

Unsung Architects of Acharya Sukhdev Maharaj Banaras Gharana: Pt. Mata Prasad Mishra and Pt. Ravi Shankar Mishra

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Abstract

Sukhdev Maharaj Banaras Gharana, one of the branches under Banaras Gharana of Kathak Dance, foundation of which was laid by the pioneer Acharya Sukhdev Maharaj, is one of the renowned Kathak styles famous for its breathtaking speed and clarity in performing complex hand and footwork, skilfully presenting dynamic Natwari Tukada-s and expressive Kavitta Parans and the use of gymnastic elements. While firmly grounded in the sacred traditions of Banaras and transmitted through the Guru-Shishya Parampara, the artistic path of Kathak saw a radical transformation, towards the commercial driven environment of Mumbai. This transition, while exploring new opportunities left behind only a handful of dedicated practitioners in Banaras who were preserving this essence of the Kathak. In this context, were two disciples of Late Smt. Alaknanda Devi (eldest daughter of Sukhdev Maharaj) - Pt. Mata Prasad Mishra and Pt. Ravi Shankar Mishra, whose artistic contributions and pedagogical influence have been the core in popularizing this gharana. Despite their tremendous work they have not been adequately recognized or documented in existing Kathak literature which is evident from various literatures and videos archives that had been taken into consideration. For conducting this research work qualitative and historical-analytical approach method was used. This research aims to explore and highlight the invaluable contributions of Pt. Mata Prasad Mishra and Pt. Ravi Shankar Mishra in shaping, preserving, and evolving the Banaras Gharana of Kathak during a critical phase of cultural transformation which if adequately mentioned in scholarly literature, will guide the future generations to draw inspiration from their legacy and gain a deeper understanding of the authentic nuances of this classical tradition

Key words – Banaras Gharana, Pt. Mata Prasad Mishra, Pt. Ravi Shankar Mishra, Alaknanda devi, Acharya, Sukhdev Maharaj

Introduction

Kathak is the distinguished classical dance forms of India, evolved from northern regions of India. The term 'Kathak' is derived from the Sanskrit word Katha, meaning 'story'. It is traditionally linked to a popular saying, "Katha Kahe So Kathak Kahave" meaning one who narrates a story is known as a Kathak. It probably started as an oral tradition by itinerant bards narrating mythological and moral tales. Over time, mime, hand gestures (mudras), and rhythmic footwork were incorporated to enhance the fragrance of this art form. This gradual evolution gave rise to an expressive and dynamic dance form known as Kathak which is practiced and celebrated today. As evolving from its roots as a simple art of narrating story, to prominent classical dance form, Gharanas played a pivotal role. Every Gharana, with its own aesthetic and technique, has enriched the process of molding Kathak into the rich and vibrant tradition we see today. Primarily Kathak has three major Gharana – Lucknow, Jaipur, and

Banaras. Raigarh Gharana although a newer development in the Kathak tradition, has come to be recognized as Lakshya-Lakshana customs, a superior synthesis of aesthetic content from both Jaipur and Lucknow Gharanas which is an outstanding artistic achievement of post-independence. Byohar (2019).

Once regarded as a lesser-known tradition among the three majors Kathak gharanas, the Banaras Gharana has today emerged as one of the most prominent and celebrated style. This change is primarily because of the firm commitment and creative efforts of its practitioners, who have contributed a lot to the rise in its popularity on an international level. This gharana has 2 different branches which are as follows :-

1. Janaki Prasad Gharana
2. Acharya Sukhdev Maharaj Gharana.

Our research is focussing on the second branch of the Banaras Gharana, shaped by the visionary Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj, renowned Sanskrit scholar, son of vocalist and sarangi maestro Shri Ramdas Mishra, and a pivotal figure in Kathak's evolution. His lineage was enriched by two marriages: with Smt. Badko Devi, from whom he had four children, Shailja kumari, Pt. Kishan Maharaj, Bindu Devi, and Tirathraj Mishra (popularly known as Tiwari uncle), and with Mahalo Devi, daughter of the royal Rajguru of Nepal, he had five children: Alaknanda Devi, Tara Devi, Sitara Devi (Kathak Queen), Durga Prasad Mishra (Pandey Maharaj), and Chaturbhuj Mishra (Chaube Maharaj). This extended family lineage played a vital role in the preservation and transmission of the Banaras Gharana tradition across multiple generations. After getting rigorous trained for 18 years under his father he was later appointed as court musician in Nepal, where he was awestruck by the Kathak performance Lucknow Gharana Late Pandit Bindadin Maharaj. Upon returning India and encouraged by Rabindranath Tagore he pioneered a revival of Kathak by shifting its focus from nautch entertainment to a spiritually enriched art form, reintroducing themes from the Natyaśāstra, symbolic iconography and Hindu mythology.

Defying social norms, he trained his daughters alongside courtesans' daughters and founded a school promoting Kathak as a respected classical tradition. His efforts drew severe backlash, leading him to leave Varanasi for Kolkata, where he connected his children with Lucknow Gharana gurus. He wanted that Kathak must be widely accepted by the audience rather than being confined only in the temples, courts, kothas and mehfil. It was the visionary thinking of Acharya ji that inspired the transcendence of traditional boundaries. In pursuit of broader recognition and artistic evolution, Acharya ji believed that the true continuity of his lineage could only be ensured by bringing it to a cultural hub where it could gain greater visibility. At that time, Mumbai offered the ideal platform for such expansion, emerging as a vibrant centre of commercially-driven performance arts, opening new horizons for Kathak's evolution. All the stars of this gharana started getting work in Mumbai whether as an actor or dance choreographer which one on side made it positive for this gharana to grow but on the other side left behind only a handful of dedicated practitioners in Banaras who were preserving this essence of the Kathak. Among them was Late. Smt. Alaknanda Devi ji, the eldest daughter of Acharya ji. As she did not admired Mumbai so much so she returned to Varanasi and started preserving this gharana by teaching students the authentic teaching of her father. As she did not

have children of her own, but got two disciples in the form of sons Pandit Mata Prasad Mishra and Pandit Ravi Shankar Mishra, to whom she started imparting the rich tradition of her gharana. These two Kathak performers became popular by the name of “Priya Bandhu” and given the title of “Aandhi-Tufan”.

Pandit Mata Prasad Mishra, born on 6th July 1968, and Pandit Ravi Shankar Mishra, born on 8th August 1969, belonging to the sacred city of Lord Shiva, Varanasi. Having deep roots in a family full of artistic lineage, they started their journey into the world of music and dance under the loving care of their illustrious Guru, Pt. Paanchu Maharaj ji Ravi Shankar Mishra's father and Mata Prasad Mishra's maternal uncle. From the tender age of five, this remarkable duo embarked on a shared journey of learning and performing. Having inherited the disciplined and rigorous training of Acharya Sukhdev Maharaj through Late Smt. Alaknanda Devi ji, they were trained with utmost dedication and precision. Their early exposure and devotion to the art form enabled them radiating the essence of Banaras Gharana's rich tradition from a very young age. Their command over Laya and Taal was a gift by Pt. Paanchu Maharaj ji. He taught them the art of playing table. Both brothers gracefully mastered the arts of singing, dancing, and playing the tabla, which was rare, reflecting their deep-rooted training and dedication. This mastery became the path of their national and international acclaim. Their versatility and artistic capabilities gave them admiration across world, establishing them as prominent torchbearers of the Acharya Sukhdev Maharaj Banaras Gharana tradition because this gharana was still following the tradition of narrating the stories.

The most commendable aspect of their artistic journey lies in their commitment to preserving and advancing the legacy not solely through performance, but equally through dedicated teaching. They started imparting training and creating their own disciples in India and abroad. They prepared them in the same manner as their guru prepared them so that the essence of Acharya ji that they got from their Guru should not be left behind. Balancing between both the role, as performers and educators, they played a most significant role in establishing the next generation of artists and ensuring the continuity of this legacy. For their invaluable contributions to the field of Kathak, both artists were honored with the prestigious Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 2019. Further accentuating their illustrious journey, Pt. Mata Prasad Mishra has been conferred with the revered Shringara Mani Award by Sur Shringaara Samsad, the Nritya Prakash Award by Kala Prakash, and the esteemed Kashi Ratna Samman. His equally accomplished brother, Pt. Ravi Shankar Mishra, has received the titles of Sangeet Bhaskar and Sangeet Praveen from Prayag Sangeet Samiti, as well as the Sangeet Martand and Nritya Prakash awards from Kala Prakash. Regarding their performance journey, both artists have showcased their art on prestigious platforms across the globe, including countries such as Switzerland, Japan, the United States, Spain, Greece, and Israel. Within India, their presence has been marked in nearly all major cultural centres—Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi, Chennai, Lucknow, Jaipur, Banaras, and many others. Seeing their contribution, they have been awarded with empanelment of ICCR.

Despite their profound contributions and tireless dedication towards the legacy in form of responsibility given to them remains largely overlooked. A careful review of texts and archival footage reveals a significant gap in documentation is that one privileges bloodline over the

equally vital Guru-Shishya Parampara. Though genealogies tend to follow family lineage, they are less likely to mention the disciples who, by unshakeable dedication, have become the real torchbearers of the tradition. Their noble contribution to this gharana is priceless. Present day Unsung Architects Mata Prasad Mishra and Ravi Shankar Mishra are the seniormost practitioners and pillars of this Gharana but hardly ever do we find their contribution documented in any book. The purpose of the current research is to discover and close the already existing gap within the literature with the valuable efforts of these painters. This research seeks to present future generations with a body of work through which they would find inspiration along with a deep understanding of original subtlety ingrained in this tradition of the classical tradition.

Literature Review

For knowing about the contribution of artists of a particular gharana the word gharana should be taken into consideration. The term “Gharana” finds its origin in the Sanskrit word ‘Griha’, meaning ‘home’ or ‘house.’ (IndianClassicalMusic.com, n.d.) In the context of Indian classical traditions, especially in Hindi, it is affectionately referred to as ‘Ghar’. This word not only denotes a physical existence but also represents a lineage, a distinctive school, or an inherent heritage where art is preserved, and passed down through generations in the true spirit of the Guru-Shishya Parampara. (Digitabla, n.d.) The word Gharana gained its popularity in 16th century when numerous accomplished artists received recognition and support under the patronage of princely states, where their talents were highly valued and nurtured. But these patronized artists were restricted from traveling beyond regional boundaries, limiting cross-cultural artistic exchange leading to cultivating and nurturing their unique styles in different regions. This gave rise to the distinct variations of presenting the same art form, which was the point from where the concept of gharanas started taking shape. A Gharana takes hold when the seeds of innovation are planted sensibly through innovative experimentation, and its cultural heritage is groomed and further nurtured with devotion for a minimum of three consecutive generations i.e. founder or the guru, Disciple (or son) of the Guru and disciple of disciple (or son). (Azad, 2022).

In Kathak Gyaneshwari, Azad (2022) has stated regarding the genealogy of Acharya Pt. Sukhdev Maharaj Banaras Gharana. Genealogical search assisted in realizing the basis of this gharana, which resulted in structure building of this research. Although the work of many artists of this gharana has been recognized but the available literature and visual records only tend to highlight those who attained popularity—those who migrated to Mumbai in the quest for greater acclaim. This draws our attention to also highlighting equally devoted artists Pandit Mata Prasad Mishra and Pandit Ravi Shankar Mishra, who stayed close to Banaras, fostering and keeping alive the spirit of the tradition unassumingly.

Methodology

For conducting this research work *qualitative research methodology* with a strong emphasis on historical and ethnographic approaches were taken into consideration. The objective of this research is to uncover and document the contributions of Pt. Mata Prasad Mishra and Pt. Ravi

Shankar Mishra which are the most significant architects of the Acharya Sukhdev Maharaj Banaras Gharana tradition.

Historical Research Method was also used to trace the lineage, evolution, and artistic contributions of Pt. Mata Prasad Mishra and Pt. Ravi Shankar Mishra. Study of old manuscripts, concert reviews, historical documents, letters, recordings, and published works related to the exponents were collected and analysed. Further **Ethnographic approach** was used to gather firsthand information for analysing their work. Personal interviews with the artists have also been done to understand their process of thinking about their contribution towards the gharana.

Discussion

The Banaras Gharana of Kathak was left alone when many artists of this gharana expired. There came Pt. Mata Prasad Mishra and Pt. Ravi Shankar Mishra who took the flag of Acharya Sukhdev Maharaj's tradition and started promoting it across globe Rooted in Banaras to the very marrow, their devotion to tradition, authenticity, and excellence infused fresh life into the soul of the Gharana. Their performances, characterized by understated abhinaya and spiritual resonance, revived interest in the genre. But their greatest influence comes in pedagogy. Under intense guru-shishya training, they created not only dancers but cultural keepers, teaching Kathak's technique, philosophy, and essence. Yet, for all their important contributions, the Mishra duo is generally underrepresented in scholarly discussion a lacuna that this study attempts to fill. This research is an homage to their unflashy genius and steady devotion, and an appeal to honor the unheralded protectors of our intangible legacy those who work for the art, not the spotlight.

Conclusion

Upon conducting this research, it was observed that after the passing of Pandit Chaubey Maharaj in 1991, Pandit Gopi Krishna in 1994, and with the advancing age of Kathak Queen Vidushi Sitara Devi ji, the responsibility of sustaining and nurturing the essence of Acharya Sukhdev Maharaj Banaras Gharana increasingly rested upon this remarkable duo because they were the ones who were performing this style all over the world. Rooted in Banaras from where the Gharana originated, this duo emerged as the most vital pillars, preserving, promoting and nurturing its legacy in Banaras during a pivotal transitional phase. Their contribution not only extended to stage performances but it was deeply rooted in their commitment to education. With unwavering dedication, they imparted the strict and disciplined training got from their guru to students of all ages, nurturing not just technical proficiency but also inculcating in them a profound understanding of the visionary work of Acharya Sukhdev Maharaj.

Through their teaching, they ensured that his legacy continued to inspire and flourish across generations. Their one of the major contributions were imparting training to younger generations and creating a future of Acharya Sukhdev Maharaj Banaras Gharana. Their disciples are today's rising stars, scattering their colour of art throughout the world. Some notables disciples are Shri Vishal Krishna (Grand son of Pande Maharaj and Yuva Sangeet Natak Akademi Awardee), Shri Saurav Gaurav Mishra and Rudra Shankar Mishra (son of Mata Prasad Mishra and Yuva Sangeet Natak Akademi Awardee). Though their contributions are

invaluable but remained largely unrecognized and requires a systematic documentation. There is a need for proper scholarly acknowledgment of their work not only to honor the legacy they follow but to have a guiding light for future generations who can inspire them to understand the richness of our cultural heritage and to carry forward this tradition with the same effort, passion, dedication, and integrity that this remarkable duo embodied.

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