



ODISSI DANCE AND GITA GOVINDA: AN OVERVIEW

Manoranjan Nayak Ph.D. Research Scholar, Performing Art, Utkal University Of Culture,

ABSTRACT

Dance is always an art with its origin of divine attributes is intended for spiritual and religious contentment. The performance of dancing under most sacred auspices has prevailed in India through many centuries. Odissi is one of eight classical dance forms from India. Based on archaeological evidence, it is possibly the oldest surviving Indian dance form. Over the years Odissi has become one of the most popular classical dance styles. Odissi has its own temple history. It was regularly performed in Jagannath Temple, Shaivite, Vaishnavite and Shakta temples in Odisha. The divine love tales of Radha and the cowherd God Krishna are favorite themes for interpretation and a typical recital of Odissi always contain at least one or two ashtapadis (poem of eight couplets) from Jayadeva's Gita Govinda which describes in exquisite Sanskrit poetry the complex relationship between Radha and her Lord.

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Odissi is one of eight classical dance forms from India. Based on archaeological evidence, it is possibly the oldest surviving Indian dance form. Sage Bharata's ancient treatise on the performing arts, the *Natya Shastra*, speaks of four regions of India to which the origins of classical dance can be traced, one of which is "Odra Magadhi," widely believed to be a reference to the eastern state of Odisha. It is perhaps the most ancient form of Indian classical dance which till date has a strong and prominent position within a vast array of Indian dances. Whatever mention Odissi has in caves and treatises, the living tradition of the Odissi dance form has been kept up by the Maharis and the Gotipuas. Maharis are the Devadasis from Odisha. 'Mahari' - 'Nari' or 'Mahari' are the great one, 'chosen one for the seva or service to the Lord. The Maharis would sing and dance for the Deity. That was their seva to the Lord. The Maharis performed dance sequences based on the lyrics of the *Geet Govinda* (Gita Govinda) of the poet Jayadev. Before the time of Jayadev, the Maharis performed mainly *nrutya* (pure dance) and *abhinaya* based on mantras & Shlokas. Various reasons are attributed to the discontinuance of the Mahari tradition of dance and the emergence of the Gotipuas tradition. Gotipuas were young boys dressed as girls and made to dance. They were taught the dance by the Maharis. The Maharis themselves never performed outside the precincts of the temple. It was always inside the temple. In fact there were two dances of Maharis-the Bahara Gauni Maharis, who would reach the sanctum sanctorum. The tradition of Odissi dance has absorbed innovation during these processes of mediating the memory of the dance, while holding onto the dance's underlying values. In particular, spirituality remains core to the performance of this dance. The impact of the religion of Lord Jagannatha was so strong in Odisha that in the sixteenth century when neo-Vaisnavism was introduced in Odisha by Chaitanya and his followers, it was absorbed into the cult of Jagannatha till Lord Jagannatha came to be regarded as the chief deity of neo- Vaisnavism. With the temple acquiring importance as the focal point of life, the dance as a ritual performed by the Maharis grew in importance. It is this class of dancers who have kept the dance tradition alive in Odisha. The tradition had declined during the last decades of the nineteenth and the early decades of the present century. The arts in Odisha have flourished from ancient times. Architecture, sculpture, temples, the living traditions of dance, music, painting, and the all-pervading influence of the religion of Jagannatha have had a symbiotic growth. The rule of the Ganga kings extended for nearly four hundred years from 1078 to 1434. It was during the time of Anangabhimadeva that the celebrated poet Jayadeva wrote the great Sanskrit Kavya (poem), the *Gita Govinda*. So powerful was the impact of the *Gita Govinda* on the rulers and the devotees that it was regularly recited in the temple and thus the practice continues to this day. There are many

references, regarding the appointment of various musicians and dancers in the temple of Jagannatha towards the end of the Ganga dynasty. The preaching of Vaisnavism by Ramanuja and his disciples had greatly influenced the rulers. When Prataparudradeva who regulated the services of the Maharis at the temple made it compulsory for the Gita Govinda to be sung regularly in the temple, it is very likely that Ramananda taught the Maharis *abhinaya* (histrionics) to the ashtapadis of the Gita Govinda. He also arranged for the enactment of the Gita Govinda as a dance-drama. The Maharis of Odisha trace their origin to the celestial dancers Rambha and Urvashi. Legend apart, it was a common practice in India to consecrate handmaidens to the temples to entertain the gods. Copious references of this are found in the Puranas. It is well known that the Maharis were employed in the Jagannatha temple at Puri. Prataparudradeva's first inscription in Oriya dated AD 1099, located in the Jagannatha. Temple gives details of their performances and the schedule of performances during the course of the day. Yet another inscription stipulates that no other type of dancing should be performed except that by the Maharis. In the twelfth century, during the reign of Chodaganga deva, the Maharis were provided with maintenance, residence, and regular income. Madala Panji, the chronicle of Lord Jagannatha maintained daily for several centuries in the temple, gives an elaborate account of their duties and status. Besides the daily rituals, the Maharis were required to perform on special occasions and festivals. This was entrusted to the Sampradaya Nijoga class of the Maharis. On occasions like the Chandan, the Dola Jatra, the Jhulan Jatra, and the Rath Jatra the Maharis performed to entertain the Lord. During the Rath Jatra, the Maharis used to dance for nine days at the old temple.

In May, during the festival of Chandan Jatra, the Maharis used to perform in a boat in which idols of the Lord were taken for a cruise in the Chandan Pokhri, the tank near the temple.

For the first time in the history of Odisha, lyrics of Geeta Govinda were composed by applying tune. The tradition of Devadasi dance offering at Jagannath Temple was introduced by poet Jayadeva using his *Geeta Govinda*. It was performed by Devadasis inside temple in honor of Lord Jagannath and this form of music which has been sung in the world famous Jagannath temple at sacred Puri-Dham as a part of the temple services gradually took the form of traditional Odissi music as known today. The compositions of Gita Govinda were written with an object to be offered to Lord Jagannath, both in the form of music and dance. Ingredients of classical music like Raga, Tala, Geeta, Chhandas etc. of Sri Geeta Govinda were introduced in the services of the temple of the Lord Jagannath and accepted as the temple music of Odisha. This, over time, led to the foundation of Odissi that we

know today. In Gita Govinda Sri Jayadeva has not only embellished his lyrical poems with music and melodious versifications but also with philosophy, metaphysics, ontology and mysticism. His music is meant not only for the purpose to please but to enlighten through entertainment creating aesthetic emotions, a sense of spiritual love, supreme beauty and perpetual peace. Therefore Geeta Govinda has maintained an ascendancy since it was written.

The lyrics of Gita Govinda were harmoniously orchestrated with Raga-Tala as per the scriptures of Sangeeta Shastra rules prevalent those days in Odisha, and these lyrical songs propagated Rasa. These songs were specifically of Ashtapada or eight stanzas, based on Dhruba or Panchali or one of the four Ragas of Indian short songs that was of Chitrakala category. These songs were composed based on traditional rules of Utkalian Sangeeta Shastra scripture. Jayadeva's Gita Govinda' is also called as the prose-music from which Odissi dance emerged as a great tradition in the cultural history of Odisha. Odissi dance is usually performed to the accompaniment of Odissi music. As mentioned, originally Odissi was sung to the dance of the Mahari/Devadasis at the Jagannath Temple, and was later sung to the dances by young boys, dressed as girls, known as the Gotipua performing Odissi dance. The classical music and dance tradition of Odisha also remain unaffected and independent due to its association with the tradition of Lord Jagannath, patronage by the mighty emperors of Utkal, and the tremendous impact of great Odia musicians like Sri Jayadeva, Hari Nayak, Narahari Mohapatra, Krishnadas Badajena Mohapatra and many others. GitaGovinda was composed before 1150 A.D. and Gita Govinda dance drama was enacted in the Puri temple during the reign of Chodaganga Deva and Kamarnava Deva. Jayadev was a learned poet of spiritual devotion and Gita Govinda was his passionate illustrious composition. It constitute lyrical poetries that is organized into twelve chapters. Each chapter is further sub-divided into twenty four divisions called Prabandhas. The Prabandhas contain couplets grouped into eights, called the Ashtapadis. It is well known that Jayadev was an ardent devotee of Lord Jagannath and his Gita Govinda was solely written for the Deities of Jagannath Temple of Puri. Jayadeva had composed the Gita Govinda for Lord Jagannath and His passionate devotees. He had addressed his devotees of all classes to understand, learn, cherish and sing the glory of love to unite with him through Vishnaba Bhava. Poet Jayadeva with his submission of Gita Govinda at the lotus feet of Lord Jagannath had implemented the system of superior Bhaktibhaba through music and dance offering.

Jayadeva with his simple spoken language of Gita Govinda was able to reach out into the hearts of lay public. He is revered with such high esteem in the literary and musical traditions of India for laying a grass root foundation to Odissi dnace. Undoubtedly, most of the Odissi dance compositions based on Radha-Krishna or Krishna-related epics were highly influenced by Gita Govinda's extraordinary elusive subject and supply of lyrical classical architecture to certain extent but the ones that were highly popularized and upgraded the status of Odissi dance since past.

Odissi dance based on Odissi music has already attained the classical status because of its frequent performance both inside and outside the country. Practitioners across generations have regarded the relationship between the master and the disciple as special and sacred. Orally transmitted chants in Sanskrit that are ritually sung by dancers before a performance of the dance reveal the position of reverence that the master enjoys. As a temple-tradition, the space of performance is also considered auspicious. When the dance began to be performed outside the temple, the

association of sacredness continued. The sacredness of the body of the dancer and the space where the dance is performed has traditionally been regarded as central to its value-system.

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