Who Frames the Dance?

Writing and performing the Trinity of Odissi

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A dance form can be seen to exist at multiple levels, beyond the stage and the studio. It exists through different realities, some which are conceived and some, which are concealed. This paper attempts to look into Odissi dance (a classical dance form from the eastern Indian state of Orissa), and the many influences which influenced its (re)construction and its evolution. Two distinct realities of its revival have surfaced. Firstly, the history of dance as it existed or as historicised by the revivalists and secondly the revivalists themselves, including the Gurus, the intelligentsia and the dancers who shaped the present structure. This paper aims to look into the dance form and performance space thus created and proliferated by the policy makers, the teachers, the performers and the patrons of classical dance in India.

The researcher's experience of learning Odissi provides a primary source of information about the form, its practice and teaching. Training in the dance form, furthermore, offers a space where one accepts and imbibes the teachings of the Guru, yet is often left wondering about many other issues:the method of devising a technique, the emergence of different styles with the same technique at its base, differences between the styles, the causes which propelled Gurus to branch out with their own style, the way the dance form is perceived by other students, and the relevance of a 'classical' dance in the modern urban life-style.

Given the researcher's position as an Odissi dance practitioner, the objective at the onset of the research work was to find out how the dancers and the dance teachers responded to the current pedagogy in classical dance, the construction of dance, perception and perusal, levels of understanding of the body and the objectives of learning 'classical' dance. It was observed that 'thinking' about the dance is not usually a part of the teaching process, but to be a silent learner is expected and encouraged, knowingly or unknowingly on the part of the teacher, as this is the very pattern in which he or she learnt the form.

Realities conceived

Odissi was recognised as a 'classical' dance in the 1950s. References were drawn from ancient texts, traditional dance practices and temple sculptures. It was traced to be inherent to the *Odra Magadhi* style, mentioned in the Natyasastra[1], and seen as a direct descendant of *Odra-Nrutya*, as suggested by poet, playwright and musicologist, Kalicharan Patnaik in 1955, signalling a clear *regional and cultural specificity: 'Odissi becomes the dance form that emerges from the state of Orissa'* (author's emphasis) (Chatterjee, 2004, p.145).

Gurus were the founders and the guardians of the form. They comprised locally-bred theatre practitioners, Gotipua[2] trained dancers, percussionists or descendants of *Maharis* (temple dancers) who became the authors, the legitimisers and the authoritarians of Odissi. A majority of them did not inherit the dance profession from their families[3]. Along with the elite and intelligentsia of the cultural wing of the government of India, the Gurus brought Odissi to the forefront and claimed its position as one of the frontrunners of India's most 'classical' cultural symbols. The likes of Mayadhar Mansingh, Jiwan Pani, Charles Fabri, Kavichandra Kalicharan Pattnaik, and Dhirendranath Pattnaik shaped Odissi dance and historicised the form by writing about it. Beginning with mythologising its birth and then tracing a linear continuity in its development from ancient periods to the medieval, in order to provide a stamp of validation to its origin, there followed a short downturn in the form's development from which the form was 'rescued', by the Gurus. It was a three-fold process where involvement of the Gurus, escalating the interest of the upper/middle classes, the essential textual authority, the *sastra*, certified by the intelligentsia, along with the support of the state, helped Odissi to gain a 'classical' status. However, 'the aim was not concerned with the past as much as to serve the present. It was not the revival of the past, which held importance, but to selectively appropriate it and to use it for pragmatic reasons' (Panikkar, 2007, p. 124).

Realities concealed

The only claim to this dance's authenticity was in it being a direct descendant of ancient ritual practices and treatises. During the process of reconstruction, the revivalists tended to overlook the multiple traditions of the region. The form at its very initial stages had become bound by certain codes of 'privileged' practices and principles, which became the defining guidelines for its construction at each subsequent stage. The excluded practices were denigrated to the 'imposed' categories of folk and tribal. The revivalists deliberately left out the dance forms, which were labelled folk, so as to avoid weakening their claim of Odissi being a 'classical' form. The Gurus justified the revived form by claiming adherence to the demands of the proscenium stage, where the form had to take a more attractive and aesthetically appealing guise. Validation from the state provided the final stamp, which confirmed the 'classical' status of Odissi.

Historicisation of the form was an integral part of its establishment as a 'classical' dance. The shaping of the form to a large extent depended on its

initial writings, which began in the 1950s, and proliferated further, leading to its acceptance. The emergence of these, along with other cultural writings on India, both by Indian and western scholars, was significant and a standard code was followed. Early writings mythologise the origination of dance. Scholarly, critical and personal accounts by dance enthusiasts were written and published extensively, from the 1950s to the 1960s. Fabri (1960) Khokar (1958), Pani (1972) were among the first few to acknowledge Odissi as a classical art. Regional, and later, national publications came out with substantial writings about Odissi, along with articles on the folk performances, bhakti literature, temple sculptures, music and theatrical arts of Orissa. Reviews as well as personal and critical writings on the dance form, in local journals were also published extensively.

The Indian government as a part of its policy to preserve and promote such practices through its art institutions such as *Sangeet Natak Akademi*, Indian Council for Cultural Relations and the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, have generated writings to achieve the objective of propagating dance as the face of the nation. State publications and official writings on Indian dances, both by the tourist division and the cultural department, with the most recent ones published under the title of *Incredible India,* have assisted in glorifying the dances by classifying them as museum pieces.

It throws light upon how a dance form is channelled in a particular way, determines the course of its writings, where the mainstream writings on Odissi still follow the set pattern of heavy visual documentation and introductory information about its mythic origin, history, architecture, repertoire and dancers, ignoring the social and political aspects of the reconstruction process and evolution of Odissi. These writings, broadly constituting introductory, informative or biographical writings on dancers and historical writings on dance, provide a peek into the process of the formalisation of a 'classical' dance structure, its propagation and glorification as a window, through which a specific section of the society, may view their past.

Reconstruction

Oriya terms for foot positions, hand gestures, walks and other movements were replaced by Sanskrit nomenclature. The structure was 'cleansed' and 'refined' so as to adapt to the bodies of new dancers and appeal to the tastes of new urban audiences. Keeping its typical feature of 'femininity' intermingled with 'divinity', which is idealised in the classical form of Bharata Natyam, Odissi formalised its costume, accessories and structured its repertoire. The form, as moulded, was specific to its regional orientation, catering to the nationalist ideologies.

The practice of the dance form was instituted on the guidelines and principles as structured by the *Guru*. Initially, most of the Gurus were male. Every guru formed his own set of codes and structured the grammar as per his individual interest and aesthetic sense, making Odissi grammar highly varied and dispersed. It also lent a certain arbitrariness to the process, post *jayantika*[4], where the Gurus differentiated on their ideas regarding Odissi, and went on to

structure the course and the codes of teaching and of the form as per their specific individual objectives.

A grammar was established which was regional in appearance, yet claimed to be Sanskritic in character. Gurus were borrowing *bols* (mono syllables recited with the dance in tandem with its rhythm) from one source, lyrics from a second and movement grammar from a third, which gave a formidable arbitrariness to the structure of Odissi, imbuing it with a 'free-style' dance grammar. Keeping this in mind, only selective regional forms were used to shape Odissi, in its revived classical form.

Tribhangi[5] and *chauka*[6] became the two fundamental positions of Odissi, derived from regional sources and yet highly distinct from Bharata Natyam's *araimandi*[7]. Odissi revivalists undoubtedly followed the blueprint of 'classicism' built by Bharata Natyam designers, yet desisted falling into the trap of completely aping its structural vocabulary.

Emerging Odissi body

The notions of the 'proper' feminine body outlined boundaries for the 'ideal' dancer, as against the 'improper' one. A performative body can thus best be understood as an embodiment of recognised, accepted and learnt feminine ideals. It is in this light that one needs to understand the developing Odissi body. In Hindu imagery, where the feminine also finds a powerful, avenging, destructive and sexually potent depiction in the form of Goddess *Kali*, *Durga* or *Chamunda*, Odissi developed on a more docile, submissive, loving, nurturing and motherly aspect.

The ideal imagery of woman was consolidated from two main sources – the image of a respectable woman of the family (specifically a middle and upper class portrayal of a Hindu family woman) and the ideal, Indian feminine image portrayed on the temple walls. These became the main source for the Odissi body. The objective was to homogenise the cultural practices, to obtain a uniform national culture, keeping the regional variants intact, minus their profanities to serve the emerging modernity in the nation without transgressing its ethics, morals and values.

The revivalists, largely a male-dominated group, structured the dance form, appropriating it to their idea of femininity and Indian classical culture. They were guided by the nationalist idea of the 'new woman', which was constructed as a contrast to the modern woman of the west and distinct from that of the lower caste, 'indigenous', 'outspoken' woman.

The dancers

New students, primarily young urban women, flocked from all over the country to the Gurus. These women had already attained or inherited a position of repute and recognition in the cultural arena of the society. They were either already performing other dance styles or belonged to affluent families with political affiliations. The local aspirants who showed great zeal and enthusiasm for dance, on the other hand, were sent specifically to acquire

training in Bharata Natyam or Kathak, later applying a similar mechanism to structure Odissi dance, which was still at a nascent stage. They then assisted the Gurus in constructing the dance. Guru Mayadhar Raut[8] and Sanjukta Panigrahi[9] were both trained at Kalakshetra, the primary institute that codified Bharata Natyam as seen in its present repertoire.

The middle class woman was educated morally to associate with and support the nationalist idea of the 'new woman', which designated the inner, sacred, spiritual world as a female domain, whereas all that was material, outer and profane became the area of the male. The nationalist idea aimed at combining and realising both the areas effectively, 'with cultivation of material techniques of modern western civilization while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of national culture' (Chatterjee, 2006, p. 238). The home-bound woman became the representative of all that was ritual, spiritual and religious, relegating her to the codes of traditional patriarchy but with a new role-play in solidarity with the nation's striving for a status of 'high culture'. The female dancer, who primarily belonged to the urban/middle class, with a quest of 'self-realisation' agreed to inculcate and represent these same morals through her body.

Also, the inner, spiritual world was considered to be a sanctified area, but the boundaries of inner and the outer worlds became flexible only to that extent which would not threaten a woman's? femininity. The process worked on the principle of making modernity consistent with the nationalist project. Idealised by the dancer's body, which enunciated all that was religious and spiritual, yet performed in the new secular space of the proscenium theatre, Odissi represented the ideologies of the new nation state. The dancer was situated in the role of mother or goddess on the stage, which served to erase her sexual self in the world outside the home. The spiritual quality exercised by women was realised as a mark of a civilised nation. The theme of the dances concentrated on *bhakti* (devotion) or a 'cleansed' form of *shringar* (love), as espoused by the practices of the upper caste-educated Indians. They cleansed all that was profane, lowly and unacceptable in the *devadasi* (female servant of the deity/ temple dancers) or folk practices of their region. Becoming 'westernised' meant losing your spiritual values. Driven by the market flows and accepted norms of imagery of women on stage, the dancers, too, submitted to the prevalent sexual prejudice displayed in the dance and enhanced the conventional imagery of women, which had been earlier set by already recognised classical dance forms. Although, it was the male gurus who dictated the terms of the learning process and constructed the dance practice, the students who came from educated urban backgrounds willingly submitted to the norms; dance providing them with a window to culture and Indian values. It established each of them as the 'new woman' of the emerging independent nation, entrenched in the traditional system of religion and family with a modern outlook garnered from their education and exposure to multicultural avenues, and built them into the cultural ambassadors of the state.

Unlike *devadasis*, the new dancing women were not 'spiritual consorts' of Gods. They were the dancers of modern India, who articulated an equally

professional outlook in terms of artistic excellence as much as their overtly stated, ritualised, spiritual self.

As Foster describes, 'training not only constructs a body but also helps to fashion an expressive self that in its relation with the body, performs the dance' (Foster, 2003, p. 241). It was just the dance form and its presentation, which depicted the traditional, whereas the social body of the dancer was completely situated in the modern lifestyle, which required an absolutely professional attitude towards one's chosen career and the stipulated power plays necessary in garnering a much-desired economic and social leverage. This was made achievable through one's class, political affiliations and manoeuvrability in international circuits. Observing the list of pioneering divas of Odissi dance who had already attained or inherited a position of repute and recognition, it is clear that their familial background and influential status played a significant role in determining their position as stalwarts of Odissi and simultaneously created an identity and recognition for the dance form itself.

Dancing divas: the cultural ambassadors

The young dancers were not just performing but also holding demonstrations and teaching Odissi outside Orissa and on the international stage. With support from the State, they were promoted and recognised as icons of the emerging nation, living in modern times, yet embedded in traditional practices and Indian value systems, complying with and perpetuating the Nehruvian idea of a modern India.

It was these women who completely took over global stages, barring a few male dancers like Uday Shankar, Ram Gopal and Guru Gopinath. For this reason it tended to befemale dancers who became the cultural representatives of the nation, rather than the male gurus. It was through their recognition that a new dance form was hailed and became significantly valued by local and international audiences.

However, the female dancers were hardly ever identified as having contributed equally to the creation of the dance form, even after attaining a position of repute. The gurus formulated the rules and codes and the dancers became the prima donnas. The young women dancers became mere carriers of an 'ancient legacy', and were not even recognised as 'Gurus'. It is very rarely that a female Odissi dancer/teacher would use 'Guru' as a prefix to her name, even after devoting a substantial part of her life to dance, whereas the male dancers started applying 'Guru' as a prefix much earlier in their career-span when granted the title by their respective Gurus.

Tradition and transition

Tradition is understood as being what the gurus taught, defined by the rules of authentic and inauthentic. Gurus retained their claim of being the 'founder-guardians' of the dance form, presiding on the structuring of the Odissi body, its grammar, the influences, the sources, the history, the course, the experiments and innovations and the future gurus. After being recognised as saviours of a dying art form, Gurus were awarded several accolades for their

work by the state and central governing bodies, following which they focused their efforts on building their own autonomous institutes. They then became dancer-choreographer-managers for these institutes, employing their children or senior disciples as teachers. Odissi became a form propounded and propagated by male Gurus, denying any kind of acknowledgement; to the *devadasis* for being inheritors and preservers of the form, nor did they give due to urban woman practitioners. Taking the reigns themselves by binding the teaching process to the strictures they devised, while avoiding any outsider or state claim of authority over the form, they made it more code-ridden and strictly bound, even commanding a certain kind of authority over the institutes that were affiliated to the state.

The gurus failed to appreciate the process of growth and change, aiming to maintain their status quo. They pushed the dance form towards a being a mere museum piece and failed to appreciate their own creative journey, by not facilitating the same for their students.

Odissi: post 1990s

Following the East-West Dance Encounter[10] in 1984 and again in 1991, the dancers began to question their position within the form. A majority of dancers strongly felt a need to look back at the roots, the rules and the boundaries as interpreted and transmitted by the gurus.

Odissi is supposed to have reached its 'mid-life crisis' post 1990s (Shani, 1995). On one hand, gurus were organising seminars to stress the need for remaining with the 'authentic' and not to give in to the commercialisation and glamorisation of art. On the other hand, where most gave in to the dictates of the gurus, a few, like Sonal Mansingh defended the innovations. Sanjukta Panigrahi's experimental work at Odin[11] could have marked an intervention in the trajectory of Odissi, leading to more of these experimental works within the domestic sphere. But such productions, or even their later performances, were not much espoused in the domestic sphere. Sanjukta used Odissi as her technical base but digressed to explore it in different contexts – work demonstrations at ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology, Holstebro, Denmark), for theoretical research, working through the Odissi body in the absence of a narrative, working and evolving physical ideograms and elemental compositions through improvisations, engaging with the form at the level of minimal textual support and collaborating with other bodies trained in diverse techniques and not acquainted with the Odissi grammar. Her body was placed in such experimental sites, which no other Odissi body had ventured into, till then. However, Gurus and conservatives stressed the need for conforming to the temple form of dance, seemingly to maintain their status-quo (Satapathy, 1993).

Regional and traditional dance practices to re-search Odissi began with those very regional elements, which were excluded by the gurus in their 'retrieval' of the form, in order to give it a classical mould. With the onset of the new millennium, the need for inculcating new elements, with the due approval from the gurus, was accelerated, such that even a central government body responded to it. Central *Sangeet Natak Akademi* organised a symposium and

workshop titled 'Performing Art traditions of Orissa in reference to Odissi Dance'.[12] The symposium reflected the need to inculcate new elements into the form and to gain a stamp of validation from the gurus for such explorations. It was not simply aimed at introducing the younger generation to the roots of Odissi; rather it aimed at seeking the gurus' approval and views on what was acceptable in the innovations being made by first generation dancers in Odissi. This became the defining course, which posed a challenge to the gurus' authority.[13] Gurus however felt that such conscious efforts to 'evolve' the form were not necessary, thereby making the incongruity within the in-built structure of Odissi more visible.[14] Constant discussions between the notions of 'classical', *sastra* (canonical text) and *auchitya* (proper) in a dance form arose as the core areas of conflict between the practitioners. The elements from living traditions, that were sidelined earlier, which could or should be included in Odissi became a matter of contention with frequent arguments on what one had seen of the living traditions and the appropriate way of adopting them in Odissi. Seminar spaces were rather created and used for self-promotion, reaffirmation of codes (of one style as against the others) and negotiation of boundaries by the senior practitioners.

Questioning the 'tradition'

As a result, the established repertoire soon became exhaustive as there was hardly any leeway provided to explore for further growth of the dance. The ambiguities in the structure of the dance form came to the fore when few of the first generation dancers tried to explore beyond the learnt 'dance- items'. They ventured into moulding space and music through dance, tried to inculcate other forms and languages in their group and solo compositions, varied the themes from mythological to historical to contemporary and social. These experiments often proved futile with no landmark expansion of the technique and grammar of Odissi. The absence of any kind of 'choreographic' training in the Odissi technique can be seen as the core reason.

The people who had the advantage of being the first few to introduce Odissi on stage became the pioneers, while others who learnt at the same time or a little later, by virtue of coming to the proscenium at a time when Odissi no longer was a new dance, were actually re-performing, and not setting any new trend. They strictly adhered to the guru's teachings and consequently their choreographic ventures were limited to the format established by the gurus and were accepted in the market.

Therefore a process which needs to be allowed to be taught and practised for furtherance of the dance form should necessarily constitute the following: imbibing the language, engraining the form into the body and mind, and engaging with the form at an individual level; claiming the 'ownership' of the tradition; and realising the boundaries to be too inane, crossing these very boundaries to create an individualistic style perfected by one's own vision of dance.

The process of teaching, as continued till today, further restrains the student from accepting any kind of change, relying totally and absolutely on the guru, and ultimately conforming to the image of an 'ideal' student as defined and

taught by the guru. With the later generation of Odissi dancers, the second generation dancers who were directly trained under the pioneering dancers, issues regarding the freedom to explore beyond the marked territories become important, as they traversed through physical territories of regions and boundaries of performance genres and performance histories. They questioned if at all these boundaries could be negotiated and is the existence of negotiable boundaries even recognised. They tended to question the tradition, if it is a 'given' text, merely meant to be read, reviewed and edited or rather a language, a tool to write one's own text.

It is observed that there is an ever-growing lacuna between the dance form and the dancing body; the relationship between the two is rather determined by the relation that *shishya* shares with his/her Guru and not the way in which one would perceive the dance form individually, as an extension of the body itself, not undermining the Guru's contribution in the growth of the individual into a dancer. It can be fulfilled if the method of teaching inculcates in the students the feeling of 'owning' the technique, so as to feel comfortable in moulding it in any way and deriving their own language from it. The training process needs to involve imparting of more technique-based knowledge, as opposed to a mere emulation of the Guru's demonstrations. It can include the teaching of techniques, beyond the 'basic steps'; the logic and explanation behind every movement, the shifts in balance, the movement structure in isolation of the 'items', which would call for observing and analysing each movement in a 'deconstructed' form so as to render a knowledge of dance as a 'tool', along with the imparting of knowledge as prescribed by the canons. Even though the Gurus might accept the fact that they don't want to build their own clones, the teaching methodology towards Odissi, and other classical dances in India, is yet to evolve a method, which would accommodate technique-based and creativity-enhancing structures.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express immense gratitude to my guide, Dr. Urmimala Sarkar, for her consistent supervision, which helped in this research work. I extend my sincere appreciation to all the teachers, dancers and students of Odissi, for their support, coordination and time. I would also like to thank Central *Sangeet Natak Akademi* for its cooperation.

Notes

[1] An ancient treatise primarily on theatre (*natya*), also dealing with dance and music, claimed to be written by a sage called Bharata Muni between 2BC and 2AD.
[2] *Gotipua* was a local dance tradition of Orissa, which came into being in the 16th c., performed by young boys, dressed in female garb, in more secular public spaces, as opposed to the temple space where the *devadasis* used to perform.
[3] They did not belong to the families who followed dance as a traditional practice.
[4] *Jayantika* was formed in 1957, as a forum to consolidate Odissi, but dissolved in 1960 due to differences amongst the Gurus.
[5] As the name suggests, it means three bends at the neck, the waist and the knee, in opposing directions, i.e. if the chin is tilted towards left, the waist bend towards right and knee towards the left side. One hand is positioned on the thigh and the other one on the waist.

[6] *Chauka* literally means a square, a symmetrical position, renders balance to the body, where the ankles are placed a foot apart, knees are bent outwards, and arms are drawn out, bent at right angle at the elbow, parallel to each other, palms facing downwards. Face, neck and the body remain straight.
[7] Basic position of Bharata Natyam, with heels joined together, toes apart, knees slightly bent and facing outwards.
[8] Guru Mayadhar Raut was one of the Gurus who played a crucial role in the formation of Odissi. At *Kalakshetra* he studied ancient dance texts, and specialized in the study of *mudras,* which later helped in designing and restructuring of Odissi.
[9] Sanjukta Panigrahi hailed from an orthodox Brahmin Oriya family. She was trained under Guru Keluchran Mahapatra, joined *Kalakshetra* at the age of eight years and thereafter learnt Kathak, for some duration under Guru Hazarilal (placed in Bombay) on a scholarship provided by the Government of Orissa. She was giving Bharata Natyam performances while continuing with her training in Odissi, until she became totally involved with the growth and popularization of Odissi, under the guidance of Dr. Charles Fabri.
[10] The first 'East-West Dance Encounter' a discussion and performance forum between dancers, trained in India and abroad, in both Indian classical dances and western dance forms, respectively, was organized in 1984, in collaboration with Max Mueller Bhavan, Indian Council for Cultural Relations and *Sangeet Natak Akademi* in Mumbai followed by the next one in Delhi in 1991, which brought to light the experimental works of likes of Chandralekha, Uttara Asha Coorlawala, and others. The 'encounter' provided a platform to think and act beyond the accepted norm. Consequently, the traditionalists disparaged it, whereas there were others who felt an urge to re- view the dance forms and question it, even if submissively, they tried to expand it beyond what Gurus had prescribed.
[11] Sanjukta Panigrahi's venture at Odin Teatret began in 1980. Over the time, she collaborated with Eugenio Barba and other artists on various projects. With an objective of understanding his own tradition, by placing it in confrontation with that of the others', Barba placed together, artists with different cultural backgrounds with the purpose of carrying out a transcultural analysis of performance. At Odin, Sanjukta played the role of a primary dancer from Asia for more than a decade and even served as a member of its pedagogical committee. She collaborated with Barba and other artists from around the world for various projects, from 1980 to 1996 before her demise in 1997.
[12] 11-14 May 2003, Puri, Orissa.
[13] 'We, the traditionalists, protectionists get very much threatened by it. To maintain your identity, you need to have the right approach, to influence others you first need to be a master of it.' Kumkum Mohanty, stating the objectives of the symposium, in her inaugural speech. 'The enrichment of any art form depends on its ever new interpretations, hidden dimensions being discovered and new facets being illustrated. No art form develops overnight. It is through an ever-evolving process of osmosis, absorption, renewal and research that art form finds its intrinsic strength, character and flavour and it is ever challenging. That is only possible if we allow the form to challenge us to give and take to learn, to see the richness of living art traditions to enrich Odissi. To make it more representative of Orissa's complicated culture.' Sonal Mansingh in her inaugural speech. (Source: video of 'symposium and workshop on performing art Tradition of Orissa in reference to Odissi dance', Puri, 2003, *Sangeet Natak Akademi* Archive).
[14] Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra claimed that this symposium was a conscious effort to inculcate regional elements and present it in Odissi style, whereas he 'never took anything from the living traditions consciously. We must have taken something from them, spontaneously, but not as a conscious effort. I have done it in my own way and other Gurus have done it in their own (way)'. (Transcription from Hindi to English, by the author, source: video of 'symposium and workshop on performing art tradition of Orissa in reference to Odissi dance', Puri, 2003, *Sangeet Natak Akademi* Archive).

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Biographical statement

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