

ABHINAYA IN ODISSI

Jiwan Pani

Aesthetic sensuousness, flowing movements and rare lyric grace within a classical frame-work have won for Odissi dance an ever-increasing clientele during the last two decades. Many talented dancers, some who have a solid—in a few cases too solid—grounding in other classical dance forms, have taken to Odissi and practised meticulously its dance techniques. But few, perhaps, have laid much stress on the expressional, that is, the *abhinaya* aspect of it. To me it appears that the *abhinaya* in Odissi dance has at present come down to the level it touched in the 16th century—a fact that caused dissatisfaction in the sensitive mind of Raya Ramananda. The short-coming was not in the dance technique, nor in the *angika* nor in *vacika*. Only the *abhinaya* lacked *sattvika* depth. And that made all the difference to him; so much so that he could not rest till he had recruited two pre-adolescent girls and trained them on the right lines. This is mentioned in *Shri Caitanya Caritamrta (Dvi Kanya layan Raya vesha Karayiya)*. Why did he select two pre-adolescent girls and not the youthful *Maharis* who were traditionally commissioned to dance everyday in the temple of Lord Jagannath? No *Mahari* could have dared to disobey him as he was the most loved and trusted minister of Prataprudradev, the king. There was, perhaps, a definite reason for his choice and we must deal with it later. Let us first consider if *abhinaya* in Odissi deserves such attention.

Abhinaya Candrika, one of the most comprehensive and authoritative treatises on Odissi, written by Maheswar Mohapatra in circa 16th century A.D., lays great stress on the expressional aspect of the dance. It is worthwhile in this connection to examine carefully the following quotations from *Abhinaya Candrika*:

“Yugma-nrtyaratah gouda pancanadyanga-nartane,
Bhavapradarshane udrām khyatam atra na samshaya”

(1st Stavaka Nrtyakhanda, 194)

“udradeshe sadabhavaranjitam nrtyamandale”²

(2nd Stavaka, Bhavakhanda, 9)

“udradeshe sadashrestha nrtyabhinaya prakriya”³

(2nd Stavaka, Bhavakhanda, 25)

“Bhavamsandarshayet nityam sadanga angabhavana;
Vinasadanga jnanena nrtyam deshi sajayate”

(2nd Stavaka, Bhavakhanda, 176)

These quotations not only emphasise the relative importance of *abhinaya* but go so far as to make it a distinctive feature of Odissi dance. Evidently, the form would suffer even organic distortion if the expressional aspect does not conform to the pattern its earlier innovators and promoters had conceived for it.

In the traditional structure of the dance-form, the expressional stage of development, termed in *Abhinaya-candrika* as *Bhava-pallavi*, immediately follows the *Svara-pallavi*. (Generally, *Svara-pallavi* is called simply *Pallavi* and *Bhava-pallavi*, is *Sabhinaya-nrtya*). At this stage invariably the character of Radha is delineated through the expressional interpretation of some lines from the famous *Geeta-govinda* or from the poems written in *reeti* style by medieval Oriya poets. Inadequate comprehension of the subtlety and complexity of Radha's character — especially as a *nayika* — is sure to distort the *abhinaya* in Odissi and lower its sensuous aspects to a mere sensual level.

Odissi, in its rudimentary state might have existed in 2nd century B.C. under the inspiring patronage of king Kharavela. Some sculpture found in Khandagiri and Udayagiri caves seems to support this view. Kharavela subscribed to Jainism and it is not known definitely how far dance and religion were interrelated at that time. Dance as ritual has found place in some systems of religious worship, but the Vaisnavas are, perhaps, unique in giving it an essentially aesthetic dimension. The passionate *bhakti* of Vaisnavism is altogether different from the speculative *bhakti* of the *Geeta*. It not only transfigures the mighty sex-impulses into a passionate religious emotion but asserts the rights of the emotional and the aesthetic inherent in human nature and appeals to the exceedingly familiar and authentic intensity of feelings and sentiments. Odissi might or might not have found sanction as ritual in the Jain system of religious worship at the time of Kharavela, but there is little doubt that it owes much to the *bhakti*-cult for its nourishment and luxuriant growth. Its aesthetic appeal was greatly enhanced in the 12th century by the devout Vaisnava poet Jayadeva and his dancer-wife, Padmavati. Again, in 16th century, Raja Ramananda polished off the rust that gathered on it and gave a fresh and deeper dimension to its expressional aspect.

Odissi is linked immemorially with the Jagannath-cult. The sanctified dance-hall of Lord Jagannath's temple had been the home of Odissi dance for centuries. Dedicated danseuses (*devdasi*, — locally known as *mahari*), used to perform in the temple as part of their temple-services. The Jagannath-cult of Orissa is a rare religious system which admirably assimilates elements of Brahminism, Buddhism, Saivism, Vaisnavism and the Shakti-cult. It is amazing that some Muslims by birth, like Shalavega and Haridas, also became great devotees of Lord Jagannath and *bhajans* written by the former are widely recited even in the temples. However, from the 12th to 17th century it was predominantly influenced by Vaisnavism. All the branches of culture — poetry, painting, sculptures etc. — of Orissa

belonging to this period drew heavily from Vaisnavic symbolism. Odissi attained its peak during this period. The tradition of singing Jayadeva's *astapadis* as another item of temple-services, is probably influenced by the Alvar system, a denomination of the Vaisnavism of the South.

With this as background, it is almost imperative that the portrayal of Radha as *nayika* in Odissi has to conform to the canons of Vaisnavism. Radha, appears to enter into Krishna-legend at a much later date than *Shrimad-bhagavata* and still later into the core of Vaisnava emotionale. It is relevant, therefore, to trace the development of the Krishna-legend in its historical perspective.

Krishna is not a Vedic god. In *Rig-veda*, however, Krishna is mentioned, but described as a tribal chief defeated by Indra. Krishna of the *Geeta* and the *Mahabharata* is different from the Krishna of *Shrimad-bhagavata*. As it appears, general acceptance of Krishna as Purusottama had been rather slow and had taken a few centuries. It is learnt from *Mahavasya*, a grammatical treatise written by Patanjali in 2nd century B.C. that the Krishna-legend was also a favourite theme for dramatic presentations at that time. There used to prevail a great excitement at the time of playing *Kamsa-vadha* — the audience divided into two rival groups: devotees of Kamsa and devotees of Vasudeva-Krishna.

“Kecit kamsa-bhakta bhavanti kecid vasudeva-bhakta,s
kecid raktamukha bhavanti kecid kalamukha”

(Mahavasya, iii, 1.26)

This leads us to believe that in 2nd century B.C. Kamsa was also held in esteem by a section of the people. But by the 6th century A.D. when *Bhagvata Purana* is believed to have been written, the process of metamorphosis was, perhaps, over and it had been accepted that Kamsa was surely a demon and Vasudeva Krishna, an incarnation of Lord Visnu. Later when Vaisnavism came in to full bloom, Krishna was conceived as the total personification of the supreme being. And this has gone so deep that there is now little room for confusion while portraying Krishna as a *nayaka* in Odissi.

The case of Radha is different. The following Puranic literatures have for their main theme the Krishna-legend:

<i>Harivamsa</i>	— circa 4th century A.D.)
<i>Visnu Purana</i>	— „ 5th century A.D.) No mention of
<i>Shrimad Bhagavata</i>	— „ 6th century A.D.) Radha
<i>Padma Purana</i>	— Much later than 6th century) Radha is
<i>Brahmavaivarta Purana</i>	— —do—) mentioned

Radha is not named in the earlier Puranas, although the *Shrimad-Bhagavata* refers to a favourite Gopi with whom Krishna wanders and sports alone. She is extolled in *Padma Purana*, but it is in the *Uttara Khanda* of *Brahmavaivarta Purana* that Radha reappears against the vivid backdrop of rich and sensuous imagery.

The earliest mention of Radha in ancient literatures is found in *Gatha Saptashati*. It was compiled by Hala Satavahana who ruled in Pratisthan-

pura about the first century A.D. Some couplets in this collection describe the *vraja-leela* of Krishna. This has led some scholars to believe that Krishna and Radha were originally deities worshipped by a tribe called Abhira. Even if this is historically true, Radha, the tribal goddess had undergone the same process of metamorphosis as Krishna and by the time she appears in *Padma Purana* she is but a personified mystic symbol.

In the *Patala-Khanda* (4th chapter) of *Padma Purana* she is described as the manifestation of both delight-giving-power (*Ananda-rupini* or *Hladini Shakti*) and original Nature (*Mula* or *Adya Prakriti*). Gopis are hymns of *Veelas* (*Shruti-kanya*) or celestial damsels (*Deva-kanya*) in human form.

The *Brahmavaivarta Purana* also admits that Radha is *Mula Prakriti*, but here she is more humanised. Amongst Vaisnavas there is a difference of opinion on the importance of Radha in the philosophical concept of the system. While Ramanuja an eminent Vaisnava Philosopher did not mention Radha at all; Nimbarka professing *Dvaitadvaita* (Dualistic Monism) and Caitanya, the propounder of *Acintya-bhedabheva* (incomprehensible duality-nonduality) placed a good deal of emphasis on Radha. Rupa Goswami indentified Radha with *Hladini-Mahashakti* of Tantra and regarded her as the manifestation of the highest form of love for God, i.e. *Maha-bhava-svarupa*.

Both Jayadeva and Raya Ramananda, most eminent of the connoisseurs and promoters of Odissi dance, regard Radha as the personified mystic symbol. If the mystic symbolism and allegory in the *Geeta-Govinda* is not taken into account, it would be just well-written pornography, entirely unfit to be recited in a temple. Therefore, Radha, as portrayed in *Geeta-Govinda* and other Oriya poems of the *bhakti*-cult cannot be humanised beyond the limits prescribed by the canons of Vaisnavism.

Now let us consider how Radha as *nayika* ought to be delineated in Odissi. According to *Natyashastra* there are eight different circumstances (*avastha*) in which a *nayika* may find herself. Thus circumstantially there are 8 types of *Nayika*, viz., 1. *Svadhinabhartuka*, 2. *Abhisarika*, 3. *Vasakasajja*, 4. *Virahotkanthita*, 5. *Khandita*, 6. *Vipralabdha*, 7. *Kalahantarita* and 8. *Prositabhartruka*. But the *nayika* reacts differently to the circumstances depending upon her *sheela*, i.e. natural propensity. Odissi accepts the *nayika-bheda* of *Natyashastra* in toto. In fact, the confusion arises in determining the *sheela* of Radha. Let me explain.

If a dancer is required to expressionally interpret three different characters, Kubuja, Rukmini and Radha, all in the same circumstance of *Vasakasajja*, — that is, eagerly waiting and preparing herself for union with Krishna, — then will the *Abhinaya* be the same for all or will it be different? If different, then on what basis? Roopa Goswami, one of the most eminent Vaisnava aesthetes, has elaborately dealt with this question in his *Ujjvala Nilamani*. He categorises the *nayikas* broadly into three, according to the type of *rati* (love for Krishna) they nurture which ultimately decides their *sheela*. These three types are: *Sadharana*, *Samanjasa* and *Samartha*. The categorisation depends on the amount of *Sambhogeceha* (desire for sensual pleasure) the *nayika* has in her *rati*. When the love is entirely focussed on the desire for sensual pleasure, as is generally the case with human beings, the *rati* is called *Sadharana* and Kubuja's love comes

under this category. In *Sadharana rati* the *nayika* places more importance on her pleasure than the pleasure of her lover, Krishna. According to Rupa Goswami Rukmini's love for Krishna is classified under *Samanjasa*, which has traces of *sambhogeccha* in the *rati* but she gives as much importance to the pleasure of Krishna as to her own.

In *Samartha rati* there is total absence of any desire for personal pleasure and a complete identification (*tadatmaya*) of *sambhogeccha* with *rati* and the functions of body and mind are directed towards the enhancement of the joy and pleasure of Krishna alone. The *gopies* of Vrindavana had this type of *rati* for Krishna, which is independent of any external reason and is self evident. *Samartha rati* passes through different stages of *prema*, *sneha*, *mana*, *pranaya*, *raga*, and *anuraga*, culminating in *mahabhava*, which is the quintessence of the *Hladinishakti* of Krishna. Again, the very essence of the *mahabhava*, known as *madana*, is the unique property of Radha alone and so she is referred to in Vaisnavic literature as the personification of *mahabhava* (i.e. *mahabhava svarupini*).

Thus there is a high degree of abstraction behind the personification of Radha and *Abhinaya-candrika*, wants the Odissi dancer to have a comprehension of *mahabhava* for the portrayal of *rati*, i.e., the love for Krishna:

“*Trividha-bhava-mukhyata rati-jnana pradarshane
Iti khyata mahabhava kartavya-nrtyavedina.*”

(2nd Stavaka, Bhavakhanda, 21)

The reasoning that Radha as *nayika* in Odissi should not be humanised so that her love for Krishna has not even the slightest trace of carnal desire, is further strengthened by the whole body of mediaeval Oriya literature dealing with the Krishna-legend. For example, Abhimanyu Samantasinghar in his *Vidagdha-cintamani* defines and with rich poetry explains the love of Radha for Krishna in two cantos. I am tempted to quote here two samples of his brilliant imagery which adequately portray the character of this “love”.

“*adhama jane chayabimba vata
uttama jane pratibimba vata*”

Which means, the intellectually inferior person does not recognise “love” but only its shadow (which is a patch of black having a likeness only in its crude outer contour); the intellectual looks at its reflection (which has every likeness but lacks in dimensions). Here the poet with great subtlety suggests that the “love” of Radha for Krishna is far beyond the intellect. Then with picturesque imagery he says how this love is even beyond the supra-physical:

“*lakha-ghoda navanita suara
pracandanale patha calibara
talum ki kari rahiba sharira
talum adhika priti palibara*”

A literal translation might be,
“A horse of wax with a rider of butter
galloping on a path furiously ablaze,

the bodies melt away, consumed, gone;
far far beyond is 'love' reached"

Absolute absence of carnal desire in the love of a *samarthanayika* gives it a character of childlike innocence. Delineation of such an abstract love through *abhinaya* is really very challenging specially for one who has once tasted carnal pleasures or even has illusions about it. Because of this difficulty, perhaps, Raya Ramananda did not select youthful *maharis* but two sensitive pre-adolescent girls for the purpose. This may also be the reason why in the *Rasaleela* of Uttar Pradesh, which is exclusively based on the Krishna-legend and strongly influenced and inspired by the *bhakti*-cult, all the performing artistes are pre-adolescent boys.

The infection of decadence entered into Odissi dance towards the earlier part of the 18th century. After the advent of Shricaitanya the *bhakti*-movement gathered momentum and spread throughout the length and breadth of Orissa. The Krishna-legend became extremely popular and all forms of performing arts of Orissa drew heavily from it. The common-folk who could not comprehend the mystic symbolism interpreted the Krishna-legend in their own way and distorted it. Since the folk-forms had an altogether different texture — vibrant, with bold earthiness — the sensual interpretation of the Krishna-Radha-story went down well, earning tremendous and immediate appeal. The *gotipua* institutions, which by that time had brought Odissi dance out of the temple precincts to the general masses, unfortunately were influenced, more or less, by these folk-forms. Two or three decades ago when scholars like Kali Charan Patnaik and Dhirendranath Patnaik started a revival of Odissi, the *mahari* tradition was already in the last phase of decline and the institutions of *gotipuas* were covered under a thick moss of decadence.

If a decadent trend is not taken for granted as the authentic tradition, the portrayal of Radha as *nayika* in Odissi has to be depicted with great delicacy and subtlety, which, demands from a dancer solid *sadhana* and consummate histrionic talent.

Although allied, *abhinaya* and *nritya* are two different branches of performing art. In *nritya* the two are blended. The contemporary Odissi exponents certainly have years of training in *nritya* techniques, but do they have such training in *abhinaya*? Or do they entirely depend on their inborn talent in histrionics? Of course, without inherent talent all efforts are futile, but, I believe, that a correct knowledge and understanding through systematic training can only develop it to the fullest extent. Without proper training in the *nritya* techniques could a responsible dancer perform before an audience depending only on her inborn dancing talent? Should not the same attitude be taken towards *abhinaya*? Radha today is nowhere portrayed as she should be, by our performers of Odissi.

Dearth of a suitably qualified *guru* to give systematic training in Odissi *abhinaya* is undeniably the real problem. Generally, the *gurus* imparting training at present, subordinate other deeper aspects of expressional dance to gestural interpretation. Some of the *gurus* are, no doubt, masters of *nritya* technique but with sheer emphasis on *nritya* the requirements of *nritya* cannot possibly be fulfilled.

Under the circumstances there are two alternatives before a sincere and responsible Odissi dancer. Either the expressional stage of dance is set to any Odissi song and not based on the Krishna-legend, in which case it will not be strictly traditional. Or, sparing no pains, the dancer comprehends fully the mystic symbolism innate in Vaisnavism and accordingly designs the *abhinaya* for portrayal of Radha as *nayika*. The latter is much more difficult than it appears. Unless the commitment of the dancer to the dance rises far above the thirst for applause, the comprehension cannot reach the depth of realisation. The performance may acquire all the intellectual glamour, but it would be like beholding Radha through a distorting mirror.

Footnotes

1. While the duet is found in Bengal. And the Punjab is known for its physical flexibility, Orissa is famous for the emotional expressiveness of its dance. This cannot be denied.
2. In Orissa the dance is invariably embellished with emotional expressiveness.
3. In Orissa the expressional aspect of the dance is its quintessence.
4. In the six varieties of body flexions the expressional aspect is exhibited. Without this emphasis the dance deteriorates into folk expression.
5. Some become the devotees of Kamsa — Others of Vasudeva-Krishna. The faces of some are red — those of the others are black.

JIWAN PANI. A leading Oriya poet and well-known writer, he is also an expert in the dance arts of Orissa. At present holds the position of Field Officer at the Sangeet Natak Akademi, concerned with the documentation of Folk and Tribal arts.