



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Music

**ODISHI MUSIC IN DIASPORA:
RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY THROUGH
SOUND**

KEY WORDS: Odishi Music, Diaspora, Cultural Memory, Ethnomusicology, Digital CultureJEL: Z11, Z13, F22, Z19

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ABSTRACT

Odishi music, traditionally rooted in the ritual and cultural landscape of Odisha, has increasingly travelled beyond its geographic origins through migration and digital circulation. This paper explores how Odishi music functions as a medium for identity reconstruction within diaspora communities, where cultural belonging is negotiated through sound, memory and performance. Drawing on theories of diaspora, cultural memory and ethnomusicology, the study argues that Odishi music in diasporic contexts is not merely preserved but actively reinterpreted and hybridized (Clifford, 1994; Appadurai, 1996). Through practices such as community performances, online pedagogy and festival-based dissemination, migrants transform Odishi music into a sonic homeland, sustaining emotional and cultural continuity across distance (Stokes, 1994; Bohlman, 2011). At the same time, the shift from temple-centered ritual to global stage and digital platforms alters its aesthetic, pedagogic and devotional dimensions (Mohanty, 2007). The paper highlights how second-generation practitioners negotiate authenticity and innovation, often blending Odishi traditions with global musical influences. By situating Odishi music within diaspora studies, this research contributes to broader discussions on transnational identity, cultural resilience and the role of sound in belonging, demonstrating that music operates as both archive and agency in the making of diasporic selves.

INTRODUCTION

Global migration has transformed the ways in which cultural practices are transmitted, experienced and reimagined. Among these, music plays a crucial role in shaping diasporic identities by acting as both a repository of memory and a medium of adaptation (Stokes, 1994; Bohlman, 2011). Odishi music, an integral component of Odisha's cultural heritage, is no exception. Traditionally embedded in temple rituals, devotional practices and performance traditions, Odishi music has increasingly found new life in diasporic contexts.

This paper examines how Odishi music operates as a tool for identity reconstruction among diaspora communities. It asks: *How does Odishi music sustain cultural belonging outside its native context? How is it transformed in the process?* By integrating insights from diaspora theory, ethnomusicology and Indian aesthetic traditions, the study argues that Odishi music in diaspora becomes a dynamic site of negotiation between memory and modernity.

Theoretical Framework: Diaspora, Memory and Sound

Diaspora is not merely a condition of displacement but a continuous process of identity formation shaped by memory, imagination and cultural practice (Clifford, 1994; Brah, 1996). Appadurai's (1996) concept of "mediascapes" highlights how global flows of media enable migrants to maintain connections with their homeland while simultaneously reconfiguring cultural expressions.

Music, in this context, serves as a powerful medium of cultural memory. According to Stokes (1994), music constructs place by evoking emotional attachments to specific cultural geographies. Bohlman (2011) further argues that diasporic music is inherently hybrid, reflecting both continuity and transformation. Within Indian aesthetics, the concept of *rasa* emphasizes shared emotional experience, suggesting that music can recreate a sense of belonging even in displacement (Bharata, trans. 1996; Abhinavagupta, trans. 2005). Thus, Odishi music in diaspora can be understood as a sonic bridge between past and present, homeland and host land.

Odishi Music: Context and Characteristics

Odishi music evolved within the religious and cultural ecosystem of Odisha, closely associated with Jagannath culture, temple rituals and dance traditions (Mohanty, 2007; Patnaik, 2015). It is characterized by:

- Raga-based melodic structures

- Emphasis on lyrical and devotional expression
- Integration with Odissi dance and abhinaya
- Rhythmic fluidity and emotional depth

Historically, Odishi music functioned as ritual sound, embedded in sacred contexts rather than public performance spaces (Dash, 2014). However, modernization and globalization have gradually shifted its practice toward stage performances and institutional teaching.

Odishi Music in Diaspora: Spaces and Practices
a. Community and Cultural Associations

Diaspora communities often recreate cultural identity through associations, festivals and gatherings. Odishi music is performed during events such as Rath Yatra celebrations, cultural festivals and community programs. These performances serve as collective rituals, reinforcing shared identity and belonging (Brah, 1996; Stokes, 1994).

b. Digital Pedagogy and Transmission

The rise of digital platforms has significantly transformed the transmission of Odishi music. Online classes, YouTube tutorials and virtual performances allow practitioners to access training regardless of geographic location (Appadurai, 1996; Rao et al., 2021).

This shift from guru-shishya parampara to digital pedagogy alters the embodied nature of learning, raising questions about authenticity and depth of transmission.

c. Stage Performance and Global Audience

In diaspora contexts, Odishi music is often presented on global stages, detached from its original ritual environment.

This transformation leads to:

- Standardization of repertoire
- Emphasis on audience accessibility
- Reduction of contextual nuances

As a result, Odishi music becomes both heritage and performance, negotiating between preservation and adaptation (Bohlman, 2011).

Music as Sonic Homeland

For diaspora communities, music functions as a sonic homeland, providing emotional continuity in unfamiliar environments (Stokes, 1994). Odishi music, with its strong association with devotion and cultural memory, plays a crucial role in this process.

Listening to or performing Odishi music can evoke:

- Nostalgia for homeland
- Spiritual connection
- Collective identity

This aligns with the concept of “imagined communities,” where shared cultural practices create a sense of belonging beyond physical boundaries (Anderson, 1983).

Negotiating Authenticity and Hybridity

Diasporic Odishi music is not a static preservation of tradition but a dynamic process of reinterpretation. Second-generation practitioners often adapt the music to contemporary contexts, blending it with other musical forms or incorporating modern elements.

This hybridity reflects what Bhabha (1994) describes as a “third space,” where new cultural meanings emerge. However, it also raises debates about authenticity:

- What constitutes “pure” Odishi music?
- Who has the authority to define it?

These questions highlight the tension between cultural preservation and innovation, central to diasporic cultural practices.

Challenges and Transformations

a. Loss of Context

The removal of Odishi music from its ritual setting can lead to a loss of its deeper cultural and spiritual meanings (Mohanty, 2007).

b. Fragmented Learning

Digital and institutional modes of learning may lack the immersive experience of traditional training, affecting the transmission of subtle aspects such as *rasa* and *abhinaya* (Vatsyayan, 1977).

c. Cultural Representation

Diaspora performances often cater to multicultural audiences, leading to selective representation and simplification of complex traditions (Bohlman, 2011).

Odishi Music as Cultural Agency

Despite these challenges, Odishi music in diaspora demonstrates remarkable resilience. It becomes a form of cultural agency, enabling communities to assert identity and maintain continuity.

Music serves as:

- A tool for intergenerational transmission
- A marker of cultural distinction
- A medium of emotional expression

In this sense, Odishi music is not merely preserved but recreated, reflecting the evolving nature of diasporic identity (Clifford, 1994).

CONCLUSION

Odishi music in diaspora illustrates the transformative power of sound in shaping identity. Far from being a static cultural artifact, it becomes a dynamic medium through which individuals and communities negotiate belonging, memory and modernity.

By functioning as a sonic homeland, Odishi music bridges the gap between past and present, enabling diaspora communities to remain connected to their roots while adapting to new cultural environments. This study underscores the importance of viewing music not only as an art form but as a living cultural process, central to the construction of diasporic identities.

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