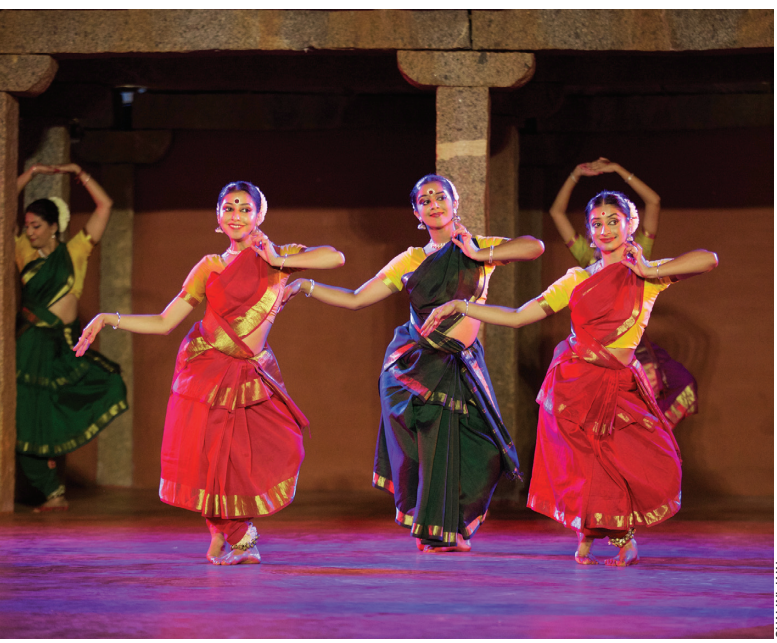
Odissi

A reconstructed classical dance of India

By Karen Greenspan

Devastated by Cyclone Fani this May, India's eastern coastal state of Odisha, also called Orissa, is a land of temples, devotion, and dance. The poetry sculpted onto temple stones and performed by living Odissi dancers forms a confluence of grace, sensuality, and joy. The most famous of the Orissan holy sites are clustered together around the Mahanadi River Delta along the coast of the Bay of Bengal.



SHALINI JAIN

Nrityagram students perform Guru Mohapatra's choreography Battu—*a presentation of Odissi's sculptural poses.*

This region veritably throbs with the rhythms and religious practices of its people.

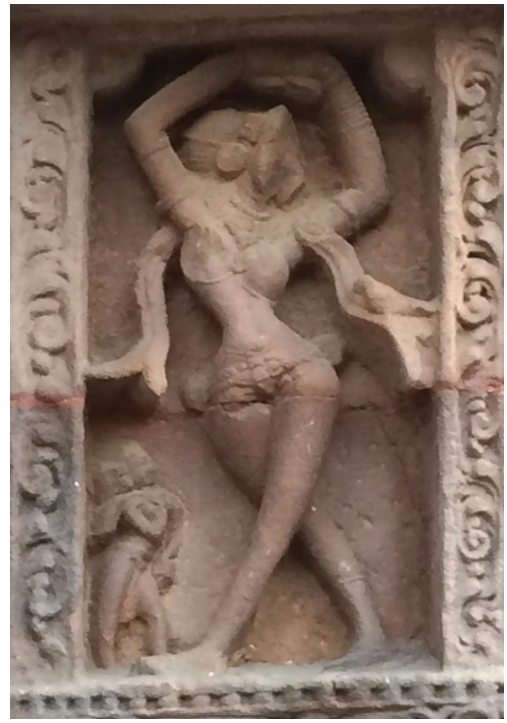
Animated sculptures of deities, dancers, and musicians on the walls of caves and temples dating back to the first century BCE document how dance and music functioned as a form of worship. Over the centuries, Indian temple dancing declined due to the destruction of many temples during Muslim invasions and later, during British colonial rule, from Western attitudes stigmatizing dancers and the notion of dance as part of religious practice. The stone friezes served as a reference source for the dance gurus during the early post-colonial years as they labored to reconstruct and codify the Odissi dance form of Odisha. Their efforts resulted in the reconstitution of a dance style and repertoire distinct to the region and its recognition by the Indian government in the 1950s as one of the country's classical dance forms. To be considered "classical" in India, a dance form must adhere to the tenets laid out in the *Natya Shastra*, the ancient Sanskrit Hindu treatise on the theory and practice of dance, drama, and music. This text is also referred to as the *Natya Veda* or Fifth Veda, indicating the sacred nature of its content.

Sounds accost you as you merge onto Bada Danda, the wide boulevard that runs through the seaside town of Puri. Honking horns dominate the soundscape as cars, mopeds, buses, minivans, tuk tuks, and bicycles vie for space with cows, goats, and pedestrians. Somehow, they all squeeze in and accommodate each other as they head toward the towering Jagannath Temple. The twenty-foot-high walled complex of shrines and courtyards, built in the twelfth century by King Anantavarman, is the center of worship of Jagannath (Lord of the Universe), an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu.

The temple is ringed by vendors selling trinkets, souvenirs, fruits, vegetables, colored powders (for rituals and blessings), and offerings. Among the throngs of visitors, the uninitiated don't know that the appropriate offerings, called *mahaprasad*, are sold within the walls of the temple complex. They include food, flowers, coconut water, or milk and are offered to the gods by the temple priests. They are then given back to the pilgrims as a form of communion.

Once inside the temple complex, pilgrims are blessed by resident priests—6,000 are on hand for daily rituals. Priests rub the forehead of pilgrims with a dot of colored powder, with the color choice dependent on the god or goddess being invoked. Pilgrims then circle the complex, making obeisance to the deities in each or some of the

COURTESY OF SRJAN ARCHIVES



KAREN GREENSPAN

Left: Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra in Alasa *pose*
Above: Dancing figure in Alasa*—Posture of Repose at Brahmeswar Temple in the town of Bhubaneshwar*

various temples. Non-Hindus are not permitted entrance.

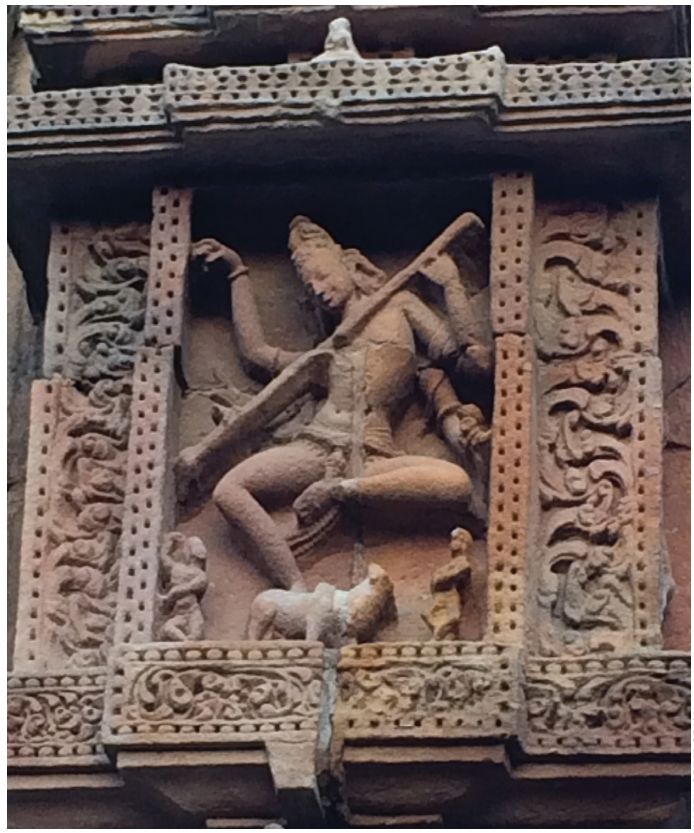
Images of Lord Jagannath (Vishnu), together with his brother Balarama (Shiva), and their sister Subhadra (Shakti—goddess of female creative energy) are a ubiquitous presence in the town, the region, and on the stage of Odissi dance presentations. At the start of every performance, the deities are supplicated and saluted with offerings through a dance of invocation, during which a handful of flower blossoms are scattered at their feet.

The origins of Odissi dance are found in the rituals of the Jagannath Temple cult. King Anantavarman Chodagangadeva (1077-1147) of the Ganga dynasty became attracted to the doctrine of Vaishnavism (worship of Vishnu) and dedicated this grand edifice to the worship of Jagannath. He appointed young women to be consecrated to serve the gods as temple dancers called *maharis*. They danced and sang verses from the *Gite Govinda* (the twelfth-century epic poem by Jayadeva) as a form of entertainment for and worship of the gods. To this day, the *Gite Govinda* is the inspiration for a large part of Odissi repertoire.

By the sixteenth century, the mahari tradition had declined and was replaced by pre-

pubescent boys dressed as women called *gotipuas*. The gotipua dance style includes exaggerated poses and yogic feats. Today's Odissi dance is an amalgam of mahari and gotipua practices, Orissan folk and tribal dances, and a living animation of the temple sculptures.

The most recognized Odissi dance guru, responsible for the revitalization of the dance, was Kelucharan Mohapatra (1926-2004). Born in the nearby tiny artisan village of Raghurajpur to a family of humble means, Mohapatra learned the arts of palm leaf painting and percussion from his father. His early dance training was in the gotipua style, but because his father disapproved, he was sent, at the age of six, to learn from the famous theater and film guru Mohan Sundar Dev Goswami. There, he learned all aspects of dance-theater performance and production, especially, the art of *abhinaya*—the mimetic aspect of dance. He also performed and toured with his guru's dance troupe for ten years. He eventually left the troupe and moved on to perform with various companies, distinguishing himself first as a fine percussionist and then as a dancer and choreographer. He was soon partnering, playing accompaniment for, and choreographing works for the female dancer Laxmipriya, the first dancer to perform Odissi onstage. They eventually married.



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Brahmeswar Temple sculpture of Lord Shiva holding his trident as he blissfully dances atop his vehicle, a bull

During the late 1950s, Mohapatra was actively engaged in dance research—studying the temple sculptures and systematizing and codifying the Odissi dance form. He created the foundational repertoire of Odissi works using the newly reconstructed classical form.

In 1993, Mohapatra formed Srjan, a dance institution committed to teaching and performing Odissi dance as well as Mohapatra's distinctive style. A man of many skills, including home building, Mohapatra designed and built the beautiful private residence in which the school is housed. Srjan holds daily classes and seasonal workshops. It also sponsors annual dance awards. The institution continues under the direction of Mohapatra's son Ratikant and daughter-in-law Sujata, who are his disciples as well as solo performers.

In 2017, I made the hour-and-a-half drive from Puri to the temple town of Bhubaneshwar, turned onto a lovely residential street, and arrived at Srjan to observe the guru's legacy in action. It was mid-morning and seven students (some of whom are teachers themselves) were in one of the studios practicing repertory to a cassette recording. Under the whirr of the ceiling fans, the dancers along with Sujata Mohapatra ran through *Battu*, the guru's choreographic presentation of the sculptural poses upon which Odissi is based. Bare feet slapped the floor loudly; arms, legs, torso, and hands moved constantly. The movement sped up just before the piece ended with the dancers in a semi-circular formation backing off upstage to exit. After the run-through, Sujata Mohapatra gave everyone feedback.

Next, they rehearsed an invocatory dance to Lord Vishnu—*Shantakaram Bhujaga Sayanam* choreographed by the guru and Ratikant Mohapatra. Every step includes the characteristic Odissi weight shift with the sensuous sinking into the hip. The curvaceous shape formed by the lateral displacement of the hip is a component of the *tribhangi* (triple curve) pose—unique to the Odissi dance form and a fundamental principle of Odissi temple sculpture.

Because of a sudden power outage, we moved upstairs to another studio with more light. The rehearsal continued with an *abhinaya* piece depicting Lord Krishna and the Gopis (female cowherd devotees). The purpose of the abhinaya piece within an Odissi performance is to evoke empathy from the audience. Using intricate hand gestures and nuanced eye and facial expressions, the gopi dancers mime the singing, dancing, and music-making performed to entertain Lord Krishna. At the end of the morning session, the dancers lined up and each one bowed before the guru to touch her feet in gratitude and bid farewell. She bent to touch their back, shoulder, or head affirming her vow to care for their training in an age-old ritual between mentor and disciple.

After lunch, three female dancers reconvened to work

intensively on a piece from the Guru's repertoire. They moved through the choreography phrase by phrase—stopping at the end of each, holding the position for Sujata Mohapatra to make hands-on adjustments and corrections. Every tilt, angle, and inflection of each body part had to be precise. She stopped correcting and demonstrated the movement. The students repeated and repeated and repeated. Finally, the rhythm of the footwork, the directional facing, and the flow of the hand gestures were replicated perfectly. Mohapatra is a stickler for detail.

That evening, she taught a men's class at a dance studio on the other side of town. The dancers were working on *Shivashtotram*, a solo piece choreographed by Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra that describes the attributes of Lord Shiva. The technical demands were apparent, with lengthy periods of holding a deep squat and a slow-turning promenade balancing on one leg. The men were capable of both soft and strong physicality. Their hands trembled expressively and formed intricate gestures while their feet stomped out powerful foot slaps in the wide squat, or *chowk* position—the male counterpart to the female tribhangi posture. They moved on to work on a dance about Lord Krishna, in which their arms maintained a flute-playing position while the lower body performed all manner of quick, light, and silent leg- and foot-work. The evening session ended as usual—with a salutation to the teacher.

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Sujata Mohapatra coaches students through a piece of the Odissi repertoire at Srjan.

The next day I was off to visit the temples that served as Guru Mohapatra's source material for the Odissi dance vocabulary—Parasurameswar, Brahmeswar, and Konark. I entered the seventh-century Parasurameswar complex to find a woman sitting just outside the entrance to the temple with two priests, performing an elaborate *puja* (ritual). They chanted mantras while fanning smoke from the small ritual fire. There were many natural ingredients laid out as part of the ceremony. Within the sanctum, a beautiful mandala of multi-colored flower petals had been assembled. The temple is dedicated to Shiva and contains many images of the deity in an assortment of forms. Walls are decorated with sculpted images of Shiva as Nataraja (Lord of the Dance) in his various postures—a couple in the typical chowk position. Several goddesses in dancing poses are rendered in detailed relief as is the representation of the six-armed goddess Durga on the tower's exterior. In an exterior courtyard stands the vertical *lingam*—a stylized phallus—an abstract representation of Shiva.

I moved on to the late eleventh-century Brahmeswar Temple, also dedicated to Shiva. Numerous sculptural depictions of dancers and musicians adorn the exterior walls. The temple also contains tantric renderings, such as the emaciated image of Chamunda (fearsome aspect of the Divine Mother Goddess). Situated on the western façade, she takes the form of a dancing skeleton holding a trident and a human head while standing on a corpse. Most enchanting and fanciful are the richly carved flying figures and fluid dancing deities, surrounded by beautiful floral designs on the temple's exterior. In their lyrical grace, they look alive.

Finally, I made a pilgrimage to the Konark Sun Temple, of which the poet Rabindranath Tagore said, "Here the language of stone surpasses the language of man." What a perfect source of inspiration for another non-verbal expression—the recreated Odissi dance form. This architectural marvel, built in the thirteenth century and now designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was conceived as a giant chariot of the Sun God, Surya. With twelve pairs of ornately carved wheels, the chariot was oriented to the east to catch the first rays of sunrise through the main entrance. The temple's facades are lace-like—thoroughly carved with deities, graceful maidens, dancers, drummers, and amorous couples in erotic postures. Meanwhile, lively sculptures of dancers, musicians, and drummers line the terraces of the multi-tiered roof. The massive structure, now in ruins, is no longer in use as a temple but remains a splendid illustration of Orissan temple architecture.

At night, Konark Temple transforms into a magical backdrop for the annual five-day Konark Festival of classical Indian dance. Dance artists from across the country are invited to perform and represent the various classical forms. My favorite, from the final two nights of the 2017 festival, was the exquisitely graceful Manipuri dancer Bimbavati Devi. She embodies a rich dance legacy handed

down to her from her parents, also renowned Manipuri dance gurus. She wore an elegant costume consisting of a teal-colored, long, wraparound skirt and gold-beaded black top, over-draped with a gold and red silk scarf, and ornamented with gold necklaces, earrings, headpiece, and belt. Devi's opening dance of offering, *Kathokchaba,* highlighted her deeply felt abhinaya as well as her gentle, lilting, curvy movements describing the beauty of Lord Krishna. In a powerful performance of *Mahashakti* (Great Goddess), she spun onto the stage and pantomimed the aiming of her warrior's bow to shoot off an arrow. Her movements were shadowed by a second dancer on a distant upper tier. The dance built in energy as they performed a sequence of traveling turns in unison. Devi concluded the dance with a powerful climax, descending onto her knees while turning and then rising up to leap about like a conquering warrior. The dancing and the outdoor venue, set between the sea and the ancient temple, offered a magical experience.

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Sculptures of Alasa Kanya *(Languorous Maidens) that adorn the Mukteswara Temple in Bhubaneshwar*

Leaving Odisha, I flew to the southwestern state of Karnataka. Just an hour's drive outside the capital city of Bangalore, I arrived at the small terra-cotta-colored settlement of Nrityagram. The village was founded in 1990 by Protima Gauri Bedi, a wealthy Mumbai socialite and model turned Odissi dancer and disciple of Guru Mohapatra. When she asked him if there was any way in which she could give something back to this art that had fulfilled her so greatly, he suggested that she build something for dance and those aspirants who had little opportunity to pursue the art. The village was designed by the acclaimed Indian architect Gerard da Cunha on a land lease granted by the Karnataka state government. Bedi described the concept: "It is a community of dancers in a forsaken place amidst nature. A place where nothing exists, except dance. A place where you breathe, eat, sleep, dream, talk, imagine—dance." The rustic structures—studios, amphitheater, temple, dining pavilion, writers' compound, office, and cottages—are situated amidst ten acres of farmland planted with orchards of a variety of fruit trees and vegetable gardens. The grounds, landscaped with colorful flowers and graceful trees, create a simple perfection.

Nrityagram means "dance village" and is a holdout of the *gurukul* (residential school) tradition, where the disciple lives with the guru, absorbing the unbroken knowledge of the lineage—about the art form as well as about life in general. Guru Mohapatra came to Nrityagram when it was being built and lived there on and off for three years while guiding the training program along with Bedi. At that time, the entire repertoire that the students learned was his. Guru Mohapatra eventually placed teachers at Nrityagram to continue the work when he wasn't there. His dancing image graces an exterior wall of the temple at Nrityagram; on the interior side is an image of his disciple, Bedi.

In this modern-day gurukul for Odissi classical dance, Bedi's students—Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy—now, respectively, the Artistic Director/Choreographer and Director of Dance Education—carry on the *guru-shishya* (teacher-disciple) tradition. With their own residential students, they continue this mentoring relationship based on complete dedication and trust between disciple and teacher. Sen described his unique institution: "We are one of maybe two or three schools that have a residential program. And we are different from the other schools in that

we are self-sustaining. We fund ourselves and the next generation of dancers. We have created the village from scratch—it was just a barren piece of land. We grow our own food and every tree that has been planted has been planted by us."

The students begin their day at 8:00 A.M. with a conditioning class. I was curious to see how the program trains and molds dancers' bodies to perform Odissi movement. One morning, the class combined yoga, Pilates mat work, calisthenics strengthening exercises, modern dance standing center barre, and traveling sequences from the Kalaripayattu martial art form (from Kerala). Another morning, the class consisted of traveling exercises from the ancient *Natyashastra* text. The exercises are called *caris,* thirty-two movements of the legs—sixteen earthbound variations and sixteen aerial variations—all performed traveling across the floor.

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Nrityagram students rehearse in the outdoor amphitheater holding Darpana—Pose of Self-Contemplation

Sathpathy clarified that body conditioning is not common practice among Odissi dancers, as it is for ballet or Western modern dancers. An Odissi dance class, or lesson, usually refers to a session devoted to learning a piece from the repertory, which is what I observed at Srjan. In contrast, at Nrityagram, Satpathy has assembled a physical regimen that she asserts, "develops and maintains strength, flexibility, and agility to support a dancer's ability to perform the technically demanding Odissi choreography and extends the longevity of the dancer's career."

I happened to be visiting during a concentrated working period on a new piece of choreography—*Dasavataar* (The Ten Incarnations of Vishnu)—an allegorical tale of how Lord Vishnu manifests ten different forms to urge human development forward on its evolutionary trajectory. This Hindu narrative was shaped into the first song of the *Gita Govinda*. Although popular subject matter for many Indian dance choreographies, at Nrityagram, with Surupa Sen's ingenious creativity and interpretation, the poem is given vivid new expression. She delivered her updated rhyming translation of the Sanskrit verses alternating with an accompanying pure rhythm composition. The other two Nrityagram soloists, Bijayini Satpathy and Pavithra Reddy, danced the conflict, terror, and wonder of the ten dramatic episodes, with Sen joining in to dance and amplify the climax. A total, cleansing destruction of the degenerate forces to enable a new cycle of creation is the task of Vishnu's final incarnation as Kalki the Destroyer. The dancing, the drumming, and the repeated melodic *bhakti* (devotional) refrain created a truly awe-inspiring experience, which is the goal of an Odissi performance—*moksha*—spiritual transcendence.

Through the work of the dance gurus past and present, the myths, beliefs, and values of the culture are inscribed onto the bodies of the present, just as they were carved onto the temple stones in times past. Today's Odissi dancers continue to invoke the Divine, create and dissolve worlds, and generate sublime rapture.

This spring, the people of Odisha endured the destructive force of Cyclone Fani. One million people were evacuated from eastern coastal communities along its path. As reported in the daily newspaper, *The Hindu*, "21 of the 29 deaths were registered in the pilgrim town of Puri, where the storm made a landfall on May 3, flattening fragile houses, uprooting scores of trees, electric poles and mobile towers." Odisha's rich architectural heritage of temples and their sculptural archive of history appear spared major damage. The continuity of this fragile legacy, however, may one day depend only on the kinetic memory retained by devoted Odissi dancers and their reconstituted dance.

Karen Greenspan, a New York City-based dance journalist, writes about global dance traditions and contemporary dance artists and trends. She is a frequent contributor to *Natural History* and her book *Footfalls from the Land of Happiness: A Journey into the Dances of Bhutan* will be available September 2019 through Amazon.