



## HISTORY AND THE ANTIQUITY OF ODISSI DANCE

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### ABSTRACT :

*Dancing is one of the oldest art forms because it enables the mind to travel beyond the ordinary world and create rhythmic transactions in space that are independent of time. All societies have dance, and dance has power just like language does. Dancers use their body language—movements, gestures, and postures—to convey their emotions and ideas. It also serves as the main way that rhythm is expressed. Dancing is a purposeful activity with rhythm, culturally specific sequences, extra-ordinary motions with intrinsic beauty, and purpose. Every culture has its unique dancing styles, rhythms, and stylized methods of expressing and celebrating with the body. Throughout history, distinct dance traditions and architectural styles have coexisted in numerous regions of India. They experienced a similar narrative of origin, proliferation, fall, and resurgence over time. For Odissi, the earliest examples of Odisha's various art forms may be seen etched into the walls of the temples that served as its birthplace. These were not just places of worship; they were also collaboration hubs for musicians, dancers, sculptors, and architects striving for artistic excellence. India is among the few nations globally that offers a diverse range of classical dance styles alongside its folklore. Each classical dance style in this Indian garden is exquisite, unique, and has a unique scent. This essay is an endeavor to look into the history and antiquity of Odissi as a dance form in India.*

**KEYWORDS :** Art, Dance, Classical, Temple, Odissi & Architecture.

### INTRODUCTION

Dance is perhaps the earliest art evolved by man. Dance allows the human mind to soar beyond the regular world creating transactions of rhythms in space, transcending time. Dance, like language, is found in all societies, and dance, like language has power. In dance movements, gestures, and postures - all becomes a language, giving expression to human thoughts and feelings. It is also the primary expression of the sense of rhythm. Dance is a deliberate activity that involves purpose, rhythm, culturally patterned sequences and extra ordinary movements of aesthetic and inherent value. Every culture has its own dance forms, rhythms, and stylized ways to using the body to communicate and celebrate.

India is having many languages of dance. In a country, extraordinarily gifted in its artistic vocabulary, the dances have been articulated from all comers of the land, from all walks of life. This project has attempted to cover to some extent the history of the various styles of Indian dance forms. It gives a related account of the religious, social and political factors which influenced their growth and development, with fascinating sidelights on the etiquette and moves of Indian society. Dance history in India stretches beyond 2000 BC and has left its traces on ornamentation of architecture, which serve as living museums, that have survived through centuries. The Hindu temples not only serve as open books for learning about the history of art and architecture but also trace how dance as an art has evolved through time and its significance in the cultural traditions of the people. Historically in many parts of

India different dance traditions developed in the same way as different architectural styles. Over the years they underwent a similar discourse of creation, proliferation, decline and revival.

For Odissi, the origins are embedded in the walls of the temples that provided a place where the different art forms of Odisha originated. They were not only religious sites but also institutions where architects, dancers, sculptures and musicians worked with each other to attain perfection in their art. India is one of the few countries in the world that has a variety of classical dances forms in addition to folk dances. In this Indian garden of classical dance forms, each so beautiful, distinct and with its own special fragrance. Yet they are all united in terms of the unitary thread of spirituality and the Indian ethos even though they are separated from each other in terms of geographical boundaries that have influenced the development of regional styles of classical dances. Few also exude different ethnic origin. That is its beauty and its strength. It cannot also be ignored, the great similarity in their birth and development for each has temple association as points of origin.

Scholars of the twentieth century sought to find linkages to various elements of dance in the term Bharata, author of Natyasastra. Each of the alphabet making up the word Bharata was taken to signify 'bhava' (from bha) 'Taga' (from Ra) and 'tala' (from Ta) respectively. These three important limbs of dance are applicable to the entire panorama of classical dance forms for without them no dance can be visualized.

The various classical dances, such as Odissi, Kathak, Bharatnatyam, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Sattriya etc. are living proof of India's amazing variety in aesthetic culture. The Indian nation has itself progressed from a confluence of various historical and cultural factors. In such a scenario, it is inevitable that this becomes reflected in the classical dances of the country, which are a testimony to its treasure trove of heritage wealth. The cultural development of any region is conditioned by various geographical factors and Odisha, in that respect is no exception. The geographical situation of the land has to be considered for shaping its culture. Odisha is like a bridge between the northern and southern halves of the country where the plains of the coastal belt as well as contacts easier within the country.

Through ages, Odisha has nurtured a rich cultural heritage and has contributed significantly to the cultural development of the country.<sup>1</sup>

The classical dance as practiced in Odisha, a state on the mid-north eastern coast of India is known as Odissi. Odisha is one of the most picturesque and historically rich regions in our country, from earliest times, eminent writers, scholars, dancers, musicians and gifted artisans have given of their talents to foster and enrich Odisha's cultural traditions and they continue to day to add lustre to the renaissance of the arts of India<sup>2</sup>.

As in other part of India, dance in Odisha was also an expression of devotion for the Higher being. Hence, Dance was closely linked with religious movements. The Jainas, the Buddhists and the Hindus have all recognized dance as a ritual for worship. Various ruling dynasties have supported dance as a part of the rituals in the temple.

The notable dynasties which ruled over the territory were the Chadis or the Aira Mahameghavahana, the mathara, the Bhuma-kara, the Somavansi, the Ganga and the Surya Vansi<sup>3</sup> of all these dynasties that ruled over Odisha, the Bhaumakara rulers built Shaiva temple which have excellent examples of Lord Shiva's dance. After the Bhaumakaras came the rule of the Kesari dynasty which extended from the eighth century till the end of the eleventh century. The Kesari kings were adapt in the art of dance and music and Yajati Keshari took pride in describing himself as Nritya Kesari and Gandharva Kesari. It was during this period that there was an ascendancy of Brahmanism which in turn paved the way for the cult of Jagannath<sup>4</sup>.

The Odissi dance of Odisha is one of the oldest in India. The genesis of this dance style is clouded by legends. Since the devadasis were "servitresses of God", legendarily Odissi originated as a temple dance. The Natya sastra refers to the Odra magadhi dance style which is most probably the precursor of present day Odissi. Odissi may claim to be the earliest classical Indian dance style on the basis of archeological evidence, the most outstanding being the Rani Gumpha caves of the second century B.C. near Bhubaneswar in Odisha.

Frescoes and Friezes, those seen in the sculptures of the Ranigumpha caves, indicate the existence of a thriving temple art including dance, that was perhaps known as the Odra Magadhi style of art. The temple is the home of the architecture and sculpture. It was here that great poets presented their works for the first time. Great musicians and dancers were attached to the temples. Music and dance were presented as a part of ritual and worship.

Odissi dance, which is the typical classical dance form of Odisha, had its origin in the temples of Odisha. As the temples are the seats of cultural life in this state, the Odissi dance, the Odissi form of classical dance has been closely connected with their day-to-day activities. The rhythm, Bhangis and Mudras used in Odissi dance have a distinctive style of their own.

This living dance tradition of the area has been kept alive by the Maharis (devadasis in the temple of Jagannath at Puri) and the Gotipuas (dance of the male dancers dressed up as girls. 11th century saw the rise of Brahmanism which resulted in the pervading influence of Vaishnavism (worship of Lord Vishnu). This paved the way for the emergence and rise of the cult of Jagannath which eventually played a crucial role in the shaping of Odissi.

The seat of Jagannath on the east-coast at Puri has been the symbol of a synthesis of all that is good in every religion or culture. No wonder therefore the dance art of this part of the country should have in it the reflection of these cultures.<sup>5</sup> Odissi dance bears a close resemblance to sculpture. Dance has always been an important motif for the ornamental sculpture in Indian temples and is also indicative of the dance tradition of the time. Odisha is exceptionally rich, both in temples and in dance sculptures so much so that, it may be opined that the tradition of Odissi dance has been preserved in the temple architecture. Prevalence of dance figures in the temples also reflect the close relationship between dance and religion.<sup>6</sup>

As far as the scholars are able to glean from some of the inscription placed between 9th and 13th century A.D., the institution of Devadasis became established with the great temple building period of the Chola Kings, especially Raja Raja I in south and of Kesari kings and Choda kings of Odisha. With the close interrelation between the higher philosophies, dance and the temples which were the centres of religion as well as art and culture it was only natural that the system of having devadasis became established with the practice of consecrating dancing girls (devadasis) the tradition of dance was thus nurtured<sup>7</sup>.

With the advent of the poet, Jayadeva, in the 12th century and his literary masterpiece, Gita Govinda, Odissi reached its highest peak in aesthetic excellence and social acceptance. Eclipsed for a few years and showing signs of decline, it has with its inner resilience and fullness revived and attained its former glory, charm and luster.

In the 50's of 20th century, some of the dance gurus like Pankaj Charan Das coming from Mahari dance style and Kelucharan Mohapatra, from Gotipua style of dance form, were instrumental in rescuing it from oblivion. What they rediscovered and renewed has been taken over by several highly talented dancers who have given Odissi its rightful place among the major classical forms of India and made it a part of the international dance scene.

Kathak is the only classical dance form the entire Indo-Gangetic belt. It is rooted in brahmanical Hinduism<sup>8</sup>. Kathak, as the name suggests, is derived from the word 'Katha' (story) or Kathakar' (story teller). This art of storytelling through dancing and acting existed in India from ancient times. Kathak was prevalent among women too. References are there to talented and skilled women dancers such as Vaishalis, Amrapali, Magadha's Salvati and Padmavati all contemporaries of Buddha (6th century BC). A few centuries later Ghosha from Pataliputra followed their dance, which indicate the exalted state of dance among women of the Indo-Gangetic region.

There are references to women temple dancers called 'Kalavangti' and 'bhagtan' in the Sun temple at Multan as well as in a few temples of Benaras and Rajasthan. Kalhan's Rajatarangini and the comments of Abul Fazl form some of the major sources.

Due to the establishment of Islam as the state religion in much of northern India, there is a lack of iconographical evidence of this dance style. But there is "prolific evidence of dance and dance drama in rural and miniature painting in all parts of India."<sup>9</sup>

The mood, nature and range of the tala performed by a dancer is a pure rhythmic piece of dance. This is followed by 'gatnikas', an item that mirrors the gaits as classified in the *Natyasastra*, indicating deep knowledge of the treatise following it is the 'Gat bhava' in which a story is enacted utilizing hard gestures and the entire range of mimetic dramatic "abhinaya" capabilities, for it is performed without the familiar accompanying song. Abhinaya sequences with song accompaniment, known as thumris revolve round Radha Krishna talas or 'Ashta Nayika' or bhajans (devotional songs). The finale is usually performed with the 'tarana' that culminates in breath taking foot work. However, Kathak as a classical dance, in its present form, found its beginnings with the rise of Vaishnavism and its flowering during the Mughal rule. The home of Kathak spans a large expanse in India. Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Uttara Khand, Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Jammu & Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand.

Manipur is a small state near the Burma border encircled by lofty mountains. The people of this state trace their arts to Gandharvas, the celestial musicians, of Vedic mythology. Manipur is mentioned in the Mahabharat epic. Arjuna, the handsome Pandava prince, visited Manipur, and fell in love with princess Chitraangada, whom he married. They had a son, Babrubahana, who ruled Manipur. In later period, the Raja of Manipur traces his royal descent to Babrubahana. Manipuri dances incorporate within their fold three distinct dances streams, all mirroring the development of culture and the trajectory of faith. These are pre-vaishnav dances such as Jagoi, Lai Haraba, Khomba Thoibi, Vaishnav dances such as the various Raasa dances and the martial dances. 'Jagoi' is a ritualistic dance dedicated to Lord Shiva. 'Chingkhrol' namely dance of Usha is considered to be amongst the oldest Manipuri dances.<sup>10</sup>

The principal male and female dancers are known as Amaibas and Amaibeas or some times shortened to maibas and maibeas. Both maibas and maibeas were temple dancer. Unlike the devadasis of Odisha and southern India, women temple dancers of Manipur namely Maibeas could lead a normal married life even while sanctified as temple dancers. The maibas and maibeas are usually dressed in distinctive white costume.

Raasa dances, of post-vaishnav period, are performed carrying themes from Maha Raas, Vasanta Raas and the Kunj Raas. The Rasalila of Manipur is first presented before the Shrine of Shri Shri Govindaji Temple at Imphal in Manipur.<sup>11</sup>

The Manipuri dance repertoires are short musical compositions known as "Swarmalas", The type of music rendered is typical of the north-eastern region. Hailing from Assam, Sattriya is the latest addition to the classical dance panorama. The name is derived from the 'Sattras' (monasteries) that had ritual dancing performed by celibate priests. This ritual was later incorporated into the practices followed after the adoption of Vaishnavism in 16th century A.D. further theatrical elements were incorporated from Ankiya Nat Theatre, Ojapali traditions and Sankaradeva's 'Chinha-yatra'. The legend of Radha does not play dominant role in the traditional Ankiya Nat.<sup>12</sup> The movements employed in Sattriya are basically circular in nature with a number of leaps and jumps being frequently employed.<sup>13</sup>

During the Bhakti Movement when there was a resurgence of religious philosophy, it manifested itself not only in the poetry of the Ashtachhap poets, but also in the emergence of the Raas-Leela tradition of Vrindavan that has been nurtured carefully till today.

The twentieth century with its modern, impersonal and large auditoria equipped with the latest sound and light technologies, has influenced the presentation of the performing arts. The dance that developed in the regions of Tamil Nadu, Andhra and Karnataka was known as 'Dasiattant'. But this name was changed to "Bharat Natyam" sometime in the mid-thirties of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> In its strict adherence to the *Natyasastra*, Bharat Natyam may well claim to be the most Shastraic dance in the classical repertoire.

Between the 2nd Century B.C. and 2nd century A.D., came the *Natyasastra*, the text that is considered the dance scripture by all the dancers in the subcontinent. Still extant are two significant Tamil works of literature, *Silapadikaram* and *Manimekalai* (dated between 500 BC and 500 AD) that describe extensively various aspects of this dance style. The third major textual evidence is *Sangitasaramita*, a Sanskrit treatise from King Tulaja's time (1763-1787 AD), that detailed the practice of the *adavus* (dance steps and exercises) which are still used in today's classical Bharat Natyam.<sup>15</sup>

The Chola rulers of tenth century AD to fourth century AD specially Raja Raja -1 provided the much-needed patronage for the growth and development of the form sculptures in various temples such as the Brihadeswar a temple at Tanjavur, Gangaikonda Choliswaram temple at Cholaपुरam, Meenakhi temple at Madurai and the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram bear evidence of this<sup>16</sup>.

The reign of Raja Sarabhoji II (1798-1832 AD) was the rise of the Tanjore Quartette, four famous court musicians and dancers; Chinnayya, Ponnaiyya, Shivanandam and Vadivelu. They added vibrancy and creativity to the existing tradition of dance. They also created the repertoire: Alarippu, Jathisvaram, Sabdam, Vamam, padam, Javali and Tillana.<sup>17</sup>

Under the British rule, Bharata Natyam lost its prestige. The dancers came to be called by the derogatory term, "Nautch", and treated as prostitutes. But it was during 30s and 40s of twentieth century when the process of reform and restoration commenced the first step towards the rechristening of this dance form was taken. E.Krishna Iyer, Rukmini Devi Arundele and other enlightened members of society dedicated themselves to the task of formalization of the dance form. To Rukmini Arundele goes the credit of being the first Brahmin lady dancer hailing from a noble and enlightened family background.

At the south western tip of the south Asian peninsula, idyllic land known today as Kerala, where the legendary Parasurama (from the epic, Mahabharata) did his penance, developed Kathakali (literary story play), a very complex art, performed by the warrior caste.

Kathakali evolved during the 17th century and combined the older arts of Kudiattam or Kutiyattam, Kalarippayatt, Teyyam, and mudiyettu, that included dance movements, facial expressions, elaborate hand gestures, music, theatre and martial arts.

According to Scholars, Kudiattam (dating from 9th century AD) is probably the oldest extant form of classical aesthetic theatre in the world performed by the Chakkayars and sometimes the Nangayars, the art form was in all probability introduced by the early Aryans. The earliest written reference to this art form is in the Tamil epic, Shilapadikaram (dated between 500 BC and 500 AD).<sup>18</sup>

The second major influence in the formulation of Kathakali was the ancient martial art of Kalarippayatt. The martial form had developed by the 12th century AD and was practiced by the warrior caste the Nayars. The third influence on Kathakali was the ritual performances, Ayyappan tiyatta, Mudiyettu, and Teyyam, particularly the last two, dances of the Non-Aryan peoples.<sup>19</sup>

The dance style that evolved in the 17th century is known as Krishnattam and is still performed in Calicut (Kerala). The grueling, sophisticated training in martial arts and dance required dedication. Stamina, flexibility, and control. It is said that a Kathakali dancer finally comes into his own at the age of forty, if he begins to train at an early age. The basics require 8-10 years of dedication. Kathakali relies on an elaborate gestural language as well as facial expressions. It also relies heavily on excessive colour coded make-up, that often takes hours, to take characterize the personalities on stage.

Another dance style that originated in the luscious environs of Kerala is Mohini Attam. Mohiniattam literally means the dance performed by Lord Vishnu who had taken on the form of the enchantress Mohini in order to kill the demon Bhasmasura, who had been granted the boon of invincibility by Lord Shiva. Not surprisingly, this dance of Kerala is performed only by women<sup>20</sup>.

This art form received great patronage from the Raja of Travancore some four centuries ago. This was furthered by Maharaja Swati Tirunal in the eighteenth century. The Maharaja is accredited with the popularisation and further development in terms of text and musical compositions. The next major landmark came with the efforts of vallattol and the establishment of the Kerala Kalamandalam.

One of its characteristic features is its deceptive simplicity and the apparent 'internalisation' of movements as each movement unfolds from the centre of the body as it traverses to the periphery. In terms of technique, it seems to be inspired by 'Kalaripayattu', the martial art form of the area whereas for abhinaya (expression), it seems to draw inspiration from Koodiyattam. But the eye movements are subtle<sup>21</sup>. In the state of Andhra Pradesh, there developed an exquisite style of classical dance, the dance drama known as Kuchipudi, performed by male dancers only. Today, as the dance style has gained national recognition, many solo pieces are being performed by women.<sup>22</sup> Through these dance dramas,

the full beauty of lyric, music and dance composition are unfold to tell a story pregnant with emotional expression and high ethical intent.<sup>23</sup>

In this dance, the vehicle of expression originally was hymns that were sung, but gradually developed into dance dramas as the ultimate form of bhakti (devotion). Since the themes were from Bhagavatas, in Tamil Nadu, these dance dramas came to be known as the 'Bhagavata mela Nataka'. In Andhra Pradesh, they are known as Kuchipudi.<sup>24</sup>

Even though there are similarities between Kuchipudi and Bharatanatyam in terms of body positions and the employment of 'ardhamandali' or the half sitting position with outstretched knees, it is the mood of delineation that distinguishes the two styles. Kuchipudi is light and effervescent, bringing with it the fresh spontaneous aura of village life<sup>25</sup>.

Besides classical dances folk dances of India reflect an expression of inner joy experienced by people who express their exuberance of spirit, arising from anything that touches their day-to-day life, whether it is the pouring season, the harvests, the arrival of the monsoon, the birth of a child, wedding celebration etc. Each and every region, depending on its culture, habit and life style, has its own folklore and folk-dance music and drama, with specialty and grace, along with a set pattern of customs and make-up.

Odisha, located in the mid north-eastern coast of India has the rhythmic fury and sweet elegance of various forms and varieties of folk performing arts. Folk dance originates from and flourishes in the rich web of community living as forms of *communitas*.

The folk art of Odisha, like all folk art, originated in the life style of the people, are nourished by the generations and carried forward over time.<sup>26</sup> Though many of them have become extinct and some are languishing there are surviving expression still preserved and fostered by the reveal folk, because they are not merely sources of enjoyment alone, but are sources of all knowledge - religion, social, cultural and all that concerns, Community living some of the representative folk dances existing in Odisha are Danda Nata, Chadeya Chadeyani, Paika Nritya, Chaiti Ghoda Dance, Kela Keluni, Dalkhai, Medha Nacha, Karma Dance etc. All of them manifest different styles derived from the local traditions and the social environment.

The Tribal communities of Odisha have their dances which differ from tribe to tribe and even within a large tribe, from area to area. Most tribal dances are accompanied by appropriate song numbers and ritual performances. Most of the tribal Communities have retained the rich and varied heritage of colourful dance developed over centuries and maintained by them in a continuous tradition. To them dances and songs are part of their life and sources of enjoyment and relaxation. Although every tribe has its unique pattern of dance, there are several characteristic features which are common to all. Both men and women young and old, dance but the accompanying orchestra is usually provided by the male members.

Invariably the dancers sing to the accompaniment of music. To them dance and song are group activities forming integral part of the celebration of religious festivals, wedding and funeral and occasionally for enjoyment and relaxation. Odisha is inhabited by 62 varieties of tribal communities with distinct cultural practices. Some of the major tribal dance forms performed in Odisha are Bathudi, Oraon, Kissan, Kolha, Koya, Saora, Dharua, Desia Kondh, Dongria Kondha, Santal, Ho, Gond, Gadaba, Juang, Dhmsa etc. The dances of tribals are extremely rhythmic as well as meaningful. It is a matter of concern that, tribal dances of Odisha are gradually losing their traditional forms and slowly vanishing<sup>27</sup>.

The above brief outline on various classical dance forms of India as well as different folk and tribal dances of Odisha may provide a little bit of understanding and a refreshing way of looking at dance form of Odisha and India.

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