

## The Trinity of Odissi

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Quite suddenly and unannounced, Odissi exploded on the world dance scene and, virtually overnight, emerged a conquerer. This happened some 30 years ago—in the early '50s. Until then no one outside Orissa knew of its dance tradition. And in Orissa itself, though the tradition was alive, its pulse was feeble, erratic, terminal. If people accepted the legacy, it was apologetically (see 'My Initiation': Mohan Khokar, Angahar Festival Souvenir, 1985).

I start this article with a reference to Khokar because he sums up in his essay the dramatic revival of Odissi in a relatively short span of time. He also affirms that the dance form was totally unknown outside Orissa. So, as a person who played a critical role in the revival (unconsciously, initially, but consciously at a later stage), it is best that I describe here, first, the state of the art as it was in the early part of this century.

At any given time, a dance form acquires qualities suitable to its period and social ambience. In Orissa the dance which later came to be known as Odissi was practised by the Gotipuas on the one hand—an exclusively male tradition—and the Maharis on the other—exclusively female. The dance of the Maharis, being mainly ritualistic, was more of a closed system than the

*Gurus Pankaj Charan Das (1971), Kelucharan Mohapatra (1982), Debaprasad Das (1978).*



Gotipuas'. In *Chaitanya Charitamruta* it is mentioned that Raya Ramananda Patnaik, Minister of King Prataparudra—who was a great devotee of Shri Chaitanya—taught *abhinaya* to the Maharis. According to this work Ramananda taught *satvika* and *sanchari bhavas* to the beautiful *devadasis* (later to be known as Maharis) and had the *Geeta Govinda* enacted by them in dance. Ramananda also wrote *Jagannath Ballava Nataka* and organized many performances involving *devadasis* in the Jagannath temple of Puri. But from what we know from the present-day Maharis and the Records of Rights of Jagannath Temple, there was very little scope for *nritya* in the actual rituals.

There used to be two daily rituals for the Maharis, the first during the morning meal of the deities. The duration of this ritual, which used to take place near the *Garuda-stambha*—with the door to the *sanctum sanctorum* closed—was variable. The Maharis had to dance from the time the Jaya-Vijaya Dwara—the door to the *sanctum sanctorum*—closed for the morning meal till it opened again. The Maharis did not see the deities while dancing. This dance was pure *nritya*: only a few movements were repeated

*Maharis Kokilaprabha, Subasini, Haripriya, Shashiprabha: Puri, 1958.*



over and over again to the accompaniment of the Mardal. The Mardal players were from the traditional Madeli families. The evening ritual mainly consisted of songs from the *Gita Govinda* and devotional Oriya poetry before the deities retired late at night.

Although we know that the Mahari dance began as ritual in temples, we do not know how the Gotipua system began. Evidently, the Gotipuas adapted the Maharis' art, bringing in both *nritta* and *natya*, and thus expanding the scope of the dance. The Gotipuas were specially trained in interpretive dance to the songs of great medieval poets like Banamali, Kavisurya, and Gopala Krishna. They took the dance to the people and for the first time there was an interaction with the audience, which was absent in the Mahari context. It seems that the dance of the Gotipuas became a very popular performing art and the Vaishnav *mathas* and zamindars became its patrons. The Gotipuas were trained in both singing and dancing, which gave a new dimension to the art—*vachikabhinaya*. With the wealth of lyrics at hand, there was scope for more and more *vachikabhinaya*. In addition, the art of the Gotipuas was enriched with pure dance pieces like the *Batu-nritya* and *Pallavi*. Little boys dressed as girls contributed to the *aharya*. Till about the '50s, Gotipua troupes were mobile troupes travelling from village to village. As boys impersonated women in the dance, they could not perform once their voices broke or beards appeared. The performing life of a Gotipua was thus very short, around ten years, after which most Gotipuas had to adopt other means of livelihood. The Gotipua system had a *guru-parampara* absent in the closed mother-to-daughter teaching tradition of the Maharis and, not surprisingly, some of the Gotipua gurus were the teachers of the present-day gurus of Odissi dance.

Odissi travelled outside the State for the first time in 1954 when I danced in the first Inter-University Youth Festival in Delhi. Dhirendra Nath Patnaik, now Secretary of Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi, also danced *Dashavatara* in the same festival. The dance immediately caught the attention of critics, dancers and public alike. Most important of all, the late Charles Fabri, art critic of *The Statesman*, subsequently highlighted in his writings the discovery of a new classical dance form. It was at his persuasion that Indrani Rehman learnt Odissi and carried it as part of her repertoire all over India as well as different parts of the world.

While Odissi was being seen by more and more people, questions were being raised about its authenticity as a full-fledged classical dance form. To answer such questions the late Kavichandra Kalicharan Patnaik put together the first book (rather a booklet, now a collector's item) on *Odissi Dance* with my photographs in some of the typical poses. This was published by Utkal Nritya Sangeet Natyakala Parishad, later renamed



*Kalicharan Patnaik (seated) with Debaprasad Das, Priyambada Mohanty (first and fourth from left) and others, circa 1954. Courtesy: author.*

Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi. In this booklet, Kavichandra put forth documentary evidence to prove that Odissi dance had a tradition dating back to the *Natyashastra*. More and more seminars were organized, both in Orissa and in Delhi, where lecture-demonstrations of Odissi were presented to select audiences. The challenge brought together Odissi dancers, gurus and *vidwans*, and what emerged—mainly by salvaging whatever was left with the Gotipuas, Maharis and their gurus—was a standardized, highly sophisticated art form.

While experts were assessing the status of the dance, Odissi started gaining ground mainly for its striking lyrical qualities. Fortunately this happened at a time when we had a batch of young gurus from the Mahari and Gotipua traditions who could rise to the occasion and enrich the Odissi repertoire, creating new works within the framework of the traditional art which now emerged as a distinctive self-sufficient dance form.

From, say, the mid-'50s to the mid-'70s the Odissi repertoire was enriched mainly by the efforts and contributions of three leading gurus:



Priyambada Mohanty, circa 1954. Courtesy: author.

Guru Pankaj Charan Das, who came from a traditional Madeli family attached to the Jagannath temple; Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, who comes from a traditional *chitrakara* (*patachitra*-painter) family of Puri; and the late Guru Debaprasad Das, who had a very different background and belonged to Cuttack district. I refer to these three gurus as the trinity of modern-day Odissi. I have had the privilege of learning Odissi from all three of them at one time or the other; I have thus witnessed the gradual enrichment of their repertoires and have seen them reach further and further in their art. I have refrained so far from discussing their roles in Odissi lest I be thought presumptuous. However, with the generosity and affection they have always given me, I hope I can now try to assess their contributions towards the emergence of modern-day Odissi.

First of all, it is necessary to discuss the background of each of the three gurus in order to appreciate the almost serendipitous coincidence by which they were able, at a given time and place, to transform a dying dance tradition into a vital, dynamic one. Since all three had parallel contributions which together produced the composite Odissi dance of today, I feel it is best to deal with the background, stylistic distinctiveness, and repertoire of

each guru in the order of seniority.

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Of the three gurus, the seniormost is Guru Pankaj Charan Das of Puri. As I said earlier, he belongs to a Madeli family attached to the Jagannath temple: the Madelis provide Mardal or drum accompaniment to the Maharis or dancers of Jagannath temple. He is the son of Kshetramani and Dharme Das, a policeman. Dharme Das died before Pankaj Charan was born, and he was brought up by his mother in difficult circumstances.

Kshetramani and young Pankaj Charan lived with Fakira Mahari and his aunt Ratnaprabha Mahari and therefore he was exposed to music and dance from his very infancy. According to him he was consciously attracted to dance and music in his early childhood. He could easily repeat the dances and music practiced by the Maharis at home, so much so that young Mahari trainees were often asked to "sing and dance like Pankaj" by the senior Maharis teaching them. In the evenings he used to go to an *akhādāghara*—centres for training in gymnastics, music, and dance exclusively for men. Here he was exposed to the more vigorous singing and dancing style of the Gotipuas. Thus he acquired a sound background in both the Mahari and Gotipua styles of dance and music. Therefore his choreography has a range of items some of which are in the typically demure lyrical style of the Maharis and some in the more perky effervescent style of the Gotipuas.

Unconsciously absorbing the art initially in a Mahari family—chiefly from his aunt Ratnaprabha—and then consciously seeking training in an *akhādāghara*, and still later from Ranganath Dev Goswami and Bhikari Charan Dalei of Rasalila troupes, Pankaj Charan grew into a fine performer. As a boy he used to participate in dance, music, and plays at school. Later he started giving occasional performances at the Hajuri Theatre in Puri. During his training in the *akhādāghara* he learnt the two most popular virtuoso items of the Gotipua repertoire—the acrobatic *Bandha-nrutya* and the skilful *Thali-nrutya*. Of course, it was not possible for him to make a living only by performances: it is humbling to note that this great guru earned his living first as a hawker of *pan* and a *pan*-seller in a betel shop and later as a part-time peon in Puri.

The turning point in his life came when he joined New Theatres and travelled all over Orissa singing, dancing, and acting. He began his career as a dance teacher at Annapurna Theatre in Cuttack. He also choreographed dances for the plays staged in the Theatre. A fact of historical significance for Odissi is that during this period he taught dance to the husband-and-wife team of Kelucharan and Laxmipriya Mohapatra who were then young





Pankaj Charan Das during a video-recording at Sangeet Natak Akademi studio, 1987.

artistes employed in Annapurna Theatre. He choreographed several episodes from mythology. In the *Bhasmasura* episode he acted as Bhasmasura and Kelucharan as Nataraja. He also choreographed the *Dashavatara* as a duet for Kelucharan and Laxmipriya. This was around the time he saw a book on dance by Projesh Banerjee—*Dances of India*—and for the first time became aware of the use of *mudras* to express the meanings of words. For the first time in the Odissi tradition, he used different *mudras* for his *Dashavatara*—Mina, Kurma, Varaha, etc. — from Banerjee's book. I consider *Dashavatara* the first work of modern choreography in Odissi; it was a landmark which started a new trend in Odissi dance which till then had employed traditional *mudras* only in a limited way. Pankaj Charan was with Annapurna Theatre from 1944 to 1949.

The early '50s saw a change in the attitude towards music and dance in Orissa, specially in Cuttack which was the centre of all cultural activities. Dance teachers started earning a living independently by teaching dance, mainly in arts organizations. People were now also willing to train their daughters in music and dance, and this opened up to gurus the avenue for private tuition. At this time Guru Pankaj Charan Das also began to be noticed by presenting his work outside Annapurna Theatre. His repertoire included, among other modified traditional items, the popular *Bandha-nrutya*, *Thali-nrutya*, and *Dashavatara*.

After my historic performance in Delhi in 1954, we were invited to participate in the National Dance Festival there in 1955. Guru Pankaj Charan Das and Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra choreographed the dance-drama *Sakhigopal* for the Festival—with lyrics by Kavichandra Kalicharan Patnaik—which was acclaimed by the critics. This perhaps was the first time that a full-length dance-drama in Odissi style was performed. Subsequently, Guru Pankaj Charan Das continued to teach dance and enrich the Odissi repertoire with new choreography. With Odissi gaining momentum, he was invited to teach Yamini Krishnamoorthy. This gave Gururji exposure to other forms of classical dance, especially Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi.

Being the most innovative and adventurous of the three gurus, Guru Pankaj Charan Das started experimenting with *Mangalacharan*. Deviating from the custom of starting a performance with *Ganesh Vandana*, he introduced a *manchapraवेशa* to Shankaracharya's *Jagannathashtaka*: '*Jagannatha Swami Nayanapathagami Bhavatume*'. This caught the imagination of dancers and gurus alike and has now become the standard invocation with which to begin an Odissi performance. The change has occurred despite the initial criticism against *Jagannath Vandana* preceding *Ganesh Vandana*: according to Hindu tradition, as well as the Odissi tradition—more specifically the Gotipua tradition—Lord Ganesh, being Vighnaraja, was to be worshipped first! But innovations like this have marked the expansion and evolution of Odissi throughout its history. As a dancer Gururji excelled in solo as well as group items—*mela-nrutya*.

Guru Pankaj Charan Das joined Utkal Sangeet Mahavidyalaya in Bhubaneswar in the early '60s and his tenure there can be considered the most productive part of his career. He trained several generations of dancers at the Mahavidyalaya including most of the young dance gurus of today. His items have the stamp of the Mahari tradition distinguished by *atibhanya* and a peculiar *flip-flop walk*. Some of his popular items are the *Pallavis* in *ragas* Shankarabharana, Arabhi, Kalyan, Deshakhya, etc. His *sthayi* is sculpturesque, in which the transitions are very smooth but with assertive *chauka* punctuations. In *abhinaya*, besides the usual *ashtapadi*



pieces of Jayadeva like *Dashavatar* and *Badasi Yadi*, Guruji has choreographed some really perky Gotipua-style pieces like '*Radharani Songe Nache*' or '*Nahinke Karidela*' besides a series of thematic dances on the *panchakanyas*: Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, Mandodari. His *Pallavi Gatibilasa* is an innovative piece; the use of animated *tala* patterns to a traditional *Pallavi* tune makes it an item for connoisseurs. For his new choreography he has used music by Harihar Panda and Balakrushna Dash. Some of his *mela-nrutyas* are based on songs in praise of Mother India by Bhaktakabi Madhusudan Rao. '*Ahe Shiba Gouri Tume*', based on a traditional prayer song, is in praise of Lord Shiva. His *pièce de resistance* is of course the spectacular *Giani Samhara*, based on an Oriya version of the Dashavatara myth. The vigour and vitality of the piece, its use of space and its transitions, are stunning. Guruji started the practice of casting male dancers in male roles, imparting a special vigour to his choreography.

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Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra is now a legendary figure in the field of dance in India. He too had a humble beginning, brought up in penurious circumstances in a *chitrakara* family in Raghurajpur—Puri district—in 1926. Kelucharan was exposed to music from his infancy as his father was a proficient Khola player. Kelucharan learnt to play the Khola from his father, which proved very valuable to him later as a dance teacher and Pakhawaj player. His mastery over *tala* and his skill as a Pakhawaj player have given him an advantage over other contemporary *gurus*.

Like other young boys in those days with an aptitude for music and dance, Kelucharan joined a Rasalila troupe, one headed by the famous guru Mohan Sundar Dev Goswami. Here he learnt acting, mime, dance, singing, as well as make-up and stagecraft. He was with the troupe for 12 years. After leaving the troupe he lived in dire poverty: it is again humbling to note that he worked for about a year doing odd jobs like rolling *bidis*, working as a labourer in betel farms and construction works.

Life took a better turn when he was hired by the theatre company of Kavichandra Kalicharan Patnaik on a salary of seven rupees a month. His job was to help in stage-work, besides acting and playing percussion instruments. During this period he received further training in Khola from Agadhu Moharana, in Tabla from the late Kshetramohan Kar and Harihar Rao. He then joined Annapurna Theatre—a turning point in his career as a dancer. Guru Pankaj Charan Das (whom he affectionately calls Dada) had already joined the Theatre. Trained by him, Kelucharan excelled in the role



of Nataraja in *Devi Bhasmasura*. Laxmipriya, who was later to be his wife, acted as Mohini in this production. He also performed *Dashavatara* with Laxmipriya under the direction of Guru Pankaj Charan Das.

After working for about five years with Annapurna Theatre, Kelucharan and his wife Laxmipriya went to Puri and stayed there for a couple of years. At the age of 30—in the '50s—he joined the newly established Kala Vikash Kendra of Cuttack. It was here that he firmly established himself as a dance guru, Pakhawaj player, and choreographer. He trained a group of young dancers at the Kendra, some of whom are our present-day gurus. He also choreographed a number of dance-dramas: *Shakuntala*, *Gita Govinda*, *Meghaduta*, *Urbasi*, *Champu*, etc. After working with Kala Vikash Kendra for 15 years Kelubabu decided to leave the institution, mainly to devote more time to choreography and to train some leading dancers including Sanjukta Panigrahi, Sonal Mansingh, and Kumkum Mohanty. He excelled in choreography and carved a niche for himself with his choreography of *ashtapadis* from Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*. He worked closely with Bhubaneswar Misra who set to music many of his *Pallavis* which are notable items in the Odissi repertoire today—in *ragas* Kalyan, Arabhi, Shankarabharana, Mohana, Khamaj, Bilahari, etc. Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra has choreographed the largest number of items in Odissi and has considerably enriched its repertoire. His *batu* has the stamp of exactitude and a sculptural quality, his *Pallavis* are woven in with complex *tala* patterns, his *abhinayas* are extremely well balanced. Kelubabu has inspired dancers all over India to take up Odissi. The demand led to the establishment of training centres by Guruji in Calcutta, Bombay, and Delhi. He continues to teach at the training centres under the aegis of Padatik in Calcutta and the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Bombay.

A legend in his lifetime, Guruji has received honours and distinctions from many quarters. He received the Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1966, the Padma Shri in 1972, the Padma Bhushan in 1989, and the Kalidas Samman also in 1989. He is also a recipient of the ITC Award from Sangeet Research Academy, Calcutta, in 1982, and the Niladri Nataraj Award from Shree-Kshetra Kala Prakasika of Puri in 1983. He has been felicitated by Balasubramanya Sangeetha Sabha, Madras; Sur Singar Samsad, Bombay; Bhatkhande Sangeet Vidyapeeth, Lucknow. Akhil Bharatiya Gandharva Mahavidyalaya conferred on him an honorary doctorate in 1981.

Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra continues to give full evening recitals. He has been hailed as a dancer, teacher, and Pakhawaj player. The most active

*Kelucharan Mohapatra: photo session at Sangeet Natak Akademi studio, 1982.*

Odissi guru in the contemporary scene, he continues to impart training and choreograph new work at Odissi Research Centre, Bhubaneswar, Padatik, and the National Centre for the Performing Arts. His son Ratikanta is training in dance and growing into a good Pakhawaj player.

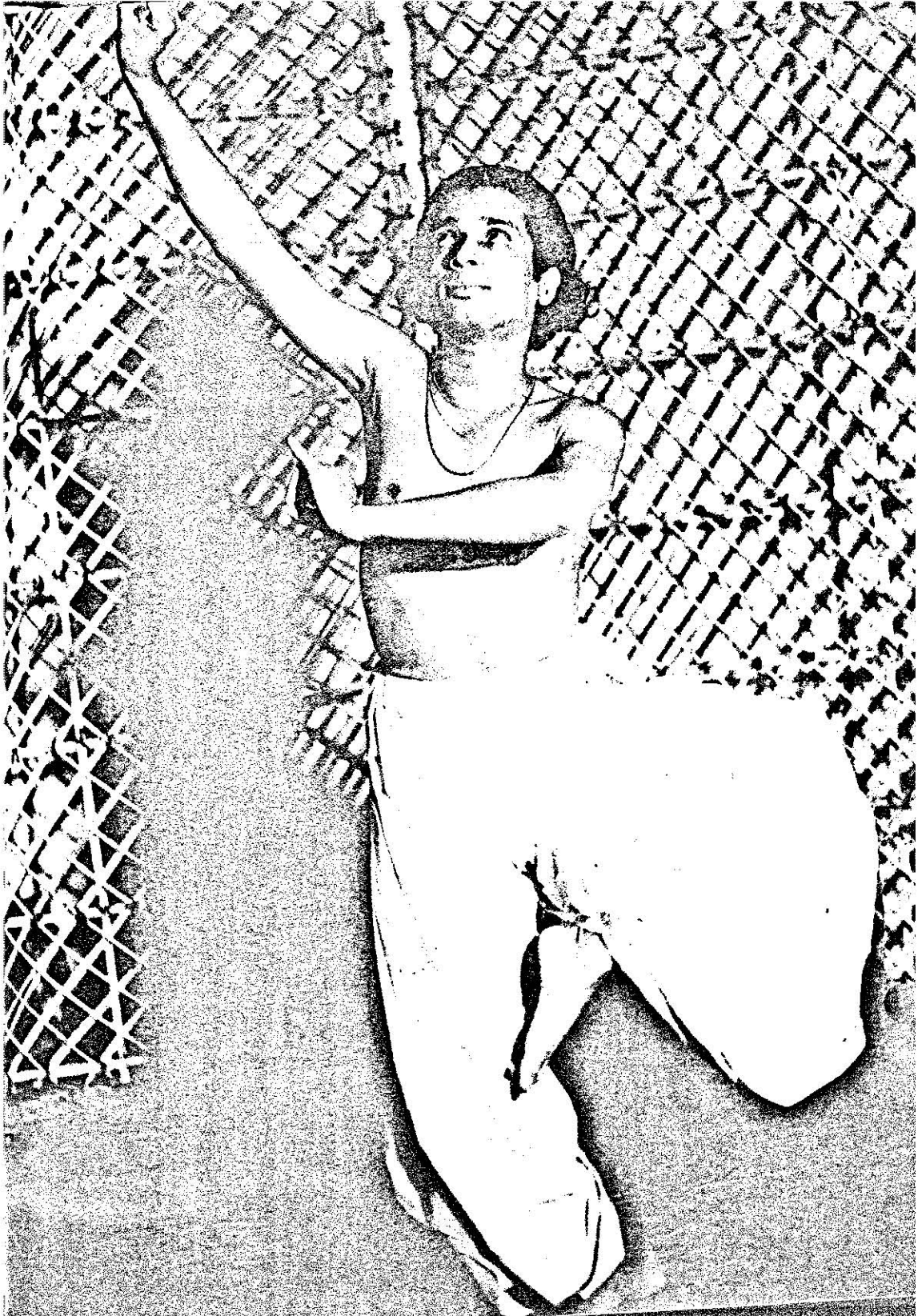
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Guru Debaprasad Das, who passed away before his time—at the age of 54 on 16 July 1986—was the youngest of the three gurus. His background was very different from the other gurus. He was born in Keul Chabi Sua village near Jhankada, famous for its Sarala temple, in Cuttack district in 1932. His father Durga Charan Das was a police inspector. His mother Indramani Devi died when he was only a year old. Debaprasad was exposed to music from his early childhood as his paternal grandfather Bauri Bandhu Das—a *gumastha* by profession—was a good violin player and the music director of the Keul Natya troupe. He taught young Debaprasad the traditional music of Orissa: *chhanda*, *chaupadi*, *Keshaba koili*, *kanta koili*, *manobodha chautisa*, *abakasha*, etc. Later Debaprasad went to Puri to stay with his maternal uncle and there he attended school. But he was not interested in his studies and was drawn more to dance, drama, Jatra, painting, etc. Often he used to sneak into the Pathara *ākhāda* and watch Ramlila in Janhimandia, Puri.

Occasional punishment did not cool his passion for music and dance. Secretly he started taking dance lessons from the legendary Gotipua Nrutyaguru Mohan Charan Mohapatra of the Pathara *ākhāda*. With great difficulty he passed his minor (elementary school) examination and left for Ganjam district where his father was posted. Here too he neglected his studies to learn painting and *terracotta* sculpture from Prahalad Patel. This led to discontent and frequent punishment at home. In 1944 he ran away from home and was employed as an actor in New Theatres from that year to 1949. As was the practice those days, he took female roles in some plays. He became very popular as a comedian.

Subsequently he joined Annapurna Theatre where he had scope both as a dancer and comedian. During this time he had the opportunity to learn the rudiments of various classical and folk dances from Guru Kumar Dayal Sharan of Madras. In the early '50s, when a lot of eager students started learning dance and music, Debaprasad started teaching Gotipua dance to young boys.

*Debaprasad Das : Delhi, Circa 1955.*





A turning point in his career came when he taught me Odissi under the supervision of Kavichandra Kalicharan Patnaik for my performance in the first Inter-University Youth Festival in Delhi in 1954. Soon after this Indrani Rehman, who had made quite a name for herself as a Bharatanatyam dancer, learnt Odissi from Guruji at the instance of Charles Fabri and the late Mayadhar Manshingh. For the next five years Guruji trained Indrani and presented Odissi before national and international audiences. This was the period when he received wide recognition and honour. Students flocked to him. He joined Utkal Sangeet Mahavidyalaya in the early '60s as a lecturer in Odissi dance and continued to teach there till his untimely death. However, he was able to train a number of dancers including Vijayalaxmi Mohanty. Some of his disciples have made quite a name for themselves as *nrutyagurus*.

Of the three gurus, Guru Debaprasad Das was the first to venture out of Orissa and gain exposure to other forms of classical dance. From this he drew some themes and movements which he used in his later choreography. However, in the final analysis, he was the most conservative of the three gurus. He was a stickler for the old Odissi style with its 'earthy' movements. He totally disapproved of modern-day Odissi costume—not even "stitched dresses". Thus in his repertoire one can still see flashes of Odissi as it used to be in the '40s and '50s. Perhaps his items are popular because of this very earthiness: indeed, they are the ones most performed in Orissa. His popular repertoire includes numbers like *Ashtushambhu*, *Thai-nata* (equivalent of *batu* and retaining the traditional form), *Pallavis in ragas* Kalyani, Basanta, Kalabati, and *Moksha* (again retaining the traditional form).

His *abhinayas* are totally devoid of *sancharis*, adhering strictly to the *bhavas* of the lyrics. He liked Oriya lyrics more than Sanskrit ones. His typical items became instant hits when he and his disciple presented them at the Angahar festival in Delhi in 1985.

In many ways, Guru Debaprasad Das's life was a sad one. Although he played a pioneering role in the propagation and popularization of Odissi, national recognition came to him rather late in the day. He received the Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1977 and an award from World Development Corporation in 1983. He also received a senior fellowship from the Department of Culture, Government of India, for research on 'Dance as Ritual in Jagannath-seva and *Akhada Sampradaya*'. He left a valuable manuscript—*Nrutyanusarani*—on the practical aspects of Odissi: this work is now in press, being published with the assistance of Sangeet Natak Akademi. There is no gainsaying that Guru Debaprasad Das has played a very critical role in the development and popularization of Odissi, deviating least from its traditional form.





To conclude, I would like to emphasize here that none of the three gurus I have discussed in this article came from a traditional line of gurus or *gharanas* as in the North or South Indian contexts of music and dance. Guru Pankaj Charan Das, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, and Guru Debaprasad Das came from diverse milieus and it was because of their own aptitude and application that they grew into gurus of gurus. The cultural atmosphere they enjoyed when they were young—particularly the still-vibrant Gotipua tradition—the establishment of professional theatre groups, and ultimately the social acceptance of dance in Orissa contributed to their emergence as full-fledged gurus. It is their individual efforts and genius that transformed the amorphous materials—be it movements, *abhinaya*, or music—of the Maharis and Gotipuas into the crystalline classical Odissi dance of today.

However, after this vibrant renaissance in the history of Odissi, I feel that the dance has been passing through a crisis. The senior gurus have reached their peaks and the repertoire has become stale and repetitive. I hate to say it, but none of the young gurus have showed any remarkable ability in choreography. Even more distressing is the trend of dancers choreographing their own pieces without the necessary training or discipline. Only time will tell if this spells the end of traditional Odissi or is just a passing phase. I hope the latter is true. □