

Son-Father - GURUJI...

Guru Ratikant Mohapatra

The journey between me and my father Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra has spanned thirty eight years. It is been a symbiotic relationship in which I have learnt so much from him and on occasion he has never hesitated to learn a little bit from me when in my own humble way I have expressed dissent in matters of concept and choreography. I have been an extremely fortunate human being in many ways. First, I have had the benefit of father who himself has fathered the revival of Odissi and who was a brilliant sum of many parts – diverse talents which he projected with great aplomb, dancer and choreographer of rare excellence, brilliant percussionist, master story teller, and above all a keen observer of life around him which he faithfully mimed on stage with exacting detail. Second, I have watched from the side lines his growth and development as a dancer and choreographer from a very early age and from those impressionable times I have hugely benefited consciously and subconsciously by the twists and turns, by the changes and the evolution of an artiste's creative potential unfolding in front of our very own eyes. Third, and perhaps the most significant is that this period coincided with the visible evolution of Odissi classical dance as we know it today and much of this evolution, you will agree, has been the hard work of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. Thus Ratikant Mohapatra is a thrice blessed individual-in life, dance and the creative flowering of an entire age in the life of Odissi dance.

One of the important aspects of this evolution of Odissi and my father's role in it has been the introduction of new technique within the parameters of the traditional Odissi body stance. This is expressed itself in many small and big ways and most significantly in the establishment of 'Chauka' as evident in Guruji's style. In the feet placement of 'Chauka' Guruji contrived to reduce the distance between the feet, and this innovation, although a small departure from the traditionally inherited 'Chauka' position, had a far reaching influence in providing a firm body positioning and greater stability in balance, because the return to a stable center of gravity, especially after rapid body and foot movements, made it so much easier for us dancers to maintain an equilibrium, and also helped increase the visual effect by economizing the side to side swaying motions so frequently employed in Odissi dance. In other words firming up of the line of the body from its central position in 'Chauka' to its take off in any 'laya' or in any direction of

movement considerably improved the beauty and the attractiveness of the age old 'Chauka'. This constitutes just one of Guruji's major contribution of Odissi's classicism, especially since this technical innovation quickly found its way into the appropriate body positioning in 'Tribhangi', 'Samabhanga', 'Abhanga', and other ancillary stances.

Yet another landmark contribution of Guruji was the introduction of sideways movement of the torso while the mid section of the body, especially the hip was kept in a rigid position. This added tremendous subtlety as well as fluidity while minimising the exaggerated swaying of hips and buttocks. The adoption of this particular stylisation by number of young dancers set them apart from the normal run of established Odissi practice; it was a startling innovation, well within the Odissi tradition: what it certainly did was to enhance the attractiveness of the upper body lateral, backward / forward and rotatory movements, so germane to traditional Odissi.

What struck me as a young dancer myself was the fluidity of movement when Guruji executed mudras, bhangis, facial expression, body movement, and feet placements etc. of either simple or complex nature in any choreography he chose. As he has repeatedly emphasized – the mind has a habit of thinking faster than the body and hence to perform dance movements, especially the vigorous one, with elegance and with a sure deftness in quick rhythmic passages, the body has to be trained to synchronise with the speed of the mind.

What frequently amazed me as a young dancing student and a disciple of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra who saw him at close quarters throughout day and into the late hours of night, was the translation of his acute observation powers into faithful imaginative and brilliant choreography. What he saw in nature and natural forms, in animals and birds, in the casual walk of a village maiden carrying a pitcher of water, all these and much more he brought into vibrant life on stage as well as his teaching. Keen student of life and behavior that he was, his recitals, miming and very expressive face energized audiences and quickly transported them into a world where the mimed object, such as a strutting peacock or a swan in the water, would immediately come alive and continue to have a spellbinding effect on the audience long after the show was over.

His ability to tell a story well and his ability to link seemingly disparate event and episodes into one complete presentable format help him in his exposition of 'Sanchari'. He could elaborate and project an idea with such masterful ease and such economy of movement that a musical phrase accompanying the dance never lost its freshness and vitality in spite of being repeated many times. This, in essence, was his way of dealing with 'Sanchari' and if he made frequent departures from the traditional set pieces of the preceding generation of Odissi dancers, he did it stylishly fully conveying the subtle nuances and meanings implicit in 'Sanchari' and always succeeded in creating a coherent logical and aesthetic amalgam of music, lyric, dance, mime and stagecraft. A lesser talent would not have attempted such things or if attempted they would not come off ground.

Guruji never limited his application of 'Sanchari' or elaboration to his dance only; he was a pioneer who went beyond the known and established boundaries in the playing of 'Mardala', 'Tabla' and a vast array of leather-tensioned instruments in the accompaniment of classical Odissi dance. He was never afraid of innovating stylized rhythmic passages keeping well within the limits of traditional Odissi percussion: whatever he innovated in terms of rhythm playing fitted the dance perfectly and never for a moment caused any discomfort to either the dancer or the other musical accompanists. In effect he has built up a formidable repertoire of rhythm progression by such daring innovations in "Mardala" playing (he played the 'tala' syllables on the 'kani' instead of always using the 'chanti') thereby creating a very unusual and different technique of playing the 'Mardala'. It is an amazing fact that a very large percentage of what is being played by 'mardalikas' today had been developed by him decades ago and those 'bols' still stand the taste of time in classical Odissi performance.

The brilliance and passion in Guruji's dancing choreography and percussion also was evident in his teaching methodology. Perhaps his greatest success in transferring knowledge of the Odissi style was his very clear-cut notions of the distinctiveness of Odissi as a classical dance and its unique flavour. The student very quickly imbibed the essence of the style, because Guruji's rigorous practice sessions always addressed the subject in its minutest details. Guruji invariably went beyond the dance and music into the life and aspirations of the pupil; he combined in himself the varied roles of parent, teacher, friend and philosopher. This made the rigorous learning process not only enjoyable but also truly memorable in the guru shishya relationship

which housed in itself great affection, unlimited patience and strict discipline.

Guruji's simple trick (which many find difficult to do) was to start teaching at the exact level of the pupil's grasping ability, executing ability, retention capacity, skill in 'tala' and 'laya' and general sense of dance. He was careful never to over burden and confuse the student, while cheerfully overburdening the student with long and rigorous practice sessions. This was his formula for successfully conveying the intrinsic artistry of the Odissi dance and the perfection required in its performance. Many senior pupils who have become accomplished artistes of today and yesteryears recall how in spite of long hours and backbreaking practice schedule never felt overloaded by Guruji's training style and relentless discipline.

This above all was the essence of the man and this was the reason why thousand of students worldwide and many of us present here today miss him so badly; the influence he had on our lives has become an unshakable memory: his passionate spirit continue to guide us in the life of dance and in the business of living and creating.
