



Shyamamani Devi on Odissi Music and Her Life as a Singer¹

David Dennen, Amir Kumar Jeetendra Nayak

Early Life and Musical Influences

My family was a musical family. My father, mother, brother—all the members of our family were lovers of music. My father was a very good singer. In fact he was my first *Guru*, who nourished me in the world of music from my childhood. But at that time it was a conservative society. There were too many restrictions for girls to come out and sing. It was inconceivable for a girl of a respectable family to take part in a cultural program. My relations and people in society would not accept it. How can I express how my relations ill-treated me because I loved singing? Some of them who were my elders refused to let me touch their feet when I wanted to show respect to them. I was considered detestable because I was singing. But I did not pay heed to all this and carried on my singing with determination. I am a very determined lady—what I decide, I do.

I was ambitious from my very childhood. Let me narrate an incident which dates back to the year 1943 or 1944. My father bought a gramophone record and played the disc at our home. I was then a child. I listened with rapt attention. One thing that possessed my mind was how I myself would be able to sing like that, how my voice could be recorded to a disc, how people would hear my song and love me. That was my first inspiration in childhood. My father and my *bada bapa* [father's elder brother], Kavichandra Kalicharan Pattanayak, were impressed with my determination. It would not be exaggerating to say that my *bada bapa* was the founder of Odissi music and Odissi dance. He was the person who was instrumental in conferring a cultural status to Odissi dance. He took people like

Priyambada Mohanty and Indrani Rehman to Delhi, the center stage, and brought international status to Odissi dance. His inspiration to me is phenomenal. I became a child artist at Akashvani [All India Radio] from 1950. That was the beginning and there has been no end. It continues and I have never looked back.

My studies and music went together. My interest was more in learning the technique of singing than in myself singing. I was always attentive to learn from other artists when they were singing, to learn what technique made them melodious. Right from my days of childhood it was my hobby to listen to and learn from singers like Lata Mangeshkar, Noor Jahan, Rajkumari, and Siddheswari Devi, and I was engrossed with their songs while learning from them. It was not that I am only an Odissi music artist; I am a lover of all types of music. How to imbibe the best of different types of songs and styles was my hobby from childhood, and that immensely helped me in the future. In 1960 I left for Bombay [now Mumbai] to learn music.

My two *Gurus* who adorn my home, here beside the Lord Jagannath [indicating some framed photographs], are Sangita Sudhakar Balakrushna Dash and Singhari Shyamsundar Kar. They were my *Gurus* in Odissi music, but my learning of Odissi music went hand in hand with Hindustani classical music. My *Guru* in Hindustani classical music was Kundala Adinarayan Rao; he is also from Odisha. Singhari Shyamsundar Kar could be called first *Guru* of Odissi music. I was simultaneously learning from both of them [i.e., Balakrushna and Singhari]. Their styles were different from each other and

distinct in their own ways. Singhari was distinguished by *tala* and *laya*; Balakrushna Dash was known for his melodious voice. [she sings part of Kalicharan Pattanayak's "*Bihare dbarare basanta aja*" in the style of Singhari; then part of Banamali's "*Tore sharana galire murali*" in the style of Balakrushna] These are the different styles. Singhari's style is also very "thrown," has a harsh "throw" [i.e., the melody is disjunct; she demonstrates this by singing Benudhar's "*Mohanare bajaranu enikire bamsari*"]. Singhari Shyamsundar Kar's style is called the Puri style, the typical style of Shrikhshetra Puri.

My interest was not only confined to Odissi and Hindustani classical style. When I went to Bombay I also learned *thumri*. My teachers were B. R. Nabarang, B. R. Deodhar, Lakhmishankar, Nirmala Devi (the mother of film star Govinda). I learned *thumri* from them. I was greatly indebted to them because they taught me not to restrict myself to some particular style but to adapt my voice to a variety of music, a variety of styles. [she sings] This is the Hindustani style; I can sing it properly. But when I sing *thumri* [she sings]—I follow that style. Taking *thumri*, Hindustani classical, Singhari's style, plus Balakrushna Dash's style, I could do something different that was appreciated by people and touched them. And for this I sought the permission from my *Gurus*. Those days were different; every small thing required permission from the *Gurus*. For instance: [she sings from Kavisurya Baladeva Ratha's "*Lajare sarigali aja sajani*"]. Something of this is *thumri* style and something else is Odissi. Without mixing the two I could never have expressed what I intended to. I could not have expressed the feeling of Radha for

Krishna. Without mixing the two this would not have touched the heart. Even when I sing bhajans I do the same. [she sings] I have mixed it with *thumri*. This is my own experiment. But I owe this to my *Gurus*. It is the blessing of my teachers that have made me what I am today.

The Expressive Power of Odissi Music

Both of my *Gurus* were distinguished by their rich style and I was greatly interested to learn from them. Their blessings and styles have formed me. I am what they have made me. They have taught me how to create something by my own effort. When I sit on the stage to perform, I intently look at the audience and try to read their thoughts, feelings, and expectations. I always attempt to give my all to my performance so that I linger in their memory for some time after I have left the stage.

My song becomes meaningless if it fails to leave its imprint on the minds of the people for at least some time after my song is over. My sole ambition in life is that my song should touch my listeners and possess them at least for some time.

I have always felt that Odissi is, for me, the most effective medium of communication with my audience. For instance, the expression of the lure of the flute of Srikrishna for Radha, her palpitations at meeting him, and her yearning, for me are best conveyed through Odissi. I have always tried to do this through Odissi and even now, at age 74, I am still continuing to do so.

During my childhood there was no radio, no television. There were only folk songs, like *pala* and *daskathia*. I was attracted to these songs, and they instilled in me a love for traditional music. Of course, later on I became a playback singer for Odia and Hindi films,

and have sung for the famous Saturday programme of the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation. I have sung various types of Bengali songs and Rabindra Sangit and also Gujarati *garba*. I have sung almost each and every type of song, from folk to modern, but I have been overwhelmed by Odissi music and that has filled my whole being with an inexpressible joy. The melody and evocative power of Odissi music are unique. In no other music have I discovered this power that creates such an intense bond between the performer and the listener. And that is the reason why I have been engrossed in Odissi music. I stayed in Bombay for so many years and even settled there. But it is Odissi music that drew me back to Odisha for good.

Of course, one cannot earn much as an Odissi artist. Other songs would have given me enough money, but I followed the call of my being, my soul. I am fortunate to have been

born in Odisha, the land of Lord Jagannath, and have been nourished in his culture. I am proud too for that reason. Hence I longed to live in the land of this music and have been living here to this day. Further, the ambience here between 1954 and 1965 was wonderful. It was a musical atmosphere. The *Gurus* were exemplary. They gave their heart and soul to groom their students. The sight of a good student thrilled them and they dedicated themselves to bring the qualities of the students to fruition. But there was a code of conduct and strict discipline, including corporal punishment for the students. We were beaten several times by our *Gurus*. I myself was beaten many times by my *Guru* Singhari. They have formed us by beating! That beating was the outcome of their love and blessing for us—to develop us and make us stand on our own legs in the world with dignity. But that is not there any longer.

I had heard music in my childhood, in my fifth or sixth year, in an unsullied atmosphere. It was the traditional music of my land and thus it has left an indelible imprint on my mind and heart. I have never tried to extricate myself from the charm of traditional music. [she sings] This music has filled my life with peace. When my voice begins an Odissi song, Lord Srikrishna appears before me along with all the associations—Vrindavan, the Gopis, the creepers and plants, and so on. I feel that through Odissi I see God in person. Odissi music has a perennial appeal. There is an Odissi song which dates back 300 years, and it still continues to hold sway on the millions. [she sings from “*Ki shobha go kunje madana mohana*” by Kavisurya Baladeva Ratha] It is still continuing like this now, nobody can change it.

The Importance of Odissi Music

What is important is to establish the distinctive quality of Odissi music and not dilute it to suit the so-called modern requirements. Hindustani classical music has benefitted a lot through advertisement and propaganda. Odissi classical music is much older than Hindustani classical music, but could not be projected to the outside world due to lack of advertisement and propaganda. The artists of Odissi music did not get the opportunity to sing in the royal courts. Other states, for example Karnataka and some places in North India, have been successful in establishing their music through their own distinctive styles. So it is now imperative that the Odissi artists do not lose sight of the original basic styles of Odissi music which are its distinctive mark and which alone will provide it its due status in the world of music. If we forget what is rich in our tradition and dilute and degenerate it, neither Lord Jagannath nor our ancestral *Gurus* shall forgive us. The whole culture of this land is the culture of Lord Jagannath and this distinct style of Odissi music is His gift to this land.

Odissi music has conferred great status and dignity to this state. This music has also given me the honor to receive the goodwill of such illustrious persons of this country like Prithviraj Kapoor, the doyen of Hindi film. [she sings Banamali’s “*Bata chada suhata nagara*”] The word “chada” from this song was so affecting to him that he requested his music director to use it in his ballad; but he said because of the language problem it was not possible. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the second President of India who had felicitated me with a prize in

1962, once requested me to sing an Odia song and he was overwhelmed when I sang. At her residence, Lataji [Lata Mangeshkar] requested me to sing an Odia folk song. Then I sang a Sambalpuri folk song, the best among Odia folk songs. [she sings]

I breathe music. Music is in my soul, my life. I have no other ambition in my life, other than that connected to music. I am attached to my family, and yet I am detached from everybody. When I am immersed in the sound of music, everything is obliterated from my sight; I forget everything—even my husband, my children, and the world. The act of singing gives me transcendental peace.

Pioneering Odissi singer Shrimati Shyamamani Devi graciously agreed to be interviewed in her home on 14 April 2012. The interview was conducted by David Dennen (University of California, Davis) and Amir Kumar Jeetendra Nayak (Ravenshaw University, Cuttack); the transcript was translated and edited by Mrutyunjay Mohanty (Ravenshaw University, Cuttack) and David Dennen. Special thanks to Sagarija Mohanty and Anubha Mohanty for diligently preparing the interview transcript.

End Note

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Shyamamani Devi (Image courtesy: John Dennen)

