

The Tradition of Odissi Music

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About forty years ago, a few sensitive scholars and leading gurus awakened to the fact that the dance form now known as Odissi had come under corrupting influences, and that if these were not removed, this lyrical and beautiful dance form would soon be transformed into a sloppy display, aiming at nothing more than cheap entertainment. The task of restoration would have been extremely difficult had the tradition been entirely an oral one, but, fortunately, a few treatises on the dance are extant, of which the most important is *Abhinayachandrika*, written by Maheshwara Mahapatra in the sixteenth century. This invaluable work and the countless dance sculptures on the walls of several ancient temples of Orissa, give a comprehensive idea of this tradition and clearly indicate what should be considered authentic or otherwise. When the scholars and gurus set themselves the task of cleansing the form of its corrupt elements they used this evidence as a touchstone of authenticity. However, due attention was not paid at that time to the aspect of music, which also needed the same treatment. Consequently, while the dance moved closer to tradition, the music drifted away. And now, shorn of its distinctive character, Odissi music is often found to be under the total influence of the towering Hindustani system. Only a few characteristic *tala*-s, such as Athatali, Nihsari, Jhula, etc. distinguish it somewhat from Hindustani music. But it does not have an identity of its own.

Orissa, however, did have a distinctive tradition in music. This is unmistakably indicated by more than half a dozen treatises which were written between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century and are even now extant. The more important among them are:

Geeta Prakasha by Krishnadasa Badajena Mahapatra (1565 A.D.);
Sangeeta Kalpalata by Haladhara Mishra (circa 1623 A.D.);
Natya Manorama by Raghunath Ratha (1696 A.D.);
Sangeeta Narayana by Gajapati Narayana Deva (1750 A.D.); and
Sangeeta Muktavali by Harichandana (after 1750 A.D.)

The last named work was published in 1955 by the Utkal University, Bhubaneswar. The editor Pandit Banambar Acharya dates it to 1590 A.D., but since the work contains quotations from *Sangeeta Narayana*, it must have been written after 1750 A.D. The Orissa Sahitya Akademi, Bhubaneswar, published *Natya Manorama* in 1959 and *Sangeeta Narayana* in 1966. The other treatises have not yet been published but are in the collection of the Orissa Museum, Bhubaneswar, in the form of palmleaf manuscripts.

Krishnadasa Badajena, author of *Geeta Prakasha*, appears to have been received at the court of Akbar and rewarded for his learning. Raghunath Ratha, author of *Natya Manorama*, remarks that a king of Kerala, pleased with his knowledge of the performing arts, offered him generous patronage.

About 44 *raga*-s have been named and defined in *Geeta Prakasha*, 46 in *Sangeeta Kalpalata*, and 74 including 12 of the mixed variety (*sankirna*) in

Sangeeta Narayana. There are a few *raga*-s which may be found in one work and not in the others. But the majority of them are listed in every treatise and the manner in which they have been defined points to a consistent tradition. A careful study of these treatises leads one to the conclusion that as late as the eighteenth century the tradition of music in Orissa followed the ancient practice of *jati* singing under the *grama murchchhana* classification system. For instance, the *raga* Mallara has been defined by the *Sangeeta Narayana* thus:

धांशान्यासः पान्वयतो मल्लारः स-प-वर्जितः ।

सदा वर्षास्विष्टरसे ग-मन्द्र-तारसप्तमः ॥232॥

Again, the *raga* Gandhara has been defined in the same treatise thus:

गान्धारको मध्यमजश्चमान्तः ।

स-पोञ्जितः ब्यात् करुणे सदैव ॥ 255 ॥

These two pentatonic *raga*-s, according to their definitions, omit both *Sa* and *Pa*, which is unthinkable now in the *raga* music that accepts *Sa* as the fixed universal tonic for every *raga* without exception. This was not the practice in the *jati* singing tradition since the *Arshabi* and the *Dhaivati jati*-s used to omit both *Sa* and *Pa* in their pentatonic varieties. Although *Sa*, corresponding to *Do* of the Western solfa system, used to be considered as the first note, it was not always the tonic. In fact, in a particular *grama* (*shadja* or *madhyama* or *gandhara*; the latter two seem to have gone out of use even by the time the *Natyashastra* was written), different *murchchhana*-s were obtained by adopting different notes of the octave as the initial note or tonic. In the *jati* system, the name for the tonic was *graha* and that for the dominant note was *amsha*. Many *jati*-s had the same note for both *graha* and *amsha*, but there were exceptions such as *Nandayanti* which had *Ga* as *graha* but *Pa* as *amsha*.

Raga-s, born of *jati*-s, became so popular that by about the sixteenth century they totally eclipsed the latter both in the north and the south, but perhaps not so completely in Orissa. All the treatises mentioned above often describe *raga*-s as born of *jati*-s, and as having characteristics such as *graha*, *amsha*, *nyasa*, *apanyasa*, limits of movement in *mandra* (lower) and *tara* (higher) octaves and other elements which are now seldom used in *raga* music.

It is significant that none of the treatises written in Orissa mentions *mela* or *thaata* while most of those written elsewhere in India during the period between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century mention either one or the other of the two systems. This is because, at that time, both the Karnatic and Hindustani schools of music, discarding the *murchchhana* system, strove to formulate some kind of grouping pattern that would be scientific, convenient, and acceptable to all. In 1660, Venkatamakhi formulated the *melakarta* scheme with 72 *mela*-s and it has since been followed by Karnatic music. The Hindustani school of music, influenced more or less by the music traditions of the Middle East, has not found a satisfactory system till today. About sixty years ago, Bhatkhande suggested a scheme of ten *thaata*-s which was generally accepted. But eminent scholars like K. C. D. Brahaspati have challenged the scientific validity of the scheme which is considered quite inadequate for the purpose of accommodating

rationally all the *raga*-s in the repertoire of the Hindustani system. The music tradition of Orissa (which, for the sake of convenience, we shall call Odissi music) followed, at least till the eighteenth century, the *murchchhana* system and did not perhaps seek to consider any other. This view is strengthened by the fact that *Sangeeta Narayana* and *Natya Manorama* have different names for the *murchchhana*-s from those given by either Bharata or Narada. The table below shows names of the seven *murchchhana*-s under the *shadja-grama* as it was followed in the Odissi tradition and the corresponding names according to Bharata and Narada.

Table 1

According to the Odissi tradition	According to Bharata	According to Narada
1. Lalita	Uttaramandra	Uttaravarna
2. Madhyama	Rajani	Abhirudgata
3. Chitra	Uttarayata	Ashvakranta
4. Rohini	Shuddhashadja	Souvir
5. Matangaja	Matsarikrita	Hrishyaka
6. Soubira	Ashvakranta	Uttarayata
7. Shadjamadhya	Abhirudgata	Rajani

The names of the *murchchhana*-s under the other two *grama*-s also bear no similarity with those mentioned by either Bharata or Narada.

The Odissi tradition also accepts 22 *shruti*-s in an octave, but their names again differ from those mentioned in the *Natyashastra*. The Odissi names of the *shruti*-s and their corresponding *Natyashastra* names are listed below:

Table 2

<i>Natyashastra</i>	Odissi	Place of the seven notes of the <i>shadjagrama</i>
1. <i>Tivra</i>	<i>Nandi</i>	
2. <i>Kumudvati</i>	<i>Vishala</i>	
3. <i>Manda</i>	<i>Sumukhi</i>	
4. <i>Chandovati</i>	<i>Vichitra</i>	<i>Shadja</i>
5. <i>Dayavati</i>	<i>Chitra</i>	
6. <i>Ranjani</i>	<i>Ghana</i>	
7. <i>Ratika</i>	<i>Chandanika</i>	<i>Rishabha</i>
8. <i>Roudri</i>	<i>Sarasa</i>	
9. <i>Krodha</i>	<i>Mala</i>	<i>Gandhara</i>
10. <i>Vajrika</i>	<i>Magadhi</i>	
11. <i>Prasarini</i>	<i>Shiva</i>	
12. <i>Pritih</i>	<i>Matangi</i>	
13. <i>Marjani</i>	<i>Maitreyi</i>	<i>Madhyama</i>
14. <i>Kshitih</i>	<i>Vala</i>	
15. <i>Rakta</i>	<i>Kala</i>	
16. <i>Sandipani</i>	<i>Kalarava</i>	
17. <i>Alapini</i>	<i>Shangiravya</i>	<i>Panchama</i>
18. <i>Madanti</i>	<i>Mata</i>	
19. <i>Rohini</i>	<i>Amrita</i>	
20. <i>Ramya</i>	<i>Rasa</i>	<i>Dhaivata</i>
21. <i>Ugra</i>	<i>Vijaya</i>	
22. <i>Kshobhini</i>	<i>Madhukari</i>	<i>Nishada</i>

The view that Odissi music used to follow the ancient *murchchhana* and *jati* system is further strengthened when the definitions of the *raga*-s given in the said treatises are closely examined. *Sangeeta Narayana* deals with the maximum number of *raga*-s and mostly follows the line of *Geeta Prakasha*. In its description of many *raga*-s, it clearly indicates from which *jati*-s or *grama-raga*-s they are derived. In the table below, a few *raga*-s are listed with corresponding *jati*-s from which they are said to have been derived. The list is suggestive rather than exhaustive.

Table 3

Odissi <i>raga</i> -s	<i>Jati</i> -s from which the <i>raga</i> -s are derived
Vasanta	Shadjamadhyama
Bangala	Kaishiki
Amrapanchama	Andhri
Kamoda	Shadji
Saindhavi	Panchami
Dhannasi	Shuddhakaishika
Deshakhya	Gandharapanchami
Abhiri	Dhaivati
Gandhara	Madhyama
Nilotpala	Dhaivati

There are also a few Odissi *raga*-s which, according to the *Sangeeta Narayana*, were derived from *grama* or *bhasa* or *bibhasa raga*-s. The descriptions of *raga*-s found in the Odissi treatises are very similar to those in the *Sangeeta Ratnakara*, which is now also followed in practice to some extent in Karnatic music. Thus, the Odissi tradition had perhaps more affinity with the Karnatic rather than with the Hindustani system.

Let us now take a *raga* and closely examine it theoretically to see how it should be rendered in conformity with the tradition. The first *raga* defined in the *Sangeeta Narayana* is Shri. It is a *raga* of the *sampoorna* variety, using all the seven notes of the octave and has been defined as:

जातिन्यासग्रहग्रामांशेषु षड्जोल्पपंचम ।
धृंगारवीरयोर्गैयः श्रीरागो गीतको विदैः ॥३२॥

This means that the *jati*, *nyasa* (note of rest), *graha* (the initial note, the tonic) and *amsha* (the dominant note) of the *raga* Shri is *shadja*. It uses *panchama* infrequently and knowledgeable musicians employ this *raga* for songs which express love or heroism. The *raga* comes under the *shadja grama*.

The *Sangeeta Ratnakara* defines the *raga* as:

षड्जे षड्जी समुदभूतं श्रीरागं स्वल्प पंचमम् ।
सन्धासांशग्रहं मन्द्र गांधारं तारमध्यमम् ॥
समशेष स्वरं वीरे शास्ति श्रीकरणाग्रणी ।

The *raga* Shri, born of *shadji jati* under *shadja grama*, uses *panchama* infrequently. Its *nyasa* and *amsha* is *Sa*, and the other notes get equal importance. Its movement is between the third of the lower octave and the fourth of the higher. The leader of the *karana*-s (the epithet *Shrikaranagrani* is meant for the author, Sharngadeva) says that this *raga* is to be used for songs of heroism or those denoting a sense of punishment.

There is practically no difference between the two definitions except perhaps in the style of singing for which the *raga* could be used in the Odissi style—both for heroic and love songs! There is no disagreement about the use of the *svara*-s.

It is in the *shadja grama* and its tonic is *Sa*. Therefore, it comes under the *Uttaramandra murchchhana* (in Odissi tradition, the *murchchhana* is called Lalita). The *shruti* intervals between two successive notes should then be:

Sa-3-Ri-2-Ga-4-Ma-4-Pa-3-Dha-2-Ni-4-Sa

An interval of two *shruti*-s if taken as a half-tone and that of three or four *shruti*-s as a full tone, then the above scale has two half-tones, one between the second and the third and the other between the sixth and the seventh. For the sake of convenience, we take the notes of the Vilaval *thaata* of Hindustani music as the *shuddha svara*-s. Then, the third (*Ga*) and the seventh (*Ni*) of the above scale are flat (*komal*) and it corresponds to the Kafi *thaata* of Hindustani and the 22nd *melakarta* (named Kharaharapriya) of Karnatic music.

In practice, at present, the Hindustani style has drifted away from the tradition and Shri *raga* is sung with the second and sixth notes as flat and the fourth as sharp. It can be grouped under the Poorvi *thaata*. There are again two types of Shri: one is *audava-sampoorna*, that omits the third and the sixth in ascent, and the other is *shadava-sampoorna*, omitting only the third in ascent. This is certainly not in conformity with the tradition since even Tulaji Rao Bhonsle in his *Sangeeta Saramita*, which Hindustani music more or less follows, indicates that the *raga* is *sampoorna* and the third and the seventh notes are flat.

श्रीरागः परिपूर्णः सग्रहांशन्याससंयुतः ।

Tulaji wrote *Sangeeta Saramita* around 1770. Therefore, the wide drifting must have taken place during the last 100 or 150 years. It is significant that Bhatkhande in his *Sangeeta Shastra* does mention that Venkatamakhi in his *Chaturdandi Prakashika* includes the *raga* Kafi under Shri *mela*.

Karnatic music is not so far away from the Odissi tradition since in practice it groups even now the *raga* Shri under Kharaharapriya *mela*, but it is an *audava-sampoorna raga*, omitting the third and the sixth in ascent.

Shri *raga* has now become rather rare in Odissi. However, if one wishes to render it in conformity with the tradition, it should be treated as *sampoorna*, with *Ga* and *Ni* flat; *Sa* as both *vadi* and *nyasa* and *Ma samvadi*. Infrequent use of *Pa* will bring it, at times, closer to Bageshri. In fact, Shri *raga* in Odissi is in some ways a combination of the Bageshri and Kafi of Hindustani music.

If, however, the *raga* Vasanta (which is not now as rare as Shri) is examined, it will be clear how Odissi music has drifted away from its tradition. The *raga* is at present more often rendered with both *Ri* and *Dha* flat—resembling, more or less, the style of Karnatic music. A few musicians, besides using these two notes flat, employ both sharp and flat *Ma*, in a way similar to the Hindustani Vasanta. But the *raga* has been defined by *Sangeeta Narayana* as:

षड्जमध्यमिका-जातः षड्जन्यासग्रहंशकः।
गेयो वसन्तरागोयं वसन्तसमये बुधैः ॥ १३१॥

(The *raga* Vasanta is born of *Shadjamadhyamika jati* and the note *shadja* is its *nyasa*, *graha*, and *amsha*. Knowledgeable musicians sing it at any time during the spring season.)

Vasanta, according to *Sangeeta Ratnakara*, is a *raganga* born of Hindola which belongs to the Kaishiki *jati*. Thus the *raga* Vasanta of *Sangeeta Ratnakara* is different from the Vasanta of *Sangeeta Narayana*.

Shadjamadhyamika jati belongs to the Matsarikrita *murchchhana* which in Odissi tradition is called as Matangaja. In this *murchchhana*, *shruti* distances of the notes are:

Ma-4-Pa-3-Dha-2-Ni-4-Sa-3-Ri-2-Ga-4-Ma

We are now so accustomed to the fixed tonic *Sa* that the characteristic of the *murchchhana* can best be understood when the initial note *Ma* is regarded as *Sa*. Then the *shruti* intervals can be rewritten thus:

Sa-4-Ri-3-Ga-2-Ma-4-Pa-3-Dha-2-Ni-4-Sa

Again, if an interval of two *shruti*-s equivalent to a half-tone, and that of three or four *shruti*-s is a whole tone and the former is denoted by H, and the latter by W, the pattern of intervals covering an octave of the Vilaval *thaata* (the same as a major diatonic scale of Western music, and regarded in Hindustani music as comprising all *shuddha* notes), can be written as W W H W W W H and the above *murchchhana* as W W H W W H W. This, in comparison with the former, has the *Ni* flat, resembling the Khamaja *thaata* (Harikamboji in Karnatic music). The Odissi Vasanta belongs to this scale. Therefore, if the *raga* is rendered in conformity with the tradition, it should have only *Ni* as flat and all other notes should be *shuddha*. It should also be of the *sampoorna* variety, using all the seven notes of the scale both in ascent and in descent with the *Pa* as the *vadi* (dominant note). All main musical phrases should begin and end on the note *Pa*.

Of course, according to the rules governing the *Shadjamadhyamika jati*, it can take either of the two *sadharana svara*-s: *antara-gandhara* and *kakalinishada* or both. If it takes the *antara-ga*, *Ni* becomes sharp and thus similar to Vilaval *thaata* (Dhirashankarabharana of Karnatic). If the other, then *Ma* is augmented by a half-tone to become *tivra-Ma* and then it resembles Vachaspati, the 64th *Melakarta* of Karnatic music, which has no corresponding *thaata* in the

Hindustani system and, therefore, can be said to have Kalyana in *purvanga* and Khamaj in *Uttaranga*. If, however, both the *sadharana svara*-s are taken, it resembles Kalyana of Hindustani, corresponding to Mecakalyani of Karnatic music. In no case can the Odissi Vasanta have *Ri* and *Dha* flat unless it drifts away from the tradition owing to the influence of Hindustani music.

Similarly, it can be proved that the way the more popular *raga*, now wrongly called Saveri, is rendered does not conform to the tradition. Its correct name is Shavari and, according to the above-mentioned Odissi treatises, it is a hexatonic *raga* whereas it is being rendered as pentatonic in ascent, very similar to the *raga* Jogia of the Hindustani style. Other *raga*-s which do not at all conform to the tradition, are Todi, Bhairava, Mallara (also Malhara) and Hindola. Many typical Odissi *raga*-s, such as Deshakhya, Hunchika, Ghantarava, Pulindi, Madhukiri, etc. are now not heard at all whereas borrowed *raga*-s like Kafi, Khamaj (at times called Harikamboji), Kiravani, Arabhi, etc. are often heard. There is, of course, no harm in borrowing a *raga*, but if the borrowed ones outnumber the traditional ones, then the tradition is obviously in danger of being sooner or later extinct.

The Odissi tradition has also a fascinating and strong oral component in the *chanda* style of singing. *Chanda*, derived from the root *chand* (to move rhythmically), is basically a metrical scheme used by Oriya poetry, especially the *Kavya* (long narrative) literature which was popular from the seventeenth century to the first few decades of our century. There are about a hundred different *chanda*-s, each with a fixed metrical scheme, and they are primarily meant to be sung. Many *chanda*-s are named after *raga*-s to which they were perhaps originally set. At times, the *tala* is also indicated. In a few *chanda*-s such as Ashadhashuklavani, the *raga* is not mentioned in any of the music treatises. They are, however, now also sung in fixed traditional tunes. Therefore, it can be assumed that, right from the beginning, they might have been just names of metrical formulae or of *raga*-s which went out of use by the sixteenth century, leaving behind their names only to the literary tradition of *chanda*.

Some *chanda*-s have a simple arrangement of syllables in their metrical schemes. For instance, in the *chanda* called Bangalashri (which according to *Sangeeta Narayana*, is a mixed *raga*) each stanza has two lines and each line has a 6 + 6 + 8 arrangement of syllables or rather beats. The metrical scheme may, however, be quite complicated. For instance, one of the popular *chanda*-s is Chokhi. No *raga* of this name is found in the treatises. Only *Sangeeta Kalpalata* mentions a *raga* named Chokhari which might have originally inspired this *chanda*. A stanza of Chokhi has four lines having the following arrangement:

1st line 8 + 8 + (8 + 5)
2nd line 8 + 8 + (8 + 5)
3rd line 9
4th line 8 + 8 + 13

A number of beautiful poems have been written in this *chanda*.

It is a matter of sorrow that such an interesting and distinctive tradition of music is now in a state of decline. In this context, the treatises mentioned above deserve far closer study and deeper analysis than they have hitherto received. This may shed light on lesser known aspects of Indian music as a whole.