

Creative Innovations of Kumudini Lakhia and the Modernization of Kathak: An Analytical Study

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Abstract:

Kathak, a classical dance of North India is revered as a rich and vibrant dance form within the Indian Classical Dance tradition and believed to have originated from the ancient storytelling traditions. Initially, it was associated with temple and folk culture, but over time, it has constantly evolved under the influence of court culture, social changes, globalization and artistic innovation. In this evolutionary journey, many renowned artists have given Kathak a new direction and wider recognition through their creative vision and artistic experimentation. Among these, Kumudini Lakhia was one whose contributions to this art form are particularly noteworthy. She did not limit Kathak to traditional presentation, but incorporated contemporary ideas, abstract themes, and new possibilities of group choreography. She also experimented with costume, makeup, lights and used innovative vocabulary of dance in place of traditional 'Tukdas' and 'Tihai' in her productions. Her vision gave Kathak a broader and contemporary dimension. As a female artist, she not only established her own independent artistic identity but also played a significant role in establishing Kathak's new reputation not only on the national but also on the international stage.

Keywords: Kathak, Kumudini Lakhia, Innovation, Choreography.

Objectives:

- To study the life and artistic journey of Kumudini Lakhia.
- To discuss the important choreographic contributions made by Kumudini Lakhia to Kathak.
- To examine her innovation in Kathak choreography with reference to abstract themes, group choreography, modern stage craft, costumes, lighting, and music.
- To examine her teaching methodology.
- To investigate how these innovations impacted the evolution of Kathak choreography.

Methodology:

This study will adopt a qualitative research approach by combining historical, analytical and comparative methods. Primary and Secondary sources of data are collected to study the life and artistic journey of Kumudini Lakhia.

- Historical analysis: Reviewing various books, journals, archival records and documentary to study her life, innovations and major choreographic works.
- Analytical analysis: The study examines the innovations in choreography, stage craft, costume, lighting, music and pedagogy.
- Comparative analysis: Kumudini Lakhia's innovations are compared to traditional Kathak practices to understand their significance and impact on the evolution of the dance form.

Literature Review:

The contributions of Kumudini Lakhia in the field of Kathak, has been discussed in several books, articles and interviews. The existing Literature focuses on her contributions, particularly in group choreography, abstract themes, costume and lights. These sources, help build a foundation for examining the significant innovations done by Kumudini Lakhia in Kathak. Saxena (2017) focuses on her experiments with Tihai, especially on its division among three dancers, reflecting her contributions to group choreography and the reorganisation of traditional rhythmic structures. Arora (2017) and Trivedi (2015) discusses Duvidha highlighting Lakhia's experiments with the frame, music and contemporary movements in order to depict the inner conflict of a woman. Kothari (2018) discusses Atah Kim with regard to the usage of space, the frame and group movements, while Kothari (2017) analyses The Coat by referring to contemporary literary pieces. Venkataraman (2025) considers The Coat as an important piece that contributed to the development of Lakhia's group choreography. Moreover, the literature has examined her experiments with music, lighting and costumes as well as her progressive teaching approaches. However, these literature analyses the above mentioned areas separately. The current paper study the above mentioned areas together in order to examine the contribution of Lakhia's innovations to Kathak.

The Development of Kumudini Lakhia's Artistic Vision

The artistic journey of Kumudini Lakhia developed through the training of Kathak and exposure to diverse performance environments. She began her journey as a dancer, when the famous Indian dancer Ram Gopal approached her for a role as his partner.

Eventually, she became a member of Ram Gopal's troupe. Along with his troupe from 1947 to 1953, she performed throughout European cities, Norway, Sweden, Denmark,

Holland, France, Switzerland, and all the major countries

with Ram Gopal

of South Asia. During these tours, Kumudini Lakhia acquired extensive knowledge from Ram Gopal regarding the nuances of dance performance, the precise use of body lines, technique, costume design, stage design, and choreography. Although she was influenced by Ram Gopal,



Figure 1

she did not imitate his style. She took inspiration from him in terms of aesthetics and presentation while formulating her own language of dance in response to the changing context and contemporary audience. (Shah, 2005, p. 66)

This exposure also introduced her to Western dance forms, particularly ballet, whose influence can be observed in her later choreographic works. She carefully observed and adapted those techniques and applied in her works in a creative way.

After returning from the dance tour, Kumudini Lakhia obtained a scholarship for dance education and acquired proficiency in Kathak under the guidance of Pt. Shambhu Maharaj and Pt. Lacchu Maharaj at the Bharatiya Kala Kendra. Her association with these gurus provided a strong technical foundation of Kathak. During that time, various creative dance-drama choreographies marked a significant place. Classical Sanskrit dramas were presented in the form of dance dramas. She performed with Krishna Kumar and Pt. Birju Maharaj in many dance dramas, such as *Malati Madhav* and *Kumar Sambhavam*, where



she played the central roles. These experiences exposed Lakhia to integrate *Figure 2 with Pt. Birju Maharaj* dance, music, poetry and dramatic narrative elements in her choreographic work.

All these experiences helped to broaden her understanding of artistic presentation and paved the way for new dimensions in Kathak through her own artistic vision. Through her innovative choreography, progressive teaching methods, and contemporary creative vision, she brought a creative approach in the Kathak dance form. She presented several works that were completely unique and different from the mythological themes prevalent at the time, such as *Okharn*, *Setu*, *Chakshu*, *Suvarna*, *Yugal*, *Dwidha*, *Kot*, *Samanvay*, *Vivarta*, and *Atah Kim*. These productions created a new phase in the evolution of Kathak. (Sharma, 2025) Her objective was to create an environment where every individual could connect with the art form. She believed that the characters portrayed on stage, whether male or female, should appear in a natural and realistic way just like everyday life, so that the performances could become a more universal and relatable experience for audiences. She is also recognised as a pioneer of group choreography in Kathak. She took the dance form to a level beyond the traditional solo format by introducing group choreography and contemporary themes. (NCERT, 2026)

Contemporary and Abstract Dimensions in Lakhia's Choreography

Kumudini Lakhia is credited with adding contemporary storylines to the Kathak repertoire. She believed that Kathak should not remain confined to mythological and devotional themes. According to her, classical forms should evolve with time and adapt contemporary themes that were necessary to keep dance relevant to the modern audience. She often questioned the dependence of Kathak on “katha”. In her view, dance does not always have to rely on a story; it is an art that can stand on its own. She also believed that abstract themes allow the audience to interpret their emotions subjectively instead of imposing a fixed meaning upon them. In an interview, Utpal K. Banerjee says that “she chose Kathak themes without Krishna by opting for topics that responded to current time and affairs, leaving the Puranic, devotional and ‘Upanishadik’ ideas out” (Raja Radha Reddy, 2020).

Dhabkar is one of her abstract choreographies, which premiered in 1973. *Dhabkar* means heartbeat or pulsation; this production was centered on the idea of rhythm as the essential pulse of life, movement and human existence. She explained that she wanted to “search for the pulse of Kathak” (Lakhia, 2002). This idea led her to explore the rhythmic and movement patterns of Kathak dance by reorganizing them through new choreographic structures. She started experimenting with movement. Instead of confining a single movement to one dancer, Lakhia transferred this movement from one dancer to another by giving an impression of continuity. In other instances, the movement pattern was also broken and distributed among the dancers. These experiments with movement were extended through the use of rhythm and tempo. In the conventional presentation of Kathak, the movement of the dancers follows the tempo of the music. However, she experimented by creating an opposition between the tempo of the music and the movement of the dancers. Whenever the music tempo was high, the dancers performed more slowly, and vice versa. The relationship between auditory rhythm and visual movement became an important part of choreography. She also added a new texture to the rhythm by dividing a technical piece of Kathak, i.e., Tihai, among three dancers (Saxena, 2017). Thus, the Tihai, traditionally performed by an individual dancer, became part of a group choreographic structure. In addition to this, her experimentation with movement and rhythms led to changes in how she used space and formations within her groups. The dancers had the liberty to dance together as one group or individually, as well as occupy the whole stage. Space thus gained significance in her choreography.

Dhabkar brings about a new interpretation of Lakhia’s choreography. She does not substitute the fundamental techniques of Kathak. Instead, she uses the Kathak technique and rhythms in a new context by using group movements, fragmented movements, tempo, and space. Thus, “the pulse of Kathak” resulted in discovering a new idea within the traditional genre. The other production includes *Duvidha* in 1978. *Duvidha*, or ‘Conflict’, reflects the inner conflicts experienced by a middle-class woman balancing her personal aspirations along with the expectations of society. According to her, *Duvidha* examined “The plight of a middleclass woman who is chained to the traditions of Indian life and domestic work”. To show the contrast between her aspiration and domestic reality, she used a frame to create a visual representation of her conflict, domestic duty and inner turmoil. Inside the frame, she showcased the social restrictions of the woman, and moving out of the frame showed the extended space of her imagination, freedom and desire to lead a completely different life. This experiment of using a frame as an abstract symbol was also a very new and innovative approach in Kathak choreography.

She made use of various musical notes to bring out the distinction between the reality outside and the imagination inside the woman’s mind. The woman’s domestic life is accompanied by the sad sarod alaap, but the emotional disturbance and restlessness in her heart are brought out through the use of electronic music (Arora, 2017). The more her imagination grew, the more her movement became modern and contemporary, not just limited to traditional Kathak dance (Trivedi, 2015). Then the sudden appearance of someone knocking on the door shatters her imagination to pieces and brings her back to reality; her husband appears, bringing her back to the usual domestic life. By combining music, movement, and prop, Kumudini Lakhia has brought out the concept of *Duvidha*, the internal struggle in the woman’s mind.

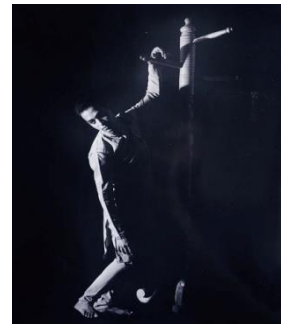
Another remarkable production was *Atah Kim*, meaning “What now?” or “Where do I go from here?” It was choreographed in 1981, with music by Atul Desai. The concept poses a philosophical question: what comes next? There is no traditional structure of a beginning–middle–end plotline. Instead, it was presented in a series of situations and relationships by using movement and space. In her choreography, space is not only a place where dancers perform but an active dramatic element. One of the most interesting visual elements used is a frame. As stated by the critic Sunil Kothari, “the frame acted as a barrier, signifying the barrier which could not be crossed.” This created a powerful image of



contrast between a group of dancers placed outside the frame and one dancer inside the frame. When the dancer tried to cross the frame, she

was stopped by the group, thereby expressing the conflict of an individual challenging the boundary. This whole choreographic scenario was further enhanced through the electronic music by Atul Desai used during the opposition scenes. The production was a major contribution to the new avenues of Indian dance (Kothari, 2018).

Another work, *The Coat*, was based on Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena’s Hindi poem *Khuntiyon Par Tange Log*, thereby bringing a contemporary literary text into the vocabulary of Kathak (Kothari, 2017). Leela Venkataraman described it as Lakhia’s first group production performed in the Sangeet Natak Akademi-sponsored New Dance Festival (Venkataraman, 2025). In it, the central character is portrayed by the Poet, who compares himself with a coat hanging from a peg. She further added a dimension to this production by introducing a ‘weaver’ of the coat who becomes the alternate ego of the coat (Saxena, 2018, p. 59).



Some other productions like *Yugal*, *Sambhav*, *Samanvaya*, *Golden Chains*, *Vivarta* are also considered important examples of abstract and

contemporary experimentation in Kathak. In these productions, she visualized the entire stage as an active choreographic space filled with dancers. She once expressed this vision at the Natakala Conference in 2001: “Solo Kathak had developed too much gimmickry”, “The way it was presented needed a lot of consideration... In my vision, I saw the entire stage filled with dancers, patterns of colours, music which had musicality and not just an accompanying element” (Krishna Gana Sabha, 2024). She started to learn about space in physics, potency and virtual space to understand how dance happens in space and applied it to her choreographies. Instead of restricting Kathak to one performer, she used multiple dancers. This shift from solo to group performance also influenced the technical vocabulary of Kathak.

Technical Innovations in Kathak:

While remaining deeply rooted in the traditional vocabulary of Kathak, she introduced innovative approaches that expanded the choreographic possibilities in the techniques of Kathak dance. As in ‘*Dhabkar*’ she divided ‘*Tihai*’ among three dancers, adding a new dimension to the production. In an interview with Narthaki, Kumudini Lakhia talks about how she improvised spins by taking them all around the stage which were traditionally taken at a single place. At first people criticised it by say ‘it is ballet not Kathak’ but later adapted it as a part of the



Figure 5. As Krishna

Kathak's vocabulary. She also emphasises on the use of spine in Kathak dance. As a single dancer portrays different characters he must use his spine accordingly, like while imitating masculine characters like 'Krishna', a dancer must hold his spine up pushing back his shoulders slightly(fig.5), similarly whilst portraying feminine characters like 'Radha' the shoulder goes the other way(fig.6), that helps the audience distinctly identify between a male and a female.

Kumudini Lakhia brought a significant transformation to the technical aspects of Kathak, while preserving the fundamental aspects of Kathak dance. Her productions doesn't limit to innovative techniques, storyline and choreography, she also gave equal importance to light, music and



Figure 6. As Radha

stagecraft to make the productions grand.

Innovations in Lighting, Music and Stagecraft:

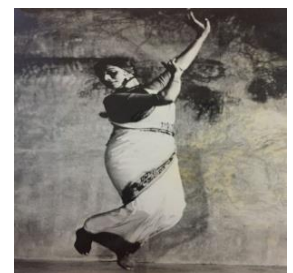
Her early exposure to global stage while touring with Ram Gopal shaped her vision, that these could enhance the visual and emotional impact of a performance. Before her interventions, these elements were generally regarded as secondary aspects of performance, the lighting was just illumination so that the dancer was seen. In an interview she said that 'when we used to dance, lighting was just illumination similar to those used in wedding mandaps so that the dancer is seen, but now we have such wonderful technology and lights that could be used in many different ways'.(EMMRC Pune: Heritage of Television Education, 2021)She treated light as an integral component of choreography rather than mere means of visibility. She carefully used the lights to create specific moods, atmosphere that complemented and enhanced the music, plot of the choreography and movements of dancers.

Apart from lights 'Kumudini Lakhia' also put a lot of thought while choosing the music for her productions. She also collaborated with a composer 'Atul Desai' to revolutionise music.

Along with the traditional music that's been going on for centuries, she also used jazz, African drum in her choreographies. She believed that people should use whatever is new in terms of lighting, costumes, music and storyline.

Minimalist Costume Aesthetics in Kathak:

Kumudini Lakhia brought significant innovation to the costume of Kathak dance by introducing simple yet functional costumes. At a time when Kathak costumes were elaborate and heavily ornamented, she redefined costume design according to the requirements of modern choreography.



Traditionally Kathak was strongly influenced by the court culture, where *Figure 7. Duvidha*

dancers commonly wore embroidered costumes, heavy jewellery and elaborate makeup but Kumudini Lakhia introduced costumes that were minimalist and suitable for group choreography. In the 1971 she presented 'Duvidha' wearing a simple saree (fig.7). She often preferred simple saree, flowing fabric and minimally ornamented attire that would not restrict a dancer's movements. Since she pioneered group presentation in Kathak, she designed costumes that could create visual harmony among



multiple dancers on stage. In her production “*Shravana*” (1992) dancers *Figure 8. Shravan (1992)* only wore white costumes without dupatta (fig.8). She also designed

costumes by using different shades of the same colour creating a pattern. In ‘*Dhabkar*’ all the dancers are seen wearing different shades of brown (fig.9). In an interview with Priya Kanungo Kumudini Lakhia states that ‘I see that the colours don’t clash and sometimes they come together in a way that they themselves create a design. Rather than the dancers, the colours make a design.’ (Doordarshan National, 2014)

Kumudini Lakhia modernised the costume of Kathak dance. She designed simple and aesthetic costumes that not only uplifted the beauty of the production, but also help the dancer to perform with ease. Moreover, her progressive approach also reflected in her teaching methodology.

Figure 9. Dhabkar (1978)



Kumudini Lakhia's Progressive Pedagogical Approach:

Her contribution was not just limited to thematic innovations and group choreography; she is also credited for the development of progressive teaching methods in Kathak. She was deeply devoted to teaching and believed in nurturing independent and creative dancers. She began Kathak classes in a small space within her husband’s automobile shop in Ahmedabad. Later in 1967, she founded the Kadamb Centre for Dance and Music, where for many decades she prepared a new



generation of intellectually and artistically skilled Kathak artists in

Figure 10. Kumudini Lakhia at kadamb addition to imparting traditional dance. She inspired students not merely to imitate her style but to think beyond it and develop their own creative identities. She often introduced ideas that were ahead of her time. At a time when the guru-shishya tradition was highly hierarchical and students were expected to follow instructions unquestioningly, she encouraged her disciples to ask questions freely and express their own opinions. Kumudini herself shared that she disliked blind obedience. As cited in Dunlas (2025), in an interview with *The Hindu* she said “My students should never hesitate to ask questions-that is what makes learning and teaching interesting.”

All the students trained under Kumudini Lakhia are not only practicing the traditional form of Kathak, but are also doing important work in expanding Kathak with their creative skills. Internationally renowned Kathak artists like Aditi Mangaldas, Daksha Sheth, Sandhya Desai, Maulik Shah, Ishira Parikh, Sonal Nimesh, Prashant Shah, Sanjukta Wagh, Parul Shah, and Sanjukta Sinha are disciples of Guru Kumudini Lakhia. Aditi Mangaldas states that “Though we were immersed in the rigour and vigour of Kathak training, she encouraged us to be aware and vigilant towards our societal conditioning, to remove our blinkers and build widening circles with the world outside and the world within.” (Mangaldas, 2025) Emerging as a pioneer within a patriarchal society, Kumudini Lakhia transformed the traditional image of the female artist from a passive and obedient performer into an independent and thoughtful seeker.

Legacy and Influence:

Kumudini Lakhia’s greatest legacy lies not only in her choreographies but also in the remarkable lineage of dancers she nurtured. Through the Kadamb Centre for Dance and

Music, founded in 1967 in Ahmedabad, she trained a new generation of artists who carried forward her philosophy of originality and experimentation. Among her most distinguished disciples is Aditi Mangaldas, internationally known for incorporating Kathak with contemporary, while preserving its classical foundation. Daksha Seth integrated kalaripayattu and contemporary with Kathak creating a distinct style. Maulik Shah and Ishira Parikh, founders of the Anart Foundation, have continued to promote Kumudini Lakhia's philosophies and teachings. Other notable disciples include Vaishali Trivedi, Gargi Shah, Sanjukta Sinha, Sandhya Desai, Urja Desai, Lajja Sambhavnath, Parul Shah and Prashant Shah many of whom have established successful careers as performers, choreographers and educators in India and abroad.

Her legacy was further recognised through numerous awards and honours. She was awarded for being dancer, innovative choreographer, and influential dance teacher, as well as for her contributions to the evolution of Kathak. The awards include the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1982, Padma Shri in 1987, Pandit Omkarnath Puraskar in 1990, Kalidas Samman in 2002-2003, Padma Bhushan in 2010, Sangeet Natak Akademi Tagore Ratna in 2011, Guru Gopinath Desai Natya Puraskaram in 2021, and Padma Vibhushan in 2025. These awards were an indication of the recognition of her contributions to Indian dances and performing arts.

Conclusion :

The contribution of Kumudini Lakhia to the development of Kathak is not just about innovation. It is about the way her innovative techniques have enriched the potentialities of this art form, allowing it to reach wider audiences. By using contemporary and abstract themes, developing group choreographies, exploring movement, rhythm and space, and equally focusing on music, costumes, lighting and stagecraft, Lakhia has shown that Kathak can be presented in a contemporary manner without giving up its classical roots.

Her contribution to Kathak introduced new forms of interaction between the performer and the audience. Indeed, moving beyond conventional solo performances based on mythological and devotional themes, Lakhia looked for ways of connecting with the audience by using universal human experiences. Her approach also demonstrated that the relevance of a classical art form can be sustained when it responds to changing social and artistic contexts.

In addition, her progressive teaching methods further contributed to the development of Kathak. She taught her students to ask questions, experiment and develop their own creative personalities, instead of simply following or imitating others. The careers of many of her disciples demonstrate the ongoing significance of this approach and the way in which it continues to contribute to experimentation in Kathak. Therefore, Lakhia's innovations have played an important role in the development, prominence and continuity of Kathak. These innovations created new possibilities in choreography and presented Kathak in a new light, making the form more appealing to contemporary spectators and encouraging youth to learn the art form.

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