

Weaving Odissi Feminine: A Malaysian Perspective

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In April 2011, Sutra, a Malaysian Odissi dance institution founded by Ramli Ibrahim, staged *Odissi Stirred* at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre. The newspapers reported that true to the art, the choreographers are inspired by the odissi tradition and reveal its rural and folk charm, incorporating elements of its originality while transcending into modernity generating moves which are mesmerising and captivating. The production included two twenty-minute compositions commissioned by Sutra called *Pallavan* choreographed by Madhavi Mudgal and another titled *Evocations*, choreographed by Sharmila Biswas. They were performed by Sutra dancers. Many were unaware that Malaysian audience had just been initiated to a paradigm shift, because this was the first time they had experienced odissi choreographed by women. Globally, it is now impossible to ignore women dance-makers who are expanding the frontiers and weaving new fabrics into the tapestry of odissi repertoire. Before this, the gurus and dance-makers of odissi tended to be male. Generally, male dancers learn odissi in order to become gurus; not many then could compete with the women, as dancers. The men seldom managed to come to the fore during the glamorous days of 'star' performers such as the late Indrani Rehman, Sanjukta Panigrahi, Sonal Mansingh and Yamini Krishnamurti. Performing the standard solo repertoire of odissi, these legendary dancers, then, were always the vehicles '*par excellence*' of lyrical odissi. Female dancers hardly ever ventured into the realm of dance-making in odissi, which was the territory of the men. Until now.

Triple Frontiers, Sutra Foundation's annual production miraculously premiered in 2020, in between Covid lockdowns, came into being after

a series of successful annual offerings such as *GANJAM*, *Amorous Delights*, and *Odissi on High* among many others. *Triple Frontiers* featured the odissi works of three women dance-makers from India: Sujata Mishra, Parwati Dutta, and Meera Das. All them can be considered the younger generation of female dancers who had made successful dance careers as dancers, then as teachers and eventually as directors of their own dance outfits.

Sutra as Sutradhar: The Missing Link

The importance of this development in the evolution of present day odissi can be fully appreciated when one understands the hierarchy of the *guru-shisya parampara* tradition (apprentice-learning through a definitive lineage) that was observed within the context of odissi, thus far. In the late 1970s, very few Malaysians were exposed to odissi. Those who were lucky enough, might have seen the spellbinding odissi performance of *Dasavatar* by Chandrabhanu when he first danced the powerful dance of the ten incarnations of Krishna. However, by mid-80's, it was through Sutra that the larger population of Malaysia became familiar with this exquisite Indian classical dance form originating from the Odisha-Kalinga region of East India as if the pre-colonial cultural link that existed for centuries with South East Asia, had been once again resurrected.

The odissi exposed by Sutra to Malaysia was mainly that of the late Guru Debaprasad Das.¹ The creative spectre of pioneering male teachers of odissi loomed large on the tapestry of odissi, such that few repertoires from their disciples would emerge and survive outside the shadow of their genius. Most of their disciples, in the capacity of novice

1 Das was one of the three pioneer giants during the re-construction of odissi. It is important to note that by the early eighties, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra was a popular odissi style. His odissi stamp had found extensive exposure, nationally and internationally, through his many disciples. Somehow, the works of the late Guru Pankaj Charan, the senior most of the three pioneer gurus, did not find as many following and remained a relatively rare phenomenon in odissi performances.

2 Durga Charan Ranbir, Gajendra Kumar Panda, Bichitrananda Swain and Ratikant Mahapatra are among the prominent 'next generation' male gurus who are not only grooming excellent dancers in their institutions but also choreographing new works and taking the creative mettle of charting the new paths of contemporary Odissi in the twenty-first century.

gurus and dance-makers, either did not want to, or were unable to, challenge the supremacy of their masters. In Odisha, experiments in odissi were usually met with vehement and heated resistance. Over time, institutions were established by both men and women, such as, Kala Vikash Kendra (date of establishment), Sangeet Mahavidyalaya (1965) and Odissi Research Centre (1984) where expertise, creativity, and talents were honed. When Cuttack and Bhubaneswar became saturated with odissi artistes, many senior disciples especially those who graduated from Kala Vikash Kendra (the earliest institution teaching odissi), ventured elsewhere to start their own schools. Ramani Ranjan Jena left for Chennai, Srinath Raut opened his school in New Delhi, while others went to Kolkata, Mumbai and other city-centres to chart their own dance odyssey. With the popularity of odissi world-wide, new dancer-gurus also began to travel internationally and made their teaching and creative presence felt. By the time the three pioneer gurus were no more, odissi has already consolidated a strong methodology of teaching. In the parallel domain of odissi music, essential to odissi, musicians who composed and performed odissi music started to be conscious of odissi music in the context of its acceptance as a unique Indian classical musical genre in its own right. Initially, the dance gurus were all mainly males whose focus was often on teaching. They might compose a few items for the annual dance productions of their institutions, but initially nothing outstanding or substantial emerged with regard to these new works. These performances concentrated mainly on highlighting 'classic' items of the three gurus as the mainstay features of 'authentic' odissi repertoire. No doubt, these are still the 'items' which odissi dancers endeavour to learn and dream of performing. The eighties were creatively dynamic time for the expansion of new repertoire thus establishing odissi as one of the most creatively driven of the Indian classical dance systems.²

Soon after the demise of Debaprasad Das (1986), Sutra's relationship with this *parampara* progressed into another phase. Post 1987, Sutra started to commission regularly new benchmark repertoires from the young Guru Gajendra Kumar Panda. These new commissioned works are focussed and independent collaborations where Sutra had a

strong voice in demanding a more resolute theme and direction. The works became sensational success in Malaysia and when performed in Odisha, they equally created lasting impact. In the meantime, Geetha Shankaran, a senior Sutra dancer who was first introduced to Odissi in the mid 80's at Sutra, began teaching odissi at the Temple of Fine Arts, Kuala Lumpur (TFA) in the early nineties. Naturally, she based her teaching on Sutra's repertoire of Debaprasad Das. This was prior to the present TFA as an institution that changed direction and adopted Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra teaching methodology, through his son, Ratikant Mahapatra. For the last five years, Ratikant Mahapatra has become the resident odissi guru of TFA.

Thus, consistent exposures of odissi dance and music were being established continuously in Malaysia through more than four decades of Sutra performances, media exposures and exhibitions of odissi. In the process, Sutra's distinctive and innovative group compositions have influenced how odissi is viewed in a large theatre and outdoor performing spaces. These have set the 'Sutra factor' apart from others as an odissi brand which is both unique and inimitable. Simultaneously, visiting Odissi dancers and gurus from India came in good numbers, increasing the awareness of the public to Odissi. New institutions teaching odissi began to appear mainly in Kuala Lumpur. Within the last four decades since odissi was first performed under Sutra, odissi in Malaysia grew in popularity and became a favourite dance performed frequently on stage both with local and overseas dancers. It also became a favourite with audiences, placing it on par with the more established Bharatanatyam. Bharatanatyam and odissi are now the two of the most frequently seen Indian classical dances in Malaysia.

In early nineties, Sujata Mishra, Parwati Dutta and Meera Das run their own successful dance institutions in India and have dedicated at least decades of their lives to odissi representing the *paramparas* of Debaprasad Das and Kelucharan Mahapatra. They each started their careers as exceptionally gifted dancers, absorbed the style of their mentors, and subsequently became teachers of odissi in their own right. Soon, they found that they were embarking on the less-charted territory

of choreography and eventually contributing their own colours and hues to the creative fabric of the odissi *parampara* that had cultivated them.

Sujata Misra hails from an established and culturally enlightened family. She was the chosen dancer of the late Debaprasad Das to perform his main work 'Asta Sambhu' featured at the landmark *Angahar Festival* (1985) in New Delhi, directed by Madhavi Mudgal. With the sudden demise of the late Debaprasad Das in 1986, Sujata established her school *Mokshya* in Bhubaneswar in the mid 1990s. Soon, she created works for her dancers, which reflected the strong influence of her guru. She has retained the minimalist approach, the earthiness in the use of *sabda*, rhythmic passages and vocabulary. The underlying tantric and Shaivite undertones of the late Debaprasad Das *parampara* are also apparent in her works.

Parwati Dutta, spent a substantial part of her creative time with the highly respected odissi dancer-choreographer, Madhavi Mudgal, before establishing her own sprawling institution *Mahagami Gurukul* in Aurangabad. She was fortunate to simultaneously have Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra as her guru when the latter often came to New Delhi to conduct workshops for Madhavi and other dancers. Later, Parwati, who also made her mark as a dance-scholar-researcher, was mentored by the distinguished scholar, the late Dr Kapila Vatsyayan. The latter exercised a profound influence on Parwati's creative approach, underscoring the research-based treatment of her creative forays. Parwati's deep knowledge of rhythm garnered as a seasoned Kathak dancer gave her the edge to explore the rhythmic frontiers that becomes a hallmark of her creations. Through her dedicated works Parwati Dutta is responsible for transforming the cultural landscape of Aurangabad with her festivals, outreach programmes and talks, which are aimed at connecting the performing arts with the general population of Aurangabad. Meera Das is no stranger to Sutra having collaborated with us on *Amorous Delights* in 2015, mentored by scholar the late Dinanath Pathy. Meera was the first graduate of Odisha Research Centre (ORC), which was the brainchild of both guru Kelucharan Mahapatra and the pioneer odissi dancer, Kum Kum Mohanty. Meera, endowed with natural musicality and a nightingale

singer-voice, flexibility of body, expressive facial expression and an outstanding aptitude for movement, not surprisingly is one of ORC's most outstanding graduates. She decided to strike out on her own and established her institution *Gunjan Dance Academy* in Cuttack where she teaches and simultaneously creates new works. Meera is fully occupied as a solo dancer, performing all over India and internationally while creating many new works for the various performances her institution is invited to perform.

Sujata, Parwati and Meera personally taught the senior Sutra dancers and thereafter contributed its inimitable mark in *Triple Frontiers* through the group compositions based on the works by these three women choreographers. Having learnt the repertoire as a solo form, the works then faced another round of transformation as they were interpreted as group compositions (with permission of the three dance-makers). As many as eighteen dancers comprising of company artists as well as young dancers from Sutra's Outreach Programme performed on stage. The result is an India-Malaysia collaboration of the highest order which simultaneously celebrated the talents of the Sutra dancers and the works of these outstanding new generation women dance-makers of odissi.