



*A group photograph of temple dancers of Puri. (From left to right) Smt. Kokilaprabha, Subasini, Smt. Haripriya and Smt. Shashiprabha.*

## With The Daughters Of Urvasi And Rambha

**R**AJA Indradyumna invited Brahma from heaven for the purpose of founding the temple at Puri. Brahma came. He was accompanied by Viswakarma, Padmanidhi, Shankhanidhi, Narad, Ha Ha, Hu Hu and other Gandharvas. Along with them came also the heavenly dancers, Urvasi and Rambha.

"When the temple was completed Lord Jagannath, his brother, Balbhadra, and sister, Subhadra, were carried in three *Rathas* (chariots) called *Taladhawaja*, *Devadalana*, and *Nandighosha*. Heavenly singers sang while Urvasi and Rambha danced. Here begins the

by

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tradition of dancing in the temple. We trace our origin to these heavenly dancers and have been continuing the tradition.....", said Smt.

Haripriya, a temple dancer of Puri, who was proud of her lineage. And why not?

Legends have an intrinsic beauty of their own which fires the imagination of people. Historians may try to disprove many statements made current by legends. Nevertheless, the legends survive and even a hardboiled historian would delight in listening to them. Fortunately, there was no historian with me and, therefore, I remained undisturbed in the



*Shri Mohan Mahapatra, Odissi dance Guru*

spell of legends woven by a daughter of Urvashi.

Puri temple dancers are known as *Maharis*. Like their counterparts in other regions of the country, they too are dedicated to the god and until recently were maintained by the temple. Besides dancing to please the Lord, they were required to dance occasionally at the palace. Now bad days have fallen on the *Maharis*. The temple does not maintain them nor does the king. They have lost the land which was allotted to them. Poverty has forced many of them to take to other means of livelihood. The result is that whereas a few decades ago there were 50 dancers in the temple, now there are only two, Smt. Haripriya and Smt. Kokilaprabha, known as Dungari and Koili, respectively. They too have now stopped dancing.

The dance of the *Maharis* inside Puri temple has been talked about widely though it is not open to public. The special dress that the *Maharis* put on for the occasion, the jewellery they wear, all these have been objects of curiosity.

According to the temple rules: "When the food is offered to the Lord, the only person whose service is essential will remain inside

the temple. Sentries will be posted to prevent any one entering. The *Rajguru* shall officiate for the King. Palia Mahari will dance at the place fixed for her. The only accompaniment will be Pakhawaj".

### **Role of 'Maharis'**

When I set foot in Puri my mind was obsessed with the idea of filming and recording this dance. I told the resourceful Shri Umakant Misra about it. He introduced me to Shri Mohan Mahapatra, an Odissi dance Guru, who knew Smt. Haripriya Devi. Accompanied by Shri Dhiren Patnaik, I made my way through the winding lanes and reached her place.

Smt. Haripriya Devi was very helpful and volunteered a lot of information, the most important part of which was the role that the *Maharis* play in the rituals of the temple.

A young *Mahari* is given training for about two years after which she is taken to the temple where Pattajoshi Mahapatra marries her to the god. This ceremony is called tying of *Sari*. At the marriage ceremony, a piece of cloth is taken from the idol and tied round the young dancer's head, after which she is given a garland. With this ceremony she gets her chance to dance.

The *Maharis* have a fixed role to play in the festivals of the temple. They have to dance in the morning when the Lord has his food and sing an *Ashtapadi* of Jaidev in the night when the Lord retires. Dungari Devi hastened to add that Padmavati, the wife of Jaidev, was a *Mahari*.

It is interesting to note that Jagannath, his brother and sister, are the deities worshipped at the Puri temple while his wife Lakshmi is relegated to the background. *Devadasis* are attendants to Lakshmi while the male *Pandas*, known as *Dayitapatis*, attend on the other three.

### **'Rath Yatra'**

At the time of *Rath Yatra*, the three main deities are taken to the old temple leaving Lakshmi behind. Lakshmi feels outraged and on the fifth day sends her attendants, *Devadasis*,



*Subasini, a Mahari dancer*

to convey her anger. They go to the old temple and launch an attack on *Dayitapatis*, and tear their clothes, etc. They also try to smash up the *Rath*. On the ninth day, Jagannath and party return to the temple. But Lakshmi gets the door bolted from inside and allows it to be opened only when the party begs on their knees. Here an interesting song duet takes place between *Maharis* and *Dayitapatis*. During the nine days of *Rath Yatra*, *Maharis* dance at the old temple.

#### **'Chandan Yatra'**

They also dance at the time of *Chandan Yatra* when the Lord is taken out to the lake temple for immersion in sandal paste. After immersion he is taken out on *Chappo* (boat) for *Nauka Behar*. *Maharis* dance on the *Chappo*.

During *Sawan*, they dance at the *Mukti Mandap* or *Jhoolan Mandap* for seven days.

Apart from this they have to take part in many other rituals.

About 50 years ago, *Maharis* were well off and could afford dance teachers to train them. But now they cannot afford it. At present the mother teaches whatever she knows to her daughter.

Dungari Devi made a fervent plea that the Akademi should find ways and means to impart training to them so that traditional art does not die.

#### **Dance Performance**

By this time I felt bold to broach the issue of a dance performance. She said: "I am too old to dance now and my colleague, Koili, is not well. Besides, she too has given up dancing long since". Sympathising with my feeling of disappointment, she added: "Koili's daughter, Subasini is the only young girl who has had training in *Mahari* dance. But the taboo attached to the community is so strong that she does not want to dance and would deny any knowledge of dancing if you were to ask her. She has taken up the profession of a nurse and is working in the hospital! If you can persuade her, I will dress her up in the traditional costume and allow you to film her in my house".

Shri Umakant Misra came to my rescue. He took me to Dr. Maheshchandra Pati, the Civil Surgeon, and an ardent lover of music and dance. Subasini could not say no. The next day she performed the dance accompanied on *Pakhawaj* by Shri Mohan Mahapatra.

#### **Temple Songs**

The same day Dungari Devi invited some more members of her community and sang all songs connected with the temple rituals for my recording. These included:

- (1) Gitagovinda: Sung in the temple at night.
- (2) An Odissi Bhajan: Sung during day.
- (3) Three Odissi Songs: Sung on the boat during *Chandan Yatra*.
- (4) Mangala: Sung at the time of Lord's marriage with Rukmini.

I was leaving after filming and recording the secretive dance of the *Maharis* of Puri when Dungari Devi told me of the *Devadasi Sangh* of which she was the President.

The Sangh demands help to keep up the *Maharis* dance tradition alive. Their demands include scholarships to deserving students from the community and appointment of a *Guru* for training the aspirants.