

Resurgence of Male Performers in Indian Dance: A Study of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra's Contribution

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Abstract: *In Indian classical dance, Lord Nataraja, the divine figure, holds great significance as he symbolizes the perpetual cycle of creation. Men now have more dancing options. Thanks to the rise of pro - art movements, the revival of Indian art forms, the global fascination with the exotic and the creation of dance troupes by foreigners who performed alongside Indian artists. In recent times, there has been a remarkable revival of male performers in Classical Indian dance styles within the cultural landscape of contemporary India. This article explores and highlights the critical milestones of dance maestros. In India, it has taken male individuals approximately a century to catch up to the achievements of their female counterparts. The conventional gender norms that once limited males have steadily faded in recent years providing room for a more inclusive and diverse environment. In performing arts, male artists frequently encounter distinctive challenges that can impede their advancement and accomplishments.*

Keywords: Indian classical dance, maestro, gender norms, challenges, accomplishments

1. Introduction

Complex cultural traditions characterize the history of gender roles in Indian classical dance. The iconography of Lord Siva holds a significant presence in the realm of contemporary Bharatnatyam performances, dating back to the 5th century, as the paramount figure in the domain of dance. While it became customary for women to constitute the dance form of Bharata Natyam, the male dancers performed Kuchipudi, Kathakali, Sattriyya, and Chhau. In recent years, the traditional gender stereotypes that once confined men to specific roles and expectations are gradually disappearing, creating a more inclusive and diverse landscape.

In the performing arts world, male artists often face unique challenges that hinder their progress and success. However, these individuals possess remarkable resilience and determination in overcoming obstacles and making significant contributions to art. Male performers have demonstrated exceptional abilities and enriched the artistic landscape by pushing beyond conventional boundaries. One of the primary goals of this paper is to raise awareness about the remarkable individuals who serve as a testament to the power of determination and resilience in the face of challenges to pursue their goals. From historical figures to contemporary heroes, their stories are a source of inspiration for us all. Let us delve deep into their journeys and discover the incredible feats they have achieved.

In a mesmerizing display of artistic rebellion, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra and his male dancers effortlessly embody the essence of this exquisite form. Their fluid moves, sensuous curves, sculptural poses and delicate gestures transcend the boundaries of tradition, leaving spectators in awe of their mastery.

Ratikant Mohapatra, the legendary scion of the Odissi lineage, beautifully tells his magical journey to demonstrate his prowess as a soloist during an interview with the Odisha Sun Times. He stated that the discriminating gaze of the audience is sensitively attuned to the enticing attraction of the feminine form and its exquisite aesthetics. He was referring to the fact that it takes a deliberate effort from the male dancers to metamorphose. The male dancers "must possess the utmost qualifications, exude intelligence, and radiate brilliance, " according to the role description. He asserted that the pursuit of this ageless art, in which gender is irrelevant, and one must submerge oneself in the divine essence, must gracefully embrace the lively tapestry of one's culture and intimately familiarise oneself with the melodic language to achieve success. The dancer explained that to begin Odissi's entrancing journey; one must first completely submerge oneself in the entrancing sounds of Odissi's classical music. The spoken and written language also permeates the mesmerizing movements that make up the dancing style and directs each step.

Moreover, as the ancient language of Sanskrit reveals its mysteries through the enthralling narratives of myths and epics, they, as a source, lead the dancer to enlightenment. In order to experience the majestic beauty of the Jagannath culture, one needs to lose oneself in the rich tapestry of Orissa's past, where myths and tales intertwine like beautiful dancers. To achieve true mastery of the art of dance, one must deftly submerge oneself in the rich tapestry of the local culture where they are performing.

During an interview on disseminating the canonized Odissi body, Mohapatra asserts that he introduced novel concepts and perspectives into his Odissi dance performance. He held himself in the position of a director to engage in many phenomena as he travelled around the globe. Regularly, he experimented with numerous thoughts arising in his consciousness to achieve successful and unsuccessful

outcomes. However, it is presentable when an outcome aligns with personal satisfaction. However, how it is ultimately presented differs. He stated that at each stage of an artist's development, they continue to further the artistic tradition. Every artist has the inherent right to engage in creative expression, albeit within the confines of fundamental technical parameters, by their respective cultural heritage.

Kelucharan, renowned Odissi dancer, captivated audiences with his solo performances. His talent was so extraordinary that American critics compared him to legendary figures such as Nijinsky and Chaplin. They praised his magnificent sinuous torso and arms and his inspired gestural acting. As he was affectionately called, Guruji had showcased his artistry in India and travelled extensively around the globe. He had the privilege of participating in prestigious festivals of India held in London, Russia, Germany, France, America, and Japan.

The Gotipua dance tradition of Orissa is a fascinating aspect of Indian culture. In this tradition, young boys dress up as girls and perform dances dedicated to the gods. The term *Gotipua* is derived from the Odia language, where *goti* means single and *pua* refers to a boy. The roots of this unique dance form can be traced back to the Devadasi dancers of ancient times. These female royal dancers, also known as Maharis, were the primary custodians of the Odissi dance style and performed it. In the state of Orissa, a unique tradition has emerged as a response to the decline of the Mahari dancers. In an effort to preserve this cultural practise, young boys have taken on the role of graceful girls. The Gotipua dance is known for its complexity and distinct differences from the Mahari dance in terms of costume and presentation. The influence of renowned Gotipua dancer Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra and other notable figures cannot be overlooked when considering the development of present - day Odissi dance. Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra began his journey as a Gotipua dancer during his childhood. As he grew older, he skilfully transformed this traditional dance form into the elegant and conservative Odissi style. In 1953, the renowned dancer embarked on a new journey as he commenced his teaching career in the captivating art form of Odissi. His passion for this ancient dance style led him to a prestigious conservatory in the vibrant city of Cuttack. With his expertise and dedication, he aimed to impart his knowledge and skills to aspiring dancers, nurturing their talents and preserving the rich cultural heritage of Odissi. Renowned for his exceptional mastery of technique and pantomimic expression, Mohapatra was driven to push the boundaries of the traditional repertoire of his chosen style. With a keen eye for innovation, he skilfully incorporated elements from ancient texts and sculptures into his choreography, breathing new life into the art form. Excavating the Mahari Dance form of ancient archaeological evidence, the captivating world of dance has always been a significant part of human culture, serving as a means of expression, storytelling, and celebration. Throughout history, various dance forms have emerged, each with its unique style and origins. One such dance form that has recently piqued the interest of researchers and enthusiasts alike is the Mahari dance.

In Indian classical dance, Kelucharan Mohapatra made a significant contribution by transforming a dance form, cleansing it of its sexual implications, and instead focusing on glorifying its rich historical roots. Mohapatra's efforts have had a lasting impact on the art form, elevating its cultural significance and preserving its traditional essence. The dance form in question, known as Odissi, originated in the eastern state of Odisha, India. Historically, Odissi was associated with the devadasi tradition, where women danced and carried it forward.

The Konark temple holds great significance as a testament to the pinnacle of dance and architecture during a specific period in history. However, it also marks a turning point when the influence of Islam and later colonialism profoundly impacted the culture and arts, leading to a decline in their prominence. The changing religious and political landscape of the state primarily drove this shift. The historical significance of Odissi dancers in temples and the impact of British rule on their performances have been subjects of great interest and debate. In the past, Odissi dancers were stigmatized and wrongly associated with prostitution. However, it is important to note that this perception was a result of societal misconceptions and prejudices rather than an accurate reflection of the dancers' profession. Odissi, a classical dance form originating from the state of Odisha Odissi dance, a classical Indian dance form was based on *Natya Shastra* and has had a tumultuous journey over the past two centuries. It faced numerous challenges and setbacks, particularly until the 1950s when India was reclaiming its national identity following its independence in 1947.

In the world of Odissi dance, the influence of colonialism and societal gender norms has played a significant role. One individual who made a notable impact in this regard is Kelucharan Mohapatra. He skilfully incorporated elements from the declining Mahari tradition and the Gotipua tradition, while also infusing his own unique style, to create what is now known as the "guru Kelucharan Mohapatra style" of contemporary Odissi. The Mahari tradition, which was once highly revered, had been subjected to strict colonial scrutiny. Additionally, societal gender norms imposed certain restrictions on the Mahari and Gotipua traditions. However, Kelucharan Mohapatra successfully navigated these challenges and revitalized the declining Mahari institution. Graceful movements and a mystic aura characterized Kelucharan Mohapatra's approach to Odissi. His deep understanding and unique approach resulted in a fusion that honoured tradition while pushing boundaries. Today, the "guru Kelucharan Mohapatra style" of Odissi is celebrated and practised by dancers around the world. It serves as an enduring legacy of Kelucharan's contributions to the evolution of Odissi dance. The present avatar of Odissi can be attributed to the relentless efforts of dancer-gurus like the late Kelucharan and Debaprasad Das.

Throughout history, there has been a prevailing tradition where male artists, including esteemed gurus, have been the ones to portray female roles in various art forms. This practice has allowed these artists to showcase their versatility and skill in capturing the intricacies of both tandava and laasya, two distinct dance styles. Kelucharan

Mohapatra discovered that dance provided a platform to express his identity and freely convey feminine emotions. Mohapatra's innovative approach involved transforming traditional dance forms to accommodate the diverse social and cultural contexts in which they were performed. By doing so, he aimed to capture the nuances and intricacies of different gender roles and their associated emotions. This adaptation allowed Mohapatra to delve deeper into his own artistic expression and connect with his feminine side through dance. In a world where societal norms often dictate how individuals should express themselves, dance became Mohapatra's sanctuary. It allowed him to explore and convey emotions traditionally associated with femininity. Through his movements, he could express vulnerability, grace, and sensitivity, breaking free from the constraints imposed by societal expectations.

Incomparable, in the world of dance, he would capture the grace and charm of various divine figures. Whether it was Lord Siva and Parvati or Radha and Krishna, his choreography reflected the beauty and intricacy of these ancient deities, reminiscent of sculptures found in sacred temples. A noted Sanskrit poet writes of Kelucharan: "Each fraction of his dancing body leads to paramount sweetness, through miraculous poses and postures. In fact, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra crossed an ocean of styles".

Kelucharan, a renowned artist, delved into various artistic forms inspired by archaeological sites. He skilfully blended textual sections of illustrations with contemporary practises of his era, resulting in the evolution of the Odissi dance form. This transformation brought a unique theatrical experience to audiences in the 20th century. In a surprising turn of events, Odissi, a traditional Indian dance form, has taken the global dance scene by storm.

Kelucharan, tracing the Roots of Odissi, an Ancient Art Form In classical Indian dance, Odissi holds a special place. This graceful and expressive art form originated in the temples of Puri, Konark, and Bhubaneswar, as well as the caves of Alatgiri, Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri, and other regions of India. Today, we delve into the fascinating journey of Kelucharan, an individual dedicated to exploring and preserving the dying tradition of Odissi. Odissi, with its intricate footwork, fluid movements, and emotive storytelling, has a rich history that dates back to ancient times. However, this traditional dance form has faced challenges and the risk of fading away over the years. Recognising the urgency to safeguard this cultural heritage, Kelucharan embarked on a mission to trace the roots of Odissi and shed light on its significance. Kelucharan's exploration begins in the sacred temples of Puri, Konark, and Bhubaneswar. These architectural marvels served as places of worship and as centres for artistic expression. The sculptures adorning these temples depict various dance poses, providing valuable insights into the early forms of Odissi. By closely studying these intricate carvings, Kelucharan unraveled the essence of the dance and its connection to religious rituals. Venturing further, Kelucharan turned in his artistic endeavours, the individual skilfully brought to life the graceful and captivating poses, postures and hand gestures depicted by the motionless figures carved in stone. He sought to convey the profound and symbolic

concepts rooted in mythology, religion, devotion, and metaphysics through his work. In a remarkable display of artistic innovation, he once again showcased the Mahari nritya, a dance form that has long been marginalized, to depict the mesmerizing Odissi dance. *Dancing to Eternity*, Kelucharan Mohapatra's discourse claims that in dance, there is no male type, it is the art of the artist that offers civilized entertainment to the growing middle and upper class.

In her book, "The Making of a Guru," Ileana Citaristi presents a thorough testimony of the evolution of Odissi dance through the life and work of the renowned doyen, Kelucharan Mohapatra. Despite the lack of written records, in 2000, New York Times dance critic and cultural reporter Anna Kisselgof wrote, *At 75, Guru Mohapatra...* leaves the fast footwork to others. Breaking every rule, "Kelu Babu was unique because he defied many popular notions about dancers.

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