

Crossing Barriers: Dance Unwound - A Conversation with Sushant Gaurav

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Having witnessed a recent Kathak performance in Pune, under the aegis of the *Birju Maharaj Kathak Mahotsav*, organized by the 'Kalachhaya Sanskritik Kendra,' I was taken aback by the grace and poise of young dancer, Sushant Gaurav. For one he did the honors by performing a large part of the presentation in 'Ati Vilambit Laya' (very slow tempo), set to Raag Darbari, a rare sighting for me, one otherwise exposed to the routine craft of Kathak. His lineage, which he said, belonged to the 'Lahore Lucknow Gharana,' was a first for the local audience in Pune, Maharashtra. There were many parts in his dance which were distinct to the routine repertoire and begged discourse. Interestingly, he trained under the Lucknow Gharana and then moved on to this lesser known family tradition of 'Lahore Lucknow Gharana.' It is not ordinary for a young dancer, still finding his feet in the dance arena, to move from the comfort and tutelage of a certain dance tradition and pursue an entirely different pedagogy, in search for himself and the philosophies he stands for. In a tete-e-tete with him about the comparison between Lucknow Gharana and Lahore Lucknow Gharana, I discovered his predilections and prejudices, his composure and aesthetic, and inquired into his desire and daring to tread the path less travelled while engraving a niche for himself.

AJAY: You have trained in the Lucknow Gharana of Kathak under stalwarts like Ustad Birju Maharaj and Vidushee Mamta Maharaj. And then you moved on to the Lahore (Lahore-Lucknow) tradition of Kathak. This transition from one Gharana to another, was it done because it was something that you 'wanted to do' to 'stand apart from the milieu' or was it a 'need that you felt', because there was 'something amiss' in the kind of training that you were getting from the Lucknow Gharana?

SUSHANT: I would like to throw some light on Lahore Lucknow Gharana and its evolution before answering this question. Lahore Lucknow Gharana is actually the original Lucknow Gharana that was championed by Pt. Acchan Maharaj, father of Pt.

Birju Maharaj. He was the pioneer of this style that focusses more on 'Ati Vilambhit Laya,' with a very strong command over movements that use different levels of bending with dancing to different speeds woven together in the same compositions called *Darzedaar Bandish*. *Darzedaar Bandish* means dancing the same composition in different *Jaatis* (rhythmic tempos) eg. *Dugun*, *Tigun*, *Chaugun*, *Khand Jaati*, *Mishra Jaati*, and beyond. As the levels of composition rises with the levels of *Laya* (speed), the movements also change. The first speed is slow so it explores extreme bendings and curves more. The second level is a little above the first and it progresses on until you reach the fifth or the sixth level where one is dancing standing up straight with fast paced footwork and fast movements to arrive at the *Sam* (first beat of the rhythmic cycle). As the canvas of a painter is white in color and it does not change while the painter paints, similarly, the *Laya* is kept constant in *Vilambhit*. The dancers' poise and grace show the different speeds reflected through the body and the footwork but the *Tabla* (percussion) and *Lehra* (drone-like background score) remain constant. It's like the dancers showing their own command on different speeds and the musicians remaining constant and not guiding the dancer with changingspeeds, which is usually the norm today. As Pt. Acchan Maharaj Ji was a court performer in the court of Raza Ali Khan, the Nawab of Rampur, his style was set to the *Tehzeeb of Darbaar* (court etiquette) that is the signature of original Lucknow gharana. After the Nawabs and the courts perished, western influences of virtuosic presentation and rhythmic speed took significance. The musicians started guiding dancers with technicalities and the movements became shorter. With rhythm and speed assuming importance, the real charm of Lucknow Gharana was lost.

This original grace of Lucknow gharana was learnt by Maharaj Ghulam Hussain, who was the direct disciple of Acchan Maharaj ji. He went to Pakistan in post-partition India, and preserved the original Lucknow Gharana style of *Purana Andaz* (old

world charm) and hence called it 'Lahore Lucknow Gharana.'

As Acchan Maharaj Ji and his ancestors performed in courts of Wajid Ali Shah and other Nawaabs of Lucknow, the court had poets and singers like Jaddan Bai, Begum Akhtar, and musicians like Bismillah Khan and Allarakha Sahib performing in the courts as well. This syncretism with poetry, music, and literature gave Lucknow Gharana a "Gayaki Ang" (a musical inflection point) while maintaining extreme command over rhythm. I chose to revive the original Lucknow Gharana style of *Gayaki Ang* as it is lost to India. Hence, I chose to train in Lahore Lucknow Gharana with my Ustaad Fasih Ur Rehman Ji. I think this was needed. I have familiarized myself with Persian literature, music, and art. I felt that with the training that I had received in the Lucknow Gharana, the basic foundation was laid really well, but it felt very restrictive. There's a set pattern to Kathak, irrespective of the Gharana; he or she is dancing the same repetitive patterns. And I felt that if I'm doing a particular movement and if I'm not exploring my body, I'm not going in the space, not exploring how else it could go, like the journey of a movement, then what am I really doing? You are taught certain beats and you follow them precisely. You are not even thinking about how the same movement can also be done in other ways with different patterns. When you read poetry by different Sufi saints, like, Amir Khusrow, Siraj Aurangabadi, or when you watch paintings by Picasso, you start questioning conventional boundaries—like classical, traditional etc. Disciplinary boundaries should set you free to explore yourself. I wanted to explore my body more. And that would happen only if I got to maintaining *Vilambit* (a slow speed), which is unlike the traditional speed of Kathak, which is 'Madhya laya' (the middle speed faster than *Vilambit*). I wanted to actually explore 'Vilambit laya', which is the essence of 'Lahore Lucknow Gharana.' They have not changed that. They dance everything in the 'Vilambit Laya' and explore various speeds keeping the base *Laya* constant. It's the base, it's the canvas, and like a painter has a white canvas and you paint on that. So, the *Laya* is the canvas, it will stay still, you as a dancer have to change your *Laya*, your rhythms, your body, your body-levels to show different kinds of speeds, within that format. And I like that thought process; it was clearer, more

serene, and more austere to connect with.

AJAY: When did you first get in touch with this Gharana? Did you see something? Were you told about it? Did you read about it, something which made you want to switch over?

SUSHANT: When you are learning, I feel that there's an intellectual push from the inside, because I have academics by my side and I keep reading a lot. So, I had this intellectual push of doing something with what I have learned. Not just that I have learnt this 'Taal' or seen that 'Tukda' and I would want to go and dance it. I questioned myself. If I have learnt it, then what was it, where will it go? What will be my addition to it? I kept on exploring my body more and more and then I saw Fasihji's video online. This was in 2020. And I realized that this person is doing it, whatever I'm thinking, whatever intellectual push I'm getting, this person is already doing it. He has already used so many 'Hastaks', which have been lost now but they existed back in the days when rhythm wasn't the leading force. I wondered how the *Purana Andaz* (old style) can be so beautiful. So, that's when I texted him, and said that I want to learn. I followed him for quite some time. I think he tested the waters; he wanted to know if I have that intellectual push to get beyond what's been taught to me. And we kept on talking on phone, it was not physical training initially. We kept on discussing a lot of poetry, a lot of Persian literature, and slowly it happened. He taught me one or two pieces. I was able to do it. He saw that my body is capable of taking it and, then I started my training.

AJAY: In the dance repertoire, you see that if you are being trained in a certain Gharana, there are some kind of rules and regulations where your body is getting molded into a certain kind of response that your Guru wants to do. When you changed over, what challenges you did you face? Did you have to unlearn what you had been taught to get onto a different system or did this give you a launch to learn further?

SUSHANT: In the Lucknow Gharana, Maharajji taught us that when you are on stage you are the king, which is the leading philosophy in the form today and makes the style look extremely appealing, confident and strong at the same time. So, you

would always take that stance and confidence. And you must have seen dancers from Lucknow Gharana doing just that, with bold, confident movements. This principle changes in the old style of Lucknow Gharana that I would henceforth refer to as Lahore-Lucknow Gharana. When they are using the poetry of Sufi saints and following the principles of Hindustani classical music, the influence is apparent. These saints have always written poetry on love, feelings, and emotions. So, with this philosophy in mind, my stance changed to a soft-gentle stance. The principle that you have in your mind, determines the form you are in. I already had my 'Hastaks' and my 'Taleem', right? Only the principle changed. And, when the principle changed, everything started adapting to that. I would start thinking, okay, if I have to dance with the feeling of love, I need to have my shoulders down, my elbows submissive. I kept on changing my movements that way as I kept on understanding more with Fasihji. I am still working on it.

AJAY: You had once said that there is a huge difference between 'Taleem' (instruction) and 'Riyaz' (practice). That they are things which need not be done behind closed doors, rather they happen as one goes through life. Can you elaborate?

SUSHANT: You must have seen Birju Maharaj Ji often talk about his father. But he passed away when Maharajji was nine. If you see my Ustaads guru, he weighed almost 100 kilos, he couldn't even get up. But, how do you think these people trained? How did they shape the form? Did they get physical training? No. It's all about thought pieces; it's all about letting the person understand what the meaning behind what you are doing. And if the person has an intellectual push and has that kind of understanding, then you need to adapt yourself to spend time with your guru. With Fasihji, it's never that he would teach me physically. He would just simply say that if you are using a particular movement, think as if with your right hand you're going in the twelfth century and the left hand to today's world. Now try to connect the twelfth century with today's world. Think of the dance from then till today, what the journey would

be and this thought process would shape my movement. Okay, he would not really demonstrate much on camera; he would just sit and tell me that the movement should be like this, that this is the principle behind it. If I'm doing a 'Salaam' (bow), he would not teach me how to do it, rather encourage me to engage with the meaning. If I am giving an interview, one has a certain confidence which you can project, but in doing a 'Salaam' you are reducing that confidence, my body must show submission and gratitude. When you are throwing your hand high up with broad shoulders, and then suddenly you pull your shoulders inside, you're reducing your ego, you're falling in submission. When you think of all this, when you talk about these principles, you start exploring it and then the form comes into you. So much of it is intellectual thought process and time spending with your Guru. It is not merely physical training.

AJAY: What are the important conversations you had with your Guru, that have been useful to you? Those that have been life changing or have kind of redefined or polished what you already knew?

SUSHANT: Fasihji often says that art forms need to reflect what you are going through in your life, be it good or bad. Art forms are meant to be a form of communication. You have to respond to whatever phase of life that you are going through at that stage. If you are an emotional person, you should take up and define those aspects, if you are a happy person you should take up the happy moments or then if you have a melancholic mood, you should respond accordingly. In Kathak you don't have to do all the things- 'Amad', 'Tukde', 'Tihayi', 'Paran'. People dance all these things. But, he has always told me that search for the Sushant in Kathak. Sushant cannot dance the entire Kathak. What goes with your thoughts, what goes with your body, needs to be picked up, and then you work on that. This has been important for me, that is why I do not explore everything. I explore things as my mood goes. You see all great artists, Vidushi Girija Devi would sing Thumris well and Farida Khanum would sing Ghazals very well. And this happens later on in life when you do a lot of 'Riyaz'. But I was taught this at the start itself that you do not need to do everything; you need

to find 'yourself' in the art form. He has taught me that dance depends on mood and is not a product that you are supposed to package and display. He has also taught me that you don't need to worry about 'claps' and reactions. A Kathak dancer tells the Tabla player to play a certain 'Tukda' and the Tabla player asks him to keep the *Laya*. He or she dances and the Tablawala plays. But, in my form, I tell the musician to sing 'Raag Darbari for example. The mood will be built depending on how you sing. Depending on how the Tabla is played, the movement gets decided. So, I have placed the musicians ahead and I follow them. But in the Kathak that happens today the percussion, dance, and music are painstakingly structured to the point of being banal and predictable. In my show that day, I asked them to open the Raag Darbari to the best of their capacity. It was an impromptu mood. Set patterns have to be broken. Be it good or bad. I am not here to convince someone that I am a good dancer. I am here to give what I feel on stage or what I feel about Kathak on stage. And I think that's the very essence of it.

AJAY: You said that you allow the singers to sing and musicians to play and you follow and adjust accordingly. Do you think this requires a lot of experience, because it cannot just be the mood. You may want to find something which you want to attach to, what is been led by the musicians. So how does it work for you?

SUSHANT: See, in Kathak, how much ever you modify it, it will have a set pattern. You know how to play the 'Amad'; you know how to play the 'Paran'. But where is the balance for all this? People get stuck at this point. I know my musicians have already learnt the compositions. So, now I don't want him to restrict himself, I want him to explore. At times you have two notes which merge into each other. Like the note 'DHA' can be played as it is, but if you drag it, it also incorporate the 'SA' in the drag. So that is the conversation I need to have with my musicians. One also has to focus on the musicality. This will give my body a chance to extend, explore the space and give a meaning to the movement and also help me create the mood. And this is what I feel was lacking in what I had learnt before. I mean I was taught that this is a notation and I have to do it just that way. When every person does the same thing in the same way, the

personality of the dancer does not come out. Whether I am feeling the sensuality or am philosophic or spiritual while performing that takes me into a trance, I want the audience too to feel that emotion. I travel with the mood and do not get locked in fixed movements. I like the freedom to explore. My piece 'Salaam' (salutation) was not choreographed. It was spontaneous. My Guru tells me 'Khula Naccho', like a 'Khayal Gayaki'. Improvisation built into the vocal solo can be a viable template for creativity and improvisation for the Lahore-Lucknow Kathak artist.

If you are going with the Tabla and it gives the beat 12345 and you go and repeat 12345, I do not consider this as art. When you dance to the set beat, there is no story there. One can be in a different layer, yet every beat can match with every beat. What is art in that? I feel the story is where the cycles are and you are travelling between the beats, where your work is happening. In this pattern you have only your body and thoughts to glide. There is no hand-holding. You have to create, to fill the gaps. I like to work in the grey areas between the notes, areas which are silent, which do not determine, do not fix. That is where your personality comes out. These are the kinds of conversations I have with my Guru.

I feel that singing is a very important part of our training, to bring out the 'Gayaki Aanga' in our dance. Unfortunately, it is given a low priority in today's pedagogy. For me *Sangeet* (music) is prime, and then the rest follows. I work very closely with my vocalists. It is important for me to be able to explain which Raga I am dancing. I cannot dance if my singer is singing badly. I must know the mood created. In the performance, I danced to 'Raga Darbari'. It's a night-time Raga, sung in the coolness of twilight, when the moon is taking form. The mood is thus created for me to respond. While dancing 'Darbari', I cannot look the king in the eyes, they have to be lowered; while dancing the romantic 'Yaman', my look changes, my eyes respond accordingly. I saw this training in the Lahore Gharana, which had names such as, Bade Gulam AliKhan, Roshan Ara, and Farida Khanun.

You see Pakistan is a very small country, without the influence of Bollywood and without the influence of too many things happening. So there, Kathak and Sangeet have stayed together. My Ustaaad has seen Noor Jahan

Begum, Mehdi Hassan Saab, and Farida Khanum Sahiba. When these people talk, they all talk of those times when they would attend each other's performances- the dancers and singers. We don't really get to see such things here. Do you see any good musicians coming for a Kathak performance? Once a sitarist, whom I was learning from said that when he works with me he feels good, because he felt there was Sangeet in my Kathak, something that he never felt with other young dancers. For me the test is not when a kathak dancer calculates my beat, but I feel more gratified when a singer appreciates my dance and comments on the musicality of the performance. I am very firm in my 'Taal' do not make a mistake in the beat. In 'Ati Vilambit' I picked from 1.15 beats, which is very difficult, but I did not falter, because *Ati Vilambhit Laya* makes your command on rhythm very strong. But 'Taal' is obvious and it is certainly going to be there to make a composition into *Bandish*. I search for that which is not obvious where my skill comes to test. This requires intellect, academic interest, and an interest in history.

AJAY: Is there anything else that is very specific to the Lahore Gharana- any kind of words, specific vocabulary, which you use in Kathak?

SUSHANT: In our area 'Thaath' is about poise. Through 'Thaath Bandhana,' we have also made 'Thaath' into an 'Amad'- by moving from one place to another. For us 'Thaath Bandhana', is about creating the mood of the 'Thaath,' by first entering into the 'Thaath,' then taking control of the 'Thaath.' Finally, by getting into the feeling of the 'Thaath' and then tying it all together, we stand in the final position. Then we also show a 'Thaath' in a 'Thaath.' Moving further along, we have 'GAAT SADHANA' that deals with rhythms. Often, you see dancers do their 'Tukda' and then leave their poise and reach for the mike. But in the Lahore Gharana we never do that. We hold the stance till the end. That is a specialty. Then you have specific ways of taking the stance when you put your hand on your cheeks. This is called 'Ruksar' in stasis or 'Gat e Ruksar' in motion. It is a Persian style of walking with your hands on your cheeks. Then you have words like 'Gat-e Husna', 'Gat e Peshani' or 'Peshani Ki Thaath'. In 'Gate Peshani', where

'Peshani' is Forehead- one hand is on your hair-bun and the other on your forehead. This 'Thaath' is unique to the Lahore Gharana. And this is the sign of feminine beauty and sensuality. I have done a 'Thaath' showing the gender-binary. Using 'Tandav' (male) as opening sequence, I glide in to the 'Husna' or the 'Lasya' (feminine) after which I close the 'Thaath'.

My Ustaad always tells me about his concepts of 'Teaching', 'Taleem', 'Practice' and 'Riyaz'. Teaching is where you teach the craft of Kathak. But 'Taleem' is not merely teaching but rather is the way you conduct your life, e.g. He says to chew your food well or else you won't be able to do a certain 'Tukda'! He says to control multitasking and to do one thing at a time but do it well or else you won't be able to dance the 'Vilambit Taal'. He says to go to work this way, control your emotions that way. It is a 'Taleem' of how to live your life 'Zindagi Ki Taleem'(Life's teachings). Then, 'Practice' is the time you spend with your Guru learning the pieces and nuances of Kathak. And, 'Riyaz' is the 'Soch' (thought process) when you are on your own, with your emotional state of mind and you go through what you have learnt both in class and from life. And this is the time when all your feelings, emotions pour out in the 'Tatkar' that you are doing; you drown yourself in doing those pieces. That is 'Riyaz' and this is how it is taught to us. The 'Riyaz' is of two levels. One, that the students do and the other is the 'Ustadana Riyaz', where you do the basics in the first few hours and then move to the complexities, where each time you start from scratch. So, it becomes a revision of sorts. Mehdi Hasan would never start singing a 'Ghazal' in the first hour; he always spent three to four hours on the 'SA'.

AJAY: You have said that detachment is the best form of attachment to love. Can you elaborate?

SUSHANT: I think love and fear can't exist together. These are two very opposite emotions. I feel that way and I feel love goes very well with freedom. In dance too it can be seen. One can sense love when you come out of merely following set patterns of 12345 and my dance 'opens up'. You feel free on stage and relaxed, and it reflects

in the dance. Love is a feeling you cannot determine, it is taking you to freedom from your body and your thoughts. Whereas I think attachment restricts you, there is a fear that I want this, I want to do this, I want to show this, I want to own! Attachment is when you look at a flower and you want to pluck it and keep it in your own room. Detachment is when you look at the flower and you are sitting there all day looking at the flower, admiring it, adoring the color, see how the sunlight is falling on it, how the green leaf looks. But not loving it to possess it. And I think this is the best form of love where you don't want to own. You give that freedom.

AJAY: Now that you are an exponent of the Lahore Gharana, how does the dance community here look at you? Would they feel you are leaving established Indian traditional Gharanas to pursue one which is lesser known?

SUSHANT: People need to understand that there is nothing specific to the Lahore Gharana rather it is the most traditional and original Lucknow Gharana. Actually, this is Birju Maharaji's father's style. This is a 'Purana Andaz' of Kathak. And this is the very style in which all the great Gurus, namely, Damayanti Joshi ji, Acchan Maharaj ji danced. Maharaj Gulam Hussain, who taught Birju Maharaji's father danced this style. All these styles used to be danced in the courts of Raza Ali Khan, where Acchan Maharaj also danced. So, this is nothing foreign as if from our neighboring Pakistan. Rather, it is about bringing in or reviving your own tradition, apart from geopolitical issues. One can claim that it was lost because of the speed of life where everything works according to temporal equations and gives little scope to understand and explore oneself and the craft.

You would never see rushed movement in 'Ati Vilambit Laya.' So, I do not see it as anything foreign. It is, in fact, more Indian because Kathak today has more foreign influences. It is influenced by *Jazz* and *POP* and *Rhythm* and *Flamenco* with a lop-sided emphasis on lot of footwork. My style is very much Indian. It is very much of the Gharana. It is of the 'Purana' Lucknow Gharana.

I have pictures and a video call with Birju Maharaj where he has acknowledged that this is Acchan

Maharaj's form. It is his own father's style that used to happen in the courts or *Darbars*. Why is this concept that Urdu is a Muslim language and that doing the 'Salaam' is a Pakistani thing? Sorry, it's not that. These are our things. Amir Khusrow was an Indian poet. He has written so many Dohas on Rama. He has used Krishna in his Dohas. People in India adore him. They go to his 'Mazar' here. So, it is wrong to say that 'Urdu' is his, 'Sher-o-Shayari' is his, and 'Salaam' is his. This was made much later. Khusrow was never political minded. Lata Mangeshkar, Farida Khanum, and Kishori Amonkar never stopped talking to each other. Mehdi Hassan was from Rajasthan. He stayed in Pakistan and sang 'Kesariya Balam.' Did you see Farida Khanum wear anything else but a saree? They said they are from Bharat; they are from Hindustan. They said their 'Parampara' had taught them this. Come what may, they will never wear anything but a saree. Even today they wear a saree, don bangles, put on a bindi, which at one time was very difficult politically. There is no politics in art, in that sense. These are all created by others, not artistes.

AJAY: You have been dancing for about three years in the Lahore Gharana with its distinctive style, and performed extensively. How has your dance been perceived by the audiences?

SUSHANT: Very well. I performed in Kolkata and received a standing ovation. Everybody appreciated that there was stability, speed, grace, 'Chakkars' etc. Wherever I have performed, the response has been overwhelming. What I liked about my Pune show is that, not only the artistic community but even the general audience came up and appreciated my work. That is very rewarding for me. It meant that my work had reached out to a common person, to non-artistes. This is the real test. My dance felt different to the lighting technician, to the musicians, and to the organizers. Some said it was like a painting to them. In the hindsight a few seniors, teachers, are restrictive in their thought process. They do not look at dance from an innocent stance, open mind. They look at the form in their own technique. It is like 'one size fits all.' You go to any place; you would see the same thing. So, they have the spectrum, if you fit in it then it is working. Like in Pune if you start with a 'Ganesh Vandana' and then go on to do a 'Kavitt', then you are on the right track. But, if you enter with an 'Ati Vilambit Laya', do a

'Salaam', bend down, and then instantly eyebrows are raised. They need to free their mind and look at it from an innocent angle. It has nothing to do with the art, just to do with the cliques formed with the styles of dancing that each group follows and the comfort zone to not let the whip go in others hands.

I also miss the mingling of the arts. There is an absence of the togetherness of music with dance. I yearn for musicians to come for a Kathak performance and vice versa. A music concert hardly has a Kathak dance and Kathak festivals hardly invite musicians. This is the drawback. Years of practice can make you dance to perfection on stage, something that one will eventually achieve. But I think it is important to break stereotypes, move away from set patterns, feel the freedom to explore and navigate the 'grey areas', not to fear to get your ideas to work on. Show what you feel, do not decide for yourself what is good and what is bad. Let the viewer decide what he likes or otherwise.

AJAY: You mention that you are now working with 'Ghazals'. Also, that you are been trained in the 'Baithaki' (Sitting) style of doing Kathak. Can you explain?

SUSHANT: Because of the absence of musicality, I feel 'Taal' has become central to Kathak. There is reduced influence of music. I have not seen much of 'Ghazals' been used in Kathak. Some parts or a few lines are used. But 'Thumri' had found its place in Kathak. I heard Ali Sethi once say that the 'Ghazal' is an emotional response, which is relevant in every century. I mean one could identify with an old 'Ghazal' even today. It can never grow old; it is always very contemporary. Also, the courtesans would dance to the 'Thumri' outside the darbars. They sat down and danced in 'Baithak' style. And their movements were invariably very feminine. I wondered how a 'man' would do it. I wanted to explore that element. It would look strange if he did the feminine gestures, then how would he show his emotions? A man can actually sit and dance because this is what he goes through in life. He goes through life, experiences mothers love, feelings, relationships etc. So much has been written about

it by Mehdi Hassan Saab, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and others. So, if not the feminine movements, how can men express these emotions. I realized men can dance to the 'Ghazal', which is good material for men. Because you have lived the written text as a father, a husband, a friend, a lover, a brother etc. There are so many compositions written about these relations. Here we can also show grace in masculinity. It gives an entirely different perspective to the dance. I am not claiming to be a pioneer in the 'Baithaki Andaz'. It has been done by Shambu Maharaj, Lacchu Maharaj, Birju Maharaj. I am now trying to pick up an intellectual idea has come, make transparent the thought process through my own communication. I will respond to what the singer is singing through my feelings. Who is right there in the 'Ghazal?' I want to find Sushant in the 'Baithaki!'

AJAY: When you are dancing to a 'Ghazal,' the temptation is to dance to the words, but do you want to dance to the emotional experience?

SUSHANT: Responding to words is the 'Thumri' style. That is why I say the 'Ghazal' is best suited for the male presentations. This is totally my opinion as I felt in my experience.

AJAY: I am aware that your Guru Fasih Ur Rehman Ji resides in London and you are based in Delhi. You meet for a month in Nepal, which is convenient for both. What do you do when you meet your Guru for a month like this? Is it a time to teach new things or is it time to correct the old things?

SUSHANT: I have my strong foundations laid with Mamta Ji and Maharaj ji. Their teachings have been extremely instrumental in developing the basics of Kathak and the ability to create my own sense of Laya-Taal-Ang (tempo-rhythm-control). So Fasih Ji and I connect over calls to discuss what we are going to work upon. We decide the technical pieces that I have to learn and basic Riyaz is the most important part anyway. It is a time to first transform movements that I already know to reflect the philosophies that he teaches. Learning the technique is a second step. I am a dancer; I understand what the movement is; but what should be the proportion in the movement? I can

only understand that when I meet him physically. This is also the time to understand how to do 'Riyaz'. I have spoken of it earlier. I have also learnt the technique of 'Khada Riyaz'. Here there is no aesthetic. It is labor intensive working on the craft and technique. Like doing 'Riyaz' in the raw form.

AJAY: Do you also visit other spaces of art on a regular basis?

SUSHANT: I feel it is very important for us to explore other art forms and specifically music. I go for music concerts and I have more friends among musicians than dancers. I read a lot of literature, mainly Urdu literature and some English literature. I am also fascinated by architecture as many of our dance movements and 'Hastaks' align with forms, shapes, structures, which are architectural constructs, like doors, windows, minarets, tombs etc. Unfortunately, dance has become very rhythmic. If you are unable to leave the 'Obvious' you will not be able to see the abstract. Then there will be no creativity. One has to think and question. These are times of technological advancements, such as robots which can be created on computers. But robots cannot bring in emotions. So, there is loss of 'Ruhaniyat'. I am aiming to bring that back.

AJAY: Do you introspect?

SUSHANT: I think I need to convince people, dancers and more so musicians, and talk about the freedom to express, to open themselves more and to accept the raw form of Kathak. Secondly, I think, I need to work on finding my balance, in what should be the proportion of everything, the proportion of dancing to 'Taal' and dancing to 'Khayal'. I am still working on how should my performances flow?; how much should be done? How do I gauge the proportion? I would really urge dancers to actually get out of these rhythmic patterns, what a robot can easily do and get in introspective emotions and feelings of the 'Zindagi' that they have lived. And that will make it individual and personified.

AJAY: How do you think you could train the audience to see work? Should they be shown what they like to see or should they also be challenged to develop their sensitivity and sensibilities?

SUSHANT: This is a question which has been on my mind for long. Often, I do not do much talking but do the 'Tukdas'. I think if I explain a bit and interject that during the pieces, it might be easier for people to connect beyond the aesthetics. For example, I danced the 'Yaar-e-man...'. But no one knows the 'Yaar-e-man...'... as a composition. It can bring tears to one's eyes. Workshops, lecture-demonstrations, outreach programmes, and intimate space-programming could help to train audiences to see beyond the obvious. It will also trigger people to view a positive way, to read more and to explore more through an intellectual pursuit. And I think this is the purpose of art and 'obviousness is not'. I also feel young dancers must not fear to make mistakes on stage. This is their laboratory. It should be love only, and we do make mistakes in love, don't we? I had asked Maharajji and Fasihji what the difference was between them and the other dancers. And they both said they were not scared on stage and open to falter and reset. To me this is very beautiful. We need to remove the filters of judgement and appreciate that the person on stage is 'human' and not a 'robot' dancing. Mistakes are inevitable.

I am trying a different path, a path that is less travelled by my fellow artists. I am not sure of what the future holds for me and the form. But hopefully my work will speak for itself down the line!

AJAY: How many girls/ boys train under your Guruji or in this Gharana?

SUSHANT: Fasih Ji has nearly 50 students training under him currently in Barcelona and London. He usually likes to create solo dancers and explore each one's individualities. A lot of students cannot be trained together hence, this number. All his students are extremely graceful dancers who were appreciated by Birju Maharaj Ji upon his visit to Barcelona for the Hemantika festival. He keeps conducting workshops all across the globe which is attended by senior artists and performers. We will soon have an online workshop of his in India.

AJAY: Apart from your Guruji who else is well known exponent of this Gharana in contemporary times who are also known in India?

SUSHANT: Nahid Siddiqui and Bina Jawwad are the

stalwarts.

AJAY: In this once female dominated art form, there are now many male dancers. And some are really good. Do you feel any competition? Or feel threatened of how long you could dance?

SUSHANT: No. I think there's good balance of male and female dancers as of now. I think the focus should not be the gender, rather the quality. Honestly, we do not have many dancers who could hold the stage as soloists and perform for an hour or more. That kind of training has vanished. We see group compositions, duets, trios, productions but the solo recital that is the soul of Kathak is vanishing.

I do not feel any competition at all. I have extreme faith in my Taleem that I have received from such great Ustaads and my own academic self is used to doing a lot of research and the combination of these two is highly potent. I am trying to create my own path and I think of myself as my strongest competition. Every other concert has to be an upgrade from where I was previously. That is how I see it.

It is all about the strength to do more and more Riyaz and keep learning from your Guru. It is not about five years of success or ten years of name in the classical field. It takes half the age to establish oneself and the other half goes in creating work and teaching. I am not in any hurry.

AJAY: Do you think there have been instances of partiality of not choosing your Gharana over some other for an invite/ competition?

SUSHANT: No. I have received immense appreciation from the organizers and the audience wherever I have performed.

AJAY: On a similar note, patronage is a major issue, along with the right kind of exposure. How do you look at this personally?

SUSHANT: If we look at history, we have always had patronage problem with classical arts, be it singing dancing or poetry. This is exactly what

Amir Khusrow or Mirza Ghalib or Begum Akhtar or Bade Ghulam Aliu Saab must have gone through in their own ways. It was never easy. It was not easy for Maharaj Ghulam Hussain, to go to Pakistan post partition and establish an art form that was considered Hindu in a country with such high religious sentiment back then. I remember these people whenever I think about the challenges. It fills me with sense of purpose, power and excitement to keep working hard.

AJAY: I am sure there are many critics, both junior dancers and stalwarts, of this 'Ati Vilambit' style of dance. Being a young dancer how do you face it or engage with it or negotiate?

SUSHANT: There are hardly any dancers who are working on Ati Vilambhit laya and the Purana Andaz of Kathak. Honestly, it requires a lot of patience and strong Taleem to be able to glide through such difficult Laya. Also, the duration of the events have shrunk to fifteen to twenty minutes from solos that used to happen for two to three hours. That is also a very significant factor. I must also say that Gurus and people appreciate that I am working towards preserving the original Lucknow Gharana Kathak which is nearly extinct and needs to be brought in back to its old charm. I am saying this based on reactions of Ustaads like Saswati Sen Ji, Mamta Maharaj Ji, Manjushree Chatterjee, Anindo Chatterjee and many such stalwarts who have encouraged me to keep going. As we talk about critics, I think they signal growth. They highlight areas which need to be perfected and worked upon and I take it as a challenge and an avenue to look forward into my work. Adding to this, all great people who could make a mark in this field have been fearless to present their thought process through their form. That is what is appreciated in the long run as you see in the example of Sitara Devi Ji.

AJAY: This is a lesser known Gharana to the regular repertoire seen in India. Though you have explained its lineage earlier, that it was and is very much Indian, still a feeling that this is from across the border, is bound to crop up. How do you look at it? Will you feel intimidated? Would your career be affected?

SUSHANT: As I said earlier that organizers, Gurus and Fellow artists have always encouraged me to keep going and that is how I have been able to grow from a mere Kathak dancer to a soloist. It is important for them to understand that Pakistan was formed in 1947 but this art form is ancient. Lucknow Gharana's old form was developed in the courts of Nawabs like Wajid Ali Shah. I do not feel intimidated by this. Also, my Ustaaad learnt in Pakistan but since the past twenty-five years has been living in London and working globally. Music and art knows no borders. I have the support of Birju Maharaj Ji's family who acknowledge the style to be the original Lucknow Gharana Style. With this support and my Riyaz, this will keep growing. I am very positive.

AJAY: Will you need to make extra efforts to be invited to Indian stages to perform the Lahore Lucknow Gharana?

SUSHANT: Well! To be a soloist is anyway too much effort. I have already performed in six major festivals of India and all those festivals had invited me looking at my work. I think that is commendable growth for me. Of course some eyebrows will always be raised, irrespective of gharana or style. But, the balance lies in looking at the brighter side that musicians and non-artists are loving the style. This is important to me. I would just need more Riyaz and more work on my form to be invited to perform in major festivals.

AJAY: Your Guruji had to face many hurdles to establish himself in the patriarchal and political scenario in Pakistan and moved on abroad. Will this affect your career presenting this Gharana? Your future in this form?

SUSHANT: That time was completely different. It was the era of Zia Ul Haq's rule and his hegemony. Things have never been like that after his era ended. India is completely different in those terms. We are way ahead and developed with established avenues of arts and opportunities. I told you that I have support of most gurus. They have stood up on stage and talked good about my work. Fasih Ji had a totally different journey where he was caught up in Pakistan in that era where art was banned. He then moved to London and attained British citizenship and worked in England. He also learnt with Kumudini Lakhia ji for some time and he was immensely praised by Pt. Birju Maharaj ji.

Once at Hemantika festival, Maharaj ji sat on the stage while Fasih ji performed his solos as Maharaj ji wanted to see him very closely to look at how he moves and uses his body. All of this culminates to a good future for me, I suppose!

[An excerpt of Sushant Gaurav's performance.](#)



Video Still of Performance by Sushant Gaurav