



Case Study

Guru-Shishya Parampara in The Contemporary Classroom: Continuity and Change in Kathak Pedagogy

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Abstract

Historically, Kathak is one of the eight recognised classical dance forms of India that has been passed down from generation to generation using the guru-shishya parampara, or, an apprenticeship system where the student lives with their teacher and receives hands-on training through verbal feedback and corrections. In the past century, however, the guru-shishya parampara has become more common than ever before in combination with, and influenced by, institutionally based programs such as state-funded schools (academies), colleges/universities that have dance departments, and institutions that award certificates upon completion of a program of study. Therefore, this paper will conduct a literature-based review of secondary resources to explore how the tradition of the guru-shishya has continued but has also evolved due to the development of educational systems for Kathak. Additionally, a small pilot survey will be conducted to illustrate how the tradition continues to evolve among six highly trained Kathak students. Using historical, ethnographic, and pedagogical studies as resources, the paper will highlight the similarities and differences between what are referred to as continuums, such as the significance of lineages in defining a dancer's identity, the use of embodied/imitation style learning and the role of the guru as a holistic mentor as well as changes in structure, which include standardized curricula, formal testing/exams, multiple instructors, and most notably internet based instruction. The review will also address some of the conflicts created by this blending of two different styles of learning, specifically the conflict between individualised feedback/correction and standardised assessments, and demonstrate with small-scale data collected during the pilot survey that students experience a significant difference in confidence and stress when they perform under their guru's judgment versus performing under the scrutiny of formal exams. Ultimately, this paper will conclude that contemporary Kathak pedagogy exists as an "adapted Gurukul" model where the institutional framework provides an outline for teaching/training, yet the content/philosophy of teaching/training is still rooted in the principles of traditional apprenticeships.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, the dissemination of Kathak was somewhat unique among the other classical dance forms of India. It traditionally developed through the patronage of royal courts and eventually through the salon culture of courtesans in many of North India's large cities (including Lucknow) (Morelli, 2010), and also through oral storytelling traditions. Historically, the dissemination of Kathak traditionally occurred through the guru-shishya parampara system, or "lineage" of teacher-pupil. Students would typically attach themselves to a single guru for a number of years, during which time they acquired both technical skills and cultural values/aesthetics of their respective art form(s) (Raina, 2002). The guru-shishya parampara is generally different from most systems of formal education where students receive recognition/credentials in exchange for formally established learning.

However, over the last 50 years there has been a gradual institutionalisation of Kathak. For example, Kathak Kendra was created in New Delhi in 1964 as part of the state-funded Sangeet Natak Academy (n.d.) in an attempt to create a formal course of study in Kathak. Although this was not the first organisation dedicated to the instruction of Kathak, it was the first to attempt to standardise the training of students into formal courses, degrees and examinations. Similarly, Rukmini Devi Arundale created Kalakshetra in Chennai in 1936 as an institutional model for students interested in receiving training in Bharatanatyam. Similar to Kathak Kendra, Kalakshetra was modelled after traditional Indian schools known as Gurukul, but was distinguished from them by providing a standardised structure and degree-granting programs (McCann, 2019). Additionally, universities, Indian diasporic conservatories and online platforms have become new ways for students to learn Kathak. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, these models have evolved greatly (Prickett, 2007).

This review seeks to answer a relatively simple yet previously unexplored question. What occurs when the guru-shishya parampara is placed within structures that may not naturally support its development? Rather than seeing institutionalisation as merely a loss/degradation of tradition, this review will utilize existing literature from both dance studies and anthropology to demonstrate how pedagogical adaptation can occur as an intentional, creative and productive endeavor (Dalidowicz, 2015).

All information provided throughout this review is based on secondary resources. Therefore, none of the information included in this review was obtained through primary methods. Peer reviewed journals, governmental reports, academic books/publications and publications regarding the historical background of Kathak were utilized as secondary references for this review. Thematic synthesis was applied as a methodological approach instead of completing original fieldwork/surveys.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 The Guru-Shishya Parampara: Principles and Historical Function

For decades now, the term guru-shishya parampara has been used in academic literature to describe a relationship that

transcends mere instructional methods - the guru-shishya relationship embodies a holistic approach to developing one's morality, spirituality, and artistry (Raina, 2002). For Raina (2002), the guru-shishya relationship constitutes a "creative resilient framework," in which the guru bears full responsibility for the shishya's overall growth and development and the shishya is expected to exhibit qualities such as memory, dedication, and continuous perseverance. Within the particular historical context of Kathak, Morelli (2010) illustrates how, based upon his research concerning three generations of gurus and shishyas in a single Kathak gharana, this historical relationship has consisted of long-term co-residence - students have typically resided either in the guru's home or nearby -- and that technique itself developed gradually through close iterative contact between the guru and student rather than through pre-established curricula.

Dalidowicz (2015) provides a phenomenological description of the Kathak apprentice process that complicates the common view that guru-shishya learning occurs solely through imitation. Although the model is commonly characterized as repetitive and reproductive, Dalidowicz illustrates that gurus continually invent new ways to teach their students - what she refers to as "crafting fidelity" - especially in cases where the student is in a diasporic location whose physical characteristics, schedule, and prior experience are very different from those of the traditional disciple. Therefore, Dalidowicz's work indicates that adaptability has always existed within the guru-shishya model, even prior to its formal establishment as an institutionalized form.

2.2 The Institutionalization of Indian Classical Dance

Indian classical dance has experienced significant institutionalization across various forms. Kalakshetra, founded by Rukmini Devi Arundale in 1936, is generally recognized as the first major initiative to formalize a guru-shishya-based art form into an academy with a curriculum, faculty structure and public performance schedule (McCann, 2019). According to McCann (2019), although Kalakshetra maintained the external appearance of guru-shishya mentorship - gurus remained faculty members and provided corrections to each student individually -- it embedded these practices within institutional goals related to nationalistic cultural revivalism and bourgeois respectability.

Similar developments can be identified in Kathak. Following India's independence from British rule in 1947, many Kathak gurus who had previously received financial patronage from courts began to seek employment in institutions (Sangeet Natak Akademi, no date). In 1955, Kathak Kendra was created as the Kathak division of Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra and subsequently became part of the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1964. As a result, several gurus from both Lucknow and Jaipur gharanas came together under a single institutional umbrella. Kathak Kendra offered structured diploma programs in dance along with Hindustani vocal music, tabla and pakhawaj (Sangeet Natak Akademi, no date). This time frame marked another transition for Kathak audiences from private courtyards and salons to the proscenium stage. The latter transition would require additional emphasis in teaching techniques including

projecting one's movement on a larger scale, creating choreographic groups and providing theatrical staging (Sangeet Natak Akademi, no date).

In reference to the pedagogical implications resulting from this transitional change, Prickett (2004 & 2007) identifies an "adapted gurukul" model that exists across all Indian classical dance institutions. The adapted gurukul model consists of a guru being officially affiliated with an institution and working within the confines of its syllabi and exam requirements, however continuing to provide instruction consistent with traditional principles of correcting each student individually and maintaining lineage transmission. Through her fieldwork at Kathak Kendra, Kalakshetra and other independent gurus, Prickett (2007) asserts that the two components of the parampara most symbolic of its integrity - lineage (gharana) and a holistic dance education - continue to exist despite significant transformations in its operational format. Her previous study of South Asian dance training in Britain (Prickett, 2004) extends her argument regarding institutionalized formats of diaspora locations - where formal accrediting agencies have assumed responsibilities once carried out by individual gurus.

2.3 Teaching Effectiveness/Student Experiences/Mentorship

There is a relatively limited amount of literature addressing aspects of the guru-shishya relationship through lenses focused on mentorship/teaching effectiveness more broadly. Using a sports-leadership framework applied to dance technique teaching, Rafferty & Wyon (2006) conclude that dance students significantly respond positively to behaviors demonstrated by teachers that reflect personalized feedback and social support - behavior similar to that idealized in the guru-shishya tradition. Literature using comparative frameworks like Rafferty & Wyon (2006) offer a possible indirect comparison. It suggests that what contributes to making the guru-shishya model pedagogically successful may be based on broad principles of skill-based mentorship even as the parampara introduces uniquely cultural/spiritual dimensions not captured by general teaching models (Raina, 2002).

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper is mostly based on secondary data. The researcher found relevant information via targeted searches within three types of resources. First, they searched the databases of various publishers as well as the online libraries of those publishers (Wiley Online Library, Sage Journals, etc.). Second, they located institutional repositories. Third, they reviewed the official records of the Sangeet Natak Akademi. The search terms included combinations of words such as "Kathak," "guru-shishya parampara," "dance pedagogy," and "institutionalization." In order to select only relevant research for this study, the researcher had to filter out any studies whose focus was either on the history of dance, or aesthetic aspects of dance. Only research focused on Kathak and similar Indian classical dance forms that also examined the structure of dance pedagogy, the role of the guru-disciple relationship, or the process of institutionalization were considered for use in this study.

A very small amount of empirical support for the concepts derived from these studies are provided through a pilot questionnaire (n=6) that was distributed to high level Kathak students. These results can be found in section seven. This questionnaire was originally developed for a separate study on performance anxiety. It has been included in this report solely as a way to illustrate the findings derived from the literature review. Thus, it provides limited support and is clearly bounded from changing the fact that this report is primarily about secondary data.

The researcher analyzed the literature using a thematic approach. After completing an initial review of each source, the researcher categorized the elements of continuity and change in dance education in India that could be found in the sources. A third category was added to capture all tension that may exist when continuity and change meet.

4. Continuity: Elements of the Guru-Shishya Parampara That Persist

Across the literature examined here are three components of the traditional Guru-Shishya system which remain constant in their resistance to structural reforms across all institutions. First, lineage is central to the professional and artistic identity of each Kathak dancer. The same can be observed inside institutional structures as well. Students continue to identify themselves with their Gharana (Lucknow, Jaipur or Benares) and their Guru (teacher), this was seen at the Kathak Kendra where Gurus from both the Lucknow and Jaipur Gharanas taught next to one another maintaining different styles in the two Gharanas (Sangeet Natak Akademi, no date; Prickett, 2007).

Second, direct, hands-on, embodied feedback from the Guru remains the fundamental mechanism of developing skills of practice despite whether there is a formally established curriculum. In his study of what he calls the "Adapted Gurukul," Prickett (2007) states that when the gurukul model is adapted into a modern institutional setting, the formal curriculum acts as an external boundary condition to guide the learning process. However, according to Prickett (2007), the actual transmission of knowledge occurs through continuous and real-time pedagogical improvisation of the Guru directly correcting each individual student's movement (footwork), posture and expression. This mirrors Dalidowicz (2015) findings in relation to how Gurus develop their pedagogy in terms of creating a holistic approach to teaching/mentorship. Finally, regardless if the student is being educated in an institutionally based or privately-based education setting, the Guru is perceived as providing holistic guidance to the Shishya (student) in all aspects of life including education/artistic training, unlike in Western models of education that provide specialized instruction.

5. Change: Institutional Restructuring of Kathak Training

The institutionalized formalization of both the curriculum and examinations for Kathak training represents a major structural change. The Sangeet Natak Akademi, by virtue of its inclusion of Kathak Kendras in its umbrella organization, established structured courses of study which were formally recognized at a

degree level. This represented a fundamental shift in how students learn Kathak from what was previously an informal apprenticeship model where students would spend years learning from a single teacher, versus a formalized educational model that is structured around a specific duration and series of progressively advanced lessons.

A similar transformation can be seen in the case of Bharatanatyam through the efforts of Rukmini Devi who developed Kalakshetra to provide students with formal education in both the technical aspects of dance and in

aesthetics based on the Natyashastra and Sanskrit philosophical traditions. Students today are typically taught by many different teachers over the course of their studies, rather than being apprenticed to a single teacher. In fact, much of Prickett's research (2004; 2007) comparing India and the UK illustrates that institutions – especially those outside of India or located in diaspora communities – often employ a variety of different teachers, including visiting faculty, guest instructors and examiners, each operating independently of other teachers. This undermines the exclusive nature of the relationship that has traditionally existed between a student and her/his guru.

Table 1. Summary of continuity and change in Kathak pedagogy, synthesised from Sections 4–5

Dimension	Continuity (traditional parampara)	Change (institutional adaptation)
Identity	Lineage (gharana) remains central to a dancer's artistic identity	Students trained under one institutional roof spanning multiple gharanas
Correction	Individualised, embodied, physical correction of technique	Correction delivered within a fixed syllabus and time-bound course structure
Role of guru	Holistic mentor responsible for artistic and personal formation	Guru as faculty member operating within institutional goals and calendars
Assessment	Progress paced to individual readiness; no fixed benchmarks	Standardised examinations, diplomas, and graded curricula
Teacher exposure	Long-term, often exclusive, attachment to a single guru	Rotating faculty, guest instructors, external examination boards
Setting	Courtyard, salon, or guru's home; intimate scale	Proscenium stage, group choreography, and, increasingly, online platforms

Sources: Raina, 2002; Prickett, 2004, 2007; McCann, 2019; Dalidowicz, 2015; Sangeet Natak Akademi, n.d.)

6. Tensions Between Tradition and Institutional Structure

The literature on continuity and change illustrates that while they exist side-by-side, there are particular sites of conflict. For example, standardized assessments have caused problems with a pedagogic tradition which has a history of rejecting the notion of rigidly defined time frames and common standards, because the guru-shishya paradigm assumed that a student would learn at his/her own pace based on their preparedness for learning as opposed to institutional calendars. (Prickett, 2007; Raina, 2002.) Another problem is created by having multiple teachers in the same institution. This reduces the single authority and personal relationship that Raina (2002) indicates will motivate and create devotion in disciples, regardless of whether or not all of the teachers utilize guru-shishya methods of correction.

There is another site of conflict involving the concepts of authentic and standardization. As Prickett (2007) indicates in reference to both Kathak Kendra and Kalakshetra, one reason for establishing institutions was to provide financial security for hereditary gurus who had lost patronage from princes due to the loss of patronage. However, the same institutional structure that provided economic stability for the lineage also forced it into teachable units of examination-able content, and thus raises the question that is only obliquely referenced throughout the above literature review - i.e., how much of the traditional experiential/tacit knowledge of the parampara will be able to endure this transformation.

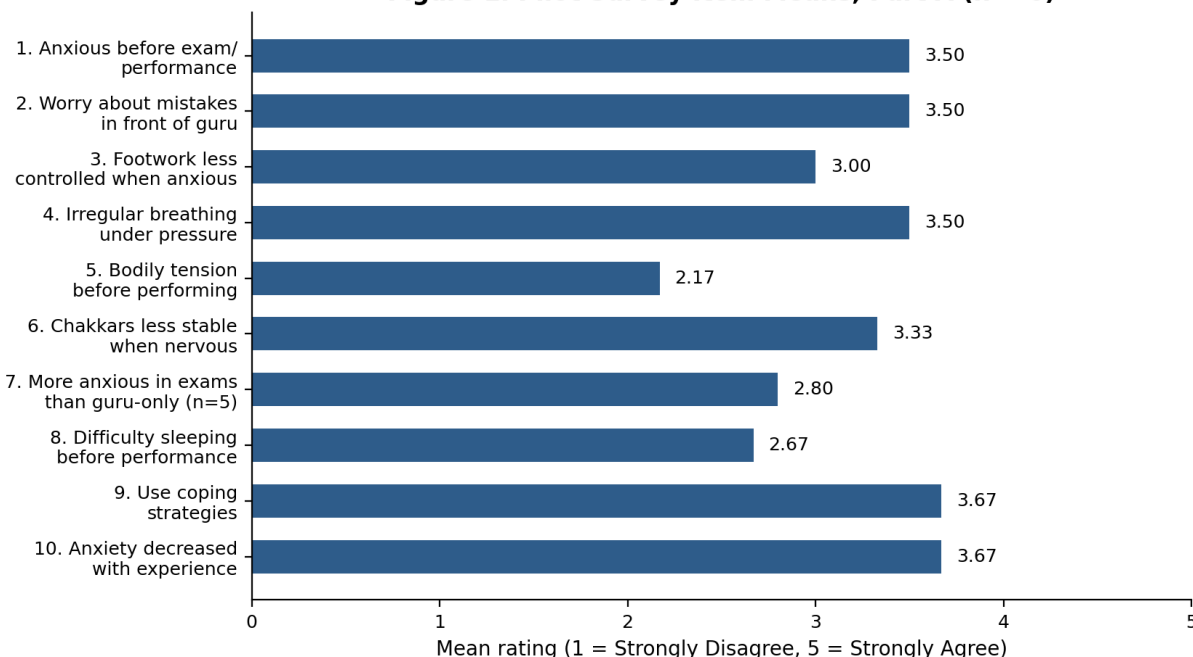
7. Supplementary Illustration: A Small Pilot Survey of Kathak Students

Although this paper is largely based upon secondary sources, a limited pilot survey was conducted with six Kathak students at an advanced level (with each student having approximately ten to fifteen years of training). The pilot survey was conducted for an additional research project focused on performance anxiety. Students were asked to rate statements using a five-point scale (one being, 'strongly disagree', five being, 'strongly agree') and they responded to two open ended questions regarding the role of their gurus and whether they preferred to perform for examinations or for evaluations by their gurus. As the pilot survey included such a very small, self-selected sample from one institution (n=6), the data will be used to illustrate the literature supported themes discussed earlier; therefore, they should not be viewed as a representative or generalizable dataset, nor independently, as part of an empirical study.

Students average rating on the statement, 'I worry about making errors in front of my guru,' was three and half out of five. Therefore, although many students attend a school and take exams, the presence of the guru in terms of evaluation appears to have psychological significance for most students — similar to Raina's (2002) description of the guru as a source of motivation and sense of responsibility for the disciple.

Table 2. Mean ratings on the pilot survey's 5-point rating-scale items (n = 6; item 7 n = 5 due to one non-response)

#	Statement (Part A)	Mean (1–5)	n
1	I feel anxious in the days before a Kathak examination or public performance	3.50	6
2	I worry about making mistakes in front of my guru	3.50	6
3	My footwork feels less controlled when I am anxious	3.00	6
4	I notice my breathing becomes irregular during high-pressure rehearsals or performances	3.50	6
5	I feel tension in my body (e.g., shoulders, legs, jaw) before performing	2.17	6
6	My chakkars (spins) feel less stable when I am nervous	3.33	6
7	I feel more anxious during university examinations than during performances for my guru alone	2.80	5
8	I have difficulty sleeping the night before a major performance or examination	2.67	6
9	I use specific strategies (breathing, prayer, visualisation, etc.) to manage anxiety before performing	3.67	6
10	My anxiety before performing has decreased as I have gained more experience	3.67	6

Figure 1. Pilot Survey Item Means, Part A (n = 6)**Figure 1.** Mean ratings across the ten Part A items of the pilot survey (n = 6)

This qualitative similarity in the way all six students expressed confidence about future performances in relation to the impact of their guru's attendance or feedback during rehearsals is notable. Each of the six students mentioned positive ways that they felt motivated to continue practicing after receiving feedback on their past performances, each of the six students mentioned that they were able to feel confident because of the clarity they received from their guru on correcting previous mistakes, and each of the six students mentioned that their guru helped them to feel reassured and less nervous when they were preparing to perform. Not one of the six students indicated that the guru's attendance caused increased pressure. Additionally, the survey asked whether students experienced examinations differently than performances where their guru judged their work. All six students answered "yes." Of those six students, four students stated that examinations were generally more stressful than when their guru judged their work. Those four cited such reasons as the presence of other people who would judge them formally, the use of formal guidelines to assess their work, and the fact that their guru tended to see his

evaluations of them as learning experiences whereas formal examinations were seen as assessments. The remaining two students did distinguish between the two environments, but one student saw examinations as motivating factors, rather than simply as causes for stress. Collectively, these responses illustrate both large- and small-scale support for the previously noted tension, namely, that standardized institutional testing creates a different type of pressure which coexists with, but does not replace, the traditional teacher-student relationship (Prickett, 2007).

Caution must be used when interpreting these illustrative results. The sample size is small, derived from students at approximately the same level of advancement within what appears to be a single teaching lineage, and the survey was intended as an exploratory tool rather than a structured validation of the continuum/framework presented in the literature review. Therefore, the value of these results is more indicative than confirmatory. They indicate that the pedagogically-derived patterns illustrated in the secondary sources appear to be present in the narratives of at least some

current students. In addition, the results suggest a need for a larger study using a combination of quantitative/qualitative methodologies as a natural progression.

8. Discussion: Implications for Pedagogy and Student Experience

The overall trend in this analysis is not simply downward, but hybridization. Prickett's (2007) definition of 'adapted gurukul' fits this observation well; the institution provides the structural framework for the content to be delivered, the structure, the time line and certification; while the Guru continues to deliver the personal/relational learning associated with the historical parampara within that structural framework. Dalidowicz's (2015) definition of 'crafting fidelity', implies that this adaptation is not merely a defensive mechanism to ensure institutional survival, but an active pedagogical skill on behalf of the Guru that has been used for many years prior to the existence of formalized institutions.

There are also potential implications related to how educational institutions can conceptualize the student's experience of education/training (i.e., performance-based pressures). Both Raina (2002), and Rafferty & Wyon (2006) note that a student's confidence, motivation and perceptions of personalized teacher/student mentoring, are all highly correlated. When institutional constructs (e.g., rotating faculty, standardized grading systems, external exams etc.) erode the singular nature of the Guru-student bond - i.e., a singular, long-term teacher/student relationship- students will likely perceive less security historically afforded by an exclusive long-term Guru bond, even though they will receive greater accessibility to training and formal certifications.

9. CONCLUSION

The guru-shishya parampara has not been replaced by formalized education in Kathak but rather reorganized through a formal structure. The values of lineage, personalized corrections and all-encompassing mentoring continue to exist at the heart of formal schools, whereas the formalization of education has changed the way these values are imparted. These changes include curriculum design, evaluations, exposures to many teachers and more recently, delivery of teaching via internet platforms. This review is a compilation of historical, ethnographic and educational literature and supports Prickett's (2007) description of contemporary Kathak training as an "adapted gurukul" paradigm. Future research – including field-based studies that combine documentations from formal schools with student and teacher/guru interviews/surveys – will provide additional insight into the flexibility of the adapted gurukul paradigm and whether such hybrid models can be expanded upon without sacrificing the traditional pedagogic/psychological benefits provided by the gurus' relationships with their shishyas.

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