

## **Odissi in contemporary Orissa. strategies, constraints, gender**

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While Odissi dance emerged during the second half of the 20th century as one of the re-created dance forms of India, asserting "authenticity", "antiquity" & "sacredness", little attention has been paid to the homeland of the dance which, in fact, had spread considerably beyond these geographical boundaries. Many nonOriya dancers practiced and propagated Odissi. They trained either by going to Orissa for short spans of time or under those Oriya gurus who had migrated to big cities like Delhi or used to travel there to conduct workshops. While Orissa definitely figured on the travel route of dancers for cultural journeys, in which they could experience art, aesthetics & the sculpture-dance connection, they mostly evolved outside the Oriya reality.

Yet, whether triggered by a national rather than a regional movement of rediscovery of cultural identity of the post-Independence era, whether it spread out to other parts of India, the development of Odissi in the state of Orissa has been important, as anybody can see by trying to count Odissi dance schools in Bhubaneswar. And it is clearly through male Oriya "gurus" that the form expanded to other locations.

In some way, Orissa's socio-economic conditions are in tune with the fact that the form spread elsewhere: created in 1936 as a consequence of a long lasting nationalistic - or rather regional-movement, the new State of Orissa (comprising territories that had before been scattered into different administrative units), was already carrying the weight of delayed economic development. Reading the history and the "District Gazetteers" of Orissa, one is

struck by the numerous reports on floods, famines & cyclones throughout XIXth and XXth centuries. The Sen Index of poverty of 1987-88 confirms Orissa's backwardness: the index is the highest in rural areas & the second highest in urban areas of India. Phillip B. Zarilli, by analysing the development of Kathakali in relation to the shifts in patronage from the royal patrons of the initial years to the diffused and multiple patrons of the modern period - pointed out the strong relationship between development of a performance tradition & its material support. And so we are wondering how, in a State known for its lack of economic achievements, an emerging artistic movement found support for its development.

Odissi, through its struggle to establish itself as a "classical" dance form & to distinguish itself from the "small", "folk" traditions, claims for itself a high cultural status. Further, leaning on the model of Bharatnatyam, it rests on the concept of female solo performance, so imbibed in the Indian dance scenario - simultaneously evicting the model of the male cross-dressed child dancer, the Gotipua. It is often women who are dancing on stage. They are accompanied by mostly male musicians & often performances are directed by the male gurus. The male party sits on the side of the stage, & the highly "feminine" aesthetic of Odissi is reminiscent of a construction of the image of woman by man, and to be viewed by man.

From the nineteen-forties onward, young women in Orissa from highly cultured, respected families, started learning dance - then simply known as "nacha" - from male teachers. Priyambada Mohanty-Hejmadi, Sanjukta Mishra-Panigrahi, Kumkum Mohanty (nee Das), Meenati Mishra, all belonged to the elites. Looking at life-histories of dancers of the present generation, one finds that those belonging to higher classes seem to function like their colleagues from the first generation: they experience

dancing in childhood as a part of education & in the form of private classes in their homes; at a certain point exposure as solo performers unfolds as the apparently "natural" consequence of this childhood activity. Eventually, the question of marriage does create a conflict with the continuation of a dance career.

The fact that these female shyshyas of male Odissi dance gurus came up during the second half of the Twentieth century, has been repeatedly highlighted as a strong indicator of change & progress of the Oriya society towards accepting dance culture. But what type of a progress was that for those women? How ready was this society to accept women as active participants?

Highlighting the status of women in India seems trivial. Yet, we would like to emphasise of a few facts in order to place this manifestation of the female danseuse in its social context:

a) Ever since the first census of India held in 1901, the female to male ratio has been decreasing over the whole of India. Dreze & Sen as well as Barbara Miller argue that there is a relation between female labor participation and preservation of female life. As the "ethos of female subordination", and the related lack of autonomy on all angles (economical, geographical, & decision-making) is an ideology belonging to higher classes; women who voluntarily remain under the control of their male family members enjoy prestige. The consequences show on the structure of the population itself, in which Woman, bereft of individual choices, is decent and acceptable.

**b) National Family Health Survey (NFHS-2)**, a survey conducted in India during 1998-99, points at gender ideologies in modern India through some quantitative assessments. For example, it establishes that, out of a sample of nearly 90,000

women from all over India, 56,3% agree with at least one reason justifying a husband beating his wife; further, concerning questions of autonomy per State: in Orissa, 86,3% of married women of the sample are involved in decision-making about what to cook, but 18,2% only need not obtain permission for going to the market and 15,4% for visiting friends. Only 38,6% participate in decision making concerning their own health care. The figures are considerably worse than the national average. As it is known that women's autonomy does increase with age, the picture for the younger ones is grim. It is, of course, mainly the younger women who participate in Odissi dance activity.

Having now stated the obvious, the question concerning the development of an art form claiming a high cultural status and involving women at a prominent level, becomes very relevant. One could also formulate it like this: how could a group of people functioning within the framework of highly paternalistic gender ideologies incorporate female participation in the process of dance production while ensuring that there would be no break with the paternalistic set-up? Or: how is the "progress" of women emerging as Odissi dancers in the second half of the Twentieth century connected to the ethos of female subordination?

The gender related distribution of roles in the Odissi dance scene in Bhubaneswar suggests that individual careers are determined by factors relating to birth rather than by factors concerning the dance itself. Further, there is a strong connection between class/caste & gender. In an extremely schematic way, we may say that we find males from rural background, modest family conditions & often with little schooling and women from urban families, middle to upper classes, who generally go for university studies. While teaching dance is perceived to be the prerogative of these men, the performance is highlighted as feminine. A closer look is required to go past these stereotypes: actually, men

do perform, but mostly in "group" situations highlighting their respective gurus\choreographers; and many women do teach, yet their motivations are different from those of their male counterparts. Further, some women only perform in solo - those who are from privileged families; the ones from a less prominent background tend to remain as good bodies for the group presentations of their respective gurus, as do the male dancers.

Such a state of affairs is indicative of a situation where individual aspirations may not easily lead to success. Indeed, discussions with people active in Odissi in Bhubaneswar have clarified:

- That many men aspire as much as women to be dancers. They frequently consider that being male is a handicap to succeed in this venture.
- That many women do teach, even though they consider themselves as performers. Yet, their teaching is not necessarily acknowledged by their male colleagues.

Factors producing situations can be looked at from different angles:

- The situation and its compulsions - or structural factors.
- Collective perceptions about this situation, which may incite actors to act the way they are presumed to - this refers to the rationality of the actors.

Some observations prompted me to look at the situation itself, while the meaning of individual behavior can be explained through a detailed examination. Some statements I encountered were suggestive of the fact that assumptions about other's future actions sometimes give little space for alternate action. The economic situation of Orissa has been highlighted. How important this is in the process of dance activity comes into light

when one looks at the rewards of dance activity. The relation between class/caste & gender then gains in meaning.

While collecting data on people involved into Odissi dance in Bhubaneswar during 2000-2001, I was repeatedly informed that dancing was "a costly profession". The nature of the statement, associating the term "profession" with "costly", is rather disconcerting. Many dancers related how they had to spend on costumes, but also, in the context of performance, on fees for musicians and gurus as well as travel expenses. While the statements varied a lot, from the dancer's side, performance was never highlighted as a lucrative activity. The situations ranged from performances attended as group dancers by males & females, with either a nominal payment or none, to performances as solo dancers where funding could prove problematic: costumes, travel, musicians & guru's fees are to be covered by the dancer. Sometimes the funds permit the dancer to keep some amount to herself, but sometimes the events are openly sponsored by her family.

So, the rewards for these performances are symbolic, as artistes are eager to be seen by audiences. One may also wonder whether the ability of performing as a solo dancer then does not become a demonstration of social status. While it is mostly women who are entitled to this, at the same time they do not gain through their efforts economic empowerment in any significant way: it seems to be perfectly acceptable that the male musicians and gurus should be paid for their services, and it appears just as normal that women should not, and even could comfortably sponsor events in which they are themselves working. It is understood that the effort may turn out to be considerable when it involves not just monetary transactions, but also organisational skills. So the point of view according to which women are not to interfere with the economic world - man's world - paradoxically makes the

higher class woman an appropriate substitute for the royal artistic patron of bygone centuries. Their economic alienation, at the same time, goes hand in hand with refusing the male dancer to perform. It may be noted that young male dancers sometimes face further trouble while participating in performances, as this requires them to take leave from the private dance tuitions they are often depending upon for survival.

Male Odissi dancers often confess that they had to start teaching at early stages, independent of their competences, in order to be able to sustain themselves. Frequently, the amounts earned allowed them to climb a step in the ladder of hierarchy of their gurukul, and freed them from certain of the services offered to their guru in exchange for his support. Yet, though this constitutes a gain in autonomy, the amounts involved are modest. Teaching then appears to be a strategy for dealing with poverty. On the other hand, women who teach often do not show interest for payment, and emphasise the anthroposophy of their activity. But the financial scope also hardly matches the expectations of their lifestyles, which differ a lot from those of the males. It is significant that male dancers in good social standing tend to favour other careers, even while asserting that they would rather leave their jobs to be full-time dancers. But they cannot, considering the life-style that they and their families aspire to, think of leaving the security of their salaried lives. Another notable point is that women tend to teach in or near to their residences, and this suggests that if dancing does not empower them in economic terms, it also does not much enhance their geographical mobility.

Does the dance then enhance women's autonomy in decision making? In the context of what Ratna Roy calls "power relations in guru-shishya play", it is improbable. Much of the decision making power concerning the dance remains with the guru, who

makes choices regarding choreography, what to perform, and even the music and the costume.

I have been arguing that collective assumptions made about people's future actions may influence those. Male's attitudes are not friendly towards female teachers. They make negative statements on their presumed incompetence on grounds of gender roles. Some do not mind stating that women are too shy to face students, particularly in situations where they may "have to teach romantic scenes". Others are less verbal in their aggression of the one half of humanity, and just consider that the women's programmed marriages will always prevent them from being successful teachers. This anticipation in itself weakens women's position as potential teachers: their efforts are not acknowledged. It is nearly caricatural to see how gurus introduce even untrained boy students as future teachers to outsiders, while they would rarely do so for any, however advanced, female student.

This state of affairs has been accompanying the development of Odissi from the revival-period onwards. Poet Kali Charan Patnaik on the occasion of a seminar on Odissi dance organised by Sangeet Natak Academy in 1958, stated that "male students should learn the art in greater number so that they would continue imparting training.". This strong ideological statement excludes the women in one stroke. Interestingly, the Maharis or female temple dancers, who could have been potential teachers of the dance in the early stages, were excluded from the process of the Odissi dance revival, as has been stated by Frederique Marglin & Ratna Roy. Evidently, the "Oriya intelligentsia" and "male traditional performers", who took over the discussions on the "revival", had other ideas. It is being argued that this discrimination was directed towards "improper" women, as Maharis were perceived that way. But the "proper" women of the modern generation are not better off, and face substantial

discrimination on grounds of gender even while asserting that there is a demand for female teachers.

What appears, then, is the strength of paternalistic gender ideologies. This is underlined by incidents in which gurus tend to control more than just the dance of their students (we cannot question, within the scope of this paper, the part of these strategies which may be accommodated within a context of "legitimate" action). They may exclude from their gurukul women who have acted against their moral values, although in absolute terms this has no interference with the dance. They may impose strong control over their sishya's lives, as shows in the case of the junior male who works odd hours for his guru, or the case of the girl child who is badly beaten by her guru in the belief that this is how she will make a good dancer. They may evolve strategies to counter female students inclined towards emancipation, as is reported by young women who face rumour mongering when trying to stage their own productions - this shows the strength of the assumption that those activities are for the men. It is here that strategies towards keeping the balance in the power structure, occasionally figure within the repertory of repressive action rather than culturally imbibed models. When a person who is presumed to be "weak" evolves a strategy towards a gain in prestige or autonomy, this is perceived as unwanted reaction, and eventually the "dissident" is "put in place".

We may conclude that dance activity does not show much of empowerment for the women involved in dance in Bhubaneswar. The advantages they hold due to class do not free them from the disadvantage of their gender. And the price for this "advantage", further, is being paid as they emerge as substitutes for the lack of a more optimal funding system.

I have been struck by the importance of the gender factor in the Bhubaneswar "dance scene". It seems to me that paternalistic gender ideologies are not conducive for a positive development of dance, when achievements are acknowledged only provided the candidate matches the gender and class criteria. As Ratna Roy states: "However, as in other isms, the oppressor shares the negative repercussions of oppression with the oppressed ", It is by realising this only that the situation could be addressed as per its needs. But this really requires a major shift in mentalities.

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