

The Evolution of Odissi Dance: From Temple Rituals to Modern Revival

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Abstract

Odissi dance, originating from the ancient temples of Odisha, India, has evolved from a sacred ritual performed by temple dancers (Maharis) to a renowned classical art form. This essay explores the historical progression of Odissi, highlighting key transformations, including the decline of Maharis and the emergence of Gotipuas—a class of boy dancers trained in acrobatics and religious expression. The 20th century marked a significant revival, spearheaded by figures like Kalicharan Patnaik and initiatives such as the Jayantika project, which standardized and codified the dance. Odissi's modern form integrates elements from ancient texts, temple sculptures, and regional music, characterized by its expressive storytelling (Abhinaya) and intricate movements. Today, Odissi is celebrated globally for its grace, emotional depth, and cultural richness, standing as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of this ancient dance tradition.

Keywords: Odissi dance, Gotipuas, dance evolution, Indian classical music, dance drama Odissi Dance: Evolution from Temple Rituals to Classical Art Form

The history of Odissi dance, one of India's major classical dance forms, is deeply rooted in the cultural and religious traditions of Odisha, a state on the eastern coast of India. Its origins can be traced back to the ancient temples of Odisha, particularly the Jagannath Temple in Puri, where it was performed as a form of worship by temple dancers known as Maharis. This essay delves into the transformation of Odissi from its early days as a temple ritual to its modern incarnation as a revered classical art form, highlighting key historical developments, significant figures, and the intricate techniques that define it today.

The Decline of Maharis and the Rise of Gotipuas

Odissi's history is intertwined with the socio-political changes that swept through Odisha over centuries. The Maharis were the original custodians of this sacred art form. These women dedicated their lives to serving the deity Lord Jagannath through dance, which was an integral part of temple rituals. However, the decline of the Maharis began around the 16th century, coinciding with the loss of Odisha's independence in 1568 and subsequent invasions that disrupted the region's cultural fabric.

As the Mahari tradition waned, a new class of dancers emerged: the Gotipuas. This transformation took place during the reign of the Bhoi king, Ramachandra Deva, who ruled in the late 16th century. The Gotipuas were young boys dressed as girls, trained in the art of dance and gymnastics. They came to be known as Akhada pilas, a term reflecting their rigorous training in gymnasiums known as Akhadas. These gymnastic activities were part of a broader program aimed at protecting the temple and fostering physical culture among the youth.

The rise of the Gotipuas was not just a pragmatic response to the decline of the Maharis; it was also deeply rooted in the religious movement of sakhibhava. This movement encouraged devotees to see themselves as consorts of the Lord, a sentiment that found expression in the Gotipua dance performances. These boys performed a repertoire called Bandha Nrutya, characterized by acrobatic and physically demanding exercises that could only be mastered at a young age. The texts "Abhinaya Chandrika" and "Sangita Darpana" provide detailed descriptions of Bandha Nrutya, highlighting its complexity and the twelve varieties of these acrobatic dances mentioned in the former.

Preservation Through Gotipua Tradition

The Gotipua tradition played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting the dance knowledge through generations. Many of today's renowned Odissi gurus were once Gotipua dancers. The tradition ensured a continuity of dance practices, keeping the essence of the art form alive during a period of cultural upheaval. Prominent Gotipua teachers like Basudeva Mahapatra of Khurda, Kartika Sahoo of Bhringarpur, and Somanath Mahapatra from the district of Cuttack were instrumental in maintaining this tradition. Their dedication and teaching significantly contributed to the revival and formalization of Odissi dance in the 20th century. These teachers were not only skilled dancers but also custodians of a rich heritage, passing down intricate dance techniques and styles to the next generation.

Modern Revival and Key Figures

The 20th century marked a significant period in the history of Odissi dance, characterized by a concerted effort to revive, standardize, and promote it as a classical art form. Kalicharan Patnaik emerged as a pivotal figure in this revival. In 1932, he took the initiative to present Odissi on the modern stage, introducing refinements that made the dance more accessible to contemporary audiences. Notably, he introduced female dancers to the stage, a departure from the traditional male Gotipua performers, which helped increase the popularity of Odissi.

The post-independence period in India saw a cultural renaissance, with a renewed interest in traditional arts. By the 1930s, the dance scene in Odisha aligned with this new cultural environment. The decline of Mahari naach coincided with the emergence of concert dances created in indigenous idioms, reflecting the broader context of Indian nationalism. Influenced by choreographers like Uday Shankar, an innovator in modern Indian dance, and Rukmini Devi, a pioneering figure in Bharatanatyam, dancers in Odisha began to develop a novel style for the stage.

The reconstruction and refinement of Odissi involved drawing from various sources, including ancient texts like the Natya Shastra, Abhinaya Darpana, and Abhinaya Chandrika. These texts provided the theoretical foundation for the dance, which was complemented by imagery from temple sculptures and visual art. The region's rich poetic and musical repertoires, especially the "Gita Govinda," played a crucial role in shaping the dance's expressive content.

The syncretic religious influences of Jainism, Shaivism, Shaktism, Bhakti, and the cult of Jagannath were also integral to the dance's evolution.

The Role of Jayantika Project

The late 1950s and 1960s were transformative decades for Odissi. The Jayantika project, formed by a group of gurus and scholars, aimed to standardize and codify Odissi dance. This project was instrumental in defining the dance's modern format, incorporating principles from ancient texts and traditional practices.

Key figures like Pankaj Charan Das, Kelucharan Mohapatra, Debaprasad Das, and Mayadhar Rout played pivotal roles in this endeavor.

The Jayantika project sought to align Odissi with the principles of the Natya Shastra while integrating elements from the Gotipua and Mahari traditions. This standardization involved refining the dance's technical aspects, including its movements, postures, and expressions. The project also focused on creating a standardized costume and jewelry style, contributing to the dance's cohesive aesthetic.

Characteristics and Techniques of Odissi

Odissi is renowned for its grace, emotive expressions (Bhava), and adherence to classical dance principles. It is a composite art form that integrates three main elements: Nritya (pure dance), Nritya (expressive dance), and Natya (dance drama). These elements are rooted in the guidelines provided by the Natya Shastra, an ancient Sanskrit text on performing arts.

The dance features distinct postures and movements, such as Bhumis (foot movements) and Charis (body movements), which have roots in the Mahari tradition. The Abhinaya Chandrika, a key text for Odissi, mentions various mudras (hand gestures) and pada bhedas (foot positions) that are essential to the dance. These elements contribute to Odissi's rich and expressive vocabulary of gestures and movements.

Odissi performances are characterized by their geometric symmetry and rhythmic musical resonance. The dance is performed in a series of poses called Bhangas, which involve symmetrical body bends and stances. These poses are central to the dance's aesthetic, creating a harmonious blend of lower (footwork), mid (torso), and upper (hand and head) body movements.

The Role of Abhinaya in Odissi

One of the defining features of Odissi is its emphasis on Abhinaya, or expressive dance. Abhinaya involves conveying emotions and telling stories through facial expressions, body language, and hand gestures. This aspect of the dance is deeply influenced by the rich poetic and musical traditions of Odisha, particularly the "Gita Govinda" by the poet Jayadeva. The lyrics of the "Gita Govinda" are often used in Odissi performances, allowing dancers to express devotional themes and spiritual narratives.

The Abhinaya aspect of Odissi is highly intricate, requiring dancers to master a wide range of expressions and gestures. This expressive element is what sets Odissi apart from other classical dance forms, making it a deeply emotive and engaging performance art.

Cultural Richness and Modern Adaptations

Odissi's repertoire includes various components such as invocation (Mangala Charan), pure dance (Pallavi), expressive dance (Abhinaya), dance drama (Natya), and the climax (Moksha), which symbolizes spiritual liberation. These components are performed to traditional Odissi music, which follows specific ragas (melodic frameworks) and talas (rhythmic cycles).

The dance expresses themes from Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, and other religious traditions, blending religious and cultural narratives. Odissi has also embraced modernity, with contemporary choreographers experimenting with new themes and incorporating elements from other dance forms. This adaptability has allowed Odissi to remain relevant and vibrant in the modern cultural landscape.

One notable example of Odissi's modern adaptations is its inclusion in Michael Jackson's 1991 hit single "Black or White." This collaboration highlighted Odissi's global appeal and its ability to transcend cultural boundaries.

The Impact of Odissi on the Global Stage

In the early and mid-1950s, Odissi began to gain recognition outside of Odisha, particularly through performances by dancers like Priyambada Mohanty and Sanjukta Panigrahi in cities like New Delhi and Calcutta. These performances attracted the attention of the broader dance community, many of whom had never seen the style before.

The late 1950s and 1960s saw further expansion and codification of Odissi into its modern format. Kalicharan Patnaik played a crucial role in researching Odissi's historical connections to the Natya Shastra, presenting his findings at the 1958 All India Dance Seminar in New Delhi. This seminar was a historic event for Odissi, helping to establish it as a major classical dance form.

The efforts of the Jayantika project, combined with the dedicated work of gurus and dancers, helped to elevate Odissi to its rightful place on the global stage. Today, Odissi is recognized as one of India's classical dance forms, celebrated for its grace, expressive power, and rich cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The evolution of Odissi from temple rituals to a classical art form is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of this ancient dance. From the decline of the Maharis to the rise of the Gotipuas, and through the efforts of key figures in the 20th century, Odissi has undergone a remarkable transformation. The dance form's intricate techniques, emotive expressions, and rich cultural narratives continue to captivate audiences worldwide.

Odissi is not just a dance; it is a cultural legacy that embodies the artistic, spiritual, and historical richness of Odisha. Its journey from temple rituals to the global stage reflects the dynamic interplay of tradition and modernity, making Odissi a timeless and revered art form. Today, Odissi continues to thrive, evolving with the times while staying true to its roots, ensuring that this beautiful dance form remains a vital part of India's cultural heritage.

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