

# The Narrow Repertoire of Mythology in Kathak: Tradition, Curriculum, and the Absence of Innovation

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## Abstract

Kathak, a classical Indian dance form originating from northern India, has long incorporated elements of Indian mythology, yet its use remains strikingly limited to a handful of stories such as Draupadi's disrobing (Draupadi Chirharan), Sita's abduction (Sita Haran), Krishna's butter theft (Makhan Chori), and Krishna Leela. This paper interrogates why Kathak dancers rely predominantly on abhinaya (expressive storytelling or gatbhav) from these select narratives, neglecting the vast expanse of Indian mythology. It explores the role of institutional curriculum, historical gatekeepers, and barriers to new choreographies, particularly in universities. Drawing on dance historiography and cultural studies, it argues for a more expansive engagement to revitalize the form.



## Introduction

Kathak's evolution from temple rituals and Mughal court performances to a modern classical art form is well-documented. Central to its abhinaya repertoire where dancers interpret natya shastra emotions through gesture, mime, and music is Indian mythology. Yet, performers overwhelmingly draw from a narrow set: Krishna's playful antics (Makhan Chori, Krishna Leela), Sita Haran from the Ramayana, and Draupadi Chirharan from the Mahabharata. These stories emphasize shringara (romantic love), bhakti (devotion), and veer (heroism), often rendered in gatbhav style.

Why this limitation? Indian mythology, spanning the Vedas, Puranas, epics, and regional folklore, offers boundless narratives from Shiva's Tandava to Durga's Mahishasura Vadh. or tales of regional deities like Ayyappa or folk heroes in Tamil Sangam literature. Are we not utilizing this "vastly" rich heritage completely? This paper poses critical questions: Who curates these restrictive curriculum? Why do new choreographers, especially in universities, avoid innovative depictions? And what perpetuates the absence of variations?

### Historical Roots of the Limited Repertoire

Kathak's mythology draw traces to its 16th-19th century “kathakars” (storytellers) in temples and courts, who adapted Puranic tales for mass appeal . Under Mughal patronage, Hindu narratives like Krishna Leela gained prominence as devotional interludes, blending Hindustani music with bhakti poetry from poets like Surdas and Tulsidas. Post-independence, the form was "classicalized" during India's cultural revival.

Key gatekeepers emerged here. Gurus like Achchan Maharaj (Lucknow gharana) and Birju Maharaj standardized abhinaya items, favoring accessible, emotionally resonant stories. Birju Maharaj's compositions, such as “Draupadi Chirharan”, became staples, emphasizing female vulnerability—a reflection of 20th-century gender norms (Erdman 1985). The Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA), India's national performing arts academy founded in 1952, played a pivotal role. Its certification exams codified these narratives into syllabus ,prioritizing Krishna and Ramayana tales for their melodic compatibility with Kathak's “tala” (rhythm) and “layakari” (rhythmic play).

Key stories in kathak repertoire	Source Epic/ Purana	Dominant emotions)	Rasa(	Prominent Exponents
Makhan Chori	Bhagavata Purana	Shringara [love/playfulness]		Birju maharaj, Shovana Narayan
Krishna Leela	Bhagavata Purana	Bhakti [devotion]		Yamini Krishnamurthy
Sita Haran	Ramayana	Karuna[pathos]		Kumudini Lakhia
Draupadi Chirharan	Mahabharata	Rudra[anger/outrage]		Maya Rao

This table illustrates the concentration: over 80 % of recorded abhinaya performances in kathak festivals (e.g. khajuraho dance festival archives) recycle these four motifs ( Chatterjee 2010).

### Institutional Gatekeeping: Curriculum and the “Who” Behind It

Who decides? Primarily, guru-shishya parampara (teacher-disciple tradition) and institutions like the SNA, Indira Kala Sangeet Vishwavidyalaya (IKSV), and Kathak Kendra (Delhi). SNA’s grading system (1980s onward) mandates proficiency in 2-3 mythological abhinaya pieces from the above list for junior/senior diplomas. IKSV’s BA/BFA syllabus ,reviewed in 2022, allocate 40% of practical credits to these stories, citing “authenticity” (IKSV Prospectus 2023).

### These Curriculum stem from mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century reformers:

Pt. Lacchu Maharaj and Sohanlal Mishra, who petitioned SNA in the 1950s to “purify” Kathak of “nautch” (courtesan) elements by emphasizing bhakti-centric myths.

Government panels post-1960s, influenced by cultural nationalists like Kapila Vatsyayan, who favored epics over “obscure” Puranic tales to project a unified “Indian” identity (Vatsyayan 1977).

Universities perpetuate this. At Bhatkhande Sanskriti Vishwavidyalaya (Lucknow), theses on Kathak choreography (2015-2025) show 70% adhering to traditional stories; innovations risk failing viva voce (university archives). Why? Examiners, often retired gurus, view deviations as “diluting purity,” echoing colonial-era standardization of classical forms (Subramanian 2013).

## Barriers to New Choreographies and Variations

New artists face multifaceted hurdles:

### Tradition vs. Innovation Tension

Kathak prizes nritta (pure dance) innovation, but abhinaya is “frozen” to preserve “parampara”. Choreographers like Aditi Mangaldas have experimented (e.g., *\*Broken Boundaries\**, 2005, blending mythology with feminism), yet these rarely enter curriculum.

### Commercial Pressures

Festival circuits (e.g., SPIC MACAY) reward familiar stories for audience recognition. Data from 500 Kathak performances (2018-2023) via India Foundation for the Arts shows 65% feature Krishna Leela (IFA Report 2024).

### Gender and Thematic Bias

Dominant stories highlight male divinity (Krishna) or female victimhood (Sita, Draupadi), sidelining empowered narratives like Kali’s triumph or Andal’s poetry. Queer or Dalit myths (e.g., Ekalavya) are absent, reflecting upper-caste, heteronormative curation.

### University Constraints

Faculty shortages and funding prioritize certification over research. A 2022 UGC survey found only 15% of performing arts programs encourage original choreography; the rest drill “set pieces” (UGC Report 2022). New artists like Vaibhav Arekar create works (e.g., *\*Yugma\**, fusing Shiva myths), but these stay in contemporary festivals, not syllabus.

## Is mythology "vastly" underused?

Absolutely—the 18 Mahapuranas alone offer 400+ stories. Examples of untapped potential:

- Shiva-Parvati svayamvara for shringara & hasya (love-humor).
- Ganesha's birth for adbhuta (wonder).
- Regional tales like Sambhandi Phulvari (Rajasthani folklore) adaptable to Kathak's footwork.

## Case Studies: Attempts at Expansion

Rare innovations highlight the gap:

- Kumkum Lal's Tandav Nritya (1990s) drew from Shiva myths, performed at NSD but excluded from IKSVM exams.
- Sharmila Mukherji's Devi(2015) depicted Durga, yet remains a solo production.

In universities, IIT Kanpur's 2021 workshop yielded student pieces on “Ramakatha” variations, but none integrated into core curriculum.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Kathak's mythological repertoire is curtailed by historical standardization, institutional inertia, and market dynamics, rendering vast Indian lore untapped. Gurus, academies like SNA/IKSV, and cultural policymakers have “decided” this canon, sidelining new voices. To evolve:

1. Revise SNA/UGC syllabus to mandate 30% original abhinaya.
2. Fund university incubators for choreography (e.g., via CCRT grants).
3. Promote cross-gharana exchanges for regional myths.

This expansion would democratize Kathak, making it a living archive of India's mythic diversity.

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