Anjani Ambegaokar in California, has danced traditional Jaipur gharana Kathak on popular national television shows such as Fox’s “So You Think You Can Dance” and NBC’s “Superstars of Dance”. Whilst she presented both fast technique as well as storytelling elements, such as kavita tora (a rhythmic

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pattern based in poetry), she also reinforced Kathak’s ancientness through her interview, locating Kathak’s origin in scripture thousands of years ago. This was likely a means to mediate the conflict between a deep-rooted tradition with the need to engage a mainstream American viewing public. In performance, Chitresh Das’ collaboration with Jason Samuels Smith, the India Jazz Suites\(^{41}\) is unique in that uses two disparate movement languages and emphasizes the commonalities between the two. One needs to know very little about any music or dance styles in order to understand the exchange, and the distinction between each remains clear. Yet, the unifying element, rhythm, is what makes this multicultural encounter possible. Notably, this production traveled back to India as well, and it is interesting to consider the impact of this American exchange on local audiences.

Although the dominant narrative of Kathak is pervasive amongst American Kathaks in a straightforward way, there is one offshoot of Kathak’s story outside of the narrative that is frequently remembered in performance: Flamenco and the “gypsy”\(^{42}\) journey. Whether evidence of evolution in the arts, the influence of South Asian culture, or simply Kathak’s global appeal, collaborations with Flamenco artists are common. As the story goes, the gypsies of Rajasthan who practiced folk dances traveled through the Middle East and Europe, picking up cultural influences along the way, and ended up in Spain, the birthplace of Flamenco. This journey, although not well-documented through written records or particularly well-remembered through oral memory, is performed by American Kathaks, viscerally experienced through the clear


\(^{42}\) The term “gypsy” is a problematic. In general, it refers to the Roma people, originating in Rajasthan, India, and is said to be a derivative of “Egypt.” While not part of the dominant narrative, amongst American Kathaks the connection between Kathak and Flamenco is meaningful, and the term “gypsy” is used to describe the people who carried the art and culture out of South Asia, through the Middle East and into Europe. Thus, I use “gypsy” here as well, rather than the more correct “Roma” or “Romani.”
similarities between the two styles—improvised, percussive, with intricate footwork, and stylized finishing poses (Phillips 2013).

Figure 17: Henna Khanijou in Encuentro, a production exploring connections between Kathak, Flamenco, and Belly dance at Thalia Spanish Theatre

These collaborations demonstrate Kathak’s accessibility within world music and dance, and are uniquely American. Maira (2002) explains,

...the Immigrant generation’s desire to preserve an authentic ethnic identity lingers in the second generation, for whom being Indian becomes a cultural ideology used to calibrate the authenticity, even the goodness, of self and others. Yet Indian American youth are simultaneously positioning themselves in the racial and class hierarchies of the United States and coming of age in contexts shaped by public institutions such as schools, colleges, and the workforce. A uniquely Indian American subculture allows second-generation youth to socialize with ethnic peers while reinterpreting Indian musical and dance traditions through the rituals of American popular culture. (43-44)

For example, Soles of Duende, an all-female trio of Kathak, Tap, and Flamenco dancers

emphasize the similarities in the underlying rhythmic structure without any music or musicians outside of the sounds they are able to produce through their feet. Using a tihai (a pattern repeated

three times) that fits within the chosen sixteen-beat time cycle, they explore multicultural interpretations of five. This collaboration is emblematic of the circumstances American Kathaks might find themselves in, particularly within in a city such as New York. Each performer speaks the pattern, beginning with Brinda Guha, reciting it as a Kathak *tihai* in Hindi. She’s interrupted by the Tap dancer in English. Finally, the Flamenco dancer chimes in as well in Spanish. The audience both laughs and is engaged in the exchange: so stereotypically New York, with sassy women of color demonstrating their pride and their culture, yet coming together to celebrate commonality and diversity.

**Figure 18: Kathak notation of Ginti Ki Tihai performed by Soles of Duende**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sam</th>
<th>Taali</th>
<th>Khaali</th>
<th>Taali</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>123, 4, 5</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(½) 123, 4, 5</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(½) 1, 2, 3</td>
<td>4, 5, 1, 2</td>
<td>3, 4, 5, 1, 2, 3</td>
<td>3, 4, 5, 1, 2, 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The commonalities that lead to frequent exchanges between Kathak and Flamenco have also been effective in introducing diverse practitioners that may otherwise not had access to Kathak. For example, Paulette Beauchamp, Puerto Rico based Kathak and Flamenco dancer, first saw Kathak eighteen years ago and was struck by its similarities to Flamenco, and “it changed [my] life.” Furthermore, the colonial connections—India and its relationship to Britain and

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44 This composition is set in *teentaal*, the sixteen-beat time cycle, in *madhya laya* (medium tempo). The notation here is simplified, and does not show every single beat, instead showing the basic four part *vibhaag* (division) of the time cycle, each consisting of four beats. Bolded characters show the where the emphasis is placed during recitation. This composition is unique because it demonstrates the musicality produced by simply counting to 5 four times whilst shifting emphasis to different numbers within the pattern. Soles of Duende improvised upon this composition, expanding it into a longer piece, not bound by the time cycle. See Birju Maharaj’s demonstration for an example of a more traditional rendering: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9V5_QIC6Rg&t=62s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9V5_QIC6Rg&t=62s)
Puerto Rico and its relationship to the US—reinforced the similarities, despite other differences. For her and Carlos Bedoya, her musician partner, the form is rich and complete—drawing from its history, and is a means of creating community, “The diversity of cultures: Puerto Rican, playing Indian music and dance, with Spanish heritage...these things are not in conflict with one another...I love them all, but I can take on all of them, without becoming them.”

Finally, while the aforementioned examples represent a focus on Kathak’s rhythmic elements to either express practitioners’ multicultural contexts or appeal to multicultural audiences, there are some examples of artists using Kathak’s storytelling elements to give voice to these new contexts, but without relying on rhythmic components. Some practitioners are simply not interested in using Kathak’s abhinaya (expressive) elements as a tool to tell modern stories; Patel said “I’m not interested...it’s not entertaining for many audiences. But I do think life mirrors art” whereas other non-US based global artists feel the opposite. For example, Pali Chandra, a Switzerland based artist and teacher with schools in Switzerland and Dubai said, "The art form is a mirror of the society, whether good or bad...I am supposed to be talking about the issues that make a difference in the society. I am not supposed to be always talking about Mahabharatha and Ramayana. That is not my job” (PTI 2018). By and large though, the majority American Kathak dance looks at the past, and engages with nostalgic history. Currently, there is less room to explore the stories that practitioners currently live, or even those stories45 that their non-Indian peers may be living. We do see that Kathak and it’s technique has the capacity to, and has moved towards, more modern themes (Chakravorty 2006). Certain practitioners such as Abha Roy utilize traditional movement vocabularies to communicate new and different stories.

45 Research was conducted during the time of the #MeToo movement. Some study participants were asked about the resonance of this historical moment directly, whereas others brought it up organically. While it was seen as significant, practitioners did not express a desire to use Kathak as a tool to tell this story.
For example, at her performance at the Flushing Town Hall, Roy presented a solo work in which
she danced along live Western musicians, including a drummer, a pianist, and a bassist. The
music sounded unique but was driven by the Hindustani classical approach, with improvisation
layered on a cyclic foundation. She told a story of a simple housewife who creates a dream world
and expresses her imagined world through Kathak’s vocabulary. On the other hand, as Kathak’s
audience is diverse in the US, we see the burgeoning of Kathak vocabulary beginning to be
utilized for different, albeit old, stories with female protagonists, as explored in the previous
section. To name a few: Farah Yasmeen Sheikh’s *The Forgotten Empress*, Rina Mehta’s
*Chandanbala*, and Seibi Lee’s *Houyi and Chang’e*. A future study might explore not only the
introduction of new stories into Kathak performance, but also the new means of collaboration
and training enabled by advancements in technology and travel, collapsing boundaries between
American Kathaks, teachers, and collaborators.

**Figure 19: Flyer for the SAMAA Into Jazz Festival at the Lincoln Center Appel Room**

Chakravorty (2008) explains that for Kathak practitioners “…‘innovation’ within tradition
is the new catchword to attract the new kind of audience. The word captures the spirit of the
shifting terrain where India’s new modernity is being renegotiated” (56). Parul Shah’s
performance as part of the Indo-Jazz presentation at the Lincoln Center Appel Room is a good example of exploring new themes and innovation, with the goal of engaging with a broader American audience. Although less traditional in use of Kathak’s storytelling repertoire and technique, incorporating modern movement vocabularies, works such as hers explore what it means to tell new stories through Kathak-influenced creative expression to multicultural audiences. Finally, UrbanJATRA, a production of the Kalamandir Dance Company, choreographed by Brinda Guha, creatively interpreted Kathak—without asserting that the result can be termed classical. Commissioned by Dixon Place in New York, this choreographic work infused Kathak bols and Indian philosophies into its ambiance. Modern and classical dancers of different styles interpreted the music, which is only sometimes Hindustani. This infusion is Guha’s attempt to forge a new genre, “Contemporary Indian,” emblematic of the particular context within which it is taking shape, and by who.

Figure 20: Flyer for Kalamandir Dance Company’s UrbanJATRA

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Kathak is a dance that has absorbed from its surroundings and evolved over time. With the growing size of the South Asian diaspora to the US, it has taken a new turn—spreading geographically instead of solely being influenced by new groups and contexts within its home regions. As such, we find that American Kathak practitioners have to mediate these new contexts alongside existing histories and traditions of the dance form. As Guha says in her *UrbanJATRA*, they “plant seeds of the past.”

With the splintering of the South Asian diaspora from its homeland, Kathak too has seen a splintering from its point of origin and lineage. Yet the increased South Asian population within the US has provided an unprecedented opportunity to spread the art form to new audiences. It serves as a cultural practice and ways of remembering heritage, yet it also goes beyond simply being that—making encounters between disparate art forms and cultures possible. This is particularly true in the established centers of learning of Kathak within the US, where there is a sizeable population of practitioners. As Shaikh says, “The dilemma...being of this generation practicing this artform that has its roots geographically elsewhere, culturally grounded in tradition of *guru shishya parampara*...how does it reconcile away from South Asia and also this modern day?” American Kathaks have one foot planted in the past, and one foot in the present, confronted with the conflict of taking their art form and applying it to their multicultural contexts, whilst paying homage to its points of origin in a meaningful way.

While Kathak’s history—primarily the dominant narrative—is reflected through practitioners’ oral and embodied memories with gravitas and nostalgia, American Kathaks have

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47 “Planting Seeds of the Past” is drawn from Brinda Guha’s 2018 work, *UrbanJATRA*. 
an unprecedented opportunity to add nuance to this narrative. Traditions such as guru shishya parampara or gharana are known to be deep rooted and yet they have adapted and evolved in and outside of South Asia. The late Chitresh Das had a vision of establishing a new gharana in the US, the California gharana (Chakravorty 2006, 127), and indeed we see evidence that his lineage is emerging as a unique style. If this type of change so grounded in tradition is possible, it follows that American Kathaks must view history itself with nuance. Agrawal explained, “My mother said...if the status of this dance is so bad in our hometown, then we have to do something about it.” As the mothers of so many Kathak practitioners in the US and India demonstrated bravery in encouraging their daughters to learn the dance, despite existing stigmas, it behooves the American Kathaks to acknowledge the achievements of women in the arts, from democratizing titles based on merit and excellence, rather than marital status (Palisetty 2018), to remembering the contributions of the courtesans, even if solely through oral memory. As Shaikh says of the courtesans, “They were the bearers of our tradition, of our cultures, and our cultural practice, but we so easily forget that because history rewrote it...How did they come to be in that place that you are acknowledging them? How did the tawaiif go from being respected to sex work? As a community, we are not acknowledging the gender politics that exist to this time,” indeed we must contextualize and interrogate unquestioned narratives that have been passed on to us. To quote Aditi Mangaldas again, “An artiste needs to be informed enough about the past to think of new possibilities,” (Swaminathan 2018). While this is a challenge for the teachers and parents of young students learning Kathak as culture, and places teachers in difficult positions with relation to the communities and organizations they partner with—particularly considering
that the stigma associated with Kathak has not been fully erased and replaced with the ancient art nationalist narrative—it is essential for serious practitioners of the art to recognize.

Whereas the marginalized women of Kathak were excluded from the dominant narrative of Kathak, which privileges certain lineages and repertoire, drawing on a pristine imagined India, this need not be a permanent state: “Those social groups in dominant positions within the nation at certain moments will not necessarily dominate always, and the situations of groups marginalized, subordinated—even expelled—by nationalism in other conjunctures are not immutably fixed either” (Ismail 2000, 215). If American Kathaks are to use art as “expressions of transnational/global identities” (Chakravorty 2006, 132) and look for legitimacy as practitioners, it is befitting that we create space for history’s marginalized voices to be heard and remembered within collective memory, informing our work in new contexts.
Appendix

A. Glossary of terms

*Aamad*: a Persian word, meaning arrival. *Aamad* is a graceful composition danced at the beginning of a performance, within *vilambit laya*, or slow tempo. This uses only the *bol* (word/s) *ta thei* and *tat*.

*Bhajan*: a Hindu devotional composition.

*Chhed-chhad*: teasing and flirting, specifically Krishna teasing Radha.

*Gat Bhaav*: short expressive stories, especially around Krishna and Radha. The dancer switches between characters by doing a *palta* (half turn).

*Gat Nikaas*: an expressive composition in which a dancer demonstrates different poses and gaits.

*Gharana*: style, lineage.

*Gharanedaar*: a hereditary performer belonging to a particular family within Kathak.

*Ghazal*: a type of Urdu poetry.

*Ghungroo*: ankle bells worn by Kathak dancers, creating a percussive sound.

*Guru*: master, expert.

*Guru Shishya Parampara*: the master-discipline tradition. Revered as a long standing, traditional method of learning classical arts.

*Jugalbandi*: a rhythmic exchange between the dancer and musicians, with the first performers setting the pattern for subsequent artists.

*Laya*: tempo.

*Layakari*: rhythmic play. This portion of a Kathak performance is when the dancer demonstrates his or her command over rhythm.

*Naman*: to bow.

*Nautch*: Nautch is an Anglicized corruption of the Hindi word *naach*, derivative of the Sanskrit *nritya*, referring to dance

*Nayika*: heroine.

*Pandit*: male priest or scholar.
**Pandita**: female priest or scholar.

**Parhant**: recitation. To speak the rhythmic compositions within the time cycle.

**Riyaaz**: practice.

**Taal**: time cycle. The most common *taal* is *teentaal*, or a sixteen-beat time cycle.

**Taalim**: training.

**Tarana**: a dynamic rhythmic musical composition, comprised of meaningless phrases.

**Tawaiif**: a group of female dancers, musicians, poets, composers, skilled in poetry, arts, and etiquette. Stigmatized as prostitutes.

**Thaat**: slow, stylized stances establishing the space within which s/he dances.

**Thumri**: a semi-classical musical style. Associated with Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, as well as the courtesans.

**Upaj**: improvisation, output. Early in a solo performance, accompanied by live musicians, the dancer will demonstrate his or her command on *taal* (time cycle). Dancers often refer to this as playing with rhythm, where the accompanying musicians play the repeated time cycle and melodic structure while the dancer improvises footwork, while completing compositions on *sum*, the first beat of the time cycle. This differs from later rhythmic patterns that are defined and often repeating.

**Uthaan**: to start, to rise. This composition bridges and lifts the earlier, slow portions of a performance, moving into speedier movement.

**Utpatti**: origin. In Kathak, *utpatti* refers to the basic posture the dancer begins from, and returns to often, in between and frequently, during, compositions within rhythmic sections.
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