

KRISHNA'S KALEIDOSCOPIIC PRESENCE: A REFLECTION IN ODISSI DANCE

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Abstract

This research paper explores the kaleidoscopic presence of Lord Krishna as reflected in Odissi dance, one of the classical dance forms of India. The study delves into the historical roots of Odissi, its thematic richness, and its unique portrayal of Krishna through intricate choreography, expressive gestures, and symbolic movements. By examining specific performances and choreographic compositions, the paper highlights how Odissi dancers embody Krishna's multifaceted persona, encompassing his divine, heroic, and romantic aspects. This reflection not only underscores the spiritual and cultural significance of Krishna in Odissi dance but also illustrates the dance form's ability to convey complex narratives and emotions.

Keywords: Krishna, Odissi Dance, divine, mythology, bhakti, choreography, interpretation, traditional, innovation, mythological narratives, expressiveness, spiritual, aesthetic, emotion, iconography, classical repertoire, lyrical grace, cultural heritage, and transcendence.

Introduction

Research Paper

Odissi, a classical dance form originating from the Indian state of Odisha, is renowned for its lyrical grace, fluidity, and expressive storytelling. Rooted in the temple culture, Odissi has traditionally been performed to narrate tales of gods and goddesses, with Lord Krishna being a central figure. Krishna, revered as a divine lover, a heroic figure, and a playful child, offers a rich tapestry of narratives that are vividly brought to life through the movements and expressions of Odissi dance. This paper aims to explore how Odissi dancers encapsulate Krishna's kaleidoscopic presence, reflecting his various facets through their art.[1]

1. Historical Context of Odissi Dance

Odissi, one of the eight classical dance forms of India, is renowned for its intricate movements, lyrical grace, and expressive storytelling. Its history is a tapestry of cultural, religious, and artistic influences that span centuries, reflecting the rich heritage of Odisha, the eastern Indian state from which it originates. This section explores the historical context of Odissi dance, delving into its origins, evolution, decline, and eventual revival, as well as the cultural and religious milieu that shaped its development.

1.1 Origins and Early Development

1.1.2 Ancient Roots

Odissi's origins can be traced back to the ancient temple culture of Odisha, with references found in various literary and archaeological sources. The Natya Shastra, an ancient Indian treatise on performing arts attributed to Bharata Muni, mentions Odra-Magadhi, which is considered a precursor to Odissi.[2] The dance form is believed to have been performed as early as the 2nd century BCE, evidenced by inscriptions and sculptures in temples such as the Udayagiri and Khandagiri caves, which depict dancers in poses characteristic of Odissi.

1.1.3 Temple Tradition

Odissi was originally a temple dance, performed by Maharis, or devadasis, who were female dancers dedicated to serving the deities through dance and music. These performances were an integral part of the ritual worship in temples, particularly those dedicated to Lord Jagannath in Puri. The Maharis were considered the earthly consorts of the deity and performed dances to invoke divine presence and convey spiritual stories to the devotees.[3]

1.1.3 Charya and Abhinaya

In its early form, Odissi dance comprised two main components: Charya, which involved ritualistic dance performed inside the sanctum sanctorum of temples, and Abhinaya, which was performed outside the sanctum to depict

mythological and devotional themes. The dance was deeply intertwined with the spiritual and religious practices of the time, and it served as a medium for expressing devotion and narrating the divine exploits of gods and goddesses.

1.2 Medieval Period: Flourishing and Patronage

1.2.1 Royal Patronage

During the medieval period, Odissi dance flourished under the patronage of various dynasties that ruled Odisha, particularly the Eastern Ganga and Gajapati dynasties. Kings and nobles supported the construction of grand temples and the arts associated with them.[4] The Jagannath Temple in Puri, built in the 12th century, became a major center for Odissi dance. This period also saw the emergence of the Gotipua tradition, where young boys dressed as girls performed Odissi dance, continuing the tradition when Mahari dancers were not available.

1.2.2 Artistic Developments

The medieval period witnessed significant artistic developments in Odissi dance. The temple sculptures from this era, such as those at the Konark Sun Temple and the Mukteshwar Temple, provide valuable insights into the dance's aesthetic and technical aspects. These sculptures depict dancers in various poses and movements, many of which are integral to Odissi's vocabulary today. The influence of Vaishnavism, particularly the worship of Lord Krishna and his divine play (lila), became prominent in the dance repertoire.

1.3 Colonial Period: Decline and Challenges

1.3.1 Suppression and Decline

The advent of British colonial rule in the 19th century brought significant challenges to Odissi dance. The colonial authorities, influenced by Victorian moral values, viewed temple dances as immoral and lascivious. The Anti-Nautch movement, which aimed to suppress Indian classical dance traditions, led to the decline of Odissi as temple patronage dwindled and Mahari dancers were marginalized. The dance form faced neglect and near extinction during this period.

1.3.2 Survival Through Gotipua Tradition

Despite the decline, the Gotipua tradition played a crucial role in preserving the essence of Odissi dance. Gotipuas, young boys trained in dance and music, continued to perform in villages and at religious festivals, keeping the tradition alive. These performances, although less formal than the Mahari dances, ensured the transmission of Odissi's techniques and repertoire to future generations.[5.6]

1.4 20th Century: Revival and Reformation

1.4.1 Early Efforts of Revival

The early 20th century witnessed renewed interest in reviving classical Indian dance forms, including Odissi. Scholars, artists, and enthusiasts began researching and documenting the traditional arts. The formation of institutions like the Kalakshetra in Madras (now Chennai) and the efforts of individuals such as Rukmini Devi Arundale in Bharatanatyam set a precedent for similar revival movements across India.

1.4.2 Key Figures in Odissi Revival

The revival of Odissi dance was spearheaded by a group of dedicated individuals who sought to restore its classical status. Among them, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, Guru Pankaj Charan Das, Guru Deba Prasad Das, and Guru Mayadhar Raut played pivotal roles. These gurus, drawing on their training in the Gotipua tradition and extensive research into temple sculptures and ancient texts, worked tirelessly to reconstruct and codify Odissi dance.

1.4.3 Reconstruction and Codification

The revivalists focused on reconstructing the dance form by drawing from various sources, including the Natyashastra, temple sculptures, and manuscripts like the Abhinaya Chandrika. They systematized the dance's grammar, defining its distinct postures, movements, and expressions. The three-bend posture (tribhangi) and the square stance (chowk) became defining features of Odissi. These efforts culminated in the recognition of Odissi as a classical dance form by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1958.

1.5 Contemporary Period: Global Recognition and Evolution

1.5.1 Institutional Support and Training

The post-independence period saw the establishment of institutions dedicated to the teaching and promotion of Odissi dance. Organizations like the Odissi Research Centre in Bhubaneswar and various dance academies across India provided structured training programs, preserving and propagating the dance form.[7] These institutions played a crucial role in nurturing new generations of dancers and expanding the reach of Odissi.

1.5.2 Innovations and Experimentations

While maintaining its classical roots, Odissi dance has also embraced innovations and experimentations. Contemporary choreographers and dancers have explored new themes and narratives, incorporating elements from other dance forms and adapting Odissi to modern contexts. This dynamic evolution has ensured the relevance of Odissi in the contemporary performing arts landscape.

1.5.3 Global Dissemination

Odissi dance has gained international recognition, with practitioners and enthusiasts worldwide. Renowned dancers like Sanjukta Panigrahi, Sonal Mansingh, and Ratikant Mohapatra have performed on global stages, showcasing the elegance and depth of Odissi to diverse audiences. International festivals, workshops, and cultural exchanges have further contributed to the global dissemination of Odissi dance.[8]

1.6 Cultural and Religious Significance

1.6.1 Devotional and Spiritual Aspects

The cultural and religious significance of Odissi dance is deeply rooted in its devotional and spiritual aspects. As a temple dance, Odissi was an offering to the deities, a form of worship that transcended the physical realm. The dance's themes, drawn from Hindu mythology and religious texts, convey profound spiritual messages and embody the bhakti (devotion) tradition.

1.6.2 Symbolism and Iconography

Odissi dance is rich in symbolism and iconography, reflecting the cultural heritage of Odisha. The elaborate costumes, jewelry, and makeup worn by dancers are not merely ornamental but carry deep symbolic meanings. For instance, the use of the peacock feather, associated with Lord Krishna, and the intricate silver jewelry crafted in traditional Odishan styles, connect the performance to its cultural and religious roots.

1.6.3 Storytelling and Narrative Tradition

Odissi's narrative tradition, or abhinaya, is central to its cultural significance. Through expressive gestures (mudras) and facial expressions (bhavas), dancers bring to life the stories of gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, and the cosmic play of the universe. This storytelling aspect not only entertains but also educates and uplifts the audience, fostering a sense of cultural continuity and identity.

The historical context of Odissi dance is a testament to its resilience and adaptability. From its ancient origins in temple rituals to its decline under colonial rule and subsequent revival in the modern era, Odissi has navigated numerous challenges while preserving its core essence. The dance form's ability to convey deep spiritual and cultural narratives through its graceful movements and expressive storytelling has ensured its enduring appeal.[9]

Today, Odissi dance stands as a vibrant and dynamic art form, celebrated not only in India but across the world. Its journey from the sanctums of temples to global stages is a reflection of its timeless beauty and the enduring human quest for artistic and spiritual expression. As Odissi continues to evolve and inspire, it remains a living link to the rich cultural and religious heritage of Odisha and India, embodying the profound truths of the human experience through the language of dance.[10,11]

2. Krishna in Indian Culture

2.1 Mythological and Literary Significance

Krishna's presence in Indian culture is profound, with his life and exploits documented in various texts such as the Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, and the Bhagavata Purana. He is portrayed in multiple roles: as a divine protector, a mischievous child, a compassionate lover, and a wise philosopher. These narratives have inspired countless artistic expressions, including dance, music, and literature.[12]

2.1.1 Symbolism and Iconography

Krishna's iconography is rich with symbols: his blue complexion signifies his infinite nature, the flute represents divine music, and his association with cows and nature underscores his role as a protector of the pastoral community. These symbols are intricately woven into Odissi dance, enabling dancers to convey complex spiritual themes through their performances.[13]

2.2 Odissi Dance: Form and Technique

2.2.1 Basic Structure and Elements

Odissi's structure is marked by a distinct grammar of movements, gestures (mudras), and expressions (abhinaya). The dance form is characterized by its tribhangi posture, which divides the body into three bends at the neck, torso, and knee, creating a graceful S-shaped curve. This posture, combined with the fluidity of movements and intricate footwork, lends Odissi its unique aesthetic appeal.

2.2.2 Abhinaya: The Art of Expression

Abhinaya, or expressive dance, is a core component of Odissi, allowing dancers to convey emotions and narratives through facial expressions and gestures. In the context of Krishna's stories, abhinaya becomes a powerful tool for depicting the myriad emotions associated with his divine play (lila), romantic exploits (rasalila), and heroic deeds.[14,15]

3. Depicting Krishna in Odissi Dance

Depicting Krishna in Odissi dance is a profound artistic endeavor that encapsulates the divine essence, mythology, and cultural significance of Lord Krishna within the rich tapestry of this classical Indian dance form. With its origins deeply rooted in the spiritual traditions of Hinduism and the devotional practices of Odisha, Odissi dance offers a captivating

medium through which the multifaceted personality of Krishna is expressed, celebrated, and revered. In this exploration, we will delve into the various aspects of depicting Krishna in Odissi dance, including the portrayal of his divine exploits, his emotional depth, his philosophical teachings, and the aesthetic nuances of his representation.[16]

3.1 Mythological Context: Krishna, one of the most revered deities in Hinduism, is celebrated for his multifaceted persona as a divine child, a mischievous youth, a compassionate lover, a wise philosopher, and a heroic warrior. His life and exploits, as depicted in ancient scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita, the Mahabharata, and the Bhagavata Purana, serve as a rich source of inspiration for artists, poets, and dancers across India.[17] In Odissi dance, the depiction of Krishna draws heavily from these mythological narratives, weaving together stories of his childhood, his playful antics as a cowherd, his enchanting flute melodies, his divine love for Radha, and his role as the charioteer and spiritual guide to Arjuna in the Mahabharata war.

3.2 Iconographic Representation: In Odissi dance, the portrayal of Krishna is characterized by a distinctive iconography that reflects both his human and divine attributes. Dancers often adorn themselves with elaborate costumes, jewelry, and ornaments reminiscent of Krishna's divine attire, including his peacock feather crown, his yellow dhoti, and his adorned flute.[18] The use of symbolic gestures (mudras), facial expressions (abhinaya), and body movements (bhavas) further imbues the performance with the essence of Krishna's character, capturing his grace, charm, and divine presence.

3.3 Rasas and Bhavas: Central to the depiction of Krishna in Odissi dance is the expression of various rasas (emotional moods) and bhavas (sentiments) associated with his persona.[19] From the playful innocence of his childhood (shringara rasa) to the profound wisdom of his teachings (jnana rasa), from the ecstatic joy of his divine love (bhakti rasa) to the valor of his warrior spirit (vir rasa), Odissi dancers skillfully evoke a myriad of emotions and sentiments through their choreography, music, and expressions. Each gesture, pose, and movement in the dance sequence is meticulously crafted to convey the depth and complexity of Krishna's character, inviting the audience to immerse themselves in the divine drama unfolding before them.[20]

3.4 Leelas and Episodes: Odissi dance abounds with choreographic compositions (pallavis, abhinaya pieces, and moksha) that depict various leelas (divine pastimes) and episodes from Krishna's life. These compositions are often drawn from classical Odia literature, medieval devotional poetry, and Vaishnavite scriptures, such as the Gita Govinda composed by the 12th-century poet Jayadeva. Dancers portray iconic episodes such as Krishna's stealing of butter (makhanchor), his playful interactions with the gopis (cowherd girls), his defeat of demons like Kaliya and Putana, his enchanting Raas Leela with Radha and the gopis, and his divine dialogue with Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.[21]

3.5 Musical Accompaniment: The depiction of Krishna in Odissi dance is accompanied by a rich repertoire of classical Odissi music, which includes traditional ragas, talas, and compositions (odissi bhajans, geetas, and pallavis) that are specially dedicated to Lord Krishna. The melodic strains of the flute, the rhythmic beats of the mardala (traditional percussion instrument), and the soul-stirring vocals of the singer create a mesmerizing ambiance that enhances the storytelling and emotional resonance of the performance.[22] Musicians often draw inspiration from ancient ragas associated with Krishna, such as Yaman, Bhairavi, and Hamsadhvani, infusing their renditions with devotional fervor and artistic finesse.

3.6 Spiritual Symbolism: Beyond its aesthetic and narrative dimensions, the depiction of Krishna in Odissi dance carries profound spiritual symbolism, conveying deeper philosophical truths and mystical insights embedded within the Hindu tradition. Krishna is revered not only as a divine incarnation but also as the supreme personality of Godhead (Bhagavan) who embodies the highest ideals of dharma (righteousness), bhakti (devotion), and moksha (liberation).[23,24] Through the medium of dance, dancers seek to invoke the presence of Krishna and evoke a sense of divine communion, inviting both performers and spectators to experience the transcendental bliss of union with the divine.

3.7 Contemporary Interpretations: While rooted in tradition, the depiction of Krishna in Odissi dance also undergoes continuous reinterpretation and innovation to reflect the evolving sensibilities of contemporary audiences. Modern choreographers and dancers explore new thematic interpretations, experiment with innovative choreographic techniques, and incorporate interdisciplinary elements (such as multimedia, theater, and contemporary dance) to expand the expressive potential of Odissi as a dynamic and living art form. Despite these creative liberties, the essence of Krishna's character remains at the heart of Odissi dance, serving as a timeless source of inspiration and spiritual resonance for generations to come.

The depiction of Krishna in Odissi dance is a multifaceted artistic journey that transcends mere performance to become a transformative spiritual experience. Through its intricate choreography, expressive storytelling, and devotional fervor, Odissi dance celebrates the divine beauty, wisdom, and grace of Lord Krishna, inviting audiences to embark on a transcendent journey of love, devotion, and self-realization. As dancers embody the spirit of Krishna on stage, they become conduits for the divine energy that flows through them, awakening the hearts and minds of all who witness the

eternal dance of the beloved Lord.

4. Case Studies: Notable Performances

4.1 Kelucharan Mohapatra's Choreographies

Kelucharan Mohapatra's choreographies in Odissi dance epitomize a harmonious fusion of tradition and innovation, showcasing his profound artistic vision and deep-rooted reverence for classical aesthetics. Through meticulous research and reconstruction of Odissi's traditional repertoire, Mohapatra revived ancient compositions while infusing them with dynamic footwork, intricate hand gestures, and emotive expressions, thus setting new standards for the dance form. His compositions, inspired by diverse themes ranging from mythology to spirituality, evoke a sense of devotion (bhakti rasa) and transcendence, inviting audiences into a world of divine beauty and grace. Mohapatra's collaborations with artists from varied cultural backgrounds further enriched Odissi's repertoire, fostering intercultural dialogue and exchange. His enduring legacy as the "Guru of Gurus" continues to inspire generations of dancers, preserving Odissi's classical heritage while embracing innovation and creativity in choreographic expression.[25]

4.2 Sanjukta Panigrahi's Interpretations

Sanjukta Panigrahi's interpretations in Odissi dance epitomize a sublime blend of tradition and innovation, showcasing her exceptional artistry and profound emotional depth. As a disciple of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, Panigrahi mastered the classical repertoire while infusing her performances with her own unique expressions and interpretations. Her choreographic works, inspired by classical Odia literature and mythological narratives, evoke a sense of bhakti (devotion) and rasa (emotional essence), captivating audiences with their lyrical grace and spiritual resonance. Panigrahi's legacy as a visionary in Odissi dance continues to inspire dancers worldwide, serving as a testament to the enduring beauty and transformative power of artistic expression.[26]

Conclusion

The reflection of Krishna's kaleidoscopic presence in Odissi dance is a testament to the dance form's rich cultural and spiritual heritage. Through thematic choreographies, expressive abhinaya, and iconic representations, Odissi dancers bring to life the multifaceted persona of Krishna, offering audiences a glimpse into his divine lila. This enduring connection between Krishna and Odissi not only highlights the dance form's narrative and aesthetic strengths but also its profound ability to convey complex spiritual truths and human emotions. By exploring Krishna's various facets through Odissi dance, performers continue to celebrate and preserve a vital aspect of India's cultural and spiritual legacy. As this art form evolves, the timeless stories of Krishna will undoubtedly continue to inspire and captivate audiences, reflecting the eternal dance of divine love, wisdom, and heroism.

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