

CONSTRUCTING AND PERFORMING THE ODISSI BODY: IDEOLOGIES, INFLUENCES AND INTERJECTIONS

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Ideologies Reviving the Odissi Form

Post- independence, the image of the Indian woman became an essential marker of the Hindu cultural identity, which further defined the image for the emerging dancing body; the auspicious, civilized body invoking, practicing and representing all that is “pure” and “sanctified”. It is in this respect that we need to see and understand the re-construction of Indian classical dances, specifically Odissi dance, as the area of study in this research.

The dancing body of the woman had already shifted from the popular space of *mela* (carnival) or the ritual space of the temples to a more “dignified” and secular space, respectively, with codifying of Bharatanatyam in 1930’s. Deriving from the colonial idea of civilized entertainment; the proscenium stage, best suited for the middle/ upper class woman had by now taken on the role of the preserver and mediators of Indian culture. Under the aegis of two concurrent movements, ignited by the nationalists as part of the Indian independence struggle to claim the position of Indian culture vis- a- vis that of the west cleansing of the lowly practices and resurrection of the ‘pure’ upper caste

practices, became the foremost objectives. Hindu reformers, for whom the new criteria for civilization and culture was much influenced by the western notions of a civilized society, intended to do away with the “obscure” and “sexual”, which was mainly associated with the lower caste, and with the popular and the frivolous, as a part of the revivalist movement (Gupta, 2001; 105). The respectable values of the middle and upper class, then- on, emphasized on the domestic domain as the core of spirituality; the woman of the house was given the position of sole custodian of Hindu ethics and her image was portrayed against that of outspoken, self- indulgent, western- educated woman, on one hand and the brash folk woman on the other (Sarkar, 2003; 35).

A performative body can best be understood as an embodiment of recognized, accepted and learnt feminine ideals. As feminist theories have suggested body is not a passive object; it is rather a lived body, a situated subject, and a confluence of both materialist/ biological body and cultural practices. It is an active being which inhabits the gendered spaces and identities, such that the feminine ideals and sexual orders are mediated through the body. However, embodying the roles is not a pre- decided, deliberate effort on the part of the subject, instead, “the subject who enacts gender, in being grounded within a materiality of the body, is always already constructed” (Neeranjana, 2001; 123). Thus, the discourses live in and through the body. Also, the notions of “proper” feminine body mark boundaries for the “ideal” female body, as against the “improper” one.

It is in this light that one needs to understand the developing Odissi body placed in the urban arena of the upper/ middle classes. “Space is not a mere site of action; in fact, the social is always constituted through the spatial, with the experience of the lived

bodies forming the basis of a mediator across these spheres” states Neeranjana, (2001; 115). Even though the body was that of an educated, city- bred, urban woman, the elements constituting the performance, clearly marked the difference in hers being an auspicious and refined body, as opposed to the inauspicious one. Thus the adornment of traditional bridal attire¹, an offshoot of a *mahari*'s traditional costume, to mark its auspiciousness, and refining it according to the costume designed for and adopted by Bharatanatyam practitioners, became the norm. Anything other than this norm or beyond the codes laid down by the Gurus was strictly considered “impure” and became unacceptable. The dichotomous framework of pure/ impure and auspicious/ inauspicious thus marked the institutionalization of dance as a discipline. If viewed under this axis of polarity, many concepts and ideologies defining Odissi become clearer.

Embodying the Ideologies

The proscenium space is in itself a profane space, politico- economic realm of which was concealed under the ritualised guise². It is also the female body and “auspiciousness” as embodied and represented by her body, which extends into the

¹ Odissi costume includes a bright silk sari, worn as five- piece stitched costume, by majority of the dancers, along with heavy elaborate jewellery including a choker, a longer necklace, armlets, bracelets, a belt, anklets, bells, earrings, a piece placed on the bun, a *seenthi* (a piece placed on the hair and forehead) and *tahia* (the headgear). (Please refer to Photograph I at the end of the research paper).

² No tickets are charged, till date, for a classical dance performance, the entry is by invitation, or it is an “open to all” event. *Diya* (the lamp) or a *rangoli* (a traditional motif made from colours) in the foyer, marks the change in space. It is no more the profane space of a proscenium, with the sole purpose of entertainment. All these elements aim at taking the performance space to another level, which is not profane and not yet sacred.

space. This can be better understood by looking at the positioning of the feminine body in this space.

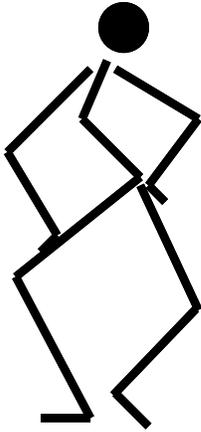


Figure 1 Tribhangi

It was a specifically feminine body, taking off from the poses depicted by temple sculptures and *gotipua*³ dance. *Tribhangi* (Figure I) the position highlighting the curves with special emphasis on the isolation of the torso from the lower body, or controlled deflection of the hip⁴, becomes the basic posture and all movements are derived from, flow into or end in it. *Chauka* (Figure II) is a more rooted basic position of Odissi, which emphasizes a markedly strong difference

from a fluid *tribhangi*, providing stability to the dance, since it has a centralized, symmetrical structure. However, it is often rendered with fluid torso movements, sideways, with the neck moving in *tiraschinna*⁵, lending an overall feminine appearance to the body by manoeuvring the body to attain more lyrical and flowing movement. With a grueling training

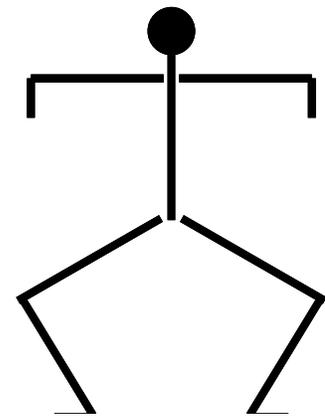


Figure 2 Chauka

³ *Gotipua*: In Oriya colloquial language Gotipua means single boy. The dance performance done by a single boy is known as Gotipua dance. When decadence and declination came in to Devadasi or mahari tradition due to various reasons this Gotipua dance tradition evolved around 15th- 16th c. It was performed outside the temple precincts. Odissi style as propagated by Guru Kelucharana Mohapatra, and many others, derive their influence from this dance.

⁴ The deflection varies for different styles. In some styles it is the isolation of the torso which is emphasized whereas in others the jutting out of the hip is considered to be appropriate to achieve desired distancing from the central axis.

⁵ *Griva Bheda* (neck movements) as prescribed by the *Natyasastra* are; *sundari*, *tiraschinna*, *parivartita*, *pratampita*. When the chin leads the movement of the head, towards left or right, and the head is tilted in the opposite direction, it is called *tiraschinna*.

period, the technique gets embedded into the dancer's body such that it becomes a practiced natural for the dancer and the dancer is able to associate her expressive self with that acquired dancing body.

Influences Furthering the Dance Form

It was just the dance form and its presentation, which depicted the traditional, whereas the social body of the dancer was completely situated in the modern lifestyle, which required a professional outlook towards one's chosen career and the stipulated power plays necessary in garnering a much-desired economic and social leverage. This was made achievable through one's class, political affiliations, and maneuverability in international circuits. Observing the list of pioneering divas of Odissi dance who had already attained or inherited a position of repute and recognition, it is discernible that their familial background and influential status played a significant role in determining their position as stalwarts of Odissi and simultaneously created an identity and recognition for the dance form itself. This list would roughly include *Indrani Rehman*-Daughter of Kathakali, and Bharatanatyam dancer Ragini Devi⁶ (Esther Sherman, 1896-1982).

Indrani received training in dance from her mother, Prof. U.S. Krishna Rao and Pandanallur Chokkalingam Pillai. Mainly, inspired by her mother to learn Odissi, she was later encouraged by Dr. Charles Fabri to propagate the emerging form; "we both toured the State and accumulated a lot of experience in Odissi dance form. When we were back in Delhi, we resolved to get this dance its due place among the classical

⁶ "I found myself cast in the role of a pioneer with a mission to revive the classical dance in India"; Ragini Devi (Misra, 1992; 3).

dance- forms of India. I have no hesitation to tell you that Dr. Fabri's contribution in popularizing this dance form was very big indeed" (Misra, 1992; 10). She was also crowned as Miss. India for the year 1952. After she had learnt a few Odissi items from Guru Deba Prasad Das, she started including them in her performances from 1957 onwards⁷. If her mother, Ragini Devi played a pioneering role in taking Kathakali and Bharatanatyam to places, it was Indrani who walked the same steps, thirty years later, by taking Kuchipudi and Odissi to the international stage.

Sonal Mansingh- Described as "the most persuasive ambassador for Indian dance" (Misra, 1992; 117) was born into an influential family. Her grandfather was one of the early governors of free India, and she was introduced to dance by her mother, who was a keen student of music. Some of the great contemporary artists of the time were frequent guests at their home. Her tryst with dance began with Manipuri, then Bharatanatyam under Prof. U. S. Krishna Rao and his dancer- wife Chandrabhaga Devi. She presented her Bharatanatyam *arengatram* in Bangalore in 1961, when she was just 17 years old. The entire cabinet, dance teachers, royalty and artists bore witness to the recital. She learnt music too and later received training in Kuchipudi from Guru Vempati Chinna Satyam but never included it in her performances⁸. She learnt Odissi on her father- in- law's insistence, Dr. Mayadhar Man Singh, under his friend Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra from 1964 onwards. From 1968 onwards, she was representing the country,

⁷ The brochure of her performance in Lucknow, in 1965, mentions; "she has danced in all the five continents as a soloist, winning laurels for her country." (Mishra, 1992; 10)

⁸ "Kuchipudi is not religion- based like Bharatanatyam or Odissi, the other two styles that I perform. It is more secular and more directed towards popular entertainment. It is better suited for dance- dramas" *Sonal Mansingh* (Misra, 1992; 119).

on all official tours with people of high profile, such as Damayanti Joshi, Begum Akhtar and Ram Narayan along with the then Prime Minister of the country, Smt. Indira Gandhi⁹. She chose a career in dance over the role of a diplomat. She continued her Odissi training under Guru Mayadhar Raut, whence Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra, being a good friend of the Mansingh family, disowned her.

Sanjukta Panigrahi hailed from an orthodox Brahmin Oriya family. Her mother had gained an appreciation of art from her own family who were deeply interested in the Chhau dances. She was trained under Guru Keluchran Mahapatra, joined Kalakshetra at the age of eight years and thereafter learnt Kathak, for some duration under Guru Hazarilal (placed in Bombay) on a scholarship provided by the Government of Orissa. She was giving Bharatanatyam performances while continuing with her training in Odissi under Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra. On the insistence of Dr. Charles Fabri, she too concentrated her energies on the growth of Odissi.

Kiran Segal is a leading exponent of Odissi dance. She was initiated in dance by her mother Zohra Segal. Following whose footsteps she was trained in Uday Shankar style of dance, later groomed as a Bharatanatyam dancer by various Gurus. Subsequently she received training in Odissi under Guru Mayadhar Raut.

Madhavi Mudgal was born into a family of artists. She received her initial training in Kathak and Bharatanatyam, at Gandharva Mahavidyalaya, one of the pioneering arts institutes in Delhi, which was set up by her father in 1939. She continued to perform Kathak for a while and then completely engaged herself in the practice of Odissi dance,

⁹ An entourage organized by I.C. C. R to accompany the Prime Minister was sent and then later in 1970 she was sent to Japan by the Government of India. (Misra, 1992; 120)

initiated into the form by Guru Hare Krishna Behra and further trained under Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra.

Visibly, the dance form came to be practiced mainly by urban middle/ upper class women, many of who were already practitioners of other classical forms, and had well established themselves as dancer. If not formerly trained, they were sent specifically to acquire training in Bharatanatyam or Kathak, (as in the case of Sanjukta Panigrahi) after a basic training in Odissi, which wasn't yet formalized, to come back and apply a similar mechanism to its structure and became the new authors of the Odissi body. These are the women who had strong political affiliations or had already made their mark as artists.

Given such familial backgrounds, one needs to draw an overview of the festivals these young divas were performing at, the sponsors and the patrons for such high-profile programs. They were performing for domestic cultural festivals, predominantly for the youth and frequently sent on government-sponsored tours, accompanying politicians and official entourage of the state, to an international diplomatic sphere aimed to build the image of the nation. They were often sent for international congregations or for welcoming foreign dignitaries in the state sponsored festivals¹⁰. It was these young women, educated in the western system, yet well versed in Indian culture, who actively

¹⁰ Refer to Sangeet Natak Akademi journals and annual reports of the *Akademi* for the performances in the formative years, exclusively organized for international VIP's or for 'festival of India' series in international arenas. (Khokar, 1958) (Pattnaik, 1957, 1958, 1967).

took on the role of cultural ambassadors¹¹. The young dancers were not just performing but, also, holding demonstrations and teaching Odissi outside Orissa and abroad- with the support of the government, they were propagated and recognized as the icons of the emerging nation, complying with and propagating Nehruvian idea of a modern India.

The Gurus were mostly accompanying their students to international platforms and important festive spaces within the country, as a Guru, guide and percussionist. It was much later, with much coaxing on the part of their students that they came back to the stage as a full- fledged performer¹². It is often acknowledged that the Gurus later became doyens through the success of their pupils, as exemplified by Sanjukta Panigrahi and Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra and Indrani Rehman and Guru Debaprasad Das and thus became the face of new India.

The Dance Maketh the Dancer...?

They represented not just any other dancing body but an age- old civilization, a philosophy, a value system. However, the role of this oriental body was not merely restricted to proliferation of its traditions, but also to orchestrate interactions and

¹¹ Indrani Rehman was the first to be titled as the “cultural ambassador of India”, the likes of Sanjukta Panigrahi and Sonal Mansingh, followed suit (source: <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/1999/7/1999-7-16.shtml>)

¹² “It was here in Gandharava Mahavidyalaya when he was giving a workshop, he was teaching us some *ashtapadi*. Even his teaching conveyed an in- depth study of the subject. I used to tell him that you have to perform this *ashtapadi*, he said “no, I have left it (stage performance) now”. I told him “you must do it and we have a stage right here”, and that’s when he performed after a very long time. A: When was this? Madhavi: 1970 or ’73, or earlier. I am not really good with dates. That is when he performed for the first time and then at Kamani, a full fledged one night of performance, and then slowly of course all over the world” (conversation with Madhavi Mudgal on Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra coming back to the stage as a dancer. February, 2008).

discourses regarding the same. The female dancers were chosen over the male body of the Gurus, who did not have influential backgrounds, lacked comprehensiveness and communicative skills in foreign languages and were not compatible with the nationalist image of India, which revered itself in the new feminine *avataar* of “*Bharatmata*”¹³. It was the dancers who organized these tours and the Gurus accompanied them as percussionists. The notion of the feminine body cannot be rooted out; it was the female dancers who completely took on the multicultural, global stage, barring a few such as Uday Shankar, Ram Gopal and Guru Gopinath; for this reason it was female dancers who became the cultural representatives of the nation, as against male gurus. It was through their name and fame that a new dance form was hailed and received a strong appreciation from local and international audiences, and was immediately conferred with the “classical” title¹⁴.

Undoubtedly, it raises a crucial question; whether it is the dancer, which maketh the dance, or is it the dance that maketh the dancer?

Gurus, since early days, i.e. in 1950's, occupied the position of revivalists, the founders of the form. The first generation dancers were perceived as subordinates, hardly ever identified as those contributing equally to the creation of the dance form.

¹³ The country's image was eulogized in the form of a Goddess, which started as a movement in 19th c. and was adopted in shaping nationalist image through cultural practices; visual, literary and performance, post independence (Sangari, Vaid, 2006), (Sarkar, 2001).

¹⁴ Ironically, it was with the first Sangeet Natak Akademi award which was conferred upon Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra, (instead of a senior artist like Guru Pankaj Charan Das, who was former's Guru, nor even to Guru Deba Prasad Das who had been involved in popularising Odissi internationally) that Odissi was finally accepted as a “classical” form.

Whereas the dancers became the prima donnas, their image was propagated as the face of young, exuberant nation, the codes and rules were still formulated by the Gurus, confining the role of the dancers to that of mere carriers of an ancient legacy.¹⁵

Interventions within the Practice

To ponder further on this subject, two major interventions in the history of Odissi need to be looked into. Firstly, Indrani Rehman's entry into an international beauty contest, as the first Miss. India, in the year 1952 and secondly, Sanjukta Panigrahi's "experimental explorations" at Odin Teatret, from 1980- 1996, and the interventions with the form thereafter.

Indrani Rehman was chosen as the first Miss. India, by Indian press, to participate in the first ever Miss. Universe pageant in the year 1952. Her photographs in classical

¹⁵ So much so, that they were not even recognized as "Gurus". It is very rarely that an Odissi dancer/ teacher would use "Guru" as a prefix to her name, even after devoting a substantial part of her life to dance, whereas the male dancers started using "Guru" as a prefix much earlier in their careers or were granted the same from their Gurus. Minati Mishra, one of the senior- most Odissi dancers, also served as the Principal of Utkal Sangeet Mahavidyalaya, where Guru Deba Prasad Das and Guru Pankaj Charan Das were employed as teachers under her, she was not allowed to use the title (in conversation with Dinanath Pathy, Pathy, 2006; 82) .

Perhaps because at the time, when she headed the institute Gurus were still present and teaching. The rules of the form were strictly bound by them. However, it is only now that dancer- teachers like Aruna Mohanty, Sujata Mohapatra, Sujata Mishra, Sangeeta Dash, Bijayani Satpathy are recognized as Gurus by their students, and have worked to attain this position, and run their own institutes to propagate Odissi language, but yet not conferred the use of the prefix Guru. xxx

Sanjukta Panigrahi , in an interview with Susheela Mishra; "The young men are better teachers because they are also trained in *Pakhavaj*- playing." (Misra, 1992; 133- 134). Young male dancers were referred to as Gurus much earlier by their teachers; the Gurus, for obvious reasons of indicating the carriers of lineage of their *parampara*.

dance poses adorned the cover page of all major dailies of India, on this event (D' Souza, 1999). She not only represented a pristine beauty, well mannered in western etiquettes under her mother's guidance, with an unmatched stage presence, but also a body which represented the most ancient classical dance form of India- Odissi. A woman, who moved around in the most elite and affluent circles of the country, she was already an established personality before she embarked on the path of learning and popularising Odissi dance. She represented the image of an ideal Indian woman entrenched in traditional systems, with a modern outlook, who carved a niche for herself in the social and political circles of the country, through her art. It is interesting to note why an Odissi practitioner was selected as Miss.India. It is the dance form that claims to portray femininity in its most beautiful, pure and divine form and its direct inheritance from temple sculptures add to its mystique. The Odissi body was thoughtfully carved to depict the cultural values and codes valorised by the upper caste. Why a dancer practising any other dance form was not chosen, is the question that arises here. Firstly, Indrani's being the most prominent name in the influential circuits, secondly the Odissi body offered much more agile and curvilinear postures, as opposed to Bharatanatyam's taut and upright structure, which made Odissi's imagery more appealing for the specific requirement of such a beauty pageant, can be speculated as a few reasons for her acquiring the title, in spite of the fact that she was already married and hence, one is left pondering how was she legally legible for the title. Also, Odissi had just "arrived" around this time; a newly discovered, fresh imagery of dance, not only attracted rave reviews but also provided a much wider scope for manoeuvrability and usage for the body dancing it. It was a mutual course where not just the dancer but also the dance form stands to benefit from those practicing it. It was Indrani's crowning as Miss.India, and

later her representing the country at an international platform, which brought the much needed recognition to the dance form and to the Guru.

Sanjukta Panigrahi's Venture at Odin Teatret¹⁶

Beginning in 1980, after her first meeting with Eugenio Barba in 1977, over the time, Sanjukta Panigrahi collaborated with him and other artists on various projects. With an objective of understanding his own tradition, by placing it in confrontation with that of the others', Eugenio placed together artists with different cultural backgrounds with the purpose of carrying out a transcultural analysis of performance. At Odin, Sanjukta played the role of a primary dancer from Asia for more than a decade and even served as a member of its pedagogical committee. She collaborated with Barba and other artists from around the world for various projects, from 1980 to 1996 before her demise in 1997. She even directed western actors for "Shakuntala among the Olive Trees" (1993) that involved, Opera singers, Odin actors, Odissi dancers, musicians and performers from different cultures and styles, with the central idea being the rediscovery of a collaboration, where "Barba was to divulge into the literary classic (Kalidasa's Shakuntalam), it was somewhat removed from his interests as dramaturg-director". With the purpose of finding different points of encounter between eastern and western forms,

¹⁶ "The Odin Teatret, which continues to produce new and exciting works, was originally formed in Oslo, Norway, in 1964. In 1966 the company moved to Holstebro, a small town near the west coast of Denmark, where it has been based ever since. In its 23-year history the company has mounted productions ranging from intimate studio pieces, for audiences as small as sixty or less, to huge street spectacles encapsulating whole villages at a time... and it is the only state-supported pedagogical institute devoted to theatre research in Western Europe." (Watson, 1988; 49)

what emerged were non- definitive performative forms by using two parallel approaches to create this production (Scheno, 1996; 93). The presence of a "collective mind" comprising of some thirty scholars and directors who collaborated in Barba's work and the idea, above all, was of a journey in various stages. This gives an overview of the work Sanjukta was engaged in, at the Odin, where she used Odissi as her technical base but digressed to explore it in different contexts- work demonstrations at ISTA, for theoretical research, working through the Odissi body in the absence of a narrative, working and evolving physical ideograms and elemental compositions through improvisations, engaging with the form at the level of minimal textual support and collaborating with other bodies trained in diverse techniques, not at all acquainted with the Odissi grammar. Her body was placed in such experimental sites, which no other Odissi body had ventured into, till then. (Refer to Photograph II at the end of the research paper).

One needs to question overruling the possibility of using other Indian traditional dance forms, in place of Odissi.¹⁷ Given the presence of Odissi at Odin Teatret, one ponders on how does the performing body and its structure confront such encounters between eastern and western forms? How did Sanjukta Panigrahi, an Oriya woman, engaged in the practice of dance since childhood, trained under the most renowned Guru of Odissi dance, fill up that space? What kind of interjections, did this endeavor, mark on the trajectory of Odissi?

¹⁷ Barba did invite some of the most prominent names of Kathakali, but only for a few engagements, his main study and experimentations dealt with Indian Odissi and Japanese Buyo from the East.

Barba was drawing parallels between different eastern performative traditions, observing the division of the body, the shift in the centre of gravity and attainment of the equilibrium in the asymmetrical body. He drew analysis of the principles working in Noh, Buyo, Odissi, Balinese dance, Kathakali along with few forms from the west. However, in most of his collaborative projects, namely, *Faust*, *Shakuntala*, *Jungle Book* etc. it was Katsuko Azuma, Japanese Buyo dancer, along with Sanjukta Panigrahi, trained in Indian Odissi, who represented the dance forms of the “Oriental East”. The two bodies used different methods of applying opposing forces and tension generating dynamics, in the body. (Refer to Photograph III at the end of the research paper).

By this time Odissi had established itself into a solo based performance, whereas till the 1960s- 70s, as was the trend, the dancers used to present individual items from several forms in a single classical dance recital¹⁸. It was with Sanjukta Panigrahi that Odissi came to be presented and popularised as a full- fledged solo performance. Secondly, Odissi carried the notion of a typical Oriental dance form, belonging to the ancient temple walls, adding to its mystique. The principle of opposing forces between upper and lower body, took a very distinct shape in Odissi’s *tribhangi*, missing from Bharatanatyam’s *araimandi* and Kathakali’s *asana* (mainly upright and taught basic positions, similar to Odissi’s *chauka*).

¹⁸ “In 1960s and 1970s when Odissi had just come about, 60’s in fact was just the beginning. Indrani Rehman used to present one Kuchipudi item, one Bharatanatyam, one Odissi and one Mohiniattam. That kind of trend was there, Yamini Krishnamurthy followed, then Sanjukta Panigrahi and Sonal Mansingh bought Odissi as a full- fledged, full-length evening recital. Priyambada Mohanty was of course the first one to present it. That was the beginning.” (In conversation with Madhavi Mudgal, February, 2008).

Undoubtedly, Odissi body is deeply entrenched in a traditionalist system, Barba keen on situating it in a different context altogether, like that of an 'alien' script; *Faust*, opposite a Japanese Buyo dancer, to observe the movement negotiations between the two. It gradually became a study of differentiating energy principles in Oriental forms. Odissi was a form which was available for experimentation, unlike other Indian classical dances which had more stern boundaries and history, because it had already been almost fifty years since their reconstruction.

The involvement of the primary Odissi danseuse, along with her Guru (Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra), lent legitimacy to the project. For Barba it was Odissi in its most authentic form, Sanjukta's dancing body provided a final stamp of validity, with the approval of her Guru and his presence at the ISTA. One can only speculate the reaction of other Gurus, or of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, on such experiments being done in the strictly codified domestic cultural spaces.

Barba intended to decodify the original structures and view their interactions when placed in western thematics. The Odissi body, along with Buyo, provided an ideal tool to substantiate his performative renditions of eastern structures on western mis-en-scene¹⁹.

¹⁹ "His *Faust* returns finally to its point of departure: a Western vision conveyed by Eastern traditions reworked by a Western director ending up with a sketch which bears all the distinguishing features of Western mis-en-scene. This unification is realized also by the neutralization of one theatrical and cultural tradition by another, by the discovery of transcultural values, by "the constant factor in cultural variation"... The neutralization is also achieved by frequent parodies of one codification by another-for example, when Azuma (playing Faust) drunkenly attempts *mudras* imitating Panigrahi (playing Mephisto). The parody of one form by another implies the ability to imitate, but

However one needs to note that such experiments received the consent of the Gurus, only in the international “experimental” space, which was not regulated by traditional strictures, and hence did not pose a threat either to the sanctity of the form, or to the dancing body²⁰. The ideologies of the *parampara* exercised a stronghold on the dancers, and “safeguarded the form against such threats.” Consequently, such works, or even their later performances, did not find much espousal in the domestic sphere, of teaching, practicing and performance, which was more regulated and constricted in its functioning.

Interjecting and Questioning the Canonized body

It then becomes essential to look at what was designated as the canonized Odissi body; imbibed, endorsed and disseminated by the first generation dancers. Who were

above all to quote, rewrite, in short, to appropriate. This parody can easily become metatextual, since it implies a reflection on forms and the means of surpassing them.” (Pavis, 52- 53 *ibid*)

²⁰ Sanjukta Panigrahi, with her Guru, Kelucharan Mohapatra in an interview with Richard Schechner;

SCHECHNER: What was your reaction, Guruji, to Sanjukta experimenting?

MAHAPATRA [speaking in English]: So many things, so many ideas from experiments. New ideas come in, new points. Some new idea comes in; I introduce it into my Odissi dance. [In Oriya, translated] I am a director. I go around the world and I see many things. Many things come into my mind. I am always experimenting, all the time. While experimenting I may do correct things, I may do wrong things, but when I do something that satisfies me, then I present it. But how you present it finally, that is different. In every age, every artist carries the tradition further. So every artist has the right to create but within the basic technical framework, according to his or her own cultural traditions.

SCHECHNER: But how does Guruji feel about what you did with Eugenio yesterday, Sanjukta?

S. PANIGRAHI: It's all right as an experiment, but if I do this on the stage before an ordinary public, he'll kill me.

(Schechner, Zarilli, 1988; 130- 132)

the dancers who stuck to the canon? What was the leeway available within the canon, which could be explored and experimented with, under the consent of the Gurus? Who were the dancers delving into such explorations? In what ways did they try to expand the canon? What were the interactions with the Guru during such an experimental course? What lead dancers to frequently change their Gurus, sometimes even shifting from one style of Odissi to another? How does the technique, then become over-binding on the dancing body, ultimately leading to “exploding of the canon”?

The problem herein lies in a constant effort to be identified as belonging to the structure, to the “authentic” mould and yet confront a constant need to go beyond the prescribed limitations and to explore something new. Pathy identifies this as a tension between the “representation” and the “canon”, between the two lies the “politics of interpretation” which is in actuality “politics of interpreters” (Pathy, 2007; 290). He sees the reason for this tension in a multicultural society, which influences and changes the expectations that the spectators have from a dance performance. Such cultural transformations lead to “integration” and “incorporation”, resulting in cultural struggles over literary canon and curriculum, which “causes stress over the defining and control of legal pedagogy.”(ibid, 291)

An Oriya dancer, Sanjukta Panigrahi was herself breaking bonds and performing on modern poetry, she was also dancing to *Bengali*, *Maithili* and songs in *Braj boli*. Her experimentations at ISTA for the “Theatrum Mundi” project, called for an interaction with other dance and theatre forms. “In such performances the choreograph is abstract and the actions are expressive. Sanjukta, after performing and participating in these

workshops, must have felt the need to incorporate new elements in the realm of Odissi to make the dance form really international, multi-lingual and multi-cultural” (ibid; 297).

Even though the first generation of Odissi dancers came from similar urban backgrounds, it cannot be ascertained if their concerns lied in pursuing the form academically; their primary concern was with upliftment and proliferation of the form to establish it as a “classical” dance. They grew into the “divas” of Odissi and still retain that position. They strictly adhered to the Guru’s teachings and consequently their choreographic ventures were limited to the format established by the Gurus and accepted in the market. The performance space available to them is more often a defined, artificially created, ethno-cultural space for representing “Indian Culture” at local as well as global stage.

With the traditional repertoire, which had no solid grounding in the living traditions, working on a fixed number of items, becoming exhaustive, the ambiguities in the structure of the form became evident. Few of the first generation dancers ventured into moulding space and music through dance, to inculcate other forms and languages in their group and solo compositions, or the age-old theme based, narrative dance-dramas with themes sometimes changing from mythological to historical to contemporary and social, these experiments often proved futile with no landmark expansion in the technique and grammar of Odissi. The people who had the advantage of being the first few to introduce Odissi on stage became the pioneers, while others who learnt at the same time or a little later, by virtue of coming to the proscenium at a time when Odissi no longer was a “new” dance, were actually re-performing, and not setting a new tradition.

With the later generation of Odissi dancers, i.e. the second generation dancers such as Rekha Tandon²¹, Ananya Chatterjee²², directly trained under the pioneers, issues regarding the freedom to explore beyond the marked territories become important. As they traversed through physical territories of regions and boundaries of performance genres and performance histories they also had to live up to the expectations of a multi-cultural audience. Most of the young prominent Odissi dancers of today, with the likes of Madhumita Raut, Reela Hota, Sharmila Mukherjee debate that the form must evolve with time, with varying audiences and society. It has to adapt to the exigencies of changing times.²³ This further propels them to question about tradition being accepted as a “given” text, merely followed, in “different ways” or if it can be learnt as a language from which new texts can be written, new vocabularies can be created? Does that mean that it is acceptable to talk about these as boundaries? Can one then negotiate with these boundaries? Is the dance then living up to its ultimate goal of liberating the body?

Tradition is not any more taken to be a fixed structure, which one apes, without actually understanding and imbibing it. This can be achieved only through claiming “ownership” of the tradition, by making new work within the traditional structures and satisfying its requirements (Tandon, 2005; 150).

What then becomes an area of tension is that which “experiments” are accepted as the expansion of the canon and receive the Gurus’ consent and what evolutions are

²¹ Rekha Tandon was trained in Odissi dance under Guru Surendranath Jena, Madhavi Mudgal and Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra.

²² Ananya Chatterjee was trained in Odissi dance under Sanjukta Panigrahi.

²³ Stated in interviews conducted by the author as part of the research work in 2008.

disparaged as “anti- *shastric*” (against the canons) which gets determined by the “politics of interpretation and interpreters”. With their training in modern dance, the latter dancers tend to explore these spaces and the form through a different dynamic structure. They don’t have any positions of pioneers to be taken over. They can either fill up the dormant spaces following the same conventional, accepted route or carve out newer spaces by redefining the vocabulary, by creating their own texts through the base provided by the tradition responding to the need of “self” and/or “society”.

Photographs:



Photograph I: Guru Pratibha Jena seen here in an elaborate Odissi costume and jewelry
(Photo courtesy: Guru Pratibha Jena)



Photograph II: Sanjukta Panigrahi and Eugenio Barba, 8th ISTA, Londrina (Brazil), 1994.
(Photo courtesy: Odin Teatret Archives; www.odinteatretarchive.dk)



Photograph III: Sanjukta Panigrahi with Katsuko Azuma, 4th ISTA, Holstebro (Denmark), 1986.
(Photo courtesy: Odin Teatret Archives; www.odinteatretarchive.dk)

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