



The Accompaniment of Vocal and Instrumental Music in the Performance of Kathak Dance in the Context of North Indian Music System

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Abstract

This study examines the accompaniment of vocal and instrumental music in Kathak dance presentations, with particular focus on the selection and application of appropriate musical elements in the creation of Kathak based Dance-Dramas. Based on interviews, literature from Scopus, Google Scholar and texts such as Kathak Nritya Shiksha and Sangeet Visharad, the study finds that vocal and instrumental accompaniment is integral to the artistic completeness of Kathak Dance-Dramas. Their integration transcends physical movement, enriching dramatic and cultural expression, aesthetic experience and spiritual depth, while fostering a cohesive and vibrant synthesis of music and dance.

Keywords : Kathak Dance, Kathak Dance-Dramas, Vocal and Instrumental accompaniment, Aesthetic experience, Spiritual depth.

Introduction

“Geetam Vadyam Tatha Nrityam Trayam Sangeetmuchyate” (Sakhare, 2024). Meaning that “the Indian musical tradition blends singing, instrumental and dance.” (Shrivastava, 2005). These three genres have their own independent existence but “in their interplay, they create a harmonious, powerful and beautiful expression.” (Shrivastava, 2024). These three genres

complement each other and through mutual interdependence they achieve perfection and create wonders. "India has eight classical dance forms, each with a distinct regional and cultural heritage. One of India's major classical dance traditions is Kathak, a classical dance form of North India." (Shah, 1998; Sharma & Harmalkar, 2024; Trivedi, 2015; Vishwakarma & Vats, 2025). Since the Vedic period, this dance has been accompanied by singing and musical instruments. Over time, Kathak dance has undergone many changes and the importance of singing and instrumentation has increased. For the presentation of a Kathak performance, the dancer relies entirely on vocal and instrumental.

"The dancer stages his performance using various compositions of classical vocal." (Bhatt & Vats, 2025). "Singing styles are divided into three main categories: Classical, Semi-Classical and Light." (Trivedi, 2015). "A Kathak dancer begins their performance with divine invocations, Shlokas, Bhajans and other devotional compositions." (Krishna, 2022; Saxena, 1979). "They express these compositions through devotional sentiments, conveying divine emotions." (Sharma & Harmalkar, 2024). "They express the love and other emotions of Nayak and Nayika (hero and heroine) through Thumri, Gazal, Dadra, Holi, Dhruvpad, Dhamar, Khayal and various seasonal song styles." (Gupta, 2024). In addition to these compositions, a Kathak dancer showcases his years of training and preparation through magical compositions such as Trivat, Chaturanga and Tarana. "All these compositions are based on a particular raga." (Mittal, 2014). Each of these compositions has its own distinctive style of singing and therefore every singing style is enriched with unique expression and aesthetic qualities, bringing diversity to the performance. Through these compositions, the dancer presents a harmonious and integrated performance of Abhinaya (expressional aspect), Nritya (pure technical aspect) and Nritya (expressional dance combining rhythm and emotion). "In Kathak dance performances, singing is used in both rhythmic and non-rhythmic forms." (Trivedi, 2015).

In addition to singing, dancers recognize the importance of musical instruments and utilize them to enhance the performance. "Instruments are divided into four categories: Percussion Instruments (Avnadya Vadya: Tabla, Pakhawaj, Mridang, dholak, etc), String Instruments (Tantra Vadya: Sitar, Sarangi, Veena, Violin, etc), Wind Instruments (Sushir Vadya: Harmonium, Flute, Shehnai, etc) and Solid Instruments (Ghana Vadya: Ghungharoo, Manjira, Jal Tarang, Jhanjh, Bells, etc)." (Shrivastava, 2006). These instruments are further divided into two categories: Melodic Instruments (Swar Vadya) and Rhythmic Instruments (Taal Vadya). Dancers use all these instruments in every part of their performance, from beginning to end. He uses melodic instruments to accompany different singing styles, understand musical notations and with Lehra to understand the rhythmic cycle. Rhythmic instruments are used to accompany various intricate rhythmic patterns (Layakari), singing styles and the syllables of Kathak dance.

"Solid instruments, such as Manjira, Bells, etc are used to fill the rest between singing and to enhance the musical impact of the performance according to its artistic requirements." (Trivedi, 2015). With the help of musical instruments, the Kathak dancer brings a feeling of joy to the audience. "To make the performance more captivating and appealing, the dancer also presents Jugalbandi with the accompanying musicians." (Sharma & Harmalkar, 2024). Jugalbandi is majorly performed in drut laya (fast speed), which makes the performance more engaging. Through this dynamic interaction, the dancer impresses the audience with their artistic excellence, leaving a lasting impression on their minds.

"Both singing and instrumental are beautifully used in the presentation of Dance-Dramas based on all classical dance forms of India." (Menon, Boobalakrishnan, Awasthi and Thomas, 2004; V.S. & H.K, 2024). Traditionally the presentation of Dance-Dramas based on Kathak dance depicted Indian mythological stories, but modern Dance-Dramas have incorporated contemporary themes such as social issues, patriotism and women's empowerment while maintaining their classical foundation. Regardless of the subject matter, "vocal and instrumental are accompanied according to the nature, personality and emotional state of the character in the narrative. The dancer chooses singing styles according to the narrative." (Lal, G., Personal Interview, 2026). "The rhythm and flow of a raga used in a composition reflect its nature and the rasa contained within it." (Shrivastava, 1983). "Therefore, the selection of ragas should be in harmony with the character being portrayed."

(Lal, G., Personal Interview, 2026) “Along with the ragas, the correct selection of octaves creates the positive and negative aspect of a character.” (Khare, 2005). Furthermore, “every singing style, raga and musical instrument possesses its own distinct nature. The nature of musical instruments is determined by their sonic qualities and tonal effects thus these musical instruments play a significant role in portraying the appearance of a particular character. Therefore, the correct selection of these instruments, notes and syllables played on them is essential. In the Kathak Dance-Drama structure, in addition to these elements, rhythmic cycle and tempo also contribute significantly to the creation and portrayal of a character. It is essential that the emotions inherent in all these factors remain consistent with one another so that the presentation of Dance-Dramas can be made meaningful and more effective.” (Lal, G., Personal Interview, 2026). The coordination of vocal and instrumental music accompaniment in the structure of Kathak Dance-Dramas is mentioned in Table 1, Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4 through the following example:

Example:

Narrative : Dance-Drama presentation of four different Leela of Lord Krishna.

Motive : To understand the role and concept of Vocal and Instrumental music accompaniment in Kathak Dance-Dramas according to the narrative and its characters.

Table 1: Panghat Chhed Chhad Leela (Lord Krishna teases the Gopis at the riverbank)

Nature of Dance-Drama: Playful and Romantic

Composition: Kahe Rokat Dagar Pyare

Rasa	Shringara
Singing Style	Thumri
Raga	Desh
Octave (Saptak)	Middle (Madhya Saptak)
Instruments	Sarangi, Tabla, Harmonium, Flute
Taal	Dadra
Tempo (Laya)	Medium (Madhya Laya)

Table 2: Uddhav Leela (Conversation between Gopis and Uddhav)

Nature of Dance-Drama: Poignant, Devotional and Philosophical

Composition: Udho Mann Na Bhaye Das Bees

Rasa	Karuna
Singing Style	Bhajan
Raga	Bhairavi
Octave (Saptak)	Middle (Madhya Saptak)
Instruments	Tabla, Sarangi, Harmonium, Tanpura, Manjira

Taal	Keherva
Tempo (Laya)	Medium (Madhya Laya)

Table 3: Jagan Leela (Maa Yashoda waking up Lord Krishna)

Nature of Dance-Drama: Maternal, Devotional and Tender

Composition: Jagiye Gopal Lal

Rasa	Vatsalya
Singing Style	Pad
Raga	Ahir Bhairav
Octave (Saptak)	Middle and upper (Madhya and Taar Saptak)
Instruments	Flute, Tabla, Swar Mandal, Manjira, Bells
Taal	Ektaal
Tempo (Laya)	Medium (Madhya Laya)

Table 4: Kaliya Daman (Lord Krishna subdues the serpent Kaliya)

Nature of Dance-Drama: Heroic, Powerful, Dramatic and Divine

Composition: Kaliya Pe Thade Aawe Mohan

Rasa	Raudra and Veera
Singing Style	Khayal
Raga	Paraj
Octave (Saptak)	Middle (Madhya Saptak)
Instruments	Tabla, Harmonium, Flute, Pakhawaj
Taal	Teentaal
Tempo (Laya)	Medium and Fast (Madhya and Drut Laya)

In the given example, four narratives were selected to create Dance-Drama. Table 1 presents the musical framework selected for the Panghat Chhed Chhad Leela, which is playful and romantic in nature. Accordingly, Thumri was selected as the most suitable vocal genre, with “Kahe Rokar Dagar Pyare” as the composition, as it effectively expresses Shringara Rasa. The composition is set in Raag Desh and Dadra Taal, with Madhya Laya, predominantly using the Madhya Saptak. Sarangi, Tabla, Harmonium and Flute were selected as accompanying instruments. Table 2 represents Uddhav Leela, which is poignant, devotional and philosophical in nature. Bhajan was selected, with “Udho Mann Na Bhaye Das Bees” as the composition, expressing Karuna Rasa thus, the composition is set in Raag Bhairavi and Keherwa Taal, with Madhya Laya

and Madhya Saptak. Tabla, Harmonium, Tanpura, Manjira and Sarangi were selected as accompanying instruments. Table 3 describes the Jagan Leela narrative, which is maternal, devotional and tender in nature. Consequently, Pad was selected as the singing style, with “Jagiye Gopal Lal” as the composition, expressing Vatsalya Rasa. As the narrative portrays morning time therefore, the composition is set in Raag Ahir Bhairav and Ektaal, with Madhya Laya, using the Madhya and Taar Saptak. Flute, Tabla, Swar Mandal, Manjira and bells were selected as the accompanying instruments. Table 4 depicts the Kaliya Daman Leela, which is heroic, powerful, dramatic and divine in nature. Khayal was selected as the singing style, with “Kaliya Pe Thade Aawe Mohan”, as the composition, expressing Raudra and Veera Rasa. The composition is set in Raga Paraj and Teentaal with Madhya and Drut Laya (Drut Laya while presenting a fighting scene), predominantly using the Madhya Saptak. Table, Harmonium, Flute and Pakhawaj were selected as accompanying instruments. These elements were selected according to the narrative and its character’s nature, personality and emotional state to enhance the emotional dimensions of the Dance-Drama.

“Acharya Nandikeshwar has stated in Abhinaya Darpana that Nrityam Geetabhinayanam Bhavtalayutam Bhavet.” (Dadheech, 2013). The shloka conveys that dance must encompass all these elements- song, abhinaya (expressive technique), bhava (emotional expression), and taal (rhythmic structure). It emphasizes the integration and coordination of the three artistic disciplines, which is essential for the effective presentation of Kathak and Kathak Dance-Dramas. Thus, this study describes the accompaniment of vocal and instrumental music in the performance of Kathak dance in the context of the North Indian music system.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for this research is descriptive, analytical, and comparative in nature based on primary and secondary data. The study systematically integrates existing scholarly literature to examine the accompaniment of singing and instrumental music in the performance of Kathak dance in the context of the North Indian music system. The methodological steps followed in the study are as follows:

Collection of Data

Data related to the subject was collected from Interview, libraries, books, journals and authentic online websites. An expert interview was conducted with eminent Kathak exponent and Guru Smt. Geetanjali Lal (on 2026, July 10) to investigate the role and significance of vocal and instrumental accompaniment in Kathak Dance-Dramas. To obtain literature-based information, majorly Indexed Journals were selected.

Classification and Theme-Based Organization

The collected information related to the topic was categorized under theme-based headings such as singing styles, types of instruments, Dance-Dramas, Raga-Rasa theory etc. This classification resulted in a structured and systematic analysis.

Analytical Study

After organizing the data, all the components of singing, instrumental and Kathak dance were analysed individually so that their role, nature and characteristics could be comprehended. Thereafter, an integrated assessment of all components was carried out to demonstrate the interrelationship and coordination among these aspects.

Comparative Study

The comparative study of various singing styles (Classical, Semi-Classical and Light), types of instruments, Kathak dance compositions and Dance-Dramas were carried out to examine how they function together to create aesthetic expression and feeling of joy.

Integration and Interpretation of Data

Data and findings obtained from various sources were integrated to understand the accompaniment of singing and instrumental music in the presentation of Kathak dance.

Results

Accompaniment of Singing in Kathak dance: This analysis shows that singing, which is an integral part of music, is essential for giving Kathak dance an aesthetic and expressive form. Although Kathak can technically be performed without singing, it cannot attain its artistic beauty without the support of singing. A Kathak dancer cannot fully complete a performance without the accompaniment of singing. According to the North Indian music system, Vocal is divided into three categories: Classical, Semi-Classical and Light. Kathak presentation traditionally begins with Vandana, which is sung by the vocalist, while the dancer expresses its emotion through movement and presents it before the audience. “With the support of various singing styles such as Dhrupad, Dhamar, Thumri, Bhajan, Gazal, Dadra, Tarana, Chaturang, Trivat etc, the Kathak dancer presents the dance beautifully.” (Bala, 2023; Trivedi, 2015; Sharma & Harmalkar, 2024). The dancer conveys graceful abhinaya through these compositions. Without singing, Kathak remains limited merely to physical movements.

Accompaniment of Instruments in Kathak dance: In Kathak dance, it is extremely difficult to imagine a dance performance without instrumental accompaniment. “In Kathak, various types of musical instruments are used, through which the dancer makes the performance engaging and aesthetically pleasing.” (Alam, Sargam, Rani, Saini, Bhilare & Balakrishnan, 2025). Musical instruments are classified into four categories: Percussion Instruments, Wind Instruments, String Instruments and Solid Instruments. All four categories have their own importance. “Through percussion instruments, the dancer makes the performance rhythmic and demonstrates years of dedicated practice through various rhythmic patterns (Layakaris).” (Jaiswal & Upadhyay, 2023; Mishra, 2023). With the support of wind and string instruments, dancers perform movements along the melodic flow (Lehra), “which helps maintain awareness of the rhythmic cycle (Taal), enabling the dancer to perform in proper rhythm.” (Saxena, 1979). Through solid instruments, the dancer introduces pauses, enhances musical effects in invocational compositions and rhythmic clarity into the performance. All these instruments together complete a Kathak dance performance.

Accompaniment of Singing and Instrumental Music in Kathak Dance-Dramas: In Kathak Dance-Dramas, the dancer expresses emotions based on a storyline and portrays various characters within that narrative. “In these Kathak Dance-Dramas, the creation of character is achieved through the support of singing and instrumental music.” (Kumar, Nayak & Swain, 2024; P., L. D., & Jitesh Wori, 2024). “The dancer selects singing styles and musical instruments according to the character’s nature, personality and emotional state, which enables effective and expressive enactment. According to the character of the story, the dancer also chooses the specific raga, octave, taal, tempo, musical notes and rhythmic syllables played on the instruments. Through this appropriate selection, the dancer evokes a sense of joy, constructs narrative

meaning, emotional depth and aesthetic pleasure in the audience.” (Lal, G., Personal Interview, 2026). The result of this research is mentioned below in Table 5:

Table 5: Accompaniment of vocal and instrumental music in Kathak dance performance

Accompaniment of Vocal Music in Kathak dance	Accompaniment of Instrumental Music in Kathak dance	Accompaniment of Vocal and Instrumental Music in Kathak Dance-Dramas
Means of expression	To make the performance rhythmic and to play syllables of Kathak dance (through percussion instruments)	To portray characters of a narrative
Presentation of Abhinaya aspect (through compositions like Vandana, Thumri, Khayal, Gazal etc.)	To accompany melody with singing (through string and wind instruments)	Selection according to the nature, personality and emotional state of a character
Presentation of technical aspect (through compositions like Tarana, Jugalbandi etc.)	To accompany Lehra (a rhythmic flow, framed in a specific Taal, played through melodic instruments)	Correct selection of different elements (like singing styles, instruments, raga, octave, taal, tempo, musical notes and syllables of Kathak dance and percussion instruments)
Presentation of dance aspect (through compositions like Trivat, Chaturanga, Ashtapadi etc.)	To introduce pauses and enhance musical effects (through solid instruments)	To construct narrative meaning and emotional depth
To achieve artistic beauty	In the performance of Jugalbandi (through rhythmic and melodic instruments)	To create aesthetic pleasure

Conclusion

In the Kathak dance performance, the structure is created with the help of singing, while on the other hand, those compositions are brought to life with the help of musical instruments. Vocal and instrumental music not only make the dance beautiful but also establish an emotional connection between the dancer and the audience. To make the dance emotional, the presentation of songs and rhythm is possible only with the help of vocal and instrumental music. Vocal, instrumental and dance together emerge as a soulful style.

Ultimately, vocal and instrumental music are of paramount importance in Kathak dance. Without the accompaniment of vocal and instrumental music, Kathak dance is lifeless, while with their accompaniment, Kathak dance becomes a beautiful amalgamation of culture, beauty and spirituality, generating joy and touching the hearts of the audience.

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