

KATHAK LEGEND PAINTED A DIVINE ROMANCE ON STAGE

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A complete artist who lived music in its entirety, Kathak legend Pandit Birju Maharaj transcended to a heavenly stage on Monday, leaving behind a rich legacy.

Inspired by the rhythm of nature, every time he took the stage, it seemed the Almighty was dancing through him. Be it the movement of ants, a river in spate, a bird feeding its young or the Earth's motion on its axis, there was nothing that escaped the Kathak maestro's dancing eyes.

Pandit Birju Maharaj's eloquent facial expressions remained unmatched. For the Padma Vibhushan, Kathak was not limited to the *parans* and *chakkars*.

The stage was a canvas for Maharajji, as he was popularly called, where he would etch paintings of Krishna and Radha's divine romance that would dissolve in space only to be replaced by a new one.

Blessed with the gift of communication, a poetic heart, and a taste for the finer aspects of life, his magnetic personality kept both the discerning connoisseur and the layman hooked. Yet he wore fame and honour lightly, the key to his immense popularity among the lay public and his stature in the art and culture fraternity.

Like his favourite deity, he could be mischievous and philosophical simultaneously. Old-timers fondly remember his ethereal performances with Odissi legend Kelucharan Mohapatra where Maharajji would become the playful Krishna and Kelubabu would essay the coy Radha.

Trained by his father Acchan Maharaj and uncles Lachchu Maharaj and Shambhu Maharaj, the journey from Brijmohan Nath Sharma to Birju Maharaj was not easy but he relentlessly worked to refine the dance form and took it out of the narrow lanes of Aminabad to the international proscenium. His father passed away when he was just 13 and he grew up under the watchful eyes of his uncles.

He would often cycle to teach at Sangeet Bharti and perform for hours in private gatherings since Delhi was yet to get its big performance spaces.

Always humble, always positive, he would say Kathak exponents are actually *kathaakars* (storytellers) and that they should tell the tales of their times. He would find rhythm in the most mundane of things and weave it into his expansive vocabulary.

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