

Sehdev  
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**“**As famous *Kathak* exponent, Birju Maharaj -- known world over for his artistry as a dancer, a choreographer and a teacher -- presents his dance and his dancers across Canada -- on June 12 at Aga Khan Museum in

Toronto -- many of us will have an opportunity to know the meaning and purpose of dance in an entirely different context.

In what other religious and spiritual tradition in the world other than Hinduism, I wonder, are gods and goddesses such consummate musicians and dancers? There is Shiva - the *Nataraja* - 'the cosmic dancer'; there is Krishna, the great chanter with his flute; there is Saraswati, with her veena.

And there is *Raas Lila*, about Krishna and his *gopis*, and there are dance celebrations at endless festivals in every village and town.

Dance as worship, as celebration, as adoration, is ubiquitous in India everywhere.

In the long and sumptuous history of India, for millennia, dance and music, poetry and *mantras*, theatre and every-day ceremonies, and rituals have so richly defined its cultural and religious ethos all across the country. It is there in exquisite sculptures in Hindu and Jain temples in Konark and Ranakpur, in miniature paintings in the Himalayas, in the telling and re-telling of myths and stories, in its great epics, The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, in its metaphors and allegories in scores of languages of India.

That is how *NatyaShastra* - an encyclopaedic treatise on the performing arts, dating back to some two thousand years, is an integral part of Hinduism and of Indian culture, with unsurpassed influence on dances, music and literature.

It is thus, over millennia, over the vast length and the breadth of India, eight classical dance forms have evolved and emerged, and have flourished, all intricately and subtly inspired by Hindu mythology and spiritual ethos. Their

# Indian Dance Maestro Birju Maharaj



forms are rich and textured, their vocabulary and structures are layered and intricate, and their development has been persistent and enduring.

Of these eight classical dances, Kathak has probably had the most dramatic history. In telling the stories of the gods and the goddesses, from the epic Mahabharata specifically, through intricate and fast footwork, through gestures and *mudras*, through facial expressions and *bhava*, the Kathak dancers have engaged their audiences on many platforms: in the temples, in public squares, in courts and durbars.

With the coming of Islam to India over a thousand years ago, and the emergence of the British Raj, the aesthetics and purpose of Indian dances evolved yet once again. From worship to celebration to entertainment to seduction to titillation, the whole gamut of human emotions came to be wrapped in new ways in dance, in Kathak in particular.

Birju Maharaj is part of the celebrated lineage of dancers and teachers who put new life into Kathak over the past hundred and fifty years and have now made it into a world-wide phenomenon. As the great Mughal Empire was decaying and the British were establishing their raj in India, in mid-19th century, the Nawab of Oudh, Wajid Ali Shah, in the secular spirit of India at the time, became a great patron of Kathak, and he himself took much delight in dancing and re-enacting the stories from the life of Krishna.

Thus emerged the Lucknow *Gharana* - school - of Kathak,



to which Birju Maharaj's grandfather, father, uncles, all contributed famously as dancers and as dance-gurus in the 20th century to making Kathak a vibrant and vivacious dance.

Much lauded and highly honoured by dance and music institutions all over the world, as a legendary teacher at Kathak Kendra in Delhi, and as an exponent of integrating traditional and new forms in dance, Birju Maharaj has trained and inspired hundreds of Kathak dancers and teachers all over the world.

As Indian diaspora spreads to many countries in the West - Canada, USA, Britain, Australia - and as a new sense of freedom and celebration emerges in young male and female dancers, through Kathak new stories are being told all over the world.

Here in Canada, many Kathak dancers and teachers - RinaSingha, Aaloka Mehndiratta, Deepti Gupta, Joanna De Souza, Usha Gupta, BageshreeVaze, SudeshnaMaulik and many more - continue to making the vivacity of Kathak part of the multicultural fabric of Canada.

In small and large classes, in Toronto, Edmonton, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Montreal, with enthusiasm and imagination, new colours and hues are being rendered to myths and fables of ancient India. Traditions are being redefined; new myths are being created. For all these Kathak dancers, and many more, in Canada and world over, an important, unflinching source of inspiration has been, and continues to be, Birju Maharaj!

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