

# Odissi Paddhiti

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Was codification of Odissi successful in capturing the true essence of the dance as it was prevalent or even as it was performed in the ancient era?

The transfer of knowledge required for the continued existence of any performance art requires intense and deliberate training from both the Guru and the Shishya. Through codification and written text, the need to rely on this tradition to study the art form decreases but the difficulty to master increases due to standardization. In my study of the readings by Anita Cherian and the Odissi Renaissance along with my understanding of linguistics and language theory I wish to answer the question of how the codification of Odissi Dance, a performance art, has resulted in the birth of a modern classical dance form, far from what was probably performed by the ancients. I will firstly give a background to the situation before independence to befit someone unbeknownst to the scenario. I will assert here that the true essence of the dance was lost and it was only after the revival of classical forms due to nationalistic planning that modern Odissi was born. I then look upon how the institutionalization of performance art in India was necessitated

by the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) and India's cultural planning and the impact it had on the local art forms of the new nation state and how it led to the codification of Odissi and argue that it was indeed the policy framework and patronage that pushed the Gotipuas to, in essence, codify and revive the Classical Odissi according to the Natyashastra. With the emergence of this totally new dance form, differing from both ancient and actually practiced forms during the times and evolving to the present day, I discuss that the codification, using a lens of linguistics, demonstrates how similar to spoken languages, dynamic art performances are not truly captured by codified grammar.

Indian Classical Dances, such as Odissi are disseminated to students via oral tradition and usually adhere to no written syllabus, other than actual toil, blood and sweat of the disciple with the Guru. Natyashastra, the ancient document on dance, music and drama mentions Odramagadhi style of dance. Through this it is concluded that Odissi dance did exist within a classical framework since 2000 years. The evidence was compounded by the sculptures of dance poses found in temples and archeological sites. The art was suppressed by the Islamic rule and the British rule that followed. The maharis, who were the temple dancers who held the knowledge of the original form stopped practicing the dance due to this suppression. The dance form was continued upon by the Gotipuas, who were boys, aged between 9-14 years dressed in drag. They continued the dance form in their own style. Hence, due to the lack of writing by the maharis there were not many written records about the dance in the recent era. Also, the original temple dance was lost and only survived by the archeological remnants and the Gotipuas. Here, we can see that since the original Gurus of these forms were lost there was no way to continue on the tradition and hence, in fact the essence was indeed lost. However, with the independence of

India, a new wave of cultural revival spawned along with a passion for identity amongst the Aanchalis to assert their Odissi style of music and dance amongst the Indian Diaspora.

Institutionalization and Standardization of the arts by the SNA was a huge influence and motivation behind the codification of Odissi. As mentioned by Anita Cherian, the Theatre was indirectly controlled by the SNA which was influenced by the Government and its idea of culture and cultural unification. The theatre is where the middle class went and for any performer to showcase their art, it was clear that they would have to conform to the SNA's ideals. Not only this, but the awards and scholarships were also directly controlled by the SNA. A clear example of this is in fact Odissi, which was not accepted to be classical enough until it was reformed with Natyashastra and the Abinaya Darpana by Guru Mayadhar Raut as mentioned in the Odissi Renaissance. The SNA had replaced the patronage of the royalty of India. And there was no way to not be in tandem with the SNA if you were an artiste in India. For example, it was mentioned in the lectures that there was no evidence for the usage of the now ubiquitously associated silver jewellery with Odissi in the ancient era. But, upon delving further, we find that one of the biggest patrons of Odissi was a Silversmith. Later, the SNA took upon this role of being the nourisher of the arts. Dhirendranath Patnaik comments that the state of Odissi was poor with poorly developed music, costumes and repertory. It is therefore, clear to see the reasons why the Jayantika Association composed of practicing gurus, dancers and scholars got together to rebuild the repertory of the form. The combined form, composed of various practiced forms were incorporated into the mutually agreed Jayantika Association codes, styles, and repertoire influenced by the sculptural poses along with the mudras. Only after this and a few

performances by the troupes which were highly appraised, the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi accepted Odissi dance as a classical school of dance.

The premise that the classical arts are not living arts has led to individual performance pieces or choreographies that do not follow a certain style to be categorized as not Odissi enough. For example, the Ramli Ibrahim style of Odissi is often remarked to be so. People who study modern linguistics consider spoken language to be the true form of language. Spoken language is the primary language while written language is an imperfect reflection of spoken language, conveyed through an imperfect technology, that is writing. Spoken language comes naturally to all normal human children. Similar to language, Dance is also an expression of the human mind. Normal human children naturally develop rhythm and can perform basic movements to rhythms at an early age. There have been numerous cases where spoken languages, without a script have been codified, such as Korean. Considering a case familiar to us Indians, would be of “Indian English” which is not yet codified or accepted to even exist. Although, considering the fact that according to linguistics, it is a real phenomenon. Here, the written language fails to capture the dynamic and changing language. Similar to grammar for languages, Odissi has been codified and is composed of motifs, movements and abhinaya. The codified structure serves as the grammar and helps the Gurus to make their choreographies. The sculptural poses, which are considered to be an essential quality in modern Odissi, were nowhere to be seen in the dances of the Gotipuas or the Maharis. The evidence for the dynamic nature of Odissi or say any other dance form is in the flourishing Odissi Paddhatis (or Gharanas). This system allows the disciples to work upon the work of their Guru and add to the style of their Gharana while at the same time being limited to the style and formalities of the Gharana. We can

see that four flavors of Odissi prevail in the modern times. All of them slightly vary from what the Jayantika Association codified earlier and in actuality, Odissi exists as a dynamic art.

As discussed above, I find that codification of Odissi has served the purpose for which it was done. Although, it is sufficient to look upon the arguments presented above to assert that classical Odissi is far from how it was practiced in the ancient era and moreover did not even capture how it was performed while being coded. The institutionalization of the arts in India played a major role and its influence was enhanced by the fact that the state was the only major patron, providing the stage, the awards and the recognition for talent. Emphasis should be placed on the fact that one can easily study and find that performance art is clearly dynamic and not static and is uniquely tied with the socio-political scenario at any given moment in time. Therefore, although the Odissi we know today is unlike what was practised years ago, we find that the codification has helped in adequate preservation and revival of the form.