DANCE CARVED IN STONE:
An Investigation of the Contemporary Presentation of Odissi Dance

Sarala Dandekar

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in
partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
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Abstract

Odissi is a North East Indian classical dance form from the state of Orissa. Originating in the temples as a form of religious ritual, Odissi was performed by *maharis*, women who dedicated their lives to temple service. Throughout its history, Odissi has undergone a series of transformations, including the transfer of dance knowledge from the *maharis* (female temple dancers) to the *gotipuas* (village boys trained in dance) and the degradation and near extinction of the form by the dawn of the twentieth century. Over the past one hundred years, Odissi has been revived in India resulting in its presentation as a classical form of theatrical dance performed on stage.

The existing literature by dance scholars and critics presents the contemporary form of Odissi as if it is suspended in a romantic, intangible construct of legend and myth. The ethnographic works published on Odissi have been authored by Western scholars who approach the subject from an outsider's perspective. This thesis provides an examination of the practice, performance and dissemination of Odissi dance as it has been developed by the internationally renowned guru, Kelucharan Mohapatra. The approach is that of a dual insider/outsider perspective, incorporating personal experience as an Odissi dancer and fieldwork as an ethnographer. The discussion includes ethnographic material gathered from Odissi performers and teachers in Bombay, Bhubaneswar, Boston, Los Angeles, and Toronto, as well as personal experiences from my own participation in Odissi as a student and performer.

The mythic and historic events that shape the context of the Odissi ritual are examined. The deconstruction of the performance process includes an analysis of the repertoire, stage elements, costuming, and the internal transformations of the dancer as performer of the dance ritual. The Odissi aesthetic and its manifestation in technique, training methods, and choreography is also investigated. Examining Odissi as a classical art form performed in contemporary society provides an opportunity to explore issues of authenticity, cultural tradition, dissemination of the dance form and the economic and commercial factors of performance. Finally, concerns and predictions about the future of Odissi dance in an increasingly global society are explored.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Bombay, April 21, 1995

Today I see a man lying on the ground, covered with flies and the stench of death at the train station. His body shudders, the last instinctive movements of some physical remainder of life. The flies don't bother to lift away from the movement. Women with school children, men, and students step over the body on the train platform like a pile of garbage. I seem to be the only one who cannot let my eyes slip immediately away from this man dying in the madness of the Bombay rush-hour. I have never felt so helpless.

I cannot stand the idea of boarding the train that arrives, of being pressed close to the complacent living. I walk the three miles to Nariman Point, in late afternoon heat, along the cement pavement that borders the sea. The noise of traffic, shrieking street children and lewd male comments cling to me in the humid air and I feel oppressed by all of it. I am suffused with remorse towards the dead man, granted neither privacy nor dignity in the last moments of life, exposed to and unseen by the apathetic masses. I am caught between distress and disgust for the world and my unanswerable participation in it.

As I enter the National Center for Performing Arts, the glare from outdoors and the heat of my body are absorbed into the cool darkness of the theater. Insulated from the frantic pace of the commercial Bombay streets, my emotional tumult is silenced by the sound

of dancing bells moving somewhere backstage. The theater grows quiet as the stage lights fade up and the low powerful notes of the pakavaj (drum) echo through the hall. The drum seems to be summoning a mysterious, powerful force from deep below the surface of the earth. Slow waves of sound roll through a seven-beat time cycle. The high, sweet notes of the flute lift through a melody of light and space, spiraling up on the delicate fragrance of lit incense. Two voices begin chanting the familiar invocation prayer. Finally the dancer, dressed in traditional silk and silver, and adorned with white flowers, enters the stage.

Her bells announce her presence and summon the eye to witness the beginning of the performance ritual. Her offering to the audience--dance--embodies highest ideals of grace, devotion and love. Odissi holds the serenity and solace of every art which has been born out of the human desire to make moments of spiritual ecstasy visible. As she performs, she opens within me a forgotten entrance into another, ageless realm, reminding me that this world of beauty exists--the product of human effort as surely as the impersonal chaos of the concrete jungle only meters away from the theater walls.

Since childhood, I have been involved in Indian classical dance as a student, performer and audience member in the United States. According to one family story, I reacted to my first Indian dance performance by sliding into the aisle and performing my own version of the dancer's movements. I began a sporadic training in Bharat Natyam (a dance form originating in South India) at the age of four. My training was frequently interrupted for other activities and it was not until my second year in university that I began

to focus seriously on dance once more. In 1994, I witnessed an Odissi dance performance in Madras which inspired me to undertake serious training in this North East Indian classical dance form.

I undertook the majority of my Odissi training in Bombay with some additional intensive training in Orissa--the state in India where this dance form originates. Studying in India provided important cultural context and exposure to an entirely different training approach than the one I had experienced in North America. Living in India challenged my consciousness and understanding of the society's culture, sweeping inclusively from thousand year old traditions to post-modern pop culture.

From the time of my arrival in Bombay, I had been struggling with the meaning of presenting a reconstructed classical dance form, based on the private embodiment of prayer, on stage for a largely secular and cosmopolitan audience. Thus my experience on April 21, 1995 represents a pivotal moment in my personal understanding of Odissi and its role in contemporary Indian society. I have always been moved by the beauty of Indian classical music and dance, but until that performance in April, I never fully experienced the power of an art form to redirect my own energies from desolation to inspiration. The aim in classical art is to transcend the superficial gratification of the senses, to go beyond entertainment. Like prayer, the intent lies not in distraction from daily life but engagement and transformation of the spirit. There is a proverb, attributed to the Sufi mystic poet Rumi, stating "man is infinitely greater than man." My experience of the dance performance on that

evening resonates with exactly that feeling.

During the time I spent training in Odissi, I supplemented the practical dance knowledge of the training process with performances (attended and eventually given), lectures, workshops and literature from the National Center for Performing Arts library. I found numerous books on Indian classical dance (depending upon the date of publication, the number of recognized classical dance forms ranged from five to seven, increasing as the dates of publication became more recent). Yet amongst these written works, there were only two books focusing specifically on Odissi dance.

While I was surprised at the scarcity of published work on Odissi, I also sensed a vast gap between the written presentation of Odissi performance and my experiences living in India and training in the dance style. Within the literature, Odissi is presented like a museum piece, intact and preserved, but removed from any process of creation. The dance form seems to be suspended in a romantic intangible construct of legend and myth. Historical records of Odissi legitimize its legacy of sacred and ancient origins; but in its contemporary form, Odissi is lifted out of life. The dance is described as if it exists only on the stage, and only once the dancer is fully transformed by costume, jewelry and years of training to present the ritual in its entirety.

The Odissi narrative consists of far more than a recitation of its history and description of aesthetic. The actual experiential qualities of training and performing Odissi, which form an integral part of understanding the dance form, are missing in the existing

literature. To depict the dance as detached and displaced from the living processes of creation, performance and teaching is to ignore an integral part of the dance and its existence in contemporary society. This thesis examines the contemporary form of Odissi dance as a process of training and assimilation which culminates in performance, but is not isolated, nor limited to the performance experience. I examine how the recreated form of Odissi is performed, preserved and passed on in contemporary society.

I hold a unique, insider/outsider position within the world of Indian dance and Indian society in general. Being of both Indian and European descent and having spent most of my life in the United States, I nonetheless have identified with and become a part of the Odissi dance world as a student, performer and teacher. Living in India with my family, I have been treated as both a native and a foreigner. As an Odissi dancer, I have been embraced by the dance community and indulged in my (sometimes) overly inquisitive questions. I believe that my position has been extremely advantageous to ethnographic work and I hope to bring these advantages to this thesis. As a dancer, I share knowledge, experiences and vocabulary with my informants. As an outsider I was able to view certain cultural elements of Odissi without any deeply embedded, lifelong associations. Thus I hope to contribute to existing literature on Indian dance and culture with a discussion of Odissi that is at once informed by an insider's perspective and guided by the rules and methodology of dance ethnography.

Odissi performance is ritualized and made meaningful to dancers and audiences by the myths and histories of Orissa and the classical Sanskrit texts of Hinduism. Thus, the

discussion of contemporary presentation is contextualized by investigating the roots of the form. The focus of Chapter Two is the mythological and historical background of Odissi dance. The twentieth century process of re-establishing the dance form relied upon the rich oral traditions and historic monuments and texts to shape the subtext of the form. Yet within the contemporary oral teaching tradition, the revival process is secondary to the history and mythology preceding Odissi's reconstruction. Thus most of Chapter Two focuses on these histories and mythological events rather than the actual reconstruction process.

The two books published on Odissi, Odissi Dance by dance scholar D.N. Patnaik (1971) and Odissi by renowned Indian dance critic Sunil Kothari (1990), were tremendously informative resources for this section. Patnaik's book, developed over years of scholarly research of the region's history, dance and religion, is an extremely valuable source of information, as Patnaik has meticulously researched the Oriya texts and palm leaf inscriptions. Kothari, a well known dance scholar and critic, provides a thorough overview of Odissi, and brief biographies of some notable gurus and dancers.

Fredrique Marglin's thesis and subsequent book Wives of the God King (1985) and Rosemary Jeanes' thesis "Tradition and Learning in Odissi Dance of India" (1982), have provided valuable information on the *mahari* tradition (the tradition of female dancers within the Oriya temples). Both scholars were able to interview *maharis*, who have now passed away, through the aid of a translator. These interviews provide the only published accounts of these *maharis'* lives and experiences as performers of dance ritual at the beginning of this

century.

Several books on the religious history of Orissa were especially useful. In G.N. Mohapatra's Jagannath in History and the Religious Tradition (1982) he discusses the religious tradition of Jagannath worship in Orissa, including legends, rituals and festivals. Prabhat Mukherjee examines in detail the historic effects of various rulers on the administration of the Jagannath Puri temple in his book History of the Jagannth Temple in the 19th Century, (1977). The Cult of Lord Jagannath and Regional Traditions of Orissa (1978), published by the South Asian Institute in New Delhi, provides a collection of essays that were helpful in researching the contemporary daily *puja* ceremony in the Puri temple, as well as background information on the *Vaisnav* tradition in Orissa.

For the section on the religious poet Jayadev, a twelfth century poet who wrote the epic Gita Govinda dedicated to Jagannath, I supplemented the oral legends surrounding Jayadev with two translated versions of the Gita Govinda. The Gitagovinda of Jayadev, by Barbara Stoler Miller (1971), represents a meticulously researched, scholarly approach to both the historical aspects of the poet Jayadev's life, and translation of the text. Gita Govindam, by Dr. N. Gangadharan (1994), presents a translation of history and text as interpreted by a well qualified Sanskrit scholar who is also a devotee of Jagannath. Using these two versions together provided an interesting study of the authors' perspectives as well as excellent translations of the poem.

When discussing culturally specific histories, it is important to examine not only the

events themselves but the perceptions, implications and power dynamics evoked by words and language. In Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) he deconstructs the bias implicit in the word "Oriental". The term "Orientalism" springs from a time when imperial colonial powers, especially Britain and France, held dominance over territories spanning the Middle East and most of Asia. "Orientalism" immediately delineates a cultural boundary between West and East and encompasses European scholarly and secular perceptions of these colonized cultures. Contemporary work in the social sciences reveals this particular historical bias. In his discussion, Said stresses the danger of unconsciously reproducing and reinforcing these biases in academic disciplines if terminology is not properly examined and defined.

Before examining Odissi's history, it was important to examine definitions of myth and history and the implications of categorizing information as factual or mythological. In addition to Said's work, Morton Klass and Melford Spiro have influenced the examination of my own definitions of myth and history. In scholarly disciplines based on the scientific method, the line between accepted fact and conjecture rests upon what can be proved reliably under controlled conditions. Within ethnographic and anthropological literature, however, the value of logical and provable truth becomes both dubious and difficult to defend. Religious terms such as "myth" fall into a realm of definitional difficulty within the larger scholarly model of science.

In Morton Klass's discussion of the anthropology of religion, Ordered Universe

(1995), he points time and time again to Spiro's "definitional daisy chain" effect on attempts to scientifically categorize the metaphysical (Spiro in Klass 1995:20). Spiro's "daisy-chain" is based upon the observation that words best suited to delineate and define religion: supernatural, divine, sacred, are terms which are vague and therefore not particularly useful in definitions. Contemporary anthropologists of religion also attempt to avoid cultural bias, in which it is assumed that one's own belief systems are true and those beliefs of others are illogical or ridiculous. Klass attempts to approach the term myth while avoiding both the definitional daisy chain and scientific ethnocentricity. Klass examines the role of the recipient of knowledge, in this case the anthropologist, in the classification of information. He reveals that much of the categorization process between myth and history lies in what is acceptable to the recipient of the knowledge rather than what is genuinely provable or true. A story that incorporates "factual" elements acceptable to the recipient's thought system is not likely to be perceived as myth (Klass 1995:125).

During my interviews as well as my training, I witnessed heated debates between religious devotees of Jagannath and more secular-minded dancers about the "mythologies" connected to the dance form. Skeptics insisted the myths were stories developed by imaginative poets in ancient times. Devotees insisted that these events truly happened, but they happened in a time so far removed from today that there are no written records. One informant and dancer from Bombay, who entered the temple as a devotee at the age of 14, explains that these stories are "histories belonging to the gods". In order to avoid value

judgements and implications of truth and falsity. I use this definition in the discussion of myth and history. By myth, I will be referring to histories belonging to the gods; by history I will be referring to the chronologies of human effort.

In the third chapter, I examine the structure of the contemporary Odissi performance in order to reveal its ritualized nature. This section telescopes down in its frame of focus, moving from an external analysis of the stage to an examination of the dance repertoire and backstage ritual of adornment, and ending with an examination of the internal transformation of the dancer during the ritual. Although there is some discussion of repertoire in Patnaik and Kothari's works, and additional information on repertoire and adornment scattered through the archive materials, there are no written accounts that deconstruct the Odissi performance ritual. My primary sources of information for this section come from interviews, observations and personal experiences. From the transformation of the stage space into a sacred space, to the performance sequence of the dance repertoire, to the backstage process of adornment, the dancer is performing a set of inflexible ritualized actions which begin the transformative process from the dancer's own self to the idealized embodiment of "the dancer", a ritual construct based upon the function of dance in the *mahari* tradition. Ideally, this transformation allows the dancer and audience to share the *rasa* (flavor or essence) of the performance which leads to spiritual illumination.

In Chapter Four, I examine the training techniques that are used to imbue signature qualities and lead students towards proficiency. Again, my sources for this discussion are

primarily observation, participation in classes and workshops, and interviews with teachers and students. The discussion follows the structure of the training pattern: first focusing upon the basic physical structure of Odissi and then upon its meaning and expression as a physical metaphor for values of Odissi dance and the classical art idiom in India. As these physical structures are assimilated, the student embarks on the more complicated task of conveying mood and meaning in the *abhinayas*, the narrative items of the repertoire. This section reveals the layered complexity of the Odissi movement vocabulary and levels of training that need to be mastered before ascending the stage as a performer.

As Odissi ripples outwards ever-further from its geographic place of origin, as dancers and teachers establish themselves and the art within the world of contemporary classical art, there is a strange duality and fragmentation that can occur from juggling the demands of modern life with the demands of a traditional performance art form. In the final chapter I examine issues surrounding the maintenance and preservation of Odissi, a task facing the contemporary Odissi dancer both in India and in North America. These issues include questions about: training in India and North America; cultural identity and authenticity; the effect of technology over dissemination of knowledge; commercial factors and innovation within the tradition.

The discussion presented in this thesis is by no means comprehensive. There are many fascinating issues that have yet to be investigated in depth. Some topics for future research include: a detailed investigation of the *gotipua* and *mahari* influences on Odissi

movement quality and choreography and the contemporary gender issues that arise from this legacy; an examination of the role of the audience in the Odissi performance ritual, in particular: comparing the role of the audience in India to North America and considering cross-cultural spectatorship; an analysis of the transforming presentation styles of dancers, including the role of verbal presentation in contemporary performance; and finally, a more detailed investigation of the commercial factors imposed upon Odissi performers and the effects of these factors on the continuation of the dance tradition.

Methods

As mentioned earlier, my sources of information consist of a combination of fieldwork gathered in 1995 as a participant-observer (as a student, performer and researcher), interviews, and the existing published materials. I was fortunate to have access to the National Center for Performing Arts archives in Bombay. Within the archives I found various excerpts from newspapers and magazines reporting on events within the world of Odissi performance from as early as 1960 onward. These sources, as well as program notes, lectures, and workshops, supplement my own direct experience of Odissi training and the interviews I conducted during the summer of 1997 with dancers, teachers and gurus in India and North America.

I have limited my discussion to one particular school of Odissi dance, developed through Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. Because my teacher is one of Mohapatra's senior

students and I was able to attend several workshops with him. I have had plenty of opportunities to meet, work with, and interview many of his senior dancers and students residing in Bombay, Calcutta, Canada and the United States. Thus all of my informants within the Odissi dance world have trained, at some point, under this man. There are several other Odissi gurus who play important roles in the revival and dissemination of Odissi. Each school and each style holds its own particular beauty. I chose to limit my work to one style because of the aforementioned access to contacts within the performance world. In addition, I found that by limiting the discussion to one style of dance, I was able to keep the discussion about the training detailed and precise within one particular lineage of the tradition.

Within the body of the discussion, I refer to informants as dancers, teachers and gurus, as well as senior and junior students. I use these labels as the interviewees have referred to themselves. Within every art form there is a belief that all artists remain students, even when they become teachers. For a dedicated dancer, learning is never complete and the true artist is always searching for higher levels of perfection. In Odissi, this belief in division between student and teacher extends another step towards the division between teacher and guru. Many masterful performers and teachers are reluctant to be called guru, since this indicates yet another level of mastery that they feel only Kelucharan Mohapatra has attained. Thus teacher and guru should not be taken as synonymous terminology. The term guruji, used in the text, connotes a high level of respect and is generally used in India when referring to a guru.

The label of senior and junior students becomes important only during Mohapatra's workshops. His senior students are generally professional dancers and teachers, and have been with him for up to twenty-five years; the junior students are generally receiving the majority of their training from the senior students. Odissi is performed by both male and female dancers; however, as the majority of the dancers are female and I have interviewed only one male informant, I orient my discussion primarily on the experiences of training and performing from a female dancer's perspective. One should be aware, however, that the training process and performance repertoire is identical for male and female Odissi dancers.

Although I was fortunate to interview many of the top Odissi dancers and teachers, during a time period from January of 1995 to July of 1997, there are many I could not interview. Rather than imparting an implied authority of those I did interview over those I did not, I have chosen to exclude the names of the informants from the body of the discussion. Similarly, I have withheld the names that arose in the context of newspaper articles and interviews, replacing the name with an "X". In this way, I am able to emphasize the words and thoughts of the informants rather than the identity of the speaker or dancer and their respective political positions and reputations in the performance world.

Within the discussion, I use quite a number of terms from the Sanskrit and Oriya languages which appear throughout the text. When the terms are first mentioned, they are accompanied by a definition within the text. Many of the terms are repeated and I have included a glossary (Appendix A) for the reader's convenience. In the discussion of dance

repertoire, the terms that refer to choreographic genres (such as *pallavi* or *abhinaya*) are not capitalized but the titles of specific items (*Mangala Cheran*) are capitalized.

Many of my interview questions were answered in story-telling form; through personal anecdotes and experiences, the re-telling of dance legends, or mythologies and histories of the form itself. This method of relating information comes straight from the studio; much of the knowledge passed on in the dance studio is done through story-telling in a way that by-passes simple descriptions and integrates the personalities of the story-tellers and a flavor that is lost through the recitations of facts. Story-telling is a performance art and an important element of Odissi performance. My decision to integrate stories into the body of the thesis arises from this awareness. I also hope to reveal some of the richness of this story-telling tradition that has not yet been addressed in the context of dance.

As well as using stories told to me during my training, the story of Maya and excerpts of the Ramayana were recounted to me by my family. These stories are well known in India, just as the fairy tales depicted in western ballet are known to children and adults alike in North America. The epic story of the Ramayana has been portrayed in India in numerous ways, including: songs, dramas, movies, children's books and dance. Sita, Rama's wife, represents a model of female virtue in classical Hinduism and plays an important role in the Ramayana and in my presentation of Odissi.

I first linked the parallel events depicted in Sita's story with the events shaping Odissi's history while watching Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra choreographing a section of the

Ramayana on his senior dancers in 1995. In that particular portion, Sita crosses three magic lines that protect her from danger, to give alms to a traveling mendicant. Guruji's attention to the choreography during that moment of crossing over lent the action an importance I had not considered before. Those three steps represented the trembling, liminal moment between present and future, between safety and abduction. It is a moment which transforms Sita forever, although she does not realize the implications of her actions until it is too late. As I watched the dancers work with guruji's choreography, I contemplated the similarities between Sita's three transitional steps and the migration of Odissi from the temples, to the villages, to the performance stage. Later, when I was writing the final chapter of this thesis, I realized that the parallel between Sita and the dance form went further than I first imagined. Sita's rejection from her original royal position in society at the conclusion of the Ramayana is mirrored by the contemporary rejection of the reinstitution of Odissi in the temples.

The Odissi aesthetic is not based on the straight or linear; everything is curved, looped, indirect. The writing, the painting, the music and dance from the Oriya region sway and bend, curl and spiral. The dance training is logical and systematic but not necessarily linear. History and mythology, past and present, nature and artifice all intertwine in the oral narratives passed on in the dance studio and the *abhinayas* danced on stage. Dance, the essence, lives in the heart of the dancer and performance is the most perfect expression of this essence. Yet for too long, written work on Odissi has been limited to linear discussion of the performance alone. The purpose of this work is to place Odissi within the modern

context in which it exists: in the midst of post-colonial identification as a National Art, and the precarious international position of a culturally specific classical art in the "global village". I also hope to give some insight into the training process of Odissi and expose the reader to the rich living narrative of the dancers.

Chapter Two

Myth and History

Sita

In the epic story Ramayana, there is a definitive moment that sends the hero, Rama, into battle with the demon-king Ravana. This moment belongs to Sita, Rama's wife. During a period of exile, while Rama, his brother Laxman, and Sita are living in the forest, Sita catches sight of a golden colored deer. She longs for the deer and Rama decides to venture deep into the forest to catch it for her. Rama leaves Sita in Laxman's protection. After some time, Sita and Laxman hear Rama's voice calling for help and Sita urges Laxman to go to his brother's aid. Reluctantly, he follows Sita's advice and leaves her alone in the forest. Using his arrow, Laxman draws three protective rings around Sita and then departs to search for his brother. As long as Sita remains within these protective rings, she will be safe, preserved from any external disorder or disturbance. If she steps out of the protective circles, she is subject to whatever forces, good or evil, that await her.

Like the famous Greek character Helen, Sita is depicted as an embodiment of feminine ideals who becomes a reason for war. Her actions belong not to herself but to forward the plot of the story. Thus when Ravana appears, disguised as a holy man, it is inevitable that she take those three forbidden steps over each of the protective rings. As she transverses the boundaries, Ravana transforms from his illusory form to his true form. When

Sita offers a bowl of food to the wandering mendicant, she lifts her eyes to meet the eyes of her abductor.

Within its history, Odissi has first transversed the protective boundaries of the temple's inner sanctorium to the villages of Orissa and then transversed cultural boundaries: first regionally and then nationally. Like Sita, the dance form is now unprotected by any formal system or institution. The contemporary presentation and preservation of Odissi is subject to commercial and cultural factors characteristic of a rapidly changing global society. In order to better understand Odissi's position today, it is necessary to transverse back across those boundaries and investigate the myths and histories of the form.

Within the field of Odissi, there is a distinct lack of tension between the authority of oral tradition and the written texts of historians, critics and dance scholars. History melts into mythology and mythology often creeps into history. Odissi's past reveals an exquisite, inseparable blend of the two. Events planted in time, marked with dates indelible as ink and carved in stone, are beautifully interwoven with the mythic stories told and retold from one generation to the next. Even events that have taken place within the twentieth century have become imbued with the mystique of legendary truth. Odissi's master narrative weaves together the material evidence of history and the spiritual myths and legends, passed down orally, which are as boundless, timeless and unquestionable as faith itself.

When examining the background of Odissi dance, one finds multiple voices of the historian, religious devotee, dance scholar and dance guru. These voices collectively form

a body of knowledge encompassing both the written scholarship based on studies of traditional texts, temple architecture and sculpture and the oral tradition in the form of stories and myth. These stories and events, which create the inseparable ties between Odissi and Lord Jagannath, are fascinating and informative. In order to understand more fully the direction Odissi is taking within this century, it is important to be aware of the history and mythology that has shaped Odissi's cultural past and present identification.

Origins Of Jagannath

He moves without feet

hears without ears

writes the fate though he is Handless

(Tulsidas)

Jagannath belongs to the *Vaishnav* tradition of Hinduism, in which devotees worship both Krishna and Vishnu as preserver of the universe. In the myths retold in the epic Gita Govinda, Jagannath is depicted as Krishna, the flute-playing *avatar* (incarnation) who delights in making mischief as a small boy and is beloved by women when he grows up. Jagannath is also identified as a form of Vishnu, Preserver of the Universe and cosmic dreamer. Jagannath is a link between the earthly *avatar* of Krishna and the divine dreamer

whose presence, never physically manifested in the material world, is yet essential to its existence.

The creation myth of Lord Jagannath is a fine example of the inextricable web of mythology and history that is revealed in the legends of Odissi's origins. The story is both the mythic retelling of divine manifestation and a historical report of the installation of a deity in a temple for worship. Myth and history blend in the creation story of the *murti* (the physical manifestation of the divine) which has been worshiped uncontested since the twelfth century A.D. (von Steitoncron 1978:19).

King Anantavarma Chodagangadeva, the ruler who constructed the Jagannath Puri temple, was a devotee of Nilamadhava (a form of Krishna worshiped in the region of Orissa) and had been searching unsuccessfully for the physical manifestation of the deity in order to install the deity in his new temple. The king was so determined to lay claim to the deity, he sent his minister to a tribal group that worshiped the *murti* of Nilamadhava, to try to steal the image. The minister is said to have attempted to find the *murti* in many devious ways, but ultimately he is unsuccessful. The deity disappears, and the minister returns to his king empty handed.[1]

One night, the king is visited by Vishnu, creator of the Universe, in a dream. Vishnu describes a giant log--the new earthly manifestation of Nilamadhava--that has washed up on the Puri sea shore, awaiting the king's discovery. The king awakens and finds the foretold log on the beach. He also encounters a carpenter who is pre-ordained to work the wood into

the murti of Jagannath. The carpenter agrees to work for the king upon the condition that he is left in solitude and not disturbed until the *murti* is finished. Weeks pass, and after several consecutive days of silence from the carpenter's room, the door is broken open (some versions claim the door was opened by the king, others maintain it was the curious queen). The promise is violated and the carpenter promptly vanishes (or dies), leaving the "half-finished" *murti* with no hands or legs, a stump of a body and huge staring eyes.

The story is fascinating in the same way as the shape of Jagannath is fascinating: both the story and the shape of the *murti* question the relationship between the divine and the humanly wrought physical form representing the divine. All over India, physical depictions of gods and goddesses have been created in exquisite detail with attention to balance, beauty and refinement. The intricately carved stone work decorating the outside of the Jagannath Puri temple seems to overshadow the simple form of the presiding deity in terms of elegance, complexity, and composition.

Some scholars link the wooden murti with the tradition of tree-worship which is an acknowledged aspect of Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions (G.N. Mohapatra: 1982:4). Traditionally, Jagannath is carved from a tree-trunk of particular specifications. Mohapatra believes the original wooden carvings were a natural extension of the tree-worshiping tradition. This suggests that perhaps the body, neck and head of the murti, formed from a single solid trunk, have been deliberately designed to recall the tree from which it was carved.

The form of Jagannath could also be linked to the rural folk tradition as defined by Pupal Jayakar (1980). Jayakar explains the belief found in many rural traditions of India that depicting a deity in too much detail distracts and thus detracts from the compact power of the form. Within these rural traditions, deities' physical forms are kept simple but the eyes are given tremendous importance. In many communities the deity's eyes are considered to be fountains of energy, the most powerful part of the *murti* (Jayakar 1980:145). Certainly the simplicity of Jagannath's form enhances the prominence of his wide, dilated eyes.

The myth not only draws attention to the rendering of divine form, but also brings into question the issue of completion. Can human consciousness determine whether or not a *murti* is complete? The myth leaves an open-ended question as to whether the carpenter had finished his task or, upon interruption, abandoned the incomplete *murti*. In one regard, the activity within the carpenter's room had ceased for days and the silence seemed to indicate completion. In another, the carpenter disappeared when the door was opened, indicating a violation of the king's promise and implying the work was abandoned before completion.

Mircea Eliade (1960: 33) introduces the concept of hierophanies when discussing the physical manifestation of divinity. Hierophany is the self-limitation of the omnipotent. Eliade discusses the creation of idols or religious iconography as an act of compliant self-limitation by a divine power. By assuming the definitions and qualities of a recognizable form for worship, the sacred ceases to be absolute and historicizes itself with specific roles, powers, and languages according to the cultural needs of the worshipers. One variation of

Jagannath's story of origins seems to demonstrate Eliade's discussion of hierophanies. According to Eschmann, "the extraordinary appearance of the figure is 'explained' and related to the will of the deity himself. When the sacred log (*daru*) appeared in Puri, nobody could carve it. Finally Jagannath appeared as a feeble old carpenter who...undertook the task" (Eschmann 1978:99). Within the story itself, the divine presence determines and limits its own physical manifestation, thus bypassing any discussion of the form's validity or completion.

The form of the deity and the ambiguity of the story ultimately question the role of the human imagination in imposing values of aesthetic "correctness" on images of the divine. It is quite possible that Eliade's discussion of hierophanies provides one answer to these questions. Regardless of the interruption to the work and subsequent disappearance of the carpenter, the *murti* is installed and worshiped in the temple as the complete and perfect manifestation of Jagannath. While one can argue that no one will ever know what the intended form of Jagannath was to be, one can also perceive an underlying warning within the myth that there may be no correct or incorrect form of the god. Ultimately, the physical manifestation of the divine is irrelevant, so long as the devotion and sincerity, the trust and faith in the mystical survives and is upheld.

Another Oriya creation myth clearly links the form of Jagannath to Krishna. This story, unlike the first, is not linked to historical events and there are no references to either king Anandavarma Chodagangadev or the temple in Puri. The story, related to me by an

Odissi dancer who is also a Jagannath devotee, was prefaced by an explanation that these events are true but occurred so long ago that there is no historical evidence. In this story, gods and people have direct contact with one another. Instead of communicating through dreams, the divine is physically present on earth. The story was narrated to me in response to my question about Jagannath's most outstanding aspect: the huge, round, dilated eyes that stare out from the *murti's* face.

One afternoon, in Brindavan (the famous woodland of Krishna's childhood) the village children flock around Mother Yashoda and ask her to tell them stories of Krishna's childhood. She agrees to do so, but first she positions Krishna's sister, Subhudra, by the door to watch for the return of Krishna and his brother Balabhudra (Balaram). Subhudra stands at the door, but soon she becomes enraptured by her mother's story telling and she notices neither the passage of time nor the eventual return of her two brothers. As Krishna and Balaram near the window, they hear Yashoda's voice and stop to listen. They are immediately arrested by the beauty of their own past-times and their eyes grow wide with pleasure. At this moment a wandering sage comes upon the scene. He observes the state of Krishna and his two siblings and declares that henceforth Jagannath, Balabhudra and Subhudra will be worshiped in this form, their eyes wide with pleasure.

This story playfully explores the idea of taking the gods themselves by surprise and celebrates the *murtis* of Jagannath, Balabhudra and Subhudra as visible evidence of divine pleasure. The myth highlights the importance of oral tradition and story-telling, indicating

that it is a source of joy for the gods as well as for human beings. The concept that Jagannath takes pleasure in hearing of his own past-times (as Krishna), re-told in song and dance, is the basis for many of the rituals in the Puri temple. Although the dance ritual is no longer performed, the Gita Govinda is still sung daily in the temples of Orissa, for the pleasure of the deity. Unlike the mythology of Shiva (the great destroyer), whose third eye opens in wrath to issue forth fires of destruction, the widened eyes of Jagannath, Balabhudra and Subhudra are benevolent and loving.

The simple trunk-like body of Jagannath and the egregious absence of hands and legs create the illusion that the whole body is truly a vehicle for those two intensely staring eyes. Vision has a tremendously important role in rituals of worship in Hinduism. To see, and be seen, by god is to receive blessing: vision is the most direct means of communication. To gaze on Lord Jagannath, to be within the vision of those enormous eyes, is to contact the divine. Dianne Eck (1981), maintains that Hindu worship, with the emphasis on direct experience, is more egalitarian than other religions which are distrustful of the senses. Religions relying heavily on words and written text require education and training. Vision requires only faith and the ability to see.

In the traditional worship of Lord Jagannath, vision is indeed a primary means to communicate with god. The Hindu ideology of *darsan*, the communication between human beings and the divine through vision, has been incorporated into the architecture of the temples in Orissa. At the very top of each temple flies a flag that signifies where Jagannath

is placed within the complex temple structure. Above the flag there is a small, circular, hollow disk. It is said that if the people (most of whom are tied to the land for their income) are unable to leave the fields, they may send their prayers to this rounded disk, and Jagannath will receive them.

Jagannath, Jayadev, and the Gita Govinda

Jagannath, as Krishna, is a lover of beauty and pleasure. The twelfth century poet and devotee of Jagannath, Jayadev, wrote the epic Gita Govinda for the pleasure of the deity. After the introductory verses, the poet describes the ten cosmic *avatars* of Jagannath, known as *Das Avatar*. Jayadev devotes the remainder of the poem to the intricate phases of love between Radha and Krishna. In English translations, both Gangadharan (1994) and Miller (1977) stress that the erotic imagery of love depicted in the poetry is subordinate to the true sentiment which is *bhakti*, devotion. "The esthetic experience of their (Krishna and Radha's) love is the means for breaking the imaginary barrier dividing human from divine" (Miller 1977:15).

Jayadev is a figure existing in myth and history; often the historic accounts and legends become interwoven. Jayadev is said to have been married to Padmavati, a temple dancer, who often inspired his work. While Miller believes this is a "legend of no historical value" (Miller 1977:5), Gangadharan states, as fact, that "Jayadev composed and sang this kavya (poem) at Puri Jagannath and his wife Padmavati danced accordingly and lord

Jagannath was pleased with that" (Gangadharan 1994:1). Whether this is true or not, the lyric songs of Jayadev's poetry were set to dance within the temples. An inscription in stone dated 1499 states "Dancing will be performed thus at the time of food offering to. . . the Lord of the Gitagovinda (Jagannath). . . . The dancing group will learn no other song than the Gitagovinda. . .They will sing no other song. No other dance should be performed before the great God. . . . Any temple official who knowingly allows any other song or dance to be performed is hostile to Jagannath" (Misra 1971:54-5). The oral tradition among devotees explains how, against political obstacles, Jayadev's Gita Govinda became part of the daily *puja* (a religious prayer ceremony) in the Jagannath Puri temple.

The legend begins when Jayadev presents the finished work to the king as an offering to Jagannath in the Puri temple. The king, however, has completed his own version of the Gita and is reluctant to let Jayadev dedicate the work in the temple. Although Jayadev's songs became very popular, the king bans any singing of the songs, until Jagannath intervenes on the poet's behalf. Although Jayadev's tunes and words are banned, the songs become very popular and people cannot help but sing them. One morning the temple priests, in great alarm, enter the court to inform the king that the deity's garments are torn and some briar bushes have been found entangled at the bottom of the cloth. The inner doors have not been tampered with, and no one can explain the event. The king is also deeply disturbed and calls upon the people for an explanation.

The next day a young girl, innocent and beautiful, is brought weeping into the court.

She explains to the king that on her way home from the fields, she found herself singing Jayadev's Gita Govinda while passing through the briar fields. The sweet night air carried her voice to the temple. Her song pleased Jagannath so much, he left the temple to follow her voice home. The king realized that he must surrender his pride and obey the desires of Jagannath. From that time forth, the Gita has been sung in the temple, and Jagannath never went roaming at night again.

History Carved in Stone

The sculptures of female dancers found at Udyagiri and Khandagiri provide the earliest documentation of dance in Orissa, dating back to the second century B.C. (Kothari 1990:13). It is unclear if one can link Odissi to this earliest dance tradition, as Odissi began in the Jagannath Puri temple which was built during the reign of King Anantavarma Chodagangadev, from 1078 to 1147 (D.N. Patnaik 1971:4). It is the latter dance tradition from which the contemporary presentation of Odissi dance draws its furthest, most direct link. Throughout its existence, the dance has been shaped over time, lost and rediscovered, and refined by countless social and cultural influences.

Originally, Odissi developed in the Jagannath Puri temple as a form of *seva*, a devotional service. The women who performed dance in the temple were called *maharis*. Marglin traces the etymology of *mahari* to the contraction of *maharani*, which means great queen (Marglin 1980:218). Dancing was one of many prayer rituals performed daily in the

temple. The other rituals: bathing and robing the deity; the offering of food and drink; and the chanting of prayers, are still upheld today. There is, however, a strange secrecy around the dance ritual of the *maharis* which was terminated in the beginning of the twentieth century and seems to be a tradition unlikely to be revived.

Historically, there were different classifications of dance ritual performed in the temple. *Maharis* performing within the inner chambers of the temple were called *bhitar gani*, and the dancers performing outside the temple on religious festival days were called *bahir gani* (Devi 1970). The dance performed outside of the temple contributed to public celebrations, while the dance performed within the chambers of Jagannath belonged to the dancer and deity alone. The *maharis* who performed within the chambers were sheltered from the public, the nature of their *seva* was private dance-prayer. At the center of the ritual was the ideal of transforming through dance-prayer from *mahari* to a self without self. The ultimate goal of the *mahari* was to attain a meditative trance state under the divine gaze of Jagannath. Thus a *mahari's* success was not based on physical technique or personal style, but upon transformation of self from the mundane to the spiritual realm.

Two distinct political moments stand out in the history of the dance tradition which were pivotal in shaping the contemporary form of Odissi. The first occurred in the fourteenth century when the Moguls ruled over the Northern regions of India. The second transformation developed, in part, as a reaction to more than two hundred years of British colonial rule. Both moments are characterized, from a historical perspective, by foreign

domination over the region of Orissa which affected the religious activities of the area. It is interesting to note that, under British rule, not all religious activities seem to have been affected, yet during both periods the dance form became a focus for disapproval and discontinuation.

According to both the oral history of the dance form, passed on from teacher to student, and the written documentation of regional history, Odissi underwent its first major transformation as a result of a Mogul invasion. According to historian Prabhat Mukerjee, in 1360 Sultan Firuz Tughluq took control of Orissa and initiated the first desecration of the Jagannath Puri temple (1977: xi). The invasions and disruption of temple routines led to a general degradation of temple activities and a demoralization of the *mahari* tradition. According to one dancer, "The Moguls caught hold of the *maharis*, polluted them by making them drink, and used them for pleasure" (Devi, 1971). In less extreme accounts of these events, the *maharis* faced the choice of dancing in the courts of the Mogul rulers, thus falling from *deva-dasi*, servant of the god, to *raj-dasi*, servant of the king, or giving up their profession. Many of the *maharis* chose retirement. Under the Mogul rule, priests and other temple attendants scattered into the villages of Orissa.

Pupul Jayakar (1989) discusses the link between classical, shastric culture in India and folk tradition. Beginning in 1750 B.C. and continuing throughout Indian history during times of political instability, Jayakar cites the migration of scholars and priests to rural villages. The villages thus became recipients of *shastric* (classical) culture, and *shastric*

culture became infused with new life and sustenance through influences of rural traditions. In order to preserve the dance tradition, it is said that the temple musicians and pundits went into the villages of Orissa and began to teach *gotipuas*, young male gymnasts, the art of dance. The young boys would dress as girls and dance during religious and secular festivals. As Odissi developed through the *gotipuas* as a form of entertainment, elements of theatricality and gymnastic feats were introduced.

The *gotipua* style, performed for secular entertainment, was strongly affected by the spiritual philosophy of *madhurarasa upasana*. Sometime between 1510 and 1540, Saint Chaitanya, one of the famous religious figures amongst Krishna devotees, arrived in Orissa to worship Jagannath. He popularized the ideology of *madhurarasa upasana* in which all human beings are feminine energy longing for union with the male spiritual energy embodied by Krishna (Kothari 1990:44). The *gotipuas*, dressed as girls, represented the female devotion of human beings towards the divine energy of Krishna, mirroring the famous love-play between Krishna and the milk-maids of Brindaban called *ras leela*. The attraction is symbolic for the soul's desire for union with the divine.

In 1436, Gajapati rulers reinstated temple activity (Mukerjee 1977: xi) and both the *mahari* and *gotipua* traditions continued exclusively of one another.[2] While the *mahari* tradition was sponsored directly by the royal patronage of the temple and thus shared the precarious highs and lows of political power, the *gotipua* dance form developed regular sponsorship through the land-owning class. The *gotipua* tradition was thus established and

remained unaffected by changes in ruling powers. Despite the philosophy of *madhurarasa upasana*, there is no indication that the *gotipuas* ever performed within the temple walls. As one *mahari* declared "even if the *Akhadi Pilas* [*gotipua*] dance is beautiful it is still only for human beings " (Jeanes 1982:80). Thus the dance form continued to evolve in two separate branches which would not coalesce until Odissi's revival in the early twentieth century.

Between the fall of the Mogul rule and the establishment of British colonial domination in 1818, temple activity reflected the strength and religious inclinations of the various rulers of the region. Preceding colonization, under control of the East India Company, it seemed as if British domination would not effect temple activities. The Board of Commissioners determined that "no interference or innovation should be experienced at the pagoda of Jaggernaut. . . former ceremonies and customes [sic] should be permitted and supported on every occasion as affecting in the utmost degree the peace and happiness of so vast a portion of the inhabitants of the British dominion in India" (Mukherjee 1977:41).[3]

In spite of the East India Company's policy of religious tolerance, under British colonial rule the dance-ritual came under moral attack. The *maharis*, educated beyond the level of most women at that time, were the most knowledgeable and powerful women in the temple systems. Yet under colonial rule, influenced by missionary accounts, temple dancers were perceived and labeled as prostitutes. In 1792, the Abbe Dubois published his account on "Hindoo manners": "Next to the Sacrificers, the most important persons about the temples are the dancing girls, who call themselves *devdasis* [sic], servants or slaves of the gods: but

they are known to the public by the coarser name of strumpets" (Abbe Dubois 1792:585).

Dubois' use of pejorative language, reducing Sanskrit scholar priests to "sacrificers" immediately reveals his dismissive attitude towards the exotic Hindu rituals performed in the temples. One may be skeptical of the authority of Dubois' analysis as it is very possible his conclusions arise from a suspicious, self-righteous religious fervor and specious fear of the unknown more than careful ethnological observation. His voice represents a valid but limited impression of the ethnocentric foreign gaze imposing values on the unknown.

A similar perspective colors British accounts of various Oriya rituals and ceremonies from the colonial era. One well documented example of the authoritative voice misunderstanding the behavior of devotees comes from the reports written on the *Ratha Yatra* (a chariot festival) which is one of the most important religious occasions of the year. A report from the Baptist Mission in the region refers to Jagannath as an "old block"(Mukherjee 1977:307). Major Thorn and Dr. Claudius Buchanon, viewing the ritual with intolerance, fear and suspicion, describe the *Ratha Yatra* as a violent and disturbing mass riot. The holy name of Jagannath, lord of the Universe, was absorbed into the English language and transformed. "Juggernaut" came to mean a "detestable moloch" and "relentless destroyer" (H.S. Patnaik 1994:5). In spite of moral outrage concerning the *Ratha Yatra*, British administrators had no desire to prohibit a temple activity which, through the sheer number of pilgrims it attracted, was a major source of revenue to the region. Faced with the potential loss of revenue, the British decided to take a tolerant stance on this temple ritual

(G.N. Patnaik 1982:404). There were no such economic advantages to the dancing traditions within the temple. The private nature of the *mahari* dance tradition came under suspicion during British rule.

Hinduism is replete with sexual imagery. The concepts of male and female energies and the union between the two are frequently depicted through a physical union between gods and goddesses. This can be represented in as abstract a form as a series of overlapping geometric shapes called a *mandala*, or in more explicit tableaux found on the outer temple walls in Orissa and other areas of India. In some of these sculptures, *apsuras*, voluptuous divine dancers, are shown in various creative positions with their lovers.[4]

In the classical Indian dance forms as well, there is an ancient tradition of acknowledging and representing the male and female energies, termed *tandava* and *lasya*. The *maharis* were dedicated to the temples and in their union with the temple they were considered to be the wives of God. Scholars cannot say whether the *maharis* from previous centuries, who held empowered positions in the temple complex as educated women, were misunderstood by Christian colonizers. As colonial mentalities were successfully disseminated through India in the form of education, however, perceptions of the colonizer were spread to the colonized. By the beginning of the twentieth century, *maharis* were sometimes referred to as *besya*, (prostitute) and there was an underlying social indictment of the *mahari* tradition (Marglin 1980:25).

By the turn of the twentieth century, the reputation of the *maharis*--the great queens

of the temple--had degraded completely, and they were considered shameful, and treated without much respect within the Oriya culture. According to Kumkum Das, Odissi had degraded into a "voluptuous dance form known as *Sakhi Nacha*" (Das 1969). In 1947, in newly independent India, an "anti-*devadasi*" act was passed in South India prohibiting the practice of temple dancing on moral grounds. Although in Orissa there was no such law passed, in 1955 the Puri temple passed into state government jurisdiction and *maharis* were no longer provided with royal patronage. As the *mahari* tradition within the temple crumbled, the sculptures on the outside walls of the temple inspired the reinvention of a new Odissi dance tradition as a performance art.

Revival of Tradition

It is widely acknowledged that the push behind the reconstruction of Indian classical dance in the twentieth century began as a part of a nationalist movement for independence. The movement was supported by an elite class of Indian intellectuals, often educated in Britain, resisting the undemocratic domination by the British Raj. As an integral part of discarding the shackles of colonialism, the intellectual elite turned to India's rich ancient culture to reclaim a national identity grounded in philosophies preceding the colonial "jewel in the crown" (referring to India's status within the British colonial empire). *Vedanta* philosophy, interpreted politically, could be used to further nationalist sentiments. Sanskrit stanzas on spiritual unity and freedom from illusion could be used in promoting national

unity and political awakening (Kulke et al 1986).

Similarly, a resurrection of dance as described in the Natya Sastra (a text on theatrical arts dated between 200B.C. and 200 A.D. and depicted in the stone sculptures on temple walls, created a basis for renewed pride in the ancient, classical arts. As with *Vedanta* philosophy, the dances were not resurrected in order to re-establish the tradition in the temples, but recreated and refined as a performance art to be upheld as a symbol of national pride. India is as fragmented culturally as it is linguistically, with fourteen officially recognized languages and enumerable dialects. It is ironic that, were it not for the national presence of British colonial domination, unification under a single cultural identification would hardly seem probable. As a by-product of India's political history, post-colonial artists and art forms of various regions have become symbols of national pride.

The revival or reconstruction of Indian dance in the twentieth century presents an interesting blend of regional and national pride and an unspoken internalization of colonial sensibilities. National revival of traditional art reflected both a rejection of colonial identity and a peculiar echo of British values, as the intellectual elite leading the movement were largely educated in Britain or British schools. According to Chandralekha, a former Bharat Natyam dancer and contemporary choreographer, Bharat Natyam's re-invention became absorbed into a "propaganda campaign to give (the dance form) the necessary sacred origins" (Barhucha 1994:41) during a political era in which national identity was being celebrated.

Odissi began to receive national attention in the early 1950s. Dance critic Sunil

Kothari recalls first witnessing Odissi in 1958 at the Sangeet Natak Akademi's All India Dance Seminar (Kothari 1990: vii). Although the Akademi first identified Odissi as a regional form of Bharat Natyam, Odissi was officially recognized as an Indian Classical Dance form in 1964 (D.N. Patnaik 1971: vii). Patnaik describes the reconstruction process as one of refinement and purification. "Till the fifties of this century Odissi in its degenerated form was confined with maharis and gotipuas. . . . (the dance was) reoriented, when it emerged on the concert stage with dancers from respected families" (D.N. Patnaik 1971: i). As Fredrique Marglin points out, the label "connotes a status on par with Western Classical Ballet" (Marglin 1985:15) and effectively removes the dance form from the moral disrepute of the past.

By reinstating the dance as a respectable reflection of culture, the revived Odissi form becomes less a reproduction of the past and more a living monument to the ancient traditions depicted in sculpture and text. Protected by the prestige of classicism, the sensuality of the physical form is heightened by recurring traditional themes of the soul longing for union with the divine. The result is a purified exoticism, free from any moral stigma and subtle in its sensuality. The ritual of devotion, removed from the secrecy of temple walls, is transformed and transported to the open view of spectatorship in the pristine setting of the international stage.[5]

Notes

[1] In G.N. Mohapatra's documentation of Oriya mythology, this episode occurs under the reign of a different king named Indradyumna who preceded Chodagangadev as ruler of the region (G.N. Mohapatra 1982:381).

[2] There is some discrepancy in establishing the exact time period marking the beginning of the *gotipua* tradition. Mohan Khokar establishes *gotipua* tradition in 1592 (Khokar 1991), over one hundred years after the re-establishment of *maharis* in the temple, while Kothari links *gotipua* tradition with rule of Ramachandradev, who preceded Prataparudeva's rule from 1497-1540 and would therefore coincide with the *maharis'* return to the temples (Kothari 1990:44).

[3] Mukherjee includes an interesting report sent to the Commission from the priests of the Jagannath temple. It seems that the priests, upon discovering that the new rulers were sincere in their protective stance towards the temple, tried to exploit the ignorance of the foreigners in regards to the customs of the temple . The document records the priests'demands for " a variety of presents for priests and persons attached there, in order to avert the evil consequences of famine and mortality foretold by the calamity of a bird alighting on the head of goddess Bimalakshi in the temple" (Mukherjee 1977:42-3).

[4] Some attribute this period of temple architecture to a time when religious pundits had taken the philosophy of religion to an extreme cerebral state, ignoring the needs of the body. These sculptures were created to remind people of their physical selves, the manifestations of male and female energy and the celebration of life.

[5] It is interesting to note that while it is an integral part of the dance legends and myths to link the modern performance of Odissi to the mahari tradition, according to Marglin, the few surviving maharis had very little to do with the actual revival process. They were, in fact, intentionally excluded from the debates about Odissi's legitimate status as a classical art form (Marglin 1980). While the revival of the dance form depended largely upon the dance gurus, the revival of its status relied upon "the Orissan intelligensia whose life-long endeavor has been 'the regaining of Orissa's cultural heritage'" (K.C. Patnaik 1966;7).

Chapter Three

From Maya to Moksha

The Birth of Maya

The birth story of Krishna is linked with the birth of one of the most important female figures in Hinduism, Maya, the embodiment of illusion. Krishna's earthly parents, Vasudev and Devaki, were imprisoned by Devaki's tyrant cousin Kansa. During their imprisonment, Kansa is warned that he will die at the hands of the eighth child born to the couple. Taking no risks, Kansa has the prison guards inform him every time Devaki gives birth. After each birth, the king enters the prison cell and kills the infant before it is more than a few days old.

When it comes time for the eighth child to be born, there is a wild storm. At the darkest and wildest part of the night, Krishna is born. Vasudev, Krishna's human father, notices that when the baby is born the shackles that bind his legs fall to the ground and the prison door swings open. In a trance, Vasudev gathers the baby in his arms and walks past the guards who are in a deep, impenetrable slumber. Father and child are sheltered from the storm by the hooded serpent of Vishnu, the Cosmic Dreamer, as they travel through the stormy night to enter Yashoda's house. Yashoda, the adoptive mother of Krishna, is in a deep slumber as she has just given birth to a baby girl. Vasudev exchanges the babies and carries the little girl back to the prison and into the room where his wife is sleeping.

As soon as he returns, the door swings closed and the shackles refasten around his legs. The guards, awakened by the cries of the infant, report the birth of Devaki's eighth child to the king. Kansa rushes into the cell and takes hold of the baby girl by her ankles, swings her over his head and dashes her against a stone. Instead of falling dead to the ground, the baby turns into a woman of indescribable beauty and floats up into the air, filling the room with laughter. Turning to the frightened king, she announces that his attempt to kill the eighth child of Devaki and Vasudev has been in vain. The child is far away, alive and safe. "Furthermore" she states "you have tried to destroy me, but I am Maya, born at this moment into the world, and illusion cannot be killed."

The birth of Maya ushers in a new dynamic to worldly events by introducing the element of sensory deception. When Maya declares her presence, she invokes a new era in which things may not, from this time forward, be taken for what they seem. According to Joseph Campbell (1974:52), Maya possess three qualities. The first property of illusion is its veiling quality, which serves to conceal what is real. The second is the power of projecting illusory impressions. Through this second quality of projection, Kansa makes the assumption that the baby lying next to Devaki is her eighth child. Finally, Maya possesses the power of revelation. Campbell links this final, revelatory power to the function of art and ritual, the purpose of which is to make the unknown known. Maya, in the form of artifice, leads to revelation.

The modern staging of Odissi dance is an exercise in the revelatory nature of Maya. A full Odissi performance is conducted in a ritualized structure and presented as a devotional

or sacred dance. The impression given by an Odissi performance is that the protective enclosure of temple walls have been lifted and the spectator is privileged to witness a beautiful form of devotion, intimate and private. This impression is orchestrated and choreographed with as much careful precision as the music and dance steps themselves.

The luxury of reconstructed, or as Richard Schechner terms it "restored behavior", is the freedom to literally re-create the past. "Restored behavior offers to both individuals and to groups the chance to rebecome what they once were--or even . . . to rebecome. . . what they wish to have been" (1985:38). The role of Maya in the re-created, staged ritual, is to reveal the integral spirit of Odissi through an invented tradition that has never existed previous to this century. On one level, the stage performance as ritual maintains contact between the form and its spiritual origins while accommodating the practical realities of its contemporary incarnation. On another level, the ritual acts as a guide to both dancer and the audience, leading the consciousness towards an uplifted state and *rasa* that is often forgotten in the everyday realm of the mundane.

The Ritual Stage

Mircea Eliade identifies a center space in religion as "pre-eminently the zone of the sacred, the zone of absolute reality" (1959:169). The center, in ritual, is both a spiritual metaphor and a physical reality. As the most potent of sacred spaces, the center contains the capacity for transformation: it is a passageway between the mundane, physical world and the metaphysical world of the sacred. Odissi was originally practiced by the *maharis* in the

center-most point of the temple complex in the sacred inner-chambers of Jagannath (Devi 1962).

Now, the stage has become the center for the performance of the contemporary Odissi ritual and thus its vehicle for transformation. The new temples for dance have lighting and sound technicians, stage wings that allow for elaborate entrances and exits, a curtain which opens and closes the ritual, program notes which guide the audience through the performance, and a box office outside. Yet, the gurus of Odissi have reconstructed the form in such a way as to maintain a spiritual connection to the original center space, which is invoked at the very heart of the dance ritual.

To signify the sacred realm of mythological time-space, a *murti* of Jagannath presides on the stage with an offering of fruits, flowers and incense placed in front of the statue. The *murti* is usually ritually ornamented and placed on stage with an accompanying *puja* ceremony. Once the deity is presiding on the stage, no one may walk on the stage floor without first removing their shoes as a sign of respect. The stage has become sacred.

The deity is placed in the left corner of the stage closest to the audience. This position has been chosen in order to respect the Hindu principle of *darsan*. *Darsan* is the form of communication between human and divine conducted through vision. To see and be seen (to be in the line of vision of a *murti*) is the strongest form of contact. To see the physical representation of divine energy is to issue forth one's prayers. To be seen by the *murti* is to be graced with divine blessing. Therefore to gaze on Lord Jagannath and to be within the range of his enormous eyes is to communicate directly with God. When Odissi

was originally performed, it was directed towards and observed by only those divine eyes.

Today, in keeping with the origins of the tradition it would be unacceptable for a dancer to dance with her back to the *murti*, since she is, in theory, recreating the *mahari* tradition of dancing for God. Thus, after the dancer places her offering of flowers in front of the *murti* in *Mangala Cheran* (the traditional invocation dance), she bows and moves to the center of the stage with her eyes and body facing the deity. The placement of the murti at the front edge of the stage ensures that few choreographic decisions could inadvertently place the dancer with her back to the god.

It would be equally unacceptable to position the *murti* so that it faces the dancer, with its back to the audience. Although the dancer would be able to perform directly towards the deity, the audience, sitting behind the *murti*, would be denied the privilege of *darsan* and would be effectively excluded from the performance ritual. Within traditional worship, Jagannath is perceived as the embodiment and manifestation of all deities and thus everyone, regardless of faith, is blessed by his presence. One cannot simultaneously acknowledge the audience as observant participants in the dance ritual and exclude them from taking *darsan*. One either lifts the protective veil from ritual entirely or keeps it fully shrouded in secrecy.

By placing the *murti* downstage left on the performance stage, the audience is immediately linked to the original mystic time-space of Odissi. There is, however, a strange resonance in the placement of the *murti* on stage. The audience, whether they realize it or not, is receiving *darsan* from Jagannath, who is facing out to gaze upon them. This is a privilege most would be denied if they made the pilgrimage to Puri in hopes of entering the

temple compound.[1] Meanwhile, the audience in the theater is gazing at the dancer, who charges the stage with performance energy, and quite naturally seems to represent the center of the dance ritual. The dancer, trained in a re-creation of the *mahari* dance tradition to send her dance as prayer to Jagannath, paradoxically faces the audience, dancing to them. Rarely is the typical audience member aware of the strange resonance of past and present traditions being both upheld and subtly flouted.

The Repertoire

"A decade ago, Odissi was a long single item in which all the items were blended together to build up the climax. For convenience, however, this item was broken up and thus a number of items were created to constitute the repertory" (D.N.Patnaik 1971:100).

Odissi is both a reconstruction and a re-invention of a dance tradition. As documented by D.N. Patnaik, there was a period during the modern evolution of the dance form in which the repertoire was altered "for convenience". Breaking one long dance item into several distinct dances, each with a characteristic choreography, mood and role in the scheme of the whole performance, is a major step in redesigning the architecture of the ritual. Dances have been divided into categories, delineated by choreographed entrances and exits and placed in a fixed sequence within the performance ritual.

Although the number of items and content may vary from performance to performance, there is a sequence that must be adhered to in a traditional presentation of Odissi. Every traditional performance begins with an item called *Mangala Cheran*, a three-

part invocation. *Mangala Cheran* begins with a choreographed entrance in which the dancer walks slowly from the wings to the stage in a devotional stance; her hands are cupped together and positioned in front of the chest holding an offering of flower petals or simply held palm to palm in front of the chest in prayer.

The first section of *Mangala Cheran* is devoted to Lord Jagannath. The dancer places the flowers in front of the *murti* and enacts the prayer *"Jagannatha swami nayana patagami bhavatume"*: "O lord of the Universe, please become visible unto me." Although the dancer may have already taken a private moment to pray to Jagannath behind closed stage curtains, this *sloka* (verse of prayer) is the first act performed in the spot-lit role of the dancer. Thus the Odissi performance, beginning in choreographed prayer, reminds the audience that the essence of the dance ritual is not directed towards them. The prayer draws the audience's attention to the sacred origins and purpose of the dance-ritual. The choreography in this section is oriented entirely towards the deity. And yet after this brief prayer, the dancer does not face directly towards the *murti* again until the very end of the performance when she will bow to Jagannath, the musicians and the audience.

After completing the prayer, the dancer walks to center stage, keeping her hands palm to palm in front of her chest and continuing to face the deity. These eight to sixteen steps serve as a transition between the first and second *pranam* (devotional bow). One performer and teacher comments that the entrance walk and transitional steps in *Mangala Cheran* "must be executed with the utmost delicacy. Before we ask for the blessings and forgiveness of mother earth, we cannot dance with force upon the ground". When the dancer reaches the

center of the stage, there is a rhythmic change indicating the introduction to the second pranam in which the dancer faces the audience and performs a stylized bow dedicated to mother earth.

After completing the two *pranams*, to Jagannath and mother earth, the dancer begins the second section of *Mangala Cheran*. The second section of the dance is set to a Sanskrit *sloka* dedicated to one of the gods from the Hindu pantheon. Usually, the dancer enacts a prayer to Ganesh, who blesses the beginnings of all endeavors and removes all obstacles. There are invocation items choreographed to Saraswati, Shiva, Shakti-Devi, Vishnu and other Hindu gods as well. The first two sections of *Mangala Cheran*, devoted to honoring the gods, are generally slow and graceful, incorporating sculpturesque poses that establish a mood of ancient otherworldliness.

The third section of *Mangala Cheran* has an accelerated tempo and more vigorous dance choreography. The dancer's energy covers a large area of stage space and the footwork becomes more varied and complex. The dance concludes at a peak tempo with a *triconda pranam*, a series of three choreographed bows allotted four beats each and divided by pauses of two beats each. The bows are set to an identical rhythmic pattern repeated three times. This pattern, called a *tihaye*, is a traditional compositional device used to signal the end of a section or dance. In the first bow, the dancer places her hands palm to palm over her head to honor the gods. In the second, she places her hands at her forehead to indicate her love and respect for her guru. Finally, with a decorative turn that both breaks the devotional focus and establishes the stage space around her, the dancer opens her eyes and

places her palms at her chest, acknowledging and welcoming the audience. Thus at the closure of *Mangala Cheran*, the spectators are formally acknowledged within the choreography and included as participant-observers in the ritual.

Mangala Cheran is followed by an item called *Botu Nrttya*, a pure dance piece composed entirely of abstract movements. *Botu*, also known as *Botuka Bhairav*, is dedicated to one of the many aspects of Lord Shiva. It is a rigorous, technique oriented piece, and is described by some dance scholars as "the most difficult item in the Odissi repertoire" (D.N. Patnaik 1971:104). Amongst dancers and gurus, it is often used as a measuring stick with which to judge a student's technical ability and endurance.

Botu begins with a section depicting four musicians: a *veena* (string instrument) player, a flute player, a drummer, and one who plays small hand-held cymbals called *manjeera* or *gini*. These musicians are depicted in the carvings that decorate the outside of the Konark temple in Orissa and the poses have inspired the movement sequences in the first section of the dance. Because the dancer remains in the character of musicians, "holding" the instruments, the arm movements in this first section of *Botu* are limited. Perhaps in order to contrast the relative simplicity of the upper body, the choreography for the footwork has evolved into a more elaborate and fast-paced sequence. According to Jeanes (1982:103), between 1960 to 1980, the choreography for *Botu* increased in tempo and complexity.

In the first sequence the dancer is "playing" a *veena*, holding the long neck diagonally across the body, with the left hand on the frets and the right hand showing the base of the instrument. In this section the dancer executes the footwork with small shifts and bends in

the torso which are accented by tilts of the head, characteristic of the form. Similarly, in the section with the flute, the emphasis remains on the strength of the footwork, torso shifts and tilts of the head. In the drum section, one sees the introduction of subtle and delicate wrist movements as the hand mimics the drum beats, following the rhythms of the footwork. These minute wrist isolations expand into a larger, carving, indirect arm movement as the dancer poses in asymmetrical *parhva mandala* (a pose in which one arm circles over-head and the other crosses the body to beat the opposite drum-face). The arm and wrist movements become fully incorporated in the fourth section as the dancer uses her arms and wrists to create circular paths and spiraling, semicircular patterns that depict a stylized ringing of the hand cymbals above, below, to the left and right of the body. As is characteristic in Odissi, even in full sweeping movements the arms are never fully extended. Instead, the dancer's arms remain slightly rotated inward from the shoulder and bent at the elbows and wrists to maintain a softened circular path that is deeply rooted in the Odissi aesthetic.

The second section of *Botu* is introduced by a strong musical change involving a transition in rhythmic phrasing and the introduction of the singer's voice. In most of the Odissi compositions, the vocalist either introduces the melodic theme before the dancer enters on stage or begins singing immediately after the dancer's entrance. In *Botu Nrttya*, the vocalist does not enter the orchestration until the second section begins. The vocal section of *Botu* is unusual, not only in its delayed introduction but also in the melodic patterning. The singer repeats the same line of syllables using the same simple melody

throughout the remainder of the dance. In other pure dance pieces, the vocal music weaves through several formal melodic variations (called *swaras* and *antaras*) as well as improvisational elaborations which are initiated by the singer. It is striking that *Botu* is the single dance in the formal performance repertoire in which this pattern is not found. The repetition, without variation, of this single melodic line interposed with sections of pure rhythmic sequences led by the *pakavaj* creates a sense of chanting as opposed to singing. The simplicity of the vocal repetition develops a powerful, solemn atmosphere that recalls the devotional roots of the dance.[2]

The second section of *Botu* metaphorically guides the audience from the decorative statues outside of the temple walls to the inner sanctorum, where the dancer, embodying "The Dancer" prepares herself to dance in the temple. Stylistically, she adorns her hair with flowers, gazes in a hand-held mirror, and smiles with shy pleasure at the image in the reflection. This representation of ritually adorning the body in preparation to dance is a shadowy reminder to the audience of the backstage process of adornment and costuming that remains a part of the unseen, mysterious process of transformation. *Botu* concludes with an acceleration in tempo and rapid footwork sequences concluding in a *tihaye* which represents a typical choreographic pattern used to conclude a dance piece. On the last beat of the *tihaye*, the dancer pauses, in a sculpturesque pose, and extends her hands towards the audience, offering the dance from her heart. From this moment of stillness the dancer slowly exits, facing the audience.

The item which traditionally follows *Botu* comes from a group of choreographies

called *pallavis*. *Pallavi* means elaboration, and the choreography generally builds from rhythmic isolated movements of the eyes, neck, torso and hands to full dance sequences. While there is one, fixed choreography for *Botu*, there are numerous *pallavis* composed to a great variety of *ragas*. One teacher describes the *pallavis* as "melodic pure dance, they remind us of *lata*, the entwining vine, seen in the softness and complex foot work of Odissi". *Pallavis* are extremely popular items in the Odissi repertoire, often a dancer will perform two *pallavis* in one performance. It is also considered acceptable to perform a *pallavi* in the place of *Botu*, in which case the *pallavi* is followed by an *abhinaya*.

The beauty of a *pallavi* grows significantly with the maturity of the performer. One dancer in Bombay, known for her ability to convey mood and emotion, explains her approach when performing a *pallavi*:

> Every movement should be conveying something more than just the physical technique. When a dancer takes a turn, she enjoys it so greatly and puts everything into that spin so that the audience feels the elation and shares that joy. . . a *pallavi* is not pure dance, it has expression, mood. That is important to always convey. . . (For) example, *Saveri Pallavi* is depicting early morning, as if the dawn is female and she is adorning herself. As it is early morning, first steps (the entrance) should be taken as if you are dawn stretching herself, and if you feel this inside and then it comes out and the audience enjoys this feeling also. The difference in the *pallavis* is the mood, and the mood is connected to the music. It is not abstract movements but mood you are presenting.

The wide variety of choreographed *pallavis* provide a range in expression: from the languorous, feminine movements of *Saveri*, to the strong, virtuoso choreography of *Kirvani*. The *pallavis* challenge the dancer's ability to interpret and represent technical movement in

a way that is both aesthetically pleasing and meaningful.

Pallavis are followed by an *abhinaya*. *Abhinayas* are traditionally linked to the performance of the Gita Govinda in the Jagannath Puri temple. Many of the more complicated *abhinayas* are set to excerpts from Jayadev's work, although items have been set to the work of other Oriya poets, notably Kavisurya Baladev Rath, Gopal Krishna Patnaik, Banamali and Upendra Bhanja (Kothari 1990:72). *Abhinayas* narrate stories using a highly stylized sign-language which combines *hastas* (hand shapes) and equally stylized facial expressions. *Abhinayas* are deeply culturally encoded, as both the stories depicted and the method of expression come from regional and classical Indian traditions. The stories are either taken from classical Hindu mythology or regional folklore. The symbolic finger positions, facial expressions and body movements are classified in traditional texts on dance and drama such as the Natya Sastra, Abhinaya Darpana and Abhinaya Chandrika, as well as coming directly from signature regional mannerisms.

Unlike *Mangala Cheran*, which follows a prescribed sequence of necessary components, or *pallavis*, which follow the musical structures of the *raga*, *abhinayas* do not follow a set musical or choreographic structure. The poetry of the story becomes the structure of the *abhinaya*. Some of the most proficient dancers improvise choreography on stage, elaborating on each line of poetry and interpreting each emotional state as they are inspired to do at that moment. Ideally, the moods and emotions of the *abhinaya*, which influence the *rasa* of the performance, will be communicated to and shared by the audience.

The concluding item of the performance is *Moksha*. In Hindu philosophy the *atman*, the spiritual essence in every living being, can be freed from the eternal cycle of reincarnation only when a person has attained a level of knowledge that leads to liberation from the material world. This ultimate release from the worldly and material plane to the enlightened state of complete freedom, returning to the divine essence from which we all spring, is a state known in Sanskrit as *moksha*. There are no words sung during this item, only the guru's voice reciting the *ukutal* (rhythmic syllables) and the accompaniment of the *pakavaj* and other instruments. The *raga* is fixed in *Bhairav*, which evokes a solemn, deep and low tone. The final item in the dance ritual culminates in a combination of intense physical exertion and prayer, a combination of disciplined training, concentration and *bhakti* (devotion) that leads the dancer, and ideally the audience as well, to a state of *moksha*.

Ahariya : Adornment of the Body

Hours before the curtain rises, the dancer begins her own transformation from her day-to-day self to her role as performer. During the back stage process there is both an internal transformation of self and an external transformation of body initiated through the elaborate process of costuming. This process can take up to two hours to complete. The costume for an Odissi dancer consists of: a sari (a length of cloth wrapped to form a dress), silver filigree jewelry, brass bells which are tied with rope and wrapped around the ankles, a white flower head-dress that decorates the hair, and stylized make-up application.

Unlike many other theatrical dance traditions, in a solo performance, costuming is

not used to signify a specific character. It is considered part of a dancer's proficiency to be able to change from one character to the next within a single item, in the same way it is essential for an actor to be able to show different moods within one character. Thus the dancer does not use a visual "prop" or costume change to signify when she is portraying a man or woman, protagonist or antagonist. The characterization becomes clear through the dancer's body language, use of movement, hand gestures and facial expression. Similarly, it should be quite clear when one character changes to another. Thus, the Odissi performer costumes herself for the single role of "The Dancer" within which she is required to use purely physical devices to depict characters of the dance.

Unlike the *gotipua* traditions, the contemporary male Odissi performers do not dress like the female dancers. They wear some jewelry on their arms and chest, and the same silver belt as the female dancers, but they do not wear any adornments on their head or hair. In addition, the male dancers do not decorate their hands and feet with the red dye used by female dancers. The male dancers wear a stitched, *dhoti* style costume which consists of loose pants and a decorative, pleated fan that falls from the waist. Some male dancers wrap the *dhoti* out of a single piece of cloth rather than using the pre-stitched costume. Generally, the men dance bare-chested, with a thin piece of cloth covering the right shoulder, or they may wear a plain, tunic top piece.

The Odissi sari costume for female dancers, woven in the *sambalpuri* style that is indigenous to Orissa, was originally wrapped in a manner that allowed the dancer more freedom of movement than a sari wrapped for daily use. In the contemporary costuming

tradition, these saris are cut and stitched into tailor-fitted costumes. The costume is assembled from several individually stitched pieces. The lower half of the costume comes in one of two styles for female dancers: a pleated fan style which attaches at the knee to the leg portion of the costume and opens into a semi-circular shape as the dancer bends her knees; and a diagonal fan style, or *dhoti* style, which begins at the ankle of one leg and pleats up to mid-thigh on the other. The latter, *dhoti* style costume is similar to the male costume for the stage, while the former is worn only by female dancers.

The lower section of the costume, which fastens around the waist, is often stitched with extra material around the hips to accentuate the roundness of the female form and to more closely approximate the voluptuous proportions of the temple sculptures. The top portion of the pants is girded with a close fitting hip-piece which describes a semi-circle in back, further emphasizing a round hip area. The top pieces of the costume consist of a fitted blouse with half-sleeves and a pleated and stitched *palu* which covers the dancer's chest in front, and drapes over the left shoulder and across the back. From the waist up, the costume is designed to look exactly as a sari is worn, but the fitted, individual pieces create cleaner, fitted lines and greater mobility.

The effect of the cut sari costume, or *dhoti* costume, is two-fold: the tailor-made creations have developed into far more elaborate visual designs than can be achieved in wrapping, pleating and folding a single piece of cloth; and the ready-to-wear costume is extremely time efficient in terms of robing and disrobing. The tailored costume is designed in such a way that there is minimal disturbance to the ornamentation of face, head and hair

when dressing. For a costume change, only a few articles of jewelry will need to be removed and replaced over the new costume. Over the years, audiences have come to expect at least one dramatic costume change during a show. The gorgeous patterns and colors of the silk costumes accentuate the aspect of spectacle in the dance-ritual. Some dancers have placed up to four costume changes in one performance, although purists believe the frequent changes not only break the flow of a performance, but shift the attention of the event away from the art form and create the mood of a fashion show.

Odissi dance make-up has also changed quite drastically in the past fifty years. The make-up once consisted of white sandalwood paste decorating the forehead and cheeks of the dancer in the pattern of twining ivy. This pattern decorates the brow and cheeks of many depictions of Krishna and Radha in Oriya paintings, as well as Jagannath, Subhudra and Balabhudra. Although the decorative technique is linked to the traditional arts of the region, this tradition seems to be radically modified to conform to a more universal standard of decorative beauty. One of the early performers of Odissi remarks that her make-up, applied by her guru before ascending the stage nearly fort-five years ago "would make any performer revolt today. I had striped cheeks and forehead with sandalwood" (Mohanty, 1981). Today, the white sandalwood is absent from the cheeks and forehead, except as it delicately outlines the red *bindi* (circle) placed in the center of the forehead between the eyebrows with white petals. This design, worn by most dancers today, is an invented standard: one dancer notes that the *maharis' bindi* design "was not at all round: it was oblong like a drop, with a black spot at the bottom and a v-shape supporting it all" (Citaristi 1983).

The rest of the face is shaped and shaded in full contemporary stage make-up, stylistically modified to a modern Indian aesthetic. The dancers often lighten their complexion several shades to appear more pale and therefore more beautiful according to Indian standards.[3] The dancers' eyes, outlined with heavy *kadjal* (black kohl), are decorated according to a stylized concept of "doe-eyed" beauty which is deeply embedded in Indian culture. Poets will describe such eyes in great length, and according to one dancer, the Natya Sastra specifies that the eyes should be darkened in lines "as sharp as the back edge of a fish". The dark lines around the eyes also serve to emphasize the quick, controlled directional eye movements which are an important detail in the dance form.

When looking at photographs, one realizes that the white flower pieces that adorn the dancer's hair, now considered a signature part of the Odissi costume, are absent in early photographs of *maharis* and *gotipuas*. The flowers, which form a halo around the dancer's head and ending in a peak of flowers at the top, echo the architectural design of the Oriya temples. The flowers also serve to accentuate the delicate head movements by emphasizing the tilt of the head and chin in the asymmetrical positions and poses throughout the dance. The sculptures of dancers found throughout the Oriya region do seem to wear a head-dress of some kind and early photographs show some Odissi dancers with metalic head-pieces reminiscent of a crown.

The jewelry is an extremely important part of the costuming. Today, both male and female dancers wear silver jewelry that, although not fixed in design, preferably comes in the delicate filigree work typical of the region. The female dancer wears a silver head piece

and earrings similar to those worn for a wedding. Perhaps because the *maharis* were considered to be wedded to god, the jewelry worn to perform the dance is intentionally evocative of wedding jewelry. Recently the jewelry used for performance has become more uniform due to the marketing of Odissi jewelry sets in some of the larger North Indian cities.

It was noted earlier that make-up and costuming serves the dual purpose of decorating as well as enhancing the beauty of the form and drawing attention to important stylistic devices. The heavily delineated eye-make up draws attention to the importance of eye movement and the direction of the gaze. In addition, the design of the white flower head-piece both echoes the silhouettes of the temple architecture and accentuates the characteristic tilts of the head. The female dancer decorates hands, feet, finger tips and toes with a red vegetable dye called *alta* for similar reasons.

The designs are generally simpler than the creations painted on hands with henna for weddings, but the practice in both situations does indicate the importance of the occasions. The dancer will paint finger tips and toes solid red and outline the hands and feet. Generally, the dancer will paint a simple circle, flower or sunburst design on each palm and the top of each foot. The red paint serves as decoration, but also accentuates foot positions and clearly delineates the various *hastas* (stylized hand positions) that are used in the dance form for both story telling language and abstract movements. Like sandalwood, which has been replaced (for reasons of convenience) by many dancers with a white eye-lining pencil or even white nail polish paint, the red dye is sometimes replaced with red permanent marker in the back stage dressing rooms.

The cumulative result of these developments in Odissi costuming is an immediately recognizable and relatively uniform costume that is identified solely with the Odissi classical dance tradition. It is important to realize that this uniformity has been developed within a specific time period; when one places a photograph from the 1980s next to a traditionally dressed performer from the late 1940s there is a striking difference in appearance.

Yet with all of the changes, innovations and substitutions that have been incorporated into the costuming process, the routine of transforming one's physical self into the guise of performer remains an unchanging and pivotal part of the dance ritual. Each dancer is expected and encouraged to develop a personal routine which will initiate a parallel mental and physical process of transformation. The physical transformation in the dressing room is part of the transformation process from class-trained knowledge to performance mood, from drawing one's concentration inwards in order to develop technique, to sending it out as something infinitely deeper than technique to an audience.

One Odissi dancer, who presently resides and performs in North America, speaks eloquently on the transformation process of *ahariya*:

> I am very quiet when I am preparing for a performance, very different than normal. . . There is a transition that takes place from my daily self to *natiki* (dancer). I am a different person, and everyone can sense that. . . In the dressing room I do the hair . . . face. . . working on my eyes is very intense, I think about every glance, every look and expression when I am pulling the kadjal tail (the long black line extending out from the outer corner of the eye). Lips are very important, very expressive, these things have to be enhanced. Putting on the costume is like putting on another body, like entering a different body. . . . Putting on my *gunguru* (the dancing bells that are worn around the ankles) is very emotional sometimes, for me,

> because I want my guru to tie them on for me. . . here we are all alone, in India it is very important, traditional for the guru to get you ready, here we don't have that. But the final thing that makes me feel like an Odissi dancer, in the dressing room, is putting on the jewelry, the temple jewelry makes me feel like I've become a *mahari* or *devadasi*. Then I do *pranam* to my mother and the photograph of my guru, before walking back stage.

Many of the dancers have described the transformation from dressing room to stage space as being comparable to entering another world. Within this world, the identity of the dancer and the elevated qualities of dance devotee mingle. One dancer describes the feeling in this way: "when you hear the music, you start to shake with the eagerness to offer your dance to god". Another senior artist explains that "When I am on stage, I am myself, but I am also something that is pure devotion". The sentiments of love and devotion described by the dancers echo the description of a *mahari* when describing her past experiences dancing in the temple: "Dedication to Jagannath implied complete surrender of body (*deha*), mind (*mana*), and life-breath (*prana*) and then it became a source of joy"(Jeanes 1982:56).

Theoretically, by the concluding item of the Odissi performance ritual, the dancer has completed the transformation process that began, at the physical level, in the dressing room. From costuming, makeup and jewelry, to the final dance item, there is a continuity of process, a deepening of intensity. The physical movements of adorning the body, like the physical movements of the dance, guide the dancer's concentration towards the ritual of the performance. The concept of *Moksha* is very powerful, the idea that the energy of dance, infused by the spirit of the dancer, can lead both dancer and the audience to a place of higher understanding. The dance item invokes beauty as a dynamic that can inspire the ultimate

freedom of mind and spirit and lead to higher truth. The playful elements portrayed in some of the *abhinaya*, the glitter and spectacle of costume and jewelry are overpowered in the end by the subdued, regal dignity of *Moksha*.

Moksha represents the leashed dynamic of the meditative form. Of all devotional energy, the meditative energy is the deepest and calmest. It fills the universe, representing balance, serenity, completion. In order to perform *Moksha*, there must be an internal transcendence of personal identity, of ego. This internal transformation erases the boundaries between the self and the ritual self which still remain as well as communication barriers between the dancer and the audience. The final moment of the Odissi ritual represents a moment of infinite completion and union between audience, dancer and the divine, before the spell is broken.

Notes

[1] Although traditionally, Jagannath may be worshiped by people of any religious faith, after a long history of repeated invasions of the Oriya region and desecrations of the Jagannath Puri temple, the doors have been closed to all non-Hindus. This policy is rigorously adhered to, and the *pundits* (priests) reserve the right to question the status of anyone on temple grounds. If they are found to be non-Hindu, they are liable to be beaten with a stick.

[2] This music pattern is also found in an Odissi item called *Sthayi*. *Sthayi* and *Botu* are thought to be related, although *Botu* is considered to be derived from the *gotipua* tradition and *Sthayi* is from the *mahari* tradition. Sections of music and *ukutals* (rhythmic patterns) are found in both dances, although the choreography is different.

[3] To an outside eye it is somewhat disconcerting to watch a beautiful woman lighten her flawless, healthy brown skin to a whitish grey for the stage. In this way, the anxieties Western dancers suffer over body lines can be seen in regard to the national preoccupation with complexion.

Chapter Four

Embodying aesthetics

Embodying Aesthetics

It is the second week of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra's annual dance workshop in Bombay. The morning classes are primarily for the junior dancers, disciples of the senior dancers who work with guruji during the afternoon. Several of the senior dancers are watching the class. The hushed, air-conditioned theater cocoons the dancers in an atmosphere of serious concentration. The stage lights are on, and guruji sits on a chair on the fully lit stage. A portable cassette player rests on the stairs to the stage. Visitors sit in clusters, creating an informal audience as they watch the workshop. The dance choreography, which has been set on the junior group over the past six days, is being polished by the guru. Body positions are corrected to minute detail, and expressions are clarified.

In unison, the group of ten dancers crosses the stage in a diagonal from the far left wing to the front right corner. The dancers are depicting Krishna, coaxing a demure consort to sit with him in a secluded spot. The dancers use one hand to represent the girl, the other hand is held as if Krishna is leading her, gently but persistently. The dancers use facial expressions--lively eyes, an innocent smile and encouraging nods--to depict the male god. Sitting in the front corner of the stage, still playing the role of Krishna, the dancers mime covert actions of reaching for some sandalwood paste and scooping it into one hand. Smiling

innocently at the girl by his side. Krishna teasingly flings the paste at her, to her shock and surprise. In quick succession the dancers change characters from flirtatious and mischievous Krishna, to the sandalwood bespattered girl. The expression on their faces, the physical reaction to the teasing gesture, and the transformation from male physicality to female, must switch within a fraction of a second. These physical changes from male to female body language are then maintained for the next section, which is danced from the perspective of the girl.

As the dalliance continues between the two lovers, the dancers continue to shift from one character to the next. In order to do so, the dancers' focus must be evenly divided between the music, the choreographed physical actions, and the emotional nuances in the story line. The movements in *abhinaya*, while appearing to flow naturally, must be performed precisely to the lyrics of the song and its rhythmic cycle. The facial expressions may vary to some degree from dancer to dancer, but there is a stylized standard of accuracy to be maintained which is enhanced by the correct body and hand movements. The ultimate goal in an *abhinaya* is to achieve a level of training and perfection that allows the dancer to "let go" and live the dance as if these stylized expressions were natural, effortless.

The activity on stage stops many times during the rehearsal, sometimes to absorb and apply a correction, sometimes to ask questions. Junior and senior dancers alike pay close attention to the physical corrections and the responses to queries. When guruji makes an adjustment for one of the dancers, it is practiced by all the dancers on stage. When questions

are raised regarding the meaning of a sequence, all the students attend to the discussion. These answers often clarify the significance of a particular section within the larger context of the dance and empower the dancers' performance with deeper understanding.

During a break, one junior dancer asks "Who is the girl Krishna is embracing and teasing?" A senior dancer, very knowledgeable in Sanskrit poetry, answers, "It is Radha." Another dancer counters "No, it is not Radha, it is a *gopika*" (a milkmaid, one of the many women with whom mischievous Krishna would engage in "love play", much to Radha's pain and dismay). Guruji, sitting on his chair on stage, listens carefully to the conversation, which is conducted in a mixture of English and Hindi. He interjects "They are all Radha, all the *gopikas*." He pauses, taking in the dancers with his gaze, he gestures to his wife sitting in the audience and then back towards them and adds "your guru-ma (guru's wife) is Radha--all are Radhas."

Odissi dance performance is the culmination of rigorous physical training and the polished expression of internalized values integral to the dance form. As seen in the discussion of repertoire, the performer is expected to convey meaning through movement whether the dance is abstract, narrative, or an enactment of prayer. Thus, the proper understanding of dance technique involves the internalization of meanings subsumed in the physical structure of the dance. In order to achieve this understanding, Odissi training is conducted with a focus that goes beyond the muscular mastery of technique. Technique is an important standard by which to measure the quality of a dancer, but the internal

embodiment of the mental state is valued in equal measure. As one artistic director puts it: "What is the good of a perfect entrance walk if the eyes are blank and empty?"

As with learning any language, it is only after the student becomes familiar with the vocabulary that the beauty and conceptual nuances of more complex expression can be appreciated and executed. As the student is guided through the various levels of training, mimesis of movement and impersonation of mannerisms become more fluid, indicating an internal assimilation of an aesthetic ideal. Assimilation encompasses both an outward, physical perfection of style and an internal absorption that shapes the mental approach of the dancer to each item of the Odissi repertoire. Thus the dance student embarks on a journey of understanding which occurs on the physical, mental and emotional levels. The years of practice required in order to create a polished dancer are boundless precisely because one can go ever-deeper on the quest to attain new understandings which translate into performance.

Gurus, teachers and students of Odissi agree that the first level of learning occurs in the purely physical development of muscle memory and control. In the beginning stages of training, the student struggles to condition the body to the requirements of the dance form. Basic exercises are taught to introduce flexibility and strength in the entire body, from the feet, legs, torso and arms, to the subtle eye, neck, and hand movements.

Even at the structural level of fundamental dance grammar, movement and meaning are linked. Basic technique introduces the principles that compose Odissi's physical and philosophical aesthetic. The four basic postures which are used to build the dance

vocabulary: *sama, abhungi, chowke* and *tribungi*, introduce physical constructs of feminine and masculine energy. In Hindu philosophy, the body, mind and the entire universe are thought to be composed of male and female energy. Completion is represented by the unification of the two energies. Gods are often worshiped with their female consort to symbolize the union of the masculine and the feminine.

In dance, the masculine energy is called *tandava*, and the female energy is called *lasya*. The four basic postures of Odissi are divided between the stable, symmetrical *tandava* positions and the more curvaceous, asymmetrical *lasya* positions. After the initial, conditioning exercises are mastered, the student is introduced to Odissi vocabulary with these four stances.

Sama is a straight and upright position: the dancer stands with weight evenly distributed on both feet, which are placed close together with the inside of the feet touching. The arms are bent with fists resting on the hip bones, elbows pointing out to the sides and the eyes focused straight ahead. This is a strong, direct posture classified as *tandava*. Guruji once expressed the feeling evoked by this stance to a group of young students by placing them in a line, in sama, like soldiers. Then he paced in front of them barking in heavily accented English "attention!" imitating the war generals on television.[1]

Abhungi is the softer, feminine foil to *sama*. In *abhungi*, the dancer's weight shifts through the hip onto one leg, the other leg is relaxed and bent at the knee. One arm drops to hang by the side of the body, slightly curved in at the elbow with the fingers relaxed.

Abhungi is the *lasya* counter-position to *sama*; the dancer's eyes are still directed forward, but the chin is inclined to one side and the curve created at the waist softens the lines of the body and the direct effect of the gaze.

Chowke and *tribungi* make up the second pairing of masculine and feminine positions. *Chowke*, meaning square, is a low stance attained by a deep flexion of the knees, with the feet separated by about 6 inches and toes turned out to face opposite walls. The hands are either firmly resting on the hips (as in the *sama* position) or create an open rectangular shape at shoulder level. This second arm position is achieved by stretching the arms straight out from the shoulder along the chest line and then bending at a 90 degree angle at the elbow, so that the fingers point forward, palms down and the hand, wrists and elbow form a straight line parallel to the ground. When the dancer is in *chowke*, one should be able to slide a box into the hollow created by the body. *Chowke* is the second *tandava* stance, strong and stable. It is also the position that represents Jagannath, who stands solidly on his truncated body with handless arms thrust forward.

The *lasya* counterpart to *chowke* is *tribungi*, which means "three bends" or "three breaks". The name draws attention to the bent position of the knees, the curve in the torso and the tilt in the chin, which is also found in the first *lasya* position, *abhungi*. In *tribungi* one foot (in this example, the right) is turned out at a 45 degree angle to the corner; the other is placed in front, perpendicular to the first, several inches away from the right big toe. The dancer is bending both legs at the knee, and the torso is deflected towards the left, creating

a curve on the right side of the waist and torso. The dancer's right hand rests on the hip and the left hand is in a fist on the upper thigh. The weight is asymmetrically distributed, without shifting the shape of the position, onto the right leg, so that the left leg is "free". If the *tribungi* position is correct, the dancer should be able to lift the free leg to pose on the supporting (right) leg without shifting weight or losing the bend in the torso. Although the effect of a proper *tribungi* is soft, curvaceous and more languorous than the strong *chowke* position, it is in fact an extremely rigorous and demanding position both in terms of the physical strength and the balance required to maintain the asymmetrical shape.

These four specific stances create the building block vocabulary for the entire dance form. The distinct associations of masculine and feminine energies imparted by these forms give the geometric lines of the body the ability to convey meaning. Thus the postures become what E.M. Gombrich calls "visual metaphors of value" (Gombrich 1952:25) because the qualities or attributes of the physical positions have become reflections of culturally entrenched concepts about, and values imparted on, the masculine and the feminine. As a lion has come to represent qualities of valor and nobility in many European cultures, specific postures in dance evoke associations, in Indian classical art, with specific qualities and deities.

In Kapila Vatsyayan's discussion of form in the Indian arts (1983), she notes the relationship between outer, physical stance of the human body and associations with qualities, moods and values within the ancient Indian texts on dance and sculpture. Both the

Natya Sastra and the Silpasastras, a classical text on sculpture, include passages which reveal the potential of the human body to emote on a structural level through pose as well as through the more obvious use of facial expression.

In Vatsyayan's discussion of the Natya Sastra she notes that stances in dance are actually embodiments of certain characteristics and deities. *Sama* represents totality: the single line created by the body represents "the line which can by itself be limitless" and is associated with the male deity Brahma. The *vaisakha* position, which Vatsyayan identifies as the *chowke* position in Odissi, is associated with "the powerful Indra", lord of the heavens (Vatsyayan 1984:54-5). Vatsyayan refers to the Silpasastras to discuss *abhungi* and *tribungi*. According to Vatsyayan, *abhungi* is a "posture of imbalance or slight asymmetry [that] also involves the slight deflection of the pelvis to one side, and is suggestive of the mildly erotic, the sweetly vivacious and the heroic . . . it is the stance of the moods of *srngara* and *rati* [love]". The tribungi position, when rendered with perfect balance, "represents the rhythm of cosmic movement" (Vatsyayan 1984:111-12).

Vatsyayan's conclusions about the significance of symbolic structure in sculpture can be applied to the art of dance as well: "Through this complex and rich technique of measure and proportion of the basic figure of Man, the relative distance of the different parts of the body from the central median, and the still center and the different deflections, the Indian sculptor suggests 'states of being' without depending on surface treatment and muscular tension and relaxation for portraying character and mood" (Vatsyayan 1984:112).

As the four basic stances of Odissi are divided into static *tandava* and *lasya* positions, so the body itself is divided at the waist into upper and lower halves that represent separate, oppositional movement qualities. In general the lower spine, hips and pelvis are anchored and strong. Since most of Odissi technique is performed with bent knees, the lower half of the body provides a weighted, steady center from which the dancer produces footwork that is forceful, direct and precise. Simultaneously, the upper body dynamic involves the co-ordination of separate torso, arm, wrist and hand, neck and head movements with controlled fluidity. The dancer learns to use the upper body to carve circular, indirect paths through a muted kinesphere.

The juxtaposition of strong, direct foot work and soft, indirect trace-patterns created by the upper body requires a demanding level of co-ordination. The dancer is trained to produce quick and sustained movement qualities simultaneously while maintaining the appearance of a seamless whole. In general, the Odissi dancer is involved in an intricate rhythmic dialog between her upper and lower body.

These movement qualities introduce a new element to the *tandava-lasya* dichotomy. Within a *lasya* position, such as *tribungi*, the footwork is generally strong and forceful. In many *chowke* positions the upper body, wrists and hands are required to move with fluidity and grace. The energy and control needed to execute the footwork is relatively obvious by the sharp clapping sound created when the foot impacts the floor. Like the illusory softness of the *tribungi* position, the gentle fluid movements of wrist, arms, torso, tend to mask the

strength and control required to execute these particular isolation movements.

Once a student has attained the physical control to execute these movements, she becomes engaged in a mental process of augmenting these sequences with mood and emotion. An example of this process occurred during a first year technique class in Bombay, in which the students were developing a basic step in *tribungi*. This basic step involves a four-beat footwork sequence enhanced by torso, head and eye movements. On the first of the four beats, the dancer strikes the right heel and lifts the foot, balancing on the left leg and shifting the torso to the left. The dancer glances up on a diagonal towards the right corner on this first beat. The torso and eye focus is maintained through the middle two beats and on the last beat the dancer shifts her torso to the right and her gaze down towards the left.

During this particular class, the teacher perceived that the physical aspects of the movement were understood and that the students could consistently execute the sequence in slow, medium and fast tempos. Therefore she urged the students to invest the movement with meaning. The teacher spoke as she demonstrated: "feel as if you are glancing with love at someone or some object and then cast your eyes down and away in a moment of shyness." Although the physical movements of the students remained the same, the difference in the quality of presentation was dramatic. As the students used the sequence to communicate emotion, the movement ceased to be a technique exercise and, infused with meaning, became a performance.

Abhinayas

The fundamental structure of Odissi, incorporating the *tandava* and *lasya* energies, is representative of a classical Indian aesthetic. As students become proficient in technique they learn to invest movement with meaning to evoke moods and emotions. In this way, the student begins to utilize the dance movements as tools for communication. In *abhinayas*, the dancer is expected to narrate stories and depict complex emotional states of a variety of characters. Within the *abhinaya*, basic physical movements become the base for the elaborate, theatrical story-telling system.

As the Odissi poses are directly linked to the sculptures on the temple architecture of the region, so the *abhinaya* tradition is linked directly to the Natya Sastra, the Abhinaya Darpana and Abhinaya Chandrika, three texts on classical theater and dance. The Natya Sastra, dated at 200 A.D. (Kothari 1990: 13), is a detailed writing on character depiction and movement as well as dance, music and theater craft. The Abhinaya Darpana, dated at 1000 A.D. (Ghosh 1975:1) focuses on the codified meaning of hand gestures. The Abhinaya Chandrika is a palm leaf manuscript from Orissa, which codifies hand gestures, postures and movements particular to Odissi dance. The themes of the *abhinayas* come from poems and compositions which narrate well known Hindu myths and histories as well as folk stories specific to the Oriya region.

The dual heritage of Odissi's dance tradition has contributed, in part, to the distinct

movement qualities and presentation of themes found in the *abhinaya* items. Particular movements are associated with the *mahari* and *gotipua* styles respectively. Often the predominance of one or the other will shape the mood of the overall choreography of an *abhinaya*. The *mahari* tradition is associated with a quiet, subtle and emotive energy, which was shaped by the devotional mood of the dance and a strong *abhinaya* tradition performed in the temple. The *gotipua* style is associated with more spectacular, gymnastic movements and the *abhinaya* is naive and often playful. A movement like *chupka*, a quick, bright change of weight in which the dancer hits one foot to initiate travel in the opposite direction, can contribute to a light, playful feel in some dance sequences.

Tolagi Gopa Danda, an *abhinaya* set to an Oriya folk song, depicts an engaging story of the lighthearted banter between Radha and Krishna. The interaction is set in Radha's husband's home, and the activities of village life create the substance of the stories related by Radha in the dance. The Jamuna river is depicted as a trysting place for lovers, accessible even to a married woman when she escapes from home with her water jug on the pretext of gathering water at the river bank.

The tone of this *abhinaya* is light and the dancer relates the story to her audience in a familiar, engaging manner. Radha and Krishna have known one another from childhood, and his misadventures with the milkmaids of the village and Radha's own troubles with her mother-in-law, are played out in a bright, deliberate manner. Often, when the dancer, as Radha, is reacting to Krishna's audacious behavior she will raise her eyebrow and gesture to

the audience, as if to say "just look at this sauciness!", inviting them to share in her amused indignation.

The music is set to a swinging six beat rhythmic cycle and the movements are light and teasing, with an abundance of choreographed *chupkas* which match the overall body language of the piece which is lighthearted, flirtatious and coy. Radha will often turn away from Krishna in mock offense or indignation, only to smile beckoningly at him over her shoulder or glance at him with an affection that negates her scolding.

Das Avatar, one of the most renowned and powerful *abhinayas* in the Odissi repertoire, creates a very different mood. It is set to the first *ashtapadi* (a form of structured verse) after the introductory verses, of Jayadev's Gita Govinda. Unlike his other *ashtapadis* which relate the various stages of love, betrayal, repentance and union between Radha and Krishna, *Das Avatar* depicts themes of cosmic salvation. The dance portrays the ten earthly *avatars* (incarnations) of Lord Jagannath and the manner in which each form saves the earth and re-establishes balance between spiritual faith and order, and nihilism and chaos. The verses are sung in Sanskrit and set to an intense, driving five-beat cycle which is the basis for the intricate dance sequences. There are no *chupkas* in the dance choreography. The movements are smooth, powerful and grounded and the mood is solemn and commanding throughout the various scenarios. When the dancer is performing *Das Avatar*, her gaze remains strong and direct while depicting ferocity, fear, serenity, joy and devotion.

Another distinctive quality of Odissi *abhinayas* comes from the use of nature as:

inspiration for movement, choreographic device, and contextual metaphor. Orissa is a costal region and the movements and movement quality of the dance form seem to evoke the swaying, willowy salt-water reeds, the push and pull of the tides and the graceful curves of the crashing waves. The supple movements of wrist and torso are often used to depict the rising swell and fall of ocean waves. These movement combinations are called *tarana*, which means water.

One of the 36 basic foot positions in Odissi is named *meena pucha pada* literally translating as "the tail of the fish", in which the leg and foot position mimics the graceful upturned curve of a fish-tail. There are walks that are executed in order to leave a trail like a snake in the sands of the sea-shore, and other walks which approximate the slow, graceful swing of an elephant. There are dance movements which demonstrate the way a vine wraps around a tree, the way bees will cluster to a flower, and how a deer takes fright. Some of these movements are part of the classical theater tradition and are described in the Natya Sastra and Abhinaya Darpana, but they are stylistically rendered in ways unique to the Odissi technique.

Ideally, when a dancer is depicting nature, the essence of the movement should enter the body of the dancer. When describing entwining ivy, both the dancer and spectator should feel the way the ivy curls around the trunk of the tree; and when depicting the wind pulling a leaf from its branch, the dancer should feel the air separating the stem from its anchor.

Choreographically, nature is often used to establish the setting of a piece: a dancer

will show the flowing waters by the river-banks where lovers meet or the dense trees in the forest where Krishna dances with the *gopikas*. Nature also serves to mirror the internal emotional state of the character. In one choreography, a lonely lover watches the setting moon with a sinking heart, knowing her beloved will not come. Her hopes fade with the moonlight as dawn lightens the sky. In this example the setting moon helps establish the early morning scene, but more importantly acts as a metaphor for the sinking heart of the lover and prepares the audience for the mood of this piece.

The natural environment is a continuous presence within the poetry of Jayadev. *Abhinayas* set to the Gita Govinda incorporate movements which evoke the natural surroundings as poetic metaphor in the structure of the choreography. No longer simply "decorative" gestures to establish setting, Jayadev's lush descriptions are mirrored in the dancer's movements. The entwining limbs of lovers are depicted as the flowering-vine which clings to the tree trunk. Birds coo to each other with loving voices. The desire for love that is heightened in springtime is compared to the ineluctable attraction of the bee to the nectar drenched flower bud.

Thus the presence of nature, the integration of *gotipua* and *mahari* traditions in choreography, the melody, the rhythmic cycle, and the content of the narrative all contribute to the mood of each *abhinaya* and help the dancer embody and depict the characters of each story.

The practical execution of an *abhinaya* relies upon the dancer use of *hasta-abhinaya*.

Hasta-abhinaya (also referred to as simply *abhinaya*) is a theatrical sign language which incorporates hand movements, body movement, and facial expression. The *abhinaya* items require a more advanced technique than abstract dance pieces, because the dancer must develop a stylized, theatrical dance narrative while maintaining the purity of her technique. One teacher from Bombay states "the *abhinayas* are important because the student starts to learn to bring expression to the face, as well as the body. The student learns to be different characters in (the) body".

The learning process for an *abhinaya* is considered to be more difficult and complex than for abstract items and *abhinayas* are often taught after the student has learned between two and three other dances. As another Bombay teacher states:

> The physical purification of the body (through basic Odissi technique) is necessary before a student can embark on *abhinaya*. Without first (attaining) physical purification the result is (aesthetically) painful. . . . I explain each movement, but it is up to the dancer to go deeper and look for meaning. If one gets into the habit of finding truth and meaning in every movement (of *abhinaya*) then it will be conveyed to the audience. . . at the highest level of *abhinaya*, it is not performance, but truth that is conveyed.

Finding Truth:

When the dancer assumes the character of a girl in love, he or she will sit, glance and smile differently than when the dancer assumes the character of a doting mother, a cynical mother-in-law or an arrogant, powerful man. The walk of a noble figure has a very different appearance from the walk of the villain. Similarly, gender in Odissi is simply another

characteristic to be portrayed through movement quality and expression.

There are no restrictions on male or female dancers learning gender-specific roles or items. In Odissi dance, it is considered a sign of strength and versatility to portray any character, male or female. In solo performances, the dancer must portray all the characters depicted in an item, switching between male and female roles. In dance dramas, frequently the male dancer will be cast in the role of the male or stronger character, to heighten visual authenticity.

There are some instances in which the dancers performing a dance drama play roles opposite their true gender. A female may take the more powerful, masculine role for dramatic effect, or simply because the particular female dancer is skilled in powerful *abhinaya*. For example, during the duet choreography of *Das Avatar*, one sometimes sees a woman playing the ferocious divine form of Narasimha, half-lion half-man, who violently rips an evil demon-king to pieces. In the 1995 Bombay production of Gita Govinda, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra and Sanjukta Panigrahi began as Krishna and Radha, respectively. At times, however, Mohapatra would switch into the female character of Radha while Panigrahi would play the role of Sakhi, Radha's female companion.

Mohapatra is renowned for his spell-binding ability to depict Radha. A senior student of guruji comments "When he mimes wrapping the sari around his body, you feel the texture and weight of the silk in his hands, you must question your eyes that you cannot see this beautiful sari for surely it is there in his hands". Mohapatra's performances inspired these

uncontested remarks by one famous theater personality: "He's the archetype of the male, his gaze for instance and the way he is built. But when he dances, he completely shifts his gender. There is no female dancer who can equal the flavor of femininity or fleeting quality of emotions that he achieves" (Shahani 1991). This comment is revealing in that it points to gender depicted in dance as a quality completely separate from actual biological gender. The artistic feminine ideals inspired by classical poetry and depicted in dance are neither a natural nor inherent femininity, but a product of training and imagination.

Most Odissi dancers perform in solo productions more often than in dance-dramas. Thus, the ability to switch rapidly and seamlessly from one character to the next and "narrate" from the first person different characters' stories, becomes an important focus for training. In the dance segment being polished in the 1995 Bombay workshop, the dancers begin as Krishna, their eyes, body, and right hand describing a young, flirtatious god-boy eager to tease the pretty girl at his side. The girl, visually depicted as if Krishna has his left hand around her, is represented by the dancer's left hand in *hamsapaksha*, a *mudra* which, in this case, means "woman".

When the dancers kneel on one knee, they assume the proud strong position of Krishna. But as soon as the sandalwood paste is "thrown", the dancer must shift, in a fraction of a beat, from the physical stance of Krishna sitting, to the feminine stance of the girl sitting. Simultaneously, the dancer's face must shift from Krishna's triumphant laughter to the girl's shock and surprise--her hands rising "instinctively" to protect her face. This

gesture, conveying an instinctive immediacy, must be portrayed in a carefully rehearsed manner so that the placement of the hands do not obstruct the expression on the face from the audience. Sitting with her knees together to one side and the body weight resting on the lower hip and leg, the dancer, as the girl, wipes away the sandalwood with a petulant pout. The entire scene takes less than eight seconds.

Part of a dancer's proficiency in *abhinaya* comes from an understanding of the story and the ability to emote. An equal part comes from mastery of physical technique. The body, hands and eyes must be well trained to change rapidly from movements which convey one mood, to movements which may contain a completely opposite connotation. Often the emotional state is complex and requires the ability to express layers of meaning. In one section of an *abhinaya* item which depicts a "dialog" between Radha and Krishna, Radha is reminding Krishna of one of his childhood misdeeds in order to scold him for his long-time habit of deceitful exploits. The dancer must learn to communicate the story to the audience in the character of Radha impersonating Krishna in one of his childish adventures. Thus the dancer must in turn display the tendencies of a spoiled and lovable child, a flirtatious and sexual lover, and the mature admonishing sentiment of Radha herself.

Cultural Identities:

It can be argued that the *abhinaya* is the most culturally encoded form in the Odissi repertoire. Although some *abhinayas* narrate stories particular to Orissa, most of the themes

transcend regional boundaries and are commonly known amongst the population in India. For Indian dance students and audiences, there is a familiarity with stories and recognition of mythic characters depicted in an *abhinaya*, exactly as a European audience would be familiar with the story and characters depicted in the ballet "The Sleeping Beauty". Recognition and understanding of plot, characters, stylized actions, and symbolic moments in the ballet, such as when Princess Aurora pricks her finger on a spindle, requires knowledge on the part of the audience.

The stylized hand gestures and facial expressions in *hasta-abhinaya* were originally inspired by movements and expressions of daily life activities. Gestures in which dancers string garlands of flowers, crush sandalwood powder to make paste, and prepare *paan* (a popular digestif made of spices and sometimes tobacco, wrapped in a leaf and chewed in the side of the mouth like gum) are depicted by specific stylized movements. Yet on any busy Indian street, one can see a more practical version of those same movements performed by flower vendors and *paan walas* (*paan* sellers).

Emotional mannerisms are also paralleled in daily life. Several foreign Odissi dancers initially found it surprising that, in India, anger is not expressed through narrowing one's eyes into venomous slits, but by opening one's eyes very wide, so that the whites are exposed above the iris. Yet, every Indian child will recognize this expression, on an otherwise impassive adult face as a clear warning sign.

The importance of specific symbolic gestures used in the *abhinayas* to further the plot

are also culturally encoded and may be lost on spectators from different cultural backgrounds. In India, the significance of a female character removing her *tika* (a piece of jewelry that adorns the head) to give to her lover, has the impact of a married woman giving her wedding ring to another man as a pledge of her love. For an Indian audience, this action and its implications would be immediately clear, especially if the story is already familiar.

Thus the level of audience involvement in an *abhinaya* partially depends upon the dancer's skill, but also depends upon the audience's understanding and recognition of actions and characters. One dance demonstration, conducted by a well-known performer who is active in the Marathi Medium School System of Bombay (schools in which material is taught primarily in the Marathi language), exemplifies the importance of the audience's cultural understanding of *abhinayas*.

The performance took place in the school gymnasium, which had a raised platform stage on one end. The gymnasium was filled with over two hundred children sitting cross-legged on the floor. At one point, the dancer enacted a beautiful *abhinaya* about the classical character Draupati, who is gambled away by her husband to an evil king in a loaded game of dice. The children, who came from many diverse religious backgrounds, all shrieked their recognition when the dancer depicted the arrogant swagger of the well-known villain making his appearance in Draupati's private chambers. Although it is unlikely these children had previously ever seen a classical dance choreography on the story of Draupati, the well-known characters and progression of events, as well as the immediate recognition of significant

expressions and gestures, made the *abhinaya* familiar and exciting for them to watch.

Regardless of the cultural background of the audience, the *abhinayas* provide a true test of the dancer's ability to express the stylistic, culturally recognized stories and emotions with understanding and integrity. And yet, throughout the training of Odissi--from the first basic stances to the most elaborate of *abhinayas*--the emphasis remains on the ideals of spiritual devotion. The re-creation of the dance form was inspired by the mind-set and perspective displayed by the simple surity of Guruji's statement: in dance we are all Radhas; we are all devotees longing for God. Ultimately, through the performance of these dances, the dancer is reaffirming this belief. Many of the second and third generation of Odissi dancers, however, are being raised in a very different cultural atmosphere with contemporary sensibilities. They juggle the demands of modern lifestyles with their devotion to dance. As the dance form itself disseminates further and further from its original source, one must question the impact of these factors on the performance and preservation of the dance form.

Notes

[1] This incident was observed during a lecture demonstration conducted in Bombay in 1995. It provides an example of how gurus and teachers are attempting to bridge the generational culture gap emerging in contemporary India.

Chapter Five

Classical Dance in Contemporary Society

Sita Cast Out

After Rama and his devotees are victorious over Ravana's army, Rama returns to his kingdom with his faithful brother Laxman and his wife Sita. The story seems to have come full circle, the journey has led the hero to reunite with his beloved wife and return home to his own kingdom. But in some versions of the Ramayana there is one final episode.

After the joyous return of the royal family, the city settles under the rule of Lord Rama. Yet all is not right. A short time later, rumors of discontent begin to circulate. Rama is disturbed by the rumors and asks an advisor why the people are dissatisfied. Rama is informed that the people are dissatisfied that their king has taken Sita back after she has lived in another man's house. While it is clear in the story that Sita was abducted and remained a captive but untouched prisoner in Ravana's kingdom, she is still regarded with distrust. Despite the extraordinary circumstances of her misadventure, her virtue has become tarnished in public opinion.

Within the Ramayana, Rama proves his love for Sita by raising an army and defeating Ravana in a tremendous battle to win her back. Sita proves her loyalty and faithfulness to Rama by undergoing a test of fire at their reunion. Sita, at Rama's request, enters a burning pyre and survives untouched to prove her virtue and purity as a chaste wife.

Still, she is not welcomed back by the citizens of the city. Rama is overcome by grief, but feels that his duty as a king outweighs his duty as a husband and he casts Sita into exile by the wishes of his citizens.

Although Sita embodies feminine ideals and wifely devotion, the abduction serves to separate Sita from her role as wife. She has moved out of the protected realm of her husband's world into strange lands. Although she returns to her role, the reaction of the citizens implies that the experience has irredeemably transformed her. Ultimately the perception of this transformation overwhelms the evidence of her virtue and she is cast out of her home and her city, never to return.

In 1995, Sanjukta Panigrahi, whose technical excellence and devotional quality has made her the most renowned female Odissi dancer of this century, offered to dance in the Jagannath Puri temple in an effort to reinstate the *mahari* tradition. She seemed to be the ideal figure to re-establish dance in the temple. Sanjukta Panigrahi's social status, performance ability and personal integrity to the art form were of the highest order. She belonged to a well respected Brahmin family, one of the first Oriya families who actively encouraged and supported the dance form. She married an accomplished Oriya vocalist, also Brahmin, and devoted her life to dance. She has been an inspiration to many of the Odissi dancers performing today for both her dedication and integrity. And yet the request was denied by the state government, which has jurisdiction over the temple activities.

The announcement of the offer extended by Sanjukta Panigrahi and its rejection by

the government seems to end any hope of reinstating dance ritual in the temple. The offer was not repeated, as Sanjukta Panigrahi passed away the following year, at 53. Her dream is a moment lost forever. There is a finality to this episode like the echo of heavy doors closing shut. If time is the test-by-fire for Odissi, then the form has flourished and survived. Re-created outside the temple boundaries, Odissi has been sustained with integrity towards its essence and origins, emerging as a respected performance ritual. Yet, in spite of efforts to maintain the spiritual purity of Odissi, its success as an Indian classical dance form could be the very reason it never crosses back into the protective walls of the temple compound. The reaction of the temple authorities seems to confirm Odissi's status as a performance art, inappropriate for the sanctity of temple ritual. The dance tradition, as it survives, transforms and is maintained from now on, will be witnessed solely on the commercial stages of India and abroad. What are the qualities necessary to uphold the authenticity of the Odissi performance ritual? What are some of the effects of contemporary society on Odissi?

Constructing Tradition

When senior and junior dancers gather annually at Kelucharan Mohapatra's Bombay workshop, one can observe the devotion felt by the students towards their guru. The air is charged with an excitement that lasts the entire month of his stay. One senior dancer, who has been with guruji for over twenty years, laughs as she describes her husband's reaction to the workshop:"He says we behave as if our god is descending from the airplane". No one

at the workshop would contradict this sentiment. The dancers' love for the art form is inseparable from the love for their guru.

Although the contemporary Odissi style is still young, there is a fierce loyalty among dancers and teachers to maintain the authenticity of the tradition. For the teachers, their highest priority is to pass on the dance form as it has been given to them. One teacher, who conducts classes in Canada states: "It is of the utmost importance to pass on, exactly, unaltered, what my own guru has given me, so that twenty, thirty years from now, what is Odissi remains clear and not something less".

This statement contains an implication that any deviation from the present style of Odissi would amount to the degradation of the form. Part of the reverence the Odissi dancers have for their gurus comes from the gurus' roles in reinventing the dance tradition. Although, as has been mentioned, the gurus studied temple carvings and texts on dance and theater, a large contribution to the present form of Odissi originates in the creative talents of the gurus. A teacher from Bombay explains:

> Not everyone can create, these (who do) are of course the great masters, they are the geniuses--and they are the ones who make traditions. . . . What Maharahji does for Kathak (a North Indian dance style), what Kelubabu does to Odissi--it may be a little different from what the *maharis* have done in the temples, but it (the dance) has not changed from the roots. The treatment becomes different and that becomes a tradition itself. They do most of this work by intuition.

There is a sense among dancers that any serious student wishing to attain understanding of Odissi tradition should undertake at least a portion of their training at the

source--in Orissa, from an Odissi guru. Many of the professional Odissi performers who began their training in other cities, or even abroad, found their training at "the source" to be a transformative experience. Training in Orissa seemed to bring out the qualitative difference between simply performing dance movements and understanding and incorporating the roots of the contemporary dance culture. One experienced teacher, who makes a point of sending her serious students to Orissa every summer, speaks about learning at the source:

> One would see how guru-ma (guruji's wife) would take her *palu* (part of the sari which, in Orissa, is worn over the head) around her, how she would walk, how she would use her hands and expressions when telling a story. Then of course, one was always hearing the language, the speech mannerisms. . . and the long hours of dance, all day long. I'll tell you, this would become a plus point for only those who really wanted to learn--even though there were so many trials--less sleep, hard conditions, and guruji would be there pushing you, it was up to you to prove the desire to learn. And with the musicians surrounding us and rehearsing all the time, you learn so much more.

When recalling their training at the source, the dancers' stories provide recurring themes of timeless focus (with classes beginning at no set time and lasting as long as four hours at a stretch), single-minded concentration (dancers speak of a tireless state of concentration which they attribute to guruji's presence), and immersion in the true culture of the dance form (the language, the food, and way of life). These integral cultural and environmental elements contribute to the dancers' perceptions of authenticity in performance. The dancers believe this experience has helped make their performances "true" and their understanding of the dance form more "felt" and less a product of intellectual understanding.

When discussing their experiences in Orissa, many dancers mention how easy it is for an Oriya girl to pick up dance movements and *abhinayas* as opposed to a dancer from a different region. They perceive an Oriya dancer's movement quality as "natural", implying the presence of cultural authenticity, as well. Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra speaks of this when he states "we have the *anubhav* (experience) of these things first hand, so when we bring them to the stage it is a natural reflection of life" (Viswananthan 1996). Yet many Odissi performers come from different areas of India, and in some cases, different countries entirely. The comments about the ease and natural ability of Oriya students to perform Odissi indicates some degree of cultural ownership. How important are cultural claims when performing Odissi? How much does cultural identity effect the authenticity of the performance?

Foreign Bodies

From the intitial stages of Odissi's acceptance as a classical art, it seems to have attracted dancers from other regional cultures of India and other parts of the world. One of the first performers to bring Odissi to international stages in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Indrani Reman, had no cultural ties to Orissa. Today, there are several dancers from Europe, North America and Japan who have completed serious training in Odissi and are well respected exponents of the dance form. One dancer in particular is praised for her total dedication to Oriya culture. Originally from Italy, she is fluent in the Oriya language and

according to one teacher from Orissa "is like a true Oriya woman, the way she sits, her mannerisms, her involvement in the culture".

It is interesting that, in the case of dancers who are fully committed participants in the dance culture, there is no particular sense of cultural exclusion from the Odissi dance community. Cultural background does not seem to immediately effect perceptions of authenticity. As one teacher from Canada states: "Culture can be learned. It is not a boundary . . . we are all human beings, we all experience the same emotions. Art is not owned".

A teacher from India countered the idea of cultural ownership with an example of the opposite situation. This teacher took on a film project in which it was necessary, within a few weeks, to teach two actresses (Indian, but raised in the West) to execute a few movements in the Odissi style. Although she was teaching them dance movements, the teacher found herself telling the actresses about daily life and traditions in India. Before teaching them dance steps, she tried to deconstruct and teach some of the mannerisms typical of a traditional Oriya woman: how she sits, stands, moves and unconsciously fixes the folds and pleats in a sari. These specific physical habits and a particular demeanor effect the overall movement dynamics and appearance of a student's approach to dance.

Although they were diligent in their efforts, the actresses had a difficult time. Their movement quality remained awkward, according to this teacher, because of their physical estrangement from India and the lack of personal context for the movements. "Even though

the girls are Indian by birth, they were raised in the West and have had no connection with this culture; their bodies have forgotten how to sit like us, how to move like we move, so they worked hard and learned well . . . but still they end up dancing like foreigners." The use of the term "foreign" describes the lack of authenticity in the actresses' movement qualities and not their ethnic background.

Between this example and the example of the fully-integrated Italian Odissi dancer, it is evident that within the context of Odissi dance, "foreign" is a term that describes a lack of understanding and ease in the culture as opposed to cultural (and thus performance) birth-rights. Dance is a visual art form and physical integrity extends beyond physical movement to shaping oneself to specific ideals of beauty as well. Although cultural background does not pose obstacles for Odissi performers, physical authenticity remains an inflexible code within the performance ritual.

One of the dancers expressed her ill-ease with the hypothetical situation of watching a blond-haired dancer performing in Odissi costume. She admitted her discomfort with the concept but at the same time tempered her hesitation with mild words: "That is quite an extreme scenario. It would disturb the aesthetic for the audience . . . perhaps a wig could be used". Another dancer was more forthcoming in her disapproval: "That is not correct. In the poetry and texts we use (for dance), the descriptions of beauty speak of hair that is black-- black like a cluster of bees, or black like the thunder clouds-- not blond. This must be respected".

Thus physical authenticity extends beyond the movement to encompass correct appearances, as well. For some teachers, the value placed on "looking authentic" extends as far as learning the regional language of the dance style. During a workshop, one choreographer from Madras brings up the issue of physical authenticity, or truth, in *abhinaya*. She maintains that the ability to perform *abhinaya* is connected to the language one speaks. Each language contains its own particular pronunciation structure that effects the shape of the mouth of the speaker. Languages in which round tones are predominant stress the muscle groups used around the mouth to develop a slightly circular appearance while speaking. Another language may stress flatter, tighter mouth shapes. This choreographer has witnessed that the shape of the mouth, conditioned by the language one speaks, will effect a dancer's *abhinaya*. "A girl raised in convent schools (in which the education is taught entirely in English) will hold their [sic] mouth in a most alarming way while doing *abhinaya*. One can notice it immediately". She believes that a dancer must speak the language of the region, not only so as to properly understand the poetry, but also in order to achieve true *abhinaya*, as it is meant to be performed. Any other way is distortion.

Thus, within Odissi, the authenticity of a dance performance does not lie in the original cultural background of the dancers. On the contrary, criticism seems to be generated purely by physical cues that indicate incomplete commitment to assimilation into the dance aesthetic. So long as the dancer successfully adopts the Odissi aesthetic, there seems to be

little concern about the integrity of Odissi performed through "foreign bodies". The integrity of the dance is considered far more essential than the racial or cultural background of the performer.

Teaching Tradition

As mentioned in the previous section, studying at the source is considered to be an important part of Odissi dance training. The emphasis placed on cultural immersion, complete and timeless focus on dance, and the full attention of their guru, reveals many of the challenges and obstacles present when training in an urban environment. Bombay, for example, is the business capital of India and home to one of the largest film industries in the world. The cosmopolitan, fast-paced, secular life style, the commercial environment and the urban concrete landscape do nothing to evoke the timeless devotion and lush natural settings found in Orissa. The elements valued in dance training in Orissa are hardly practical in a contemporary, consumer-oriented society.

Teachers and gurus are aware of these factors and in an article written ten years ago, a journalist describes how Kelucharan Mohapatra attempted to reach across the ever-widening cultural chasm between generations: "His *bhakti bhavan* (devotion to god) is a fairly alien concept to young children in the metropolis the Mohapatra visits. Yet he struggles to teach them, since they are "the future of our art. . . . If we drown our art forms, we will sit, holding something foreign'" (Vasi 1988). In another article, Prakriti Kashyap

writes that "the advent of scientific invention has shaken our faith in tradition. . . . Now a guru must divert his student's minds from the technological and the materialistic world . . . and (teach) students to rise above greed for worldly gain and fame" (Kashyap 1992).

In addition to shifting cultural values, students rarely have the luxury of devoting themselves to full-time study. Students and teachers often have many other obligations and time constraints. Thus class times are frequently restricted to a single hour, two or three times a week. Yet for students in India, there are links between dance classes in these urban centers and the pivotal experiences gained through training at the source.

There has been an attempt to standardize basic Odissi technique through a book published by the Odissi Research Center, entitled The Odissi Pathfinder. The Pathfinder is a handbook that serves as a curricular tool for both teachers and students. The volume includes basic exercises, steps, and the vocabulary for various positions which include: foot, hand and eye positions. It also introduces basic melodic and rhythmic concepts integral to Odissi music.

The Pathfinder was conceived as a means to provide students, teachers and gurus with a common language for the technical aspects of the dance, regardless of the *gharanas* (styles) of Odissi in which they may have been trained. Unfortunately, some of the technical points vary from one *gharana* to another and political objections to the validity of the book have been voiced publicly by some gurus: "Nobody knows what the earlier form of Odissi was, or about its past subtle details. When enough research has not been done on these

aspects, who is going to accept the verdict of one guru who is backed by the government?" (Chabria 1984). Another guru declared "I cannot imagine what research is going on there (The Research Center). . . . I can state fearlessly that from the day "X" came into the arena of Odissi it slowly went commercial" (Singh 1992).

The one month workshops Kelucharan Mohapatra has established in most of the major cities in India provide another link between guru and students. The second and third generation of Odissi students are able to study with Mohapatra, if only for short intervals when he conducts workshops in their city. During these workshops Mohapatra divides his time amongst the beginners as well as the junior and senior dancers. He attempts to impart a higher goal for each student: even through painstaking, elementary technique classes, he encourages each student to reach beyond physical consciousness and find their own form of spiritual connection. In an interview with Arudati Subramaniam, guruji explains the need to instill these values when practicing a classical art: "He accentuates the importance of redefining the idea of religion for the contemporary dancer. 'Within each human being there must be an aspiration, a desire for something larger than the self. This sentiment alone is sufficient for the classical dancer today'" (Subramanyam 1992).

The Pathfinder and annual workshops provide some continuity and contact with the source, but they are limited and in the case of the Pathfinder, politically charged. There remains a deep anxiety amongst the teachers, performers and dance critics about maintaining the sanctity of Odissi performance in the next generation of dancers. Nearly thirty years ago,

at the beginning of Odissi's resurgence, dance critic Mohan Khokar expressed his concern over the representation of Odissi by dancers who do not fully understand the aesthetic: "One would like to see in "X"'s rendering something of the mystical purity, the ethereal quality that an art like Odissi must possess" (Kothari 1969). Today, teachers express similar concerns about students' performances. Concern about Odissi's preservation and presentation abroad is even deeper. As one Bombay based teacher puts it "there are no dance police out there making sure it is done properly".

The status of Odissi dance within an international context seems to fall under a category Francis Sparshott refers to as "high art" (Sparshott 1995). The dance performances in India and abroad are viewed as a classical representation of Indian culture. Parag Trivedi writes, "Odissi is suddenly threatening Bharat Natyam as India's ambassador to the world" (Trivedi 1992). Odissi performances abroad draw a mixed crowd of some knowledgeable audience members and many more curious but uninformed audience members. Within this context the future of Odissi, as it is represented outside of India, rests solely in the hands of teachers and performers living abroad.

In North America, there are some very sincere and serious Odissi teachers and performers whose training and performances are on a par with those in India. These teachers struggle with problems similar to their counter-parts in India: teaching far from the source; teaching students surrounded by different cultural norms and values than those portrayed in the dance; time constraints of both students and teachers; and the personal pressures to

maintain the standards of their gurus. There are other teachers, however, whose agendas seem to validate the fears voiced by dancers in India.

I observed an interesting incident while watching an Odissi dance class being taught in the United States which would serve to confirm many of the worst fears of teachers in India and purists aiming to maintain the Odissi tradition. The students at this school had learned their basic steps and two or three items in rapid succession and in no particular order. The result was a careless display of technique with no real understanding of the movement qualities characteristic of Odissi. During this particular class, the teacher was demonstrating the second segment from *Botu Nrtya*, beginning with a *pranam* that is repeated three times. First, the dancer faces straight, in a symmetrical *chowke* position, palms together descending from above the forehead to the chest. The second *pranam* is more elaborate, beginning in the asymmetrical *tribungi* position to the right, with the hands, still connected palm to palm, angled to the right diagonal and the gaze directed in the same line towards the corner. After a sequence which concludes in *alasa* (languorous) position, the asymmetrical *pranam* is repeated to the left.

Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra once explained that this *pranam* is directed to the "god in the middle, god to the right and god to the left" referring to the trinity of Jagannath, Subhudra and Balabhudra. The *pranam* furthers the subplot of the dance sequence, providing the transition from the first section, depicting the external temple sculptures of musicians, to the second section in which the dancer becomes "The Dancer" adorning herself

to perform within the temple. However, in this class, the teacher explained to her students that this sequence was directed "to the audience to the middle, the audience to the right and the audience to the left".

In a literal sense, the North American dance teacher was not entirely wrong in her perceptions. Her explanation for the *triconda pranam* addresses the ambiguity of the dancer's priorities within an Odissi performance, dividing ritual energy between the deities and the audience. The dancer, when performing this section of choreography, is facing the audience, not the deity. This teacher, who does not have substantial Odissi training, interpreted the movement in a way that is plausible yet destroys the inherent, devotional mood of Odissi. A moment choreographed in praise of the god is transformed, through her interpretation, into coy theatricality. Perhaps this example best justifies the reservations, voiced eloquently by one teacher from Bombay, about the potential degradation of Odissi through uncontrolled dissemination of knowledge, "people who, without understanding, take part of a culture and cater it to the world--these are the culprits, the criminals".

Technology, in the form of audio and video recording, has proven to be a mixed blessing in the dissemination of dance knowledge. For loyal students living abroad, the video camera has become a memory aid and method of ensuring choreographic consistency. During visits with their gurus, many students record the classes so as to review sections of dance "with" the teacher (on tape) in years to come. Dancers also keep performances on tape to review critically with their gurus at a later date. Exact choreography is retained with the

documentation of the dance on film. In addition, dance aficionados and students enjoy taped performances on Indian television, and libraries preserve performances in video archives.

Recently, a dancer who resides in North America has used her knowledge of computer programming and Odissi to create an educational CD-ROM for the general public. Although it is still in prototype form, the CD-ROM provides the user with beautiful visual images, pieces of performance video, music and basic information about the dance form. There is also a section on Odissi technique which can be used by students and teachers. While video and computer technology are useful tools for education, there is some potential for unregulated dissemination of the dance. As Odissi is handed down from teacher to student, the progression is controlled by the teacher's judgement. Dances are learned in a particular order, although all students may not follow the same pattern of learning, and items are chosen to bring out new strengths in each student. The ties between student and teacher are such that any item learned outside of the class, without the teacher's permission, would be considered a betrayal of loyalties. The presence of video taped items, however, enables determined dancers to "learn" choreography from video.

Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra relates a story about an encounter with a woman from California that exemplifies the general concern over technology and the negative effects of unsupervised dissemination of knowledge. While on tour in California, he met a Bharat Natyam dancer who bowed to him and presented him with a gift "as her guru". He had never met her before, and listened in disbelief as she explained that, as an avid admirer of the art,

she had recorded a television broadcast of an Odissi performance. She used this video to "learn", after weeks of scrutiny, one Odissi item.

She proceeded to demonstrate her new knowledge. The woman had not picked up the subtle intricacies of the movements and her own dance style predominated in the steps. But more disturbing than her lack of technique was her belief that she could learn to dance, without any guidance and no basic technique, from video playback. "Now she says she is my student, I did not accept her (as a student) I did not teach her." His face was still and calm as he spoke, but his eyes burned with a fierce challenge that contradicted his next statement: "There is no need for Guru anymore".

Technology has created a conflict between facilitating exhibition and exposure of the dance on film, video and computers, and threatening the carefully maintained control over dance training developed over years between student and guru. As a result dancers, teachers, and gurus have become far more careful about allowing video and audio tapings of their performances. Some Indian dance performers have been told to walk off stage mid-performance if they see the red light of an unauthorized video recorder in the audience.

Selling Ritual

One of the great challenges for artists in India and North America is finding the balance between artistic integrity and commercial viability. Without a king, temple administration, or land-owning class to support the art form, Odissi dancers are faced with

the economic considerations that ideally should not effect creative endeavors. One dancer, who is renowned amongst Odissi dancers for her powerful, emotionally stirring performances, is not recognized publicly for her talent since she never actively seeks out performances. This dancer describes her choice "to leave ambition, since. . . the artist's first concern should be the art form, not public relations and so forth". She admits that her choice is personal and recognizes that, in order to be financially successful, many dancers do need to gain media attention:

> This is a media world, so to get the performances and attention, it is necessary to do all kinds of things. But there should be control in this, too. (One dancer) schemes to get plants in the audience to clap, you know, when the dance is finished. . . but why even keep the deity on stage if you are not performing for the deity? Success of the artist is to convey to the audience the feeling of love, because what is spirituality? Spirituality is nothing but the highest form of love. If an audience sees that they are seeing something very secret and very special this is success. Otherwise it is simply stunning.

Her decisions and opinions on the antics of other dancers reflect the balance each performer must weigh between artistic integrity and blatant maneuvers to manipulate one's commercial success. She also reveals the schism between the commercial and artistic definition of success.

The classical definition of success in Indian art and the contemporary, commercial definition of success create a conflict that is difficult to reconcile without compromise. The highly codified nature of Indian music and dance does not lend itself to mass appeal. One classically trained *tabla* (drum) player explains how the arts are almost intentionally

selective: "Indian arts are not made to titillate the senses, not for easy pleasure or immediate response. It takes concentration and energy to gain access to the intellect and spirit that makes the art beautiful". Reconciling the intrinsic nature of the art with the largely commercial and consumer-oriented nature of contemporary society is troublesome. Dancers are often caught between the desires of organizers, estrangement of audiences, and the purity of the art form.

One dancer discusses the contradictions between the classical perceptions of performance, in regard to an audience, and the present pressures of commercial success: "There was a time in Indian history when, as it is written in the Natya Sastra, one of the characteristics of a dance performance was that the audience should be learned. A dancer should only dance in front of a learned audience. But that was a time when dancers performed selectively. Now, we can hardly be selective in the same way. People are compromising, including myself. Not in the quality of the dance, but in the items we choose, or some other way. Not to make it totally mass-oriented, but somehow something in between".

It takes a certain degree of economic stability to afford a professional career as an Indian classical dancer. One teacher, who provides classes free of charge to under-privileged children as well as running regular classes and her professional company, discusses the class status of classical dancers:

> Most professional dancers are of an upper-class upbringing. Very rarely will you see someone from the working class in this world.

> This is because, very simply, it is a discipline that takes a lot of time to master, and is very expensive. The pressure of life at this working class level does not allow for this time and expenses. The classes, the costumes, the jewelry, even performances cost a lot of money. Music circles and so forth, cannot afford (to stage) dance performance, because each musician demands full pay.. .the expenses are too much. So if the wealthy community takes over as dancers, they themselves spend for the performances and organizers don't need to pay. In most cases, these days, the organizations give the stage and honor but don't pay. In fact, some of the very prestigious performance series and conferences here (in India), actually you have to pay to perform there. And this kind of politics, due to money and favoritism--influences things a lot.

It is interesting to consider that once, when the *mahari* tradition was maintained, caste was one of the main considerations when selecting dancers for the temple. Now, it is not caste, but economic status that can create a barrier from the dance profession.

These artistic and economic considerations are further compounded by issues of authenticity and innovation. Within Odissi, a form which still has little recognition outside of India, the conflicts between innovation and the need to establish authenticity are issues that arise for cultural performers through out the world. Among performers in India and North America, there are mixed feelings about experimenting with new directions in Odissi. Purists believe that the traditional texts and themes are timeless, providing scope for every possible voice and expression. For these dancers, there is no need to step out of the classical boundaries of the dance form to present dance that is relevant to contemporary society. They believe that the majority of new works are created as a response to the commercial pressures of sponsors. The same dancer who has forsaken ambition and the commercial pressures of

full-time performance careers explains that:

> People go to organizers and they (the organizers) want something new . . . so the dancer must try and cook up something. . . . Some people have an inner need, an urge to try out an experiment--then it will have some quality. But most of these experiments are because you can get a performance, give it a big title and a big name--it is commercial and that is why the satisfaction (derived from the work) is not so much.

Like other purists, she believes the creative process should spring from an internal desire to explore, not as a response to external pressure. Other performers believe that culture and tradition are not fixed, but fluid living reflections of society. These are the dancers who have a genuine "inner need" to create new works. The same teacher who has opened dance classes for under-privileged children feels very strongly that Odissi can be used as the base towards social awareness and education. "I have the feeling that I should make use of my dance, not only for the sake of dancing--I should try to use my technique or my knowledge to bring up some issues that have always bothered me--mostly women's issues in our society. I must go through the Odissi format for these projects because that is my training." In 1993 this teacher organized a traditional performance to celebrate International Women's Day, creating a cultural celebration that drew public attention to the issues facing women in India. This celebration has since become an annual event in Bombay and every year, there is a different theme. For the third annual performance, she choreographed a dance-drama glorifying Sita as a strong heroine who, instead of pining for her husband after her exile, turns away from Rama when she is cast out. Sita, as portrayed in the choreography, is victimized by

circumstance but she is resilient and bravely faces the challenges of raising her two sons, alone, in the forest. The dance-drama remained within the acceptable boundaries of classical dance but reinterpreted Sita's character as a role model with traditional and contemporary virtues.

She is deliberate in her conservative transition from tradition repertoire to choreography that infuses classical themes with her own political and social views. She states: "There is only so much an audience for classical art will accept. You cannot push beyond those limits very quickly". Still, amongst all of the dancers interviewed, proponents of traditional repertoire and innovators alike agree that these choreographic experiments must be kept separate from any influence on traditional technique. All of the dancers voiced the opinion that Odissi must be preserved, intact, in the form that has been passed on to them by their guru.

When asked about the future of Odissi, the responses, again, are mixed. Some dance critics and dancers from India believe that Indian dance is headed into, if not already in, its lowest ebb. They attribute the "dismal" state of dance to the economic and commercial factors controlling the performance scene, which inherently run contrary to the philosophy of classical art. Some attribute the decline to an apathetic cultural attitude, developed through a media saturated with western ideals of popular culture. It remains to be seen whether, as the pessimists forecast, once the gurus have gone, Odissi will degrade and eventually disappear.

As I reflect upon my life-long involvement with the Indian dance world and the four years I have spent as an Odissi student, teacher, and performer, I realize that my understanding of Indian dance has become richer and more complex and yet my feelings about the forms, especially about Odissi, have remained the same. I still regard the Odissi dance technique and the accompanying music as one of the most moving and perfect expressions of beauty I have ever seen. I still believe in the power of a proficient dancer to transform and uplift the spirit of her audience with her dance. I still find value in my own journey as a student, teacher and performer. I find no easy answers to the philosophical and cultural schisms developing between the art form and contemporary society. Yet I cannot agree with the pessimistic forecast of the inevitable degradation and decline of the dance. In seeking my own answers to the questions I have posed to others, I find, once more, my response is best articulated through experiences associated with dance performance:

April 4, 1998

Today I performed a new role in my life as an Odissi dancer. I was asked to be responsible for the ahariya process of a young dancer for her first full performance on stage. She had completed eight years of training and one year ago I had come in to the dance school to teach a few of her classes. Those classes were enough to make the symbolic connection between us important. As her mother had said on the phone, several weeks before, "you must tell her all the things you feel are important before she goes on stage; you are her didi (older sister) and also a teacher".

An hour before the puja, we began the tranformation process for the first time. She was very still as I tied the white flowers around her hair, and we sat inches apart as I drew the kadjal lines on her eyes. The dancer's guru came in periodically to check on her and help with the dressing process while simultaneously monitoring the front stage preparations. The dressing room filled and emptied with a constant flow of fellow dance students, mothers, and well-wishers. The ebb and flow of people reminded me that today was an important day for both the dancer and the Indian community.

By eight o'clock the performance hall was full and families spilled out into the aisles. Although the dancer remained calm, her hands trembled as she rewound the cassette tape to listen to her dance music. Her mother entered to announce the priest was ready to perform the puja. After the puja, the dancer returned to the dressing room for some moments alone and I joined the audience in the theater.

The performance was not professional, nor was it meant to be. Looking around, I could see the pride and enjoyment in the people who had come to support her. One row down, two little girls imitated the hand movements they watched on stage, reminding me of my own childhood fascination with Indian dance. As long as the beauty of Indian dance touches the imagination of the next generation, I cannot imagine the dance form disappearing. As long as there is a community which recognizes that the value of classical art is immeasurable precisely because it cannot be commodified, this art form will survive.

As I sit in the darkness of the performance hall, I recall the voice of a master story

teller and a master dancer guru, who reduces discussion about the dance form's survival to a singular clarity of perspective: "the exterior, physical form of the dance may degrade--may disappear--as people say, when I am gone. Tell me, what does that matter? The rasa, the spirit of the dance, that is like a deep river, always flowing from God. That is the important thing, and that will never die".

APPENDIX A: Glossary

abhinaya	a narrative dance using stylized hand movements and facial expressions to convey character and meaning.
abhungi	one of the four basic stances in Odissi, a relaxed standing position
alap	an introductory section of music in which the musician establishes the scale and notes used throughout the song.
alasa	a languorous pose
alta	a red dye made of natural plant extracts used to decorates the hands and feet
apsura	divine dancers who, according to mythology, performed in the divine court of Indra for the gods.
ashtapadi	a form of structured verse used by Jayadev in the Gita Govinda. Many *ashtapadis* have been used to choreograph *abhinaya* items.
atman	the spiritual essence in every living being
avatar	divine incarnation
Balabhudra	Jagannath's brother, associated with Balaram, Krishna's brother
bhakti	devotion
Botu Nrttya	the second item performed in the traditional Odissi repertoire
chupka	a quick, sharp Odissi step involving the transfer of weight, indicated by the stamp of a foot, which initiates a change in direction.
chowke	one of the four basic stances in Odissi, a strong symmetrical position
gharana	a school of thought or artistic tradition
gini	small hand-held cymbols

gopika	a milkmaid, gopikas are some of the many female devotees and lovers of Krishna
gotipua	young boys trained to dance in the style of Odissi preserved in the villages of Orissa
gunguru	dancing bells, worn around the ankles
guru	a master teacher
guruji	the respectful form of guru
hamsapaksha	a mudra used in *abhinaya* and abstract movements, one meaning of this mudra can be "woman".
Hasta	a specific, stylized positioning of the fingers, hands and wrists
Hasta-abhinaya	the stylized form of dance narrative using specific, codefied hand gestures and facial expressions, also called *abhinaya*.
Jagannath	a deity worshiped in Orissa. Odissi developed in the temple dedicated to this deity.
Krishna	an earthly avatar of Vishnu, a deity in Hinduism
Lasya	classification of the feminine dance energy
mahari	the female dancers trained in the temple to perform Odissi dance as form of prayer.
mandir	temple
Mangala Cheran	the invocation item in the Odissi repertoire
manjeera	hand-held cymbols
Maya	illusion
Moksha	the last item in an Odissi performance
moksha	the Hindu principle of ultimate spiritual liberation from the material world.

mudra	a specific, stylized positioning of the fingers, hands and wrists used to communicate meaning or abstract forms.
murti	the physical form of a deity
Nilhamadhava	an *avatar* of Krishna
Odissi	an Indian classical dance form from the state of Orissa
Orissa	a state in the North East region of India
Oriya	the language spoken in Orissa; also anything belonging to cultural tradition of region: i.e. "Oriya paintings".
puja	a ritualized prayer ceremony
pakavaj	a drum used to accompany Odissi dance
pallavi	an abstract item choreographed to various *ragas*
palu	the decorative portion of sari, worn to cover head or draped over the shoulder.
parva mandala	a pose depicting the drum-player beating a drum
pranam	a bow of respect
Radha	Krishna's consort in mythologies
raga	a melody with a set structure of notes and pitch
rasa	flavor, essence
seva	religious service
sloka	a verse of prayer
Subhudra	Jagannath's/Krishna's sister
Tandava	the classification of masculine dance energy
Tarana	movements depicting water

Tihaye	a rythmic pattern repeated three times used choreographically to conclude a section of a dance or at the end of an item
Tika	a piece of jewelry worn on the forehead
Tribungi	one of the four basic positions of Odissi; it is an asymmetrical, curvaceous position.
Tricondan Pranam	three bows choreographed in a single sequence
Visnu	Creator of the Universe

APPENDIX B: List of Interviews

Basu, Debbi. June 15, 1997. Bombay, India.

Das, Vishnu Tattva, May 4, 1997. Bombay, India.

(Second interview: December 21, 1997. Santa Rosa, California.)

Patnaik, Ellora. January 27, 1998. Toronto, Canada.

Vaze, Bageshree. February 10, 1997. Toronto, Canada.

Mohanty, Niharika. December 2, 1997. (e-mail).

Paranjape, Jhelum. June 6, 1997. Bombay, India.

Phadke, Maneesha. May 10, 1997. Bombay, India.

Mashruwalla, Daksha. June 12, 1997. Bombay, India.

Subrahmaniam, Arundati. June 16, 1997. Bombay, India.

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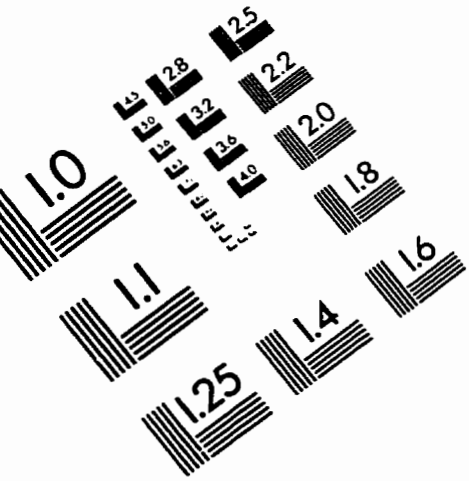

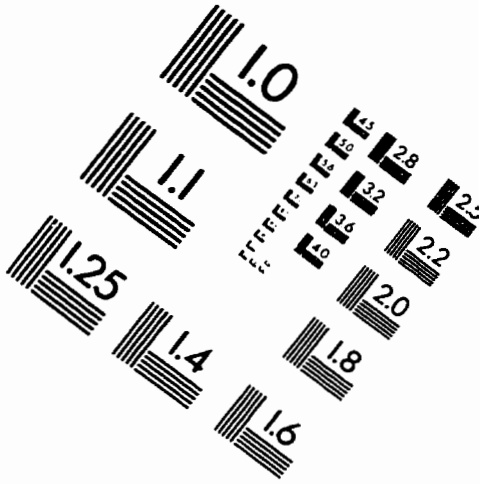

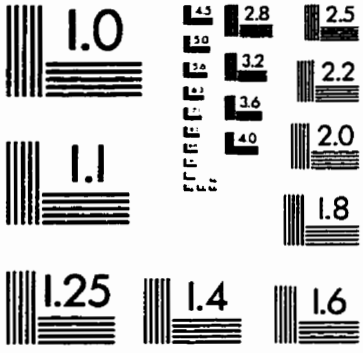

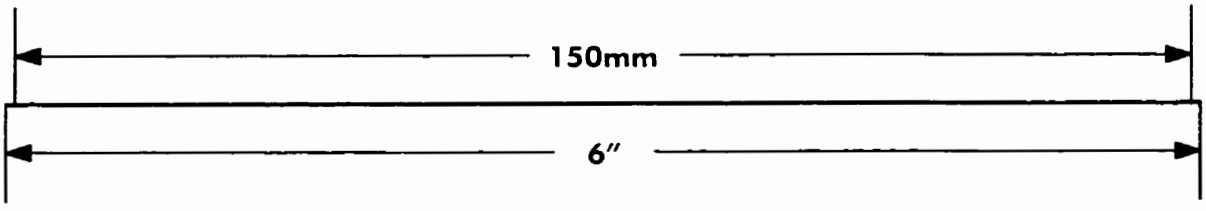

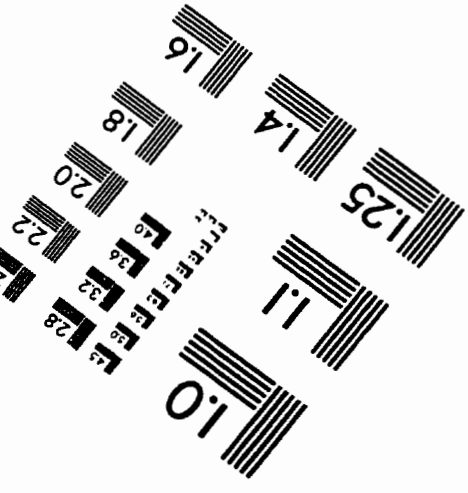

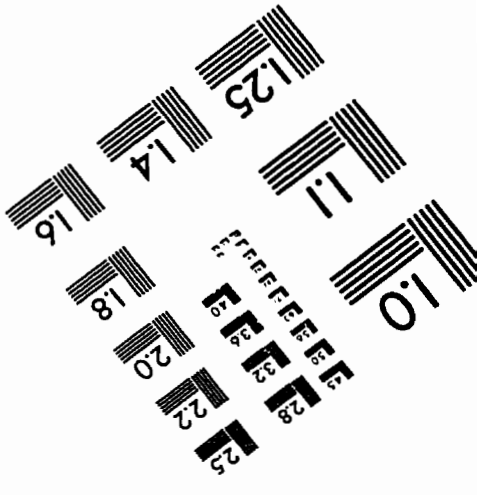

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