



Title of the article: Sufism and Kathak: Untangling a Misunderstood Phrase

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Abstract.

The term Sufi Kathak has gained popularity in recent years, especially on social media, but it is historically and culturally misleading. This article challenges the validity of the label, unpacking why Kathak and Sufi traditions, while both rich and profound, arise from distinct aesthetic, historical, and spiritual lineages. Drawing from dance history, religious context, and performance practice, it argues that merging them into a single term distorts both forms. The piece invites readers to reflect on cultural accuracy, artistic integrity, and informed terminology.

Biography

Masoom Parmar is a multidisciplinary artist, curator, creative producer, and educator. Their practice blends dance, ethnography, and literature, rooted in traditional Indic temple and court dances.

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Figure 1. Dancing Whirling Dervish on Pebbles and Boat on Lake at Dusk, Nilüfer, Bursa, Turkey, June 20, 2021. Image by Leo Arslan.

Over the past decade, a phrase has become fashionable in performance listings, festival brochures, and even workshop titles: “Sufi Kathak.”

The words are seductive. They conjure an image of graceful spins and percussive footwork entwined with mystical poetry and the devotional fervour of Sufism. They promise audiences the best of both worlds — the depth of spiritual tradition and the virtuosity of classical dance.

Journal of Emerging Dance Scholarship © Masoom Parmar

But the truth is simpler, and perhaps less glamorous: there is no such form as “Sufi Kathak.”

This is not to say that Kathak cannot draw from Sufi poetry or music. It can, and often does, — with stunning results. But calling this thematic combination a new form distorts the history of both traditions.

To understand why, we must first separate the two strands of this hybridised label and understand each on its own terms.

Kathak is one of the eight recognised classical dance forms of India. Its name comes from the Sanskrit *kathā* (story) and *kathākār* (storyteller). In its earliest form, Kathak was a devotional art, used in temples of North India to narrate stories from the *Ramayān*, *Mahābhārāt*, and the *Bhagvat Purān*. Dancer-storytellers used gesture (*mudrā*), expression (*abhinay*), and rhythmic footwork (*tatkār*) to embody divine narratives. From the 16th century onwards, Kathak developed in the courts of Mughal and regional rulers. Persian poetry, music, and aesthetics entered the repertoire. The form became more secular, incorporating *nritta* (pure dance) and stylised *nritya* (expressive storytelling). The signature spins (*chakkars*), intricate rhythmic cycles (*taal*), and

improvisational skill we see today were refined in this era.

Despite these changes, Kathak has always remained a movement language — a codified grammar of steps, rhythms, and gestures. It is not a belief system or a philosophy, but an art form that can host many different themes and narratives.

Sufism (*tasawwuf*) is the mystical dimension of Islam. While Islamic law (*shariā*) governs outward practice, Sufism is concerned with the inner journey (*tariqā*) — the transformation of the heart through love, remembrance, and surrender to God. Sufis believe that divine truth (*haqeeqa*) is not reached merely through intellectual study or ritual compliance, but through direct experience of God. This path often involves:

- **Remembrance (*zikr*):** repeating divine names to still the mind.
- **Samā:** listening to spiritually charged poetry and music.
- **Service (*khidmat*):** acts of compassion and humility.
- **Symbolic ritual:** such as the Mevlevi dervishes' whirling, representing spiritual ascent.

Sufism has produced some of the world's most beloved poetry — in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, and other languages — from masters like Rumi, Amir Khusrau, Bulleh

Shah, and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. These verses, often called *kalām*, express the longing for union with the Divine, the annihilation of the self (*fanā*), and the intoxication of divine love (*ishq-e-haqeeqi*).

Kathak and Sufism inhabit different worlds: one is a performing art, the other a spiritual discipline. But they can, and often do, intersect artistically.

A Kathak dancer might interpret a Sufi poem in movement — embodying metaphors of longing, surrender, and divine union. The music might be a *qawwālī* or a *naat*. The abhinaya might draw from the imagery of the tavern, the cupbearer, or the moonlit night, all common Sufi symbols.

But this is still Kathak. The form's grammar — its *tatkār*, *chakkars*, *tihāī*, *paran*, *gat*, and *abhinay* — remains unchanged. What shifts is the theme.

In the same way that Bharatanatyam performed to Christian hymns remains Bharatanatyam, or Odissi interpreting Japanese haiku remains Odissi, Kathak performed to Sufi verse remains Kathak. The adjective “Sufi” here describes the source material, not the dance form.

The Problem with “Sufi Kathak”

The popularity of the phrase Sufi Kathak is easy to understand — it is short, appealing, and exotic to the uninitiated. But its problems run deeper than a simple misnomer.

1. Historical Inaccuracy

There has never been a codified form in which Kathak was developed, practised, or transmitted as a formal part of Sufi ritual or philosophy. While Kathak has historically incorporated Persian and Central Asian influences, it did so through courtly patronage, not Sufi orders. To suggest that Sufi Kathak has an established lineage is to rewrite history without evidence.

2. **Philosophical Confusion**

Sufism is not a performance tradition. Its relationship to music and poetry is functional — they are tools for inner transformation, not ends in themselves. Kathak, by contrast, is a performance art. Collapsing the two risks implying that dancing Kathak is itself a recognised Sufi practice, which is not the case.

3. **Cultural Flattening**

The term “Sufi Kathak” reduces both traditions to surface aesthetics: Sufism becomes “whirling and poetry”; Kathak becomes “spins and hand gestures.” In reality, both carry deep systems of knowledge, discipline, and context that are obscured when merged into a marketing label.

4. **Pedagogical Impact**

For students and emerging artists, hearing the term repeatedly can create the impression that Sufi Kathak is a legitimate sub-style within Kathak. This leads to a generation of practitioners

growing up with blurred boundaries and a diluted understanding of both traditions.

5. **Commercialisation of Spirituality**

The label capitalises on Sufism’s aura of mysticism to enhance the appeal of a performance, regardless of whether the work engages with Sufi philosophy in a meaningful way. This can slide into “spiritual tourism” — consuming spiritual aesthetics without their ethical or philosophical substance.

Sufi Kathak is not just a harmless fusion term. It is a loaded label that distorts history, misinforms audiences, and risks turning both Sufism and Kathak into decorative motifs stripped of their depth.

What a Sufi Kalām Really Is

A *kalām* in Arabic literally means “speech” or “utterance.” In Islamic scholarship, *‘ilm al- kalām* refers to theological discourse — reasoned argument about the tenets of faith.

In the Sufi context, however, *kalām* refers to a poetic composition — usually in verse — that conveys mystical, devotional, or philosophical meaning, often authored by a Sufi saint or poet.

Defining features of a Sufi *kalām* typically include:

- **Central Theme of Divine Love** – The *Kalām* expresses *ishq-e-haqeeqi* (love for the Divine) rather than worldly love, often using the metaphor of a human lover yearning for the Beloved.

- **Symbolism and Allegory** – Imagery such as wine, intoxication, the tavern, or the journey is used as a metaphor for spiritual ecstasy, surrender, or the mystical path.
- **Quest for Union** – A recurring motif is the seeker’s yearning for *fanā* (annihilation of the self in God) and *baqā* (abiding in God).
- **Mystical and Ethical Guidance** – Many Kalāms guide the reader or listener toward humility, detachment from material desires, and remembrance (*zikr*) of the Divine.
- **Origin in Sufi Thought** – Authored by a recognised Sufi saint, poet, or practitioner deeply embedded in Sufi philosophy, rather than merely in the linguistic or cultural context of Islam.

What a Sufi Kalām is Not

Not every poem in Urdu, Persian, or Arabic is a Sufi kalām. For example:

- An Urdu *nazm* may be purely romantic or political.
- A Persian *qasida* might be an ode to a ruler.
- Arabic *hamd* (praise of God) or *naat* (praise of the Prophet) may be devotional but not mystical in the Sufi sense.
- Many Islamic texts are doctrinal or legal, without mystical allegory.

Mislabeling everything in these languages as “Sufi” flattens the diversity of their literary traditions and strips Sufi kalām of its unique spiritual depth.

Kathak and Sufism can converse in deeply moving ways. The *chakkar* of a Kathak dancer — though structurally different from a Mevlevi dervish’s whirl — can still evoke a turning towards the Beloved. The percussive *tatkar* can converse with the driving pulse of a *qawwālī*. Abhinaya can explore the surrender and longing central to Sufi metaphors.

But these are moments of dialogue, not evidence of a merged form. Just as two rivers may meet and mingle without losing their names, Kathak and Sufism can share space while retaining their identities.

Art flourishes when it is both imaginative and truthful. Imagination allows us to blend and experiment; truth anchors us in respect for the traditions we inherit.

Sufism and Kathak are not interchangeable. One is a spiritual path, the other a classical dance form. But when they meet — with clarity and integrity — they can illuminate each other in extraordinary ways.

Let us resist the temptation of catchy but inaccurate labels. Instead, let us frame our work in ways that honour both the mystics whose words inspire us, and the storytellers whose steps carry those words into motion.

A Glossary for Clarity

Here's a short reference guide to terms used in this discussion:

Term	Origin / Language	Meaning in Context
Kathak	Sanskrit / Hindi	North Indian classical dance form derived from temple storytelling traditions; developed in both sacred and courtly contexts.
Sufism (Tasawwuf)	Arabic	The mystical dimension of Islam, focusing on inner purification and direct experience of God.
Kalam	Arabic	Literally “speech”; in Sufi usage, a poetic composition expressing mystical themes.
Ishq-e-Haqiqi	Persian/Urdu	“Love of the Truth” — love for God as the ultimate beloved.
Fana	Arabic	Annihilation of the ego in the presence of God.
Baqa	Arabic	Subsistence in God after <i>fana</i> — living in divine presence.
Sama	Arabic	“Listening” — spiritual practice of listening to poetry and music for divine remembrance.
Zikr	Arabic	“Remembrance” — repeated chanting of divine names or phrases.
Qawwali	Arabic/Persian/Urdu	A devotional music tradition associated with Sufi gatherings.
Chakkar	Hindi/Urdu	Spin or turn in Kathak; in Sufi whirling, a meditative rotation symbolising cosmic unity.

Disclaimer: This invited piece was first on *Off Stage, On Script* on Aug 13, 2025.

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