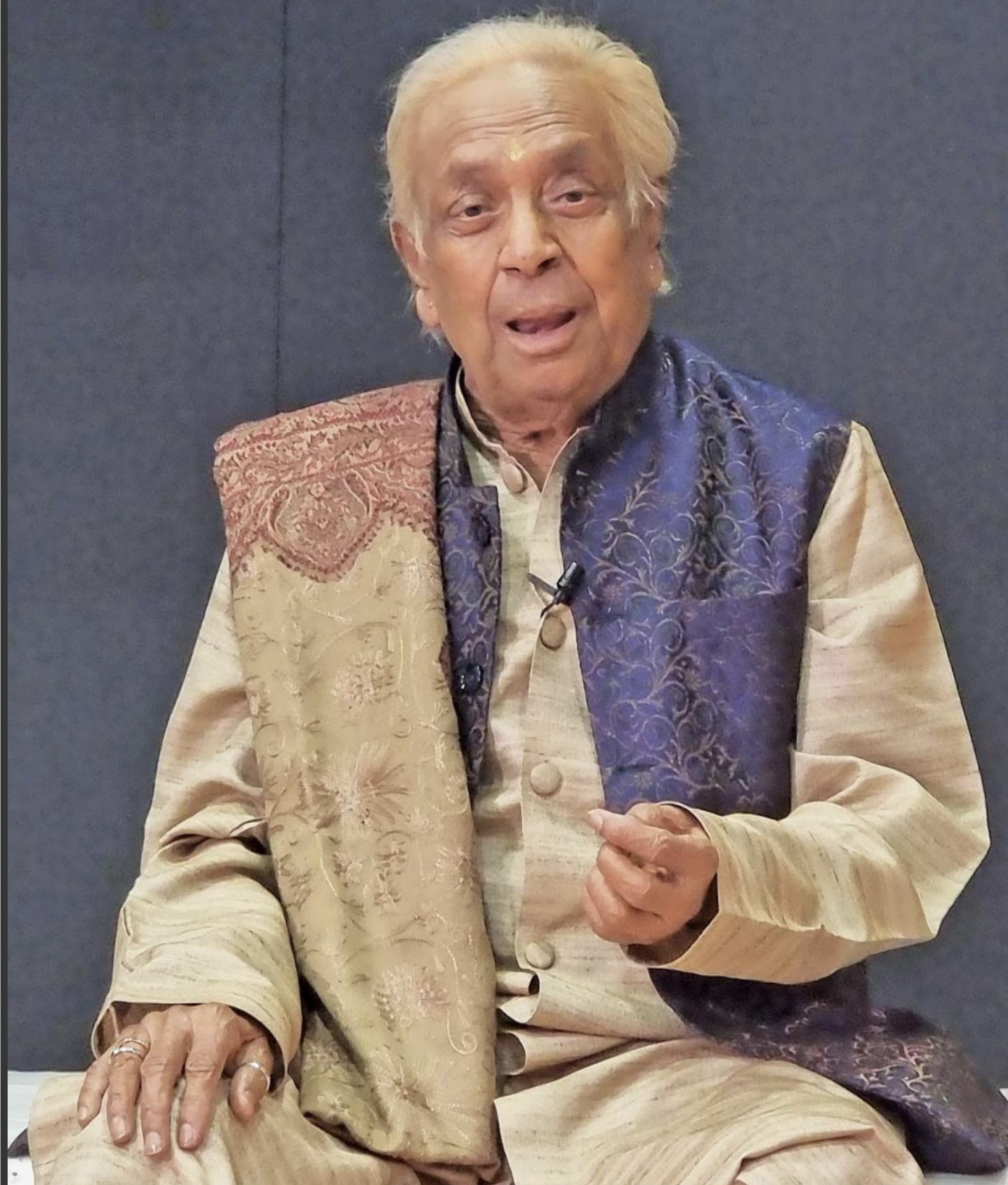


Q&A





# LEGACY ACROSS GENERATIONS



*Kathak exponent **PANDIT BIRJU MAHARAJ** has tapped into technology to teach the nuances, elements and evolution of the dance tradition, says **SAIMI SATTAR***

**THE** dance form of kathak and the person of Pandit Birju Maharaj are synonymous with each other. An exponent of the Lucknow Kalka-Bindadin *gharana* of kathak in India, he is a descendant of the Maharaj family of dancers, which includes his two uncles, Shambhu and Lachhu Maharaj as well as his father and guru, Acchan Maharaj. He is also a vocalist in Hindustani classical music.

After working along with his uncle, Shambhu Maharaj at Bhartiya Kala Kendra, later the Kathak

Kendra, he opened his own dance school, Kalashram in Delhi.

Recently, three generations — Pandit Birju Maharaj, Jain Kishan Maharaj (son), Deepak Maharaj (son), Mamta Maharaj (daughter) and Rajini Maharaj (granddaughter) — came together to perform kathak along with tabla and harmonium on a live YouTube interactive programme across India. Students from across the country joined to be a part of this programme.





***How have performing arts changed during the pandemic?***

Performing arts are one of the biggest sectors to be hit by Covid 19. Concerts of dance and music are dependent on gatherings of people in public places. With lockdowns in place and a restriction on the number of people gathering at venues, this segment has faced a major setback. Artistes have suffered a lot during the pandemic as their livelihoods have been impacted by the complete suspension of concerts.

***The guru-shishya tradition and the devotion to art... Is that tough to find in today's time?***

Yes, it is tough. In our time, guru-shishya parampara was the only way to learn art forms. Sadhna, single-minded and focussed devotion to the art form, and the guru were the hallmarks of this tradition. Today, things are more modernised and people do not have the time to do seven-eight hours of riyaz. Earning a livelihood, through art, is a bigger focus than learning the art form itself. That changes everything, including the kind of time artistes devote to learning and spending time with the guru.

***You've been performing for decades and teaching since 13... What are the changes that you've witnessed?***

Besides what I have mentioned above, everything is now instant. As a result, artistes also look at instant gratification

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and success. We waited years to get our due and to reach our goals. Today there is also more pressure due to social media and the need to stay relevant in a cluttered scenario.

***You've been a part of two films Shatranj ke Khiladi and, more recently, Devdas... Would you say popular culture can increase the outreach of classical arts?***

Yes! Definitely. Bollywood is the biggest canvas in India and performing arts —such as classical dance forms and music and folk forms — tend to reach a much wider audience if showcased in movies.

***Your message for people who want to pursue classical arts and do not have a background in it?***

It is a long journey and one that requires steadfast devotion, respect and passion. It is not for the faint-hearted or those who are in a hurry to become stars. But once you are into a classical art form, be it dance or music, you will be hooked forever. It is the most relaxing thing in life and can be extremely satisfying to pursue just an art irrespective of success or failure.

***How are your three generations coming together to guide new generations in cultural dance?***

Our *gharana* has always been involved in passing on the tradition and the *taleem* (education) we learnt from our predecessors. That is the beauty of art. It spreads and becomes bigger and immortal through sharing. Even our younger generations have disciples to whom they pass on their knowledge and art to. My children, nephew and grandchildren are all dedicated to passing on the art form to future generations.

***How has Routes2Roots brought your three generations together to guide students across India?***

The organisation has been doing great work in introducing the children of India to Indian classical art forms, be it dance, music, theatre, yoga... I was delighted when they came up with the idea of presenting three generations of our *gharana* to students to educate them on the



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nuances and elements of our tradition and how it has evolved with generations. Deepak, Ragini and I had a wonderful experience conducting this special masterclass online. Although I had my apprehensions about online teaching five years ago when they were starting Virsa, I overcame those when I saw how effective their software has been in conducting two-way classes. It almost makes you forget you are in a virtual class, with children responding to you in real-time and following your instructions. And one cannot deny the massive numbers that can be reached simultaneously through the online platform. It's a great initiative and I am thankful to them for inviting me.