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“Odissi”: On the History of a Name¹

For those unfamiliar with this topic, the appellative “Odissi” is used to refer to a set of musical and gestural practices deriving from traditions that developed in what is now Odisha, India. Odissi dance needs little introduction; it is considered to be one of India’s “classical” dance forms and during the last half of the 20th century achieved worldwide popularity. Odissi music, on the other hand, which bears some similarities to Hindustani and Karnatak music, is today practiced mainly in the urban centers of Coastal Odisha; some genres provide accompaniment to Odissi dance, while others are performed as concert music. Both the dance and music underwent processes of modernization and classicization during the latter half of the 20th century. At present, however, I am not concerned with the specifics of the practices, works, sights, or sounds that may be said to constitute Odissi music and dance; my focus is on the names themselves: how did they come to be thought about, why did they become thought into being? I am furthermore interested in how these names have been used over time, appropriated and interpreted anew at particular historical junctures. Although “Odissi” is often thought to represent something ancient—eternal, almost—I hope to show how it has not a fixed, or necessarily continuous, meaning but is always something becoming, always being constructed and reconstructed, reproduced and transformed. I am going to focus on some moments of this history from the early to mid-20th century. (Although I will not go very deeply into political history here, it should be recognized that this includes a period of intense nationalism—on both a local and a “nation”-wide level—leading up to Indian Independence.)

The terms “Odissi music” and “Odissi dance” are usually attributed to Kalicharan Patnaik (1897–1978), something of a cultural polymath who was central to many of the

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“cultural revival” movements of mid-20th century Odisha. For example, Ananya Chatterjee, in reference to dance, writes that, “Odissi was named as such in 1955 at the suggestion of ... Kalicharan Patnaik” (A. Chatterjee 2004: 145).² Likewise, dancer Ritha Devi claims that the name “was coined by the late Kavichandra Kalicharan Pattnaik in 1948” (Devi 2006: 46). And the well-known Odia writer, Mohapatra Nilamani Sahoo, has mentioned hearing the term in relation to music around 1945 (Sahoo 1997: 318), also associating the term with Kalicharan Patnaik.³ If we consult Kalicharan himself, however, we find only the claim that: “From time immemorial we have called this aesthetic dance and music as Odissi” ([1960] 1985).

But assuming that it did originate at some point, why might this modifier “Odissi” have needed to be thought? It is instructive to consider the very first written occurrence I have found of “Odissi,” contained in the massive Odia-language dictionary *Purṇṇacandra Oḍiā Bhāṣākoṣā*. There, in its very first volume published in 1931, are found entries for both “Oḍiśi saṅgīta” (i.e., Odissi music) and “Oḍiśi nāṭa” (Odissi dance). It might be noted that none of the dictionaries previous to this time that are known to me mention “Oḍiśi” (of course there may be any number of reasons for this, including that the word was not common in the contexts in which the previous compilers were working). At any rate this indicates that the Odia terms for Odissi music and dance came into being prior to 1930, perhaps during the 1920s, but quite possibly earlier. It is significant that the compilers of the *Purṇṇacandra Oḍiā Bhāṣākoṣā* locate the provenance of “Oḍiśi saṅgīta” and “Oḍiśi nāṭa” in Puri, an important temple city located midway along Odisha’s coastline. They define the former (in English) as: “Songs composed by the classical Oḍiā poets”; mentioning the use of “ancient” rāga-s and rāgiṇī-s, they go on to list a few of these poets, all of whom it must be noted worked in the princely court system, and mostly in southern Odisha. “Oḍiśi nāṭa” is defined as: “a kind of dance performed with the

2 Marglin (1985: 27) also dates the term to this period.

3 D. N. Patnaik also attributes “Odissi” to Kalicharan Patnaik (see I. Sahoo 2009: 133).

singing of Odissi music [saṅgīta], gestures expressing the meaning of the songs [abalaya], and movements of the limbs.” The definition goes on to emphasize the performance of jumps and “difficult to accomplish acrobatics.” It further differentiates between an “Oḍiśī” and a “Dakṣiṇī,” or southern, style, both of which are performed by young boys. What this definition suggests to me is the goṭipua tradition, goṭipua-s being young boys who, dressed as women, mostly performed outside the temples during social and religious festivals.⁴ This “Oḍiśī nāṭa” can be distinguished from “māhārī nāṭa,” defined elsewhere in the *Purṇṇacandra Oḍiā Bhāṣākoṣā*, that referred to the performance of female dancers inside a temple before the idol. From this we can conclude for the moment that the modifier “Oḍiśī” came into use in Puri by at least the early 20th century to distinguish between the ritual performance by women that occurred inside the temples, and that (probably) utilized a very select repertory of devotional songs (māhārī nāṭa), and the performances of boys outside the temple that utilized a larger, more flexible corpus of mostly court-associated songs (Oḍiśī nāṭa) (also cf. D. N. Pathy 2007: 49). The definitions of Oḍiśī saṅgīta and nāṭa also both relate their referents to South Odisha, that is, elsewhere of Puri.

And so we find the modifier “Oḍiśī” used to mark a distinction between inside/outside the temple, between native/foreign to Puri. Why “Oḍiśī” and not another term, I cannot say. The more interesting question at the moment is why and how this term later came to be used in the context of Odisha’s mid-century cultural revival. This is an important question because, while “Odissi music” and “Odissi dance” have emerged as the dominant terms for what they represent, they were not the only ones to be suggested, nor are they the only ones in use.

It is unlikely that the term “Odissi” was *invented* by Kalicharan Patnaik, whose early adult life was spent traveling from court to court as a playwright, poet, and musician. He did,

4 It seems significant (for reasons beyond my present scope) that the definition, if indeed it is referring to goṭipua-s (and I don’t know what else it could be referring to), mentions nothing about dress.

however, spend a great deal of time in Puri from the 1920s onward and, if that is where the term originated, he would certainly have been familiar with it. Rather than inventing it he probably later appropriated the term as a fitting designation for the new “classical” music and dance forms of Odisha.

Nevertheless, the terms “Odissi music” and “Odissi dance,” in both their English- and Odia-language versions, did indeed become enthroned and widely disseminated during the 1950s and 1960s largely through the activities of Kalicharan Patnaik along with a few other co-activists. But before delving further into this, let us focus on music for a moment and consider what is probably the first English-language term used to differentiate “music” in Odisha from other “music”—and that, in fact, referred to much of the same repertory that “Odissi music” would come to represent: that is, “Oriya music.”⁵

To my knowledge this term (along with “Oriya song”) first appeared in the writings of Manmohan Chakravarty—probably a Bengali working for the colonial administration in Odisha—who wrote one of the first substantial treatments of something called “Oriya literature.” His work on this subject, appearing in 1897 and 1898 (in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*), includes a few comments on “Oriya music,” which he compares to “Telugu music.” Terms such as these (“Oriya music,” etc.) appear to have emerged in English-language discourse in the latter half of the 19th century. Just as, for the British and for many Indians by this time, communities could be differentiated by the languages they spoke, so too could other features of culture be seen to fall along these lines. Hence, in the latter half of the 19th century we begin to see designations in English such as “Bengali music,” “Telugu music,” “Tamil music,” and so on—as opposed to, say, the largely undifferentiated “Hindu music” that was written about in earlier epochs. (This shift had to do with, above all, colonial administrative needs.)

The need for such differentiation only grew after the 19th century as train travel

5 In Odia this would come to be instantiated by the term “Oḍiā gīta” (Odia song).

increased (meaning musicians from one region were increasingly interacting with musicians and audiences from other regions), and as the gramophone and radio were introduced. The language-derived classification of music continued when the Gramophone Company, for instance, toured India in the early 20th century, recording specimens of “Hindustani,” “Bengali,” “Sindhi,” “Ooriya,” etc. songs (that is, they were classified by the language they were sung in, rather than, say, function or content) (see Kinnear 1994). And again with the beginning of radio broadcasting in eastern India during the 1930s and 1940s. Prior to the establishment of a station in Odisha, broadcasters at All-India Radio in Kolkata broadcast a weekly Odia music program. This term continues to be used even now, albeit with a much broader purview, as evidenced, for example, by the website *Odiamusic.com* (formerly *Oriyamus.com*).

Additionally, Hindustani and Karnatak music were becoming well-known in the region, practiced both in the courts and in newly formed performing arts schools. By the 1940s these schools would be teaching Odissi music as well. And then there was Indian Independence in 1947 with Odisha being integrated as never before into a national culture and national economy, in which it had to compete for recognition and economic benefits with its more prestigious neighbors. Local, Odia-language songs, finding regional popularity through new media, and being taught in institutions alongside “national” Hindustani and Karnatak music, needed their own terminological shelter.

So why then “Odissi”?

For one thing, there may have been problems with the word “Odia.” Dinanath Pathy suggests that the term “Odia” may have had “ethnic” connotations that revivalists wanted to avoid—he notes that in southern Odisha it is a caste name (2007: 24). It also may have been feared that the term might potentially deter non-Odias or Odia-speakers from appreciating the forms.

“Odissi,” on the other hand, had many advantages. Literally it means “of or relating to

Odisha,”⁶ and Odissi music and dance as newly conceived were to be *the* music and dance of *Odisha*. They were to represent, that is, the entire state, and as such cultural revivalists were also concerned that they be perceived as “classical.” On this count, in the case of music, the term “Odissi” seems to have allowed the tradition it referred to to be readily positioned in relation to the by then dominant “classical” styles: Hindusthani and (as it is called in Odia) Karnataki music. The title of a book by Kalicharan Patnaik published in 1964 makes this clear: *Saptaswarī: Oḍiśī, Hindusthānī o Karṇṇāṭakī Saṅgītara Saṅkṣipta Tathya Sambād* (Saptaswari [Seven Pitches]: Concise, Accurate Information about Odissi, Hindusthani, and Karnataki Music). Naming the practice in this way gave people like Kalicharan Patnaik a point of leverage from which they could attempt to pry open a national space for their local traditions. This conceit allows him, for example, to claim that Hindustani and Karnatak music, rather than being “national musics,” as they had come to be thought of, were in fact merely regional musics. Thus, in his view, Karnataki is the music of South India, Hindusthani the music of West India, and Odissi the music of East India (K. C. Patnaik 1997: 89).

There are, however, still other contenders for naming the tradition popularly represented by “Odissi music.” In a 1964(?) book Syamsundar Samanta Dhir suggested “Utkala saṅgīta” (“Utkal music”) “to accentuate Orissi music’s ancient origin” (I. Sahoo 2009: 133). Since the 1950s a similar term, “Utkaliya Sangeeta,” has been used in the publications of the Kala Vikash Kendra (along with “Odissi/Orissi music”).⁷ And since the 1970s Damodar Hota has argued for “Oḍra paddhatiya saṅgīta” (“the Odra method of music”). Like Odisha itself, Utkal and Odra are names of kingdoms that once existed in the area. Utkal has the advantage of supposedly meaning “excellent in the arts” (utkr̥ṣṭa + kalā) (I. Sahoo 2009: 41), and in fact a

6 Why it came to be commonly spelled in English as “Odissi” is probably a fluke. “Orissi” would have been the obvious spelling at the time—and was in fact used by many musicians, dancers, and scholars—as the state was officially spelled “Orissa.” A more correct transliteration into basic Roman characters from the Odia would be “Odisi” or “Odishi.” Why the peculiarly mixed spelling “Odissi”?

7 This term often appears in the “annual report” section of their journals and souvenirs.

number of performing arts schools bear that name (e.g., Utkal Sangeet Samaj, Utkal Sangeet Mahavidyalaya)—as does Odisha’s largest university (Utkal University). It was, perhaps surprisingly, not until 1986 that a major institution came to bear the name Odissi (i.e., the Odissi Research Centre).

Nevertheless, as I mentioned before, the terms “Oḍiśī saṅgīta” and “Oḍiśī n āṭa” were already in use in at least some parts of the state by the time the revivalists began their work in earnest. Perhaps this fact, along with the obvious connection to the official name of the state, enhanced their allure; in the afterglow of Independence, “Odissi” sounded both old and new. Yet within a few years of the revival projects, Odissi dance, much more so than music, began to attract a great deal of attention from outside the state, and this firmly fixed the name, of both the dance and the music—“Odissi” became a brand of a sort.

There was also a general split among revivalists between those who favored temple practices and those who favored the practices that took place outside the temples or in the courts. The term “Odissi,” I have suggested, in the early 20th century favored the latter, and it is probably no accident that Kalicharan Patnaik, who had worked during this time both in the courts and with goṭipua troupes, favored it. Others, however, have tried—and continue to try—to ground Odissi music and dance more firmly on temple traditions. Although some observers have argued that actual temple-based performance practices had less affect on the constitution of the new Odissi dance than they might have, the *idea* of sacredness, of the Hindu-ness of the tradition, was nevertheless so important to many Odissi supporters that by 1960 Charles Fabri, a notable Western observer of Odissi dance, believed that “Odissi was never performed publicly, as a piece of entertainment outside the temple: it always was confined to the precincts of the gods, and formed part of sacred ritual” ([1960] 1985). Thus what was 1931’s mähārī performance had, by 1960, become the proper ancestor of Odissi dance, and 1931’s Odissi dance had become demarcated as goṭipua performance. Despite these rather drastic

transformations, insofar as the modern sense of “Odissi” meant performance outside the temples—e.g., on a concert stage—there was a strand of continuity.

Looked at historically, we can view both Odissi music and dance as representing not unified traditions with distinct origins, but as indexing sets of practices that—even as they are reproduced—are continually contested, negotiated, and transformed over time. The name “Odissi” helps unify and contain the varied elements of this discontinuous and ever-shifting history (the motivation for which comes from socio-political circumstances). But tracing the history of this name we find struggles to differentiate, to identify, even to remember: “From time immemorial we have called this aesthetic dance and music as Odissi,” wrote Kalicharan Patnaik ([1960] 1985)—this as a new nation was closing in around the region he had known.

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