

## Cultural Heritage of Odissa: Challenges and Holistic Unity (With special reference to Performing Arts)

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### Abstract

*The article explores Sage Markandeya's vision of art's holistic unity, highlighting how classical Odissi art embodies this concept by integrating various forms of art like literature, visual arts, and performing arts. It discusses the emotive and lyrical nature of Odissi arts, aiming to evoke Srīngara rasa (the sentiment of love). While classical arts were traditionally for pleasing gods or royalty, folk arts belonged to tribal and rural communities. Despite efforts to create barriers between these art forms, cultural dynamics led to mutual influence, bridged by factors like Vaisnavism, the Bhagavat scripture, and Odissi dance and music.*

*The article also addresses efforts to revive Odissi music and dance, balancing tradition with innovation. It discusses the challenges faced by puritanical and maverick approaches and highlights the importance of preserving Odissi's unique identity while adapting to modern times. Furthermore, it delves into the ideological aspects of performing arts and the struggle for recognition and preservation of Odia identity. It mentions historical movements aimed at safeguarding Odia language, literature, and culture against external threats.*

*In conclusion, the article emphasizes the need for systematic research and standardized demonstrations to establish Odissi music and dance firmly within Odisha itself, rather than seeking validation from national standards. It advocates for preserving the regional identity of Odissi arts while acknowledging their universal appeal.*

**Keywords:** Sage Markandeya, Holistic unity, Odissi art, Vaisnavism, Bhagavat scripture, Tradition vs. innovation

### Introduction:

The article explores how classical Odissi art blends different art forms like literature, visual arts, and performing arts to create a unified expression. It focuses on the emotional and lyrical aspects of Odissi, aiming to evoke a sense of love. Despite historical divides between classical and folk arts, influences like Vaisnavism and the Bhagavat scripture have connected these worlds, shaping a unique cultural identity in Orissa. Efforts to revive Odissi music and dance are discussed, highlighting the importance of preserving tradition while embracing innovation.

Overall, the article emphasizes the significance of maintaining Odissi's regional identity while adapting to modern times.

### Observation/analysis:

The article delves into the intricate relationship between classical and folk arts in Odisha, focusing on how they interact and influence each other. It highlights the efforts to bridge the gap between these two worlds, with factors like Vaisnavism, the Bhagavat scripture, and Odissi dance/music playing significant roles. The piece also discusses the challenges faced by Odissi music, including attempts at revival by various groups, from traditionalists to innovators. Moreover, it explores the historical context of Odisha's cultural identity struggles, including language and literature disputes. Ultimately, it calls for a balance between tradition and innovation in preserving Odissi's unique identity and suggests focusing on strengthening Odissi within its own cultural framework rather than seeking validation from national music systems.

Sage Markandeya's holistic approach to the arts indicated that the classic concept of art always aimed at a grand unity. A unity of all kinds of arts i.e. literary, visual and performing arts. Seen in that light classical Odissi art in all its ramifications presents an ideal view of that classic unity. The sastrik performing arts of Orissa in their tenor as well as ethos go hand in hand with the sastrik medieval Odissi literature, Odissi painting as well as Odissi sculpture. All of them are highly emotive, lyrical, ornate and sensuous in nature. The aim of all the medieval arts of Orissa was to evoke *Sringararasa*. The artist also tried to attend that sense of unity and harmony at another level. The classical arts of Orissa, like Vamana, had one foot in the hell (*kama*), one foot one earth (*artha*) and the third one towards the sky (*dharma*).

While the classical arts were meant to please either the Gods or the royal courts, the folk arts were the exclusive property of tribal and rural folk. The feudal connoisseur maintained as much distance from folk art forms as from the folk. Not only "*Gramya*" Sahitya was considered inane and inferior. "*gramyata*" (rusticity) was considered to be a *dosha* (defect) in art and literature by the ancient rhetoricians.

But inspite of this conscious effort at creating barriers between the two classes, the laws of social dynamics have always forced a two-way flow of culture from elite to folk and folk to elite, each influencing the other. Three forces have contributed to the synthesis of these two cultures, namely (i) Vaisnavism, (ii) Bhagavat (the oriya translation of Srimad Bhagavatam by Jagannath Das) and (iii) Odissi dance / music. These three factors have helped to create successfully a folk-elite continuum of Orissan culture. Interestingly enough, all the three emerged in the Middle Ages. Sri Chaitanya came to Orissa in 1510 A.D and his Vaisnavic sect, known as Goudiya Vaisnavism attracted the ruler Kapilendra Dev. Receiving royal patronage the preachings of this sect spread in Orissa like wild fire. There is a saying in Oriya. "Twelve pure castes and thirteen hybrid castes – all are shattered once one embraces Vaisnavism." This liberalism preached by Vaisnavism though could not demolish the caste system had a great democratising effect on the stratified Hindu community of Orissa. Even it brought the Muslim community closer to Hindu as some Muslim nobles embraced Vaisnavism. Humility preached

by Vaisnavism also brought the elite and the folk closer when they came under the same Vaisnav brotherhood.

“Bhagavat” of Jagannath Das also brought the folk and elite closer. Jagannath Das translated the Sanskrit Srimad Bhagavatam in highly lyrical and simple Oriya. It became equally popular with the court as well as the folk. Shrines where “Bhagavat” scripture was worshipped and recited every day, known as *Bhagavatghara* or *Bhagavattungi* is found in almost every village of Orissa even today Many have become literate in the past only to be able to read Bhagavat. The third force which has worked as a bridge between the elite and the folk is the Odissi dance – music combines. While the devadasis practiced Odissi to please the gods and the royal courts, *gotipua* took it to the remote villages of Orissa of course, the target group being different in the two cases, the repertoire and presentation style also differed from one another in both the cases. But there is also difference in the content as well as style in the presentation of Odissi dance / music even when presented for the same elite audience by gurus of two different schools. Thus, Odissi dance and music have played an integrative role in binding the elite and folk in a common aesthetic bond.

The structure of Odissi dance also presents another kind of unity. “Abhinay” as the name suggests represents its dramatic aspect and Odissi music is traditionally considered its musical cognate. Thus, though the dance is its dominant aspect it carries elements of drama and music in its structure. Even the inner structure of Odissi music presents a parallel kind of unity. Odissi music is divided into four segments, namely *Dhrupadanga*, *Raganga*, *Bhavanga* and *Natyanaga*<sup>i</sup>. They put equal emphasis on *tala*, *raga*, *bhava* and *natya*.

Unless one keeps pace with changing time one is bound to be knocked out of the race. That is the rudimentary law of survival. Performing arts of Orissa cannot be an exception. Some ancient forms of performing arts are already extinct. Some like Prahalad Natak (drama) or Ravan Chhaya (Shadow play) are almost on the verge of extinction<sup>ii</sup>.

Though Odissi music is not seriously ill, its condition in no way can be called healthy. The efforts to revive its health are made by two kinds of extremists. While some Puritan gurus are trying to conform to some fixed classical norms dogmatically, the mavericks are ready to sacrifice all norms and cannons to show off their flair for novelty. A minority of wise and pragmatic gurus are trying to strike a balance between these two extremes. They are not obsessed with the idea of proving Odissi classical by hook or by crook, nor are they prepared to tarnish its special identity as serious bhava music by taking to some populist gimmicks. Some great masters in the recent past have shown how to make Odissi popular without adapting populist gimmicks Kavichandra Kalicharan Pattanaik has adapted old compositions as well as has crafted new compositions to suit the theatre. Sangeet Sudhakar Balakrishan Dash has given Odissi turn to some new compositions meant for the silver screen. Smt. Shyamamani Pattnaik and Dr. Ramhan Das have shown how to make Odissi sound melodious to the untrained modern ears, while not compromising the important sastric canons.

In the field of folk performing arts some innovative experiments have been made by Dhiren Dash, Gopal Chhotray and Gauranga Charan Dash. While Dhiren Dash has given a face

left to the traditional Yatra, Chhotray has adopted many operas for radio broadcasting G.C. Dash has done a lot of research in the field of Orissan puppetry and has developed the dying art of Ravan Chhaya (shadow puppet) in a new line.

### **Odissi and the revivalist movements:**

The founder of Indian dramaturgy sage Bharata has demonstrated clearly that the performing arts like any other sector of life has an ideological aspect to it. When Brahma ordained Bharata to write a drama to be staged on the occasion of India's "Dhwaja Utsav", Peprahs trying to please the gods, Bharata took up the theme of "Samudra Manthan" (Churning of the ocean). In that play he showed how the demons were defeated by the gods. The demons who were present in the audience protested and made a walkout. But when in spite of that the play went on they created all kinds of disturbances even threatening Bharata with life. The gods chastised the demons and took precautions for safe future staging. Then Brahma tried to pacify the demons. He said that he had no intention to offend them and they have been given due recognition in his text on dramaturgy<sup>iii</sup>. This clearly proves that even such apparently innocuous field as arts can be paved with extra-aesthetic explosives. The demand to give Odissi music national recognition seems to have extra-aesthetic and extra-academic intention behind it. The considerations behind this demand seem to be more ideological than academic in nature. To find out the cause one has to go back in history.

Orissa, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not only suffered the onslaught of the foreign rulers but also it had to face conspiracy from within the country. Even a section of Oriyas also played the role of saboteur. Orissa's physical existence, its language, literature and culture were threatened with complete extinction. Many Oriya nationalist leaders along with some non-oriya domicile patriots fought tooth and nail against their diverse forces. They become defensive and fought to establish their Oriya identity with a vengeance.

As we have mentioned earlier many parts of Orissa were scattered in the neighboring provinces. When there was an effort to amalgamate then in Orissa there was vehement resistance. 'Utkal Sameelni' under the leadership of Madhusudan Das fought relentlessly and as we have mentioned earlier, new Orissa state was born on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1936. But again in 19<sup>th</sup> century there was also a conspiracy against Oriya language<sup>iv</sup>. (*Samantaray-1964*)

Some non-oriyas tried to prove that Oriya language is not a separate language Gourisankar Roy, a domicile Bengali patriot and Fakirmohan Senapati the founder of modern Oriya fiction fought against this. Likewise in the same 19<sup>th</sup> century. Oriya *Kavya Sahitya* was attacked, this time by some puritan Oriya intellectuals. They vehemently criticized the medieval Kavya literature of Orissa as phonographic. The intellectuals, for and against the issue took shelter under two literary journals, namely "Bijuli" and "Indradhanu". The defenders of kavya literature took the stand that the kavyas were erotic in nature but not pornographic. Eroticism or *sringar* had been considered as the soul of art by a school of rhetoricians in the past. Odissi medieval kavyas were the flesh and blood of Odissi music and dance. So this movement against medieval literature alerted the connoisseurs of Odissi music and dance. Bichhandacharan Pattanaik took up the cause of the Oriya medieval literature and Kalicharan

Pattanaik tried to resurrect Odissi dance and music. They claimed classical status for both Odissi music and dance. In those days this stand was more a survival strategy and was part of the revivalist movement which was going on in political, economic and cultural fronts. There was an effort on all fronts to heal the wounded ego of Oriya nationalism. The awareness that Oriya have been neglected on all fronts in the national level made the activists in various fronts fight for a niche at the national level for Orissa. The poorest state of India being one of the richest repository of cultural heritage through culture to be the surest path for reaching the top Recognition of Odisha dance at national level proved their strategy to be correct one. Their next move, naturally, was to fight for Odissi music which is traditionally considered the natural cognate of Odisha dance. Thus, the debate around Odissi music agree on one point the more systematic research accompanied by more standardized demonstrations be carried on.

We can safely conclude with Dr. Premlata Sharma. Odissi is fine Odissi. It is fine as song, fine as composition. Why can't we remain satisfied with that much! Odissi is fine as Bhava music, not as raga music. I mean, whether you like it or not whether is appropriate or not, if Odissi music is classed to be in the same category as Hindustani or Carnatic it can do it only on their terms and not on its own terms. And if it accepts their term uncritically it will lose its identity. This is the dilemma. To resolve it your researchers, have to do hard labour and concerted effort<sup>v</sup>. As another stalwart of Odissi music Mrs. Syammamani Pattanaik advises, the protagonists of Odissi music should concentrate more on establishing it on firmer ground in Odissi itself than hanker for a niche among the national music systems<sup>vi</sup>. When a music system is established on a firm foundation the questions like folk and classical become immaterial. Our predecessors had realized this very well. Pt. Maheswar Mohapatra, the Oriya musicologist who wrote "Abhinaya Chandrika" around 1670 A.D rightly observes.

*Nrityam Jadyapi Sasrtoktma Talamanasarayam  
Tathapi Deshabhedena Loukikam Supratisthium*

(Though dance conforms to *Tala, Mana and Rasa* as mentioned in the Sastras, still, there are established regional dances in different countries)<sup>vii</sup>. This applies to music also. The regional performing arts in general and the regional music systems in particular, should try to take their roots deeper than vic to reach the sky through their branches.

**Result:**

The article talks about how different kinds of art in Odisha, like classical and folk, influence each other. It says that things like religion and ancient texts have helped connect these two types of art. Also, it explains how some people are trying to keep traditional music alive, even though it's facing challenges. The article also looks at the history of Odisha's culture, including times when its language and literature were under attack. Finally, it suggests that instead of trying to fit in with other music styles, Odissi music should focus on being itself.

**Endnotes:**

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- <sup>i</sup> Das, Ramahari, 1989, Sangeeta Sangya (Odia), puri: Badahat
- <sup>ii</sup> Pani, Jeevan, 1990, Shadow puppetry and Ravan Chhaya of Odisha, Sangeet Natak- Vol.98
- <sup>iii</sup> Bharata, *Natya Sastram*, 1.54.104
- <sup>iv</sup> Samantray, N.1964, Odia Sahityara Itihas (Odia) Bhubaneswar: Lavanya Bhavan
- <sup>v</sup> Dr. Premlata Sharma in an interview given to this researcher just before her sudden demise, published in English daily Sun Times, Bhubaneswar. 6.12.1998.
- <sup>vi</sup> S. Pattanaik in an interview with this researcher published in Oriya daly Sambad, 6.1.2002.
- <sup>vii</sup> Maheswara Mohapatra, Abhinaya Chandraika, ed by D.N. Pattanaik. 1999. Cuttack. K.V.K. Trust Board, p.13, sloka 18.