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## Eternal Rhythms: The Sculptural Symphony and Cultural Odyssey of Odissi Dance

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### Abstract

Odissi dance, a luminous jewel in the crown of India's classical performing arts, emerges from the sun-kissed shores of Odisha, where temple walls whisper ancient tales of devotion and divine ecstasy. Rooted in the sacred rituals of the Jagannath temple at Puri and immortalized in the sinuous curves of stone sculptures, Odissi transcends mere movement to embody a profound synthesis of spirituality, sensuality, and sculptural grace. This research article traces its historicity from the archaeological echoes of second-century BCE caves at Udayagiri and Khandagiri to the resplendent friezes of the Konark Sun Temple, revealing how Odissi evolved as a bridge between the ethereal *Natyashastra* of Bharata Muni and the lived devotion of Mahari dancers and acrobatic Gotipuas. Drawing on temple iconography, literary treatises like the *Gita Govinda*, and the rhythmic imperatives of Vaishnavism, the discussion illuminates Odissi's structural elegance its *Tribhanga* poses, fluid *Bhangas*, and evocative *Abhinaya* while confronting periods of decline under invasions and its phoenix-like revival in the twentieth century through gurus like Kelucharan Mohapatra. Amidst Odisha's cultural mosaic, Odissi stands as a testament to resilience, where stone maidens (*Alasa Kanyas*) and celestial dancers (*Apsaras*) pulse with the same life force that animates modern stages. By weaving historical evidence with philosophical depth, this study underscores Odissi's role in preserving India's pluralistic ethos, inviting scholars and enthusiasts to rediscover its timeless allure as a dance of cosmic union and human transcendence.

### Keywords

Odissi dance, *Natyashastra*, temple sculptures, Mahari tradition, Gotipua acrobatics, Jagannath cult, *Tribhanga* pose, *Abhinaya* expression, Vaishnavism, cultural revival, Kalinga architecture, Bharata Muni, *Gita Govinda*, Devadasi system, rhythmic *Bhangas*

### Introduction

In the cradle of antiquity, where the Bay of Bengal's waves caress Odisha's golden sands, dance unfurled not as mere entertainment but as a celestial dialogue between the mortal coil and the divine. Odissi, this exquisite classical form, is more than a sequence of gestures; it is a living scripture etched in the undulating lines of temple friezes, a rhythmic incantation that summons the gods from stone to flesh. As the earliest art form birthed by humanity, dance allows the spirit to transcend the mundane, weaving transactions of rhythm in space and time, much like language itself a universal lexicon of emotion and ecstasy. In Odisha, this language finds its most poetic fluency, preserved in the sacred precincts of temples that stand as eternal sentinels of cultural memory.

Odisha, ancient Kalinga, a verdant bridge between India's northern vigor and southern serenity, has long been a crucible of artistic alchemy. Its coastal plains and riverine veins facilitated not just trade but a confluence of ideas, birthing a heritage where Jainism, Buddhism, Shaivism, and Vaishnavism danced in harmonious discord. Here, dance was no peripheral adornment but the very pulse of worship, an outward manifestation of inner

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liberation *Moksha* the sublime release from samsara's cycle. Hinduism, with its philosophical tapestry, posits music and dance as yogic paths to the divine, intertwined with life's cosmic play. Ritual, from pre-Aryan rites to post-Vedic iconography, elevated song and movement to sacraments, birthing forms that echo the Supreme Lord's incarnations: Krishna's Natavara charm and Shiva's Nataraja fury.

Odissi, then, is the regional blossom of this pan-Indian garden, its petals unfurling from temple origins where architects, sculptors, dancers, and musicians collaborated in divine synergy. The *Natyashastra*, Bharata Muni's seminal treatise, nods to the Odra-Magadhi style Odissi's precursor classifying it among four regional *vrittis*, a testament to its antiquity predating even the text's composition around the second century BCE. Archaeological whispers from Rani Gumpha caves corroborate this: friezes of celestial dancers encircling chaitya trees, accompanied by veenas and mardalas, capture the earliest staged spectacles under Jain emperor Kharavela, who proclaimed himself *Gandharva-Veda-Buddha*, maestro of the arts.

Yet Odissi's soul resides in Odisha's temples Bhubaneswar's Lingaraja, Puri's Jagannath, Konark's solar chariot where dance transcended ritual to become cultural oxygen. Dynasties like the Bhaumakaras (eighth century CE) erected Shaivite shrines pulsing with Shiva's tandava; Kesari kings, self-styled Nritya Kesari, elevated Brahmanism, paving the way for Jagannath's syncretic cult. The Ganga rulers (twelfth century) formalized Devadasi traditions, consecrating Maharis as "great women" devoted to the Lord, their performances integral to daily *sevas*. These temple servitors, clad in resplendent silks, embodied *abhinaya's* fourfold grace: *angika* (body), *vachika* (voice), *aharya* (adornments), and *sattvika* (temperament), narrating epics from *Ramayana* to *Gita Govinda*.

The *Gita Govinda*, Jayadeva's twelfth-century opus, infuses Odissi with erotic-mystical sringara rasa, celebrating Krishna-Radha's amours as paths to bhakti. Yet this devotion was shadowed by Gotipua boys, trained in *akhadas* for martial prowess yet clad as maidens, their acrobatic *bandhas* a secular counterpoint to Mahari solemnity. Invasions Kalachuri raids, Tughlaq's fourteenth-century depredations dimmed the flame, scattering dancers into courts as concubines, but resilience endured. The twentieth century's revival, spearheaded by gurus like Pankaj Charan Das and Kelucharan Mohapatra, fused Mahari poise with Gotipua vigor, globalizing Odissi while honoring its roots.

This article delves into Odissi's odyssey: its archaeological cradle, sculptural symphony, religious renaissance, structural splendor, and modern metamorphosis. Through lenses of history, philosophy, and performance, it unveils how Odissi, like Odisha's monoliths, defies entropy eternal, evocative, eternally evolving. In an era of cultural

homogenization, Odissi reminds us: true art is not frozen in time but dances through it, a *tribhanga* of past, present, and infinite possibility.

### **The Antiquarian Echoes: Origins and Archaeological Foundations**

Odissi's genesis is shrouded in legend yet illuminated by stone, a narrative commencing in the rock-hewn sanctuaries of Udayagiri and Khandagiri (second century BCE). These Jaina caves, hewn for ascetic repose, brim with vignettes of revelry: devotees encircling sacred trees in rhythmic abandon, musicians wielding flutes and cymbals, dancers frozen mid-leap in what scholars deem proto-Odissi grace. Kharavela's Hathigumpha inscription heralds him as *Gandharva-Veda-Buddha*, patron of a spectacle blending music, drama, and dance India's inaugural epigraphic nod to performative splendor.

The *Natyashastra*, Bharata Muni's magnum opus (circa 200 BCE–200 CE), codifies this vitality, delineating Odra-Magadhi as one of four *vrittis*: a style flourishing in eastern realms like Kalinga and Odra (modern Odisha). Its 108 *karanas* cadenced transitions of limb and torso mirror Odissi's fluidic *bhargas*, while *sthanakas* (poses) evoke the *tribhanga*, that thrice-bent arc symbolizing life's serpentine journey. Yet Odissi predates even this treatise; Rani Gumpha's friezes, predating *Natyashastra* by centuries, depict orchestrated ensembles a danseuse before the nepithyagriha, flanked by drummers and flutists capturing dynamic arrestment akin to modern *nritta*.

Post-Kharavela (third century CE), Buddhism's Mahayana bloom infused Odissi with tantric fervor. Vajrayana shrines at Ratnagiri and Lalitagiri (eighth–ninth centuries) teem with deities in kinetic poses: Marichi's uplifted udhvajanu, Vajravarahi's alidha thrust. These are not static icons but choreographed invocations, where dance bridges samsara and nirvana. By the sixth century, Kosaleswara temple's *tribhanga* figures exude feminine allure, their s-curves a prelude to Odissi's *lasya* elegance gentle, erotic counterpoint to Shiva's *tandava* fury.

### **Temple Tapestries: The Devadasi Legacy and Sculptural Narratives**

Odisha's temples are Odissi's true proscenium, where dance and divinity entwine in eternal pas de deux. The Parasurameswara (seventh century CE), Odisha's earliest intact shrine, enshrines chauka's geometric austerity four right angles at shoulder, elbow, thigh, knee beside tandava frenzies of Nataraja. Vaital Deul's Chamunda portal frames salabhanjikas entwined with lotuses, their *ardhamandali* deflection a sculptural sonnet to natya's poise. Mukteswara (tenth century), "poem in stone," dazzles with *navikas* in *alaskanya* languor, eight-armed Ganesha mid-nritya, and ceiling quartets of orchestral revelry echoes of *abhinaya's* *sattvika* depth.

The Ganga era (eleventh–thirteenth centuries) elevates this to apotheosis. Chodaganga Deva's Jagannath temple, syncretic hearth of tribal, Buddhist, and Vaishnava flames, institutionalizes Mahari sevas: Devadasis as "servitresses of God," their mahari (great women) dances daily offerings from *Gita Govinda's sringara* verses. *Ekanta Seva's* intimate palanquin rituals, tutored by Ramananda Pattnaik, fused *nritta's* precision with *nritya's* emotive fire. Prataprudra Deva's patronage birthed six Mahari castes Bhitara Gauni to Rudra Ganika ensuring chaste devotion amid societal esteem.

Konark's Surya Deva chariot (mid-thirteenth century) is Odissi's sculptural zenith: 24 wheels propel a ratha of rhythm, where *alaskanyas* command horizons, their *bandha* contortions human pyramids of limb and longing defy gravity's tyranny. *Natamandapa's* pillars teem with diminutive dancers, marginalia alive with unspoken narratives; monumental flutists and mridanga virtuosos overlook earthly expanse, their free-standing forms a bold riposte to Vaital's peeping charis. Here, Odissi materializes as cosmic mandala: Tandava's vigor in Shiva's *pralaya* whirl, *Lasya's* allure in Parvati's serpentine sway.

Gotipuas, Ramachandra Deva's seventeenth-century innovation, inject acrobatic vitality. Akhadas, martial gymnasia, groomed boys as girl-dancers, their oil-slicked limbs mastering bhujangasana coils and *urdhva hasta* leaps secular balms to Mahari's temple sanctity. Disdained by Vaishnava purists yet resilient, Gotipuas preserved Odissi's lexicon through invasions, their dal troupes a folkloric lifeline.

### **Religious Renaissance: From Shaiva Fury to Vaishnava Bliss**

Odissi's spiritual sinew threads through Odisha's faiths. Shaivism's Sailodbhava (seventh–eighth centuries) and Bhaumakara (eighth–ninth) eras yield Nataraja reliefs at Sisireswara, where Shiva's *ugra tandava* twelve variants from Ananda to Pralaya pulses with destructive creation. Tantra's infusion, via Vajrayana, births batu *nritya*: Bhairava's feral leaps, Batuka's youthful vigor.

The Kesari (ninth–tenth centuries) zenith, under Nritya Kesari Yajati, weds Shaivism to nascent Vaishnavism, Mukteswara's Ganesha *nritya* a harmonious herald. Yet eleventh-century Gangas usher Vaishnavism's triumph: Anantavarman Chodaganga's Jagannath, Vishnu's tribal avatar, synthesizes cults. Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, Krishna-Radha's erotic mysticism, scripts Odissi's *abhinaya vachika* chants evoking *sringara's* bliss, *aharya* silks mirroring Radha's adornments.

This pluralism Shiva's tandava fury, Vishnu's *lasya* charm defines Odissi's *rasa* palette: *karuna* pathos in Rama's exile, *veera* valor in Arjuna's bow. Dynastic patronage, from Chedis to Suryas, ensured dance's ritual primacy, *Madala*

*Panji* chronicles attesting Mahari sevas as Jagannath's daily breath.

### **Structural Splendor: Bhangas, Mudras, and the Anatomy of Grace**

**Odissi's anatomy is geometry of grace:** *bhangas* as symmetric bends *chauka's* stoic square, *tribhanga's* serpentine S interweave *nritta* (pure rhythm), *nritya* (expressive narrative), and *natya* (dramatic enactment). Footwork's *murchhanas* pulse with *pakhawaj's talas*; torso's undulations evoke *konarak* wheels; *hastas pataka's* wing, *katakamukha's* beak narrate Gita's amours.

**Abhinaya's quartet breathes life:** *angika's tribhanga* sways Radha's longing, *vachika's Gitagovinda* verses sigh bhakti, *aharya's* silver anklets chime devotion, *sattvika's* involuntary shivers transmute ecstasy. *Bandha nritya's* acrobatics, Gotipua's gift, defy anatomy human lotuses blooming in impossible arcs while *moksha's* climax liberates the soul in rhythmic *nirvana*.

### **Shadows and Dawn: Decline, Revival, and Global Resonance**

Muslim incursions (fourteenth century) Tughlaq's temple razings scattered Maharis into concubinage, dance halls crumbling to dust. Yet Gotipuas endured, their akhada vigor a subterranean flame. British suppression (nineteenth century) branded Devadasis "nautch girls," but independence (1947) ignited revival: Congress cultural academies, Sangeet Natak Akademi (1952) championed Odissi.

Pankaj Charan Das's Mahari fidelity, Kelucharan Mohapatra's Gotipua fusion tutoring Indrani Rahman, Sanjukta Panigrahi birthed a renaissance. Guru Kelu's choreography, blending sculpture's stasis with breath's flow, globalized Odissi: Alarmélu's *lasya* finesse, Madhavi Mudgal's intellectual depth. Today, Odissi troupes tour continents, its *tribhanga* a universal emblem of resilience adapting fusion with flamenco, yet unyielding to its Kalingan core.

### **Conclusion**

Odissi dance, born of Odisha's temple womb, endures as a luminous thread in India's cultural loom interweaving antiquity's stone whispers with modernity's vibrant pulse. From Udayagiri's proto-friezes to Konark's chariot crescendo, its journey mirrors Kalinga's odyssey: invasions weathered, faiths fused, devotions danced into eternity. The Maharis' solemn sevas and Gotipuas' acrobatic defiance preserved its essence through tempests, while gurus like Mohapatra resurrected its glory, gifting the world a form where body bends to spirit's will.

In Odissi's *tribhanga*, we glimpse life's paradox: rigid geometry yielding fluid grace, mortal form channeling divine *rasa*. As Bharata's *Natyashastra* endures, so does Odissi challenging homogenization, bridging East and West,

temple and stage. It beckons us: in rhythm's embrace, find Moksha's whisper, for true art does not mimic the gods; it awakens them within. May Odissi's eternal rhythms inspire generations, a sculptural symphony echoing across oceans and epochs.

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