



---

## THE ABHINAYA CHANDRIKA: A COMPREHENSIVE MANUAL FOR ODISSI EXPRESSIONS

**Manoranjan Pradhan**  
Reader Dept. of Odissi Dance ,  
Utkal University of Culture,  
Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India.



---

### ABSTRACT:

*Odissi dance, a classical Indian art form originating from the state of Odisha, embodies a rich tapestry of theoretical foundations rooted in ancient scriptures, philosophical treatises, and regional traditions. This abstract explores the theoretical underpinnings of Odissi dance, focusing on its textual sources and diverse interpretations. Drawing upon ancient texts such as the Natya Shastra, Abhinaya Chandrika, and Sangeet Ratnakara, as well as contemporary scholarship and artistic innovations, the abstract delves into the historical evolution, aesthetic principles, philosophical dimensions, and spiritual aspects of Odissi. Through interdisciplinary exploration, it elucidates the intricate connections between theory and practice in Odissi dance, highlighting the enduring legacy and cultural significance of this classical Indian art form.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Odissi dance, theoretical foundations, textual sources, interpretations, classical Indian art form, Natya Shastra, Abhinaya Chandrika, Sangeet Ratnakara, philosophical dimensions, spiritual aspects, cultural significance, interdisciplinary exploration.*

### INTRODUCTION:

Odissi dance, a classical Indian dance form originating from the state of Odisha, is renowned for its intricate movements, graceful gestures, and rich storytelling. While its performance aspect often takes center stage, Odissi's theoretical foundations are equally significant, rooted in ancient scriptures, philosophical treatises, and regional traditions. In this blog, we embark on a journey to explore the theoretical underpinnings of Odissi dance, delving into textual sources, historical contexts, contemporary interpretations, philosophical dimensions, and spiritual aspects that have shaped its practice over the centuries.

### HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF ODISSI DANCE

To understand the theoretical foundations of Odissi dance, we must delve into its historical roots, which stretch back to ancient times. References to dance can be found in texts like the Natya Shastra, attributed to the sage Bharata, which lays down the foundational principles of Indian classical dance. Over the centuries, Odissi evolved through interactions with various cultural influences, including the temple traditions of Odisha, the patronage of royal courts, and the devotional fervor of Vaishnavism.

Temples served as epicenters of artistic expression, where Odissi flourished as a form of worship, embodying divine narratives and invoking spiritual transcendence through its artistry. The journey of Odissi dance traces back to ancient India, where it flourished as an integral part of temple

rituals, royal courts, and devotional practices. Influenced by diverse cultural traditions and regional customs, Odissi evolved over centuries, blending elements of music, theatre, and dance to create a unique artistic expression. References to dance can be found in ancient texts such as the Natya Shastra, which laid down the foundational principles of Indian classical dance and provided a framework for Odissi's development.

### **NATYA SHASTRA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ODISSI**

The Natya Shastra, attributed to the sage Bharata, serves as a foundational treatise on Indian performing arts, encompassing music, theatre, and dance. Its principles and theories have had a profound influence on the practice of Odissi, providing a framework for understanding rhythm, movement, and aesthetics. Through its detailed descriptions of *angika* (body), *vachika* (speech), *aharya* (costume), and *satvika* (emotions), the Natya Shastra continues to inform and inspire Odissi practitioners, shaping the trajectory of the art form over the centuries.

### **AESTHETICS AND TECHNIQUE:**

The Natya Shastra expounds on the aesthetic principles governing Indian classical dance, emphasizing the harmonious integration of music, movement, and emotion. Odissi, with its emphasis on lyrical movements, intricate footwork, and emotive storytelling, embodies these aesthetic ideals. The text also discusses the role of costume (*aharya*), makeup (*sattvika*), and stagecraft (*natya-dharmi*) in enhancing the visual appeal of dance performances, influencing the elaborate costumes and makeup worn by Odissi dancers.

### **SPIRITUAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSIONS:**

Beyond its technical aspects, the Natya Shastra delves into the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of dance, viewing it as a sacred art form with the power to evoke spiritual experiences in both performers and spectators. Odissi, with its roots in Hindu mythology and religious traditions, embodies these spiritual themes, often depicting stories from ancient epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Through dance, Odissi practitioners seek to transcend worldly limitations and connect with the divine, echoing the spiritual aspirations outlined in the Natya Shastra.

### **Interpretations of Odissi: From Traditional to Contemporary Perspectives**

Odissi dance, a classical Indian art form with roots in the ancient temples of Odisha, has undergone various interpretations over the centuries, reflecting evolving cultural, social, and artistic contexts. From traditional renditions rooted in temple rituals and classical repertoire to contemporary explorations that embrace fusion, experimentation, and innovation, Odissi's interpretations offer a diverse tapestry of expression and creativity.

### **Traditional Interpretations:**

Traditional interpretations of Odissi are deeply rooted in the rich heritage of temple traditions, where dance was regarded as a form of worship and spiritual devotion. Dancers, known as *devadasis*, performed Odissi as offerings to the deity, embodying divine narratives and invoking spiritual transcendence through their artistry. The repertoire of traditional Odissi includes compositions based on classical texts such as the Gita Govinda and the Mahabharata, portraying themes of divine love, mythology, and devotion.

The traditional style of Odissi is characterized by its emphasis on graceful movements, intricate footwork, and expressive storytelling. Dancers use a repertoire of hand gestures (*mudras*), facial expressions (*bhava*), and body movements (*anga*) to convey narratives and evoke emotions, following the principles outlined in ancient texts like the Natya Shastra. Costumes, jewelry, and makeup play an essential role in enhancing the visual appeal of traditional Odissi performances, reflecting the aesthetic sensibilities of Odisha's cultural heritage.

---

### CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS:

In the contemporary milieu, Odissi dance has witnessed a resurgence of interest and experimentation, as dancers and choreographers explore new avenues for artistic expression and engagement. Contemporary interpretations of Odissi embrace a wide range of influences, from Western dance forms to global trends in music, fashion, and visual arts. Fusion collaborations, interdisciplinary performances, and experimental choreography are increasingly prevalent, blurring the boundaries between tradition and innovation.

Contemporary Odissi dancers often draw inspiration from diverse sources, incorporating themes of social justice, gender equality, and environmental sustainability into their performances. They reinterpret classical repertoire with a modern sensibility, infusing it with personal narratives, political commentary, and cultural critique. At the same time, they remain mindful of the traditional roots and aesthetic principles of Odissi, striving to maintain a balance between innovation and authenticity.

### PHILOSOPHICAL THEMES IN ODISSI DANCE

Odissi dance, deeply rooted in Hindu mythology and spiritual traditions, embodies profound philosophical themes that transcend mere physical movements and choreography. Through intricate gestures, expressive storytelling, and emotive expressions, Odissi dancers explore timeless concepts of existence, consciousness, and divine connection, inviting audiences on a transformative journey of introspection and spiritual awakening.

### DIVINE LOVE AND DEVOTION :

At the heart of Odissi dance lies the theme of divine love and devotion, as dancers invoke the presence of gods and goddesses through their performances. Stories of Radha and Krishna, the eternal lovers, are a recurrent motif in Odissi repertoire, symbolizing the soul's yearning for union with the divine. Through emotive expressions and lyrical movements, Odissi dancers embody the ecstasy and longing of divine love, transcending earthly limitations and connecting with the cosmic realm of the divine.

### COSMIC HARMONY AND BALANCE:

Odissi dance reflects the Hindu concept of cosmic harmony and balance, wherein the universe is seen as an interconnected web of rhythms, energies, and forces. Through rhythmic footwork, graceful movements, and intricate patterns, Odissi dancers symbolize the cosmic dance of creation, preservation, and destruction, known as the tandava and lasya. By attuning themselves to the natural rhythms of the universe, dancers seek to harmonize mind, body, and spirit, embodying the eternal flow of cosmic energy.

### ETERNAL QUEST FOR SELF-REALIZATION:

Odissi dance is also imbued with themes of self-realization and spiritual enlightenment, as dancers embark on a journey of inner exploration and self-discovery. Through the process of abhinaya, or interpretive expression, dancers delve into the depths of human emotions and experiences, transcending personal ego and identity to attain a state of oneness with the divine. Odissi performances serve as a pathway to self-realization, guiding practitioners and spectators alike towards a deeper understanding of the nature of existence and consciousness.

### TRANSCENDENCE OF DUALITIES:

In Odissi dance, the portrayal of dualities such as light and darkness, joy and sorrow, and birth and death serves as a means of transcending worldly limitations and attaining spiritual liberation. Through expressive storytelling and emotive gestures, dancers navigate the complexities of human experience, embracing both the joys and sorrows of life as manifestations of the divine. By transcending

---

dualities, Odissi dancers seek to awaken the consciousness to the underlying unity and interconnectedness of all beings.

### **SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF ODISSI: EXPLORING DIVINE NARRATIVES**

Odissi dance, rooted in the rich tapestry of Hindu mythology and spiritual traditions, serves as a sacred medium for exploring divine narratives and invoking spiritual transcendence. Through expressive movements, evocative gestures, and soul-stirring music, Odissi dancers immerse themselves and their audiences in the timeless stories of gods, goddesses, and divine beings, inviting a profound journey of spiritual exploration and connection.

### **EMBODIMENT OF DIVINE BEINGS:**

In Odissi dance, performers embody divine beings from Hindu mythology, portraying characters such as Lord Krishna, Radha, Shiva, Parvati, and other celestial figures. Through meticulous choreography, dancers bring these characters to life, capturing their essence, attributes, and emotions with authenticity and reverence. Each gesture, expression, and movement is infused with the divine presence, allowing audiences to experience a direct connection with the sacred realm.

### **INVOCATION OF SPIRITUAL PRESENCE:**

Odissi performances serve as potent rituals of invocation, wherein dancers channel the spiritual presence of deities and invite their divine energy into the earthly realm.

Through intricate hand gestures (mudras), facial expressions (bhava), and rhythmic footwork, dancers create a sacred space where the boundaries between the mundane and the divine blur. Spectators are transported to realms of heightened consciousness and spiritual resonance, experiencing moments of transcendence and communion with the divine.

### **EXPLORATION OF COSMIC THEMES:**

Odissi dance explores profound cosmic themes that resonate with the deepest aspirations of the human soul. Stories of creation, destruction, love, and liberation are vividly depicted through the medium of dance, offering insights into the mysteries of existence and the nature of reality. Themes such as the cosmic dance of Lord Shiva (Nataraja), the divine love of Radha and Krishna, and the triumph of good over evil in epic narratives like the Ramayana and Mahabharata are brought to life with grace, beauty, and spiritual depth.

### **QUEST FOR SPIRITUAL AWAKENING:**

At its core, Odissi dance is a sacred quest for spiritual awakening and self-realization.

Through the process of abhinaya, or interpretive expression, dancers delve into the depths of human emotions and experiences, transcending personal ego and identity to attain a state of oneness with the divine. Odissi performances serve as a pathway to inner transformation, guiding practitioners and spectators alike towards a deeper understanding of the self and the universe.

### **TEXTUAL SOURCES:**

Central to understanding the theoretical framework of Odissi dance are various textual sources that offer insights into its aesthetic principles, technical intricacies, and spiritual dimensions. The Abhinaya Chandrika, authored by Maheshvara Mahapatra in the 19th century, stands as a comprehensive manual on Odissi's expressive aspects, including facial expressions, hand gestures (mudras), and emotional portrayal (bhava). Additionally, the Natya Shastra and its commentaries provide a broader understanding of Indian classical dance, serving as guiding lights for Odissi practitioners. These texts not only delineate the techniques and aesthetics of Odissi but also imbue it with a sense of cultural continuity and spiritual resonance.

1. **1.\*\*Natya Shastra:\*\*** Attributed to the sage Bharata, the Natya Shastra stands as the foundational treatise on Indian performing arts, encompassing music, theatre, and dance. This ancient text provides detailed descriptions of the theoretical principles underlying classical dance forms, including Odissi. It delineates various aspects of dance, such as *angika* (body movements), *vachika* (speech), *aharya* (costume), and *satvika* (emotions), offering a comprehensive guide for Odissi practitioners.
2. **2.\*\*Abhinaya Chandrika:\*\*** Authored by Maheshvara Mahapatra in the 19th century, the Abhinaya Chandrika serves as a seminal manual for Odissi expressions. This comprehensive text provides detailed instructions on facial expressions, hand gestures (*mudras*), emotional portrayal (*bhava*), and other aspects of Odissi performance. It serves as a valuable resource for both practitioners and scholars seeking to deepen their understanding of Odissi's expressive repertoire.
3. **3.\*\*Sangeet Ratnakara:\*\*** Written by Sarangadeva in the 13th century, the Sangeet Ratnakara is a classic Sanskrit text that covers various aspects of music, dance, and drama. While primarily focused on music, it contains sections dedicated to dance (*nritta*) and dramatic performance (*natya*), offering insights into the aesthetic principles and technical aspects of Odissi dance. It provides valuable information on rhythm, tempo, and musical accompaniment in Odissi performances.
4. **4.\*\*Odissi Mahavidyalaya:\*\*** Established in 1958, the Odissi Research Centre and the Odissi Dance Research Institute have played pivotal roles in documenting, preserving, and disseminating knowledge about Odissi dance. Through their research publications, academic journals, and archival materials, these institutions have contributed significantly to the scholarly understanding of Odissi's textual sources, historical development, and cultural significance.
5. **\*\*Ancient Sanskrit Texts:\*\*** In addition to specific treatises on dance, Odissi practitioners also draw inspiration from a wide range of ancient Sanskrit texts, including the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, and other mythological epics. These texts contain stories, narratives, and poetic verses that form the basis of Odissi repertoire, allowing dancers to explore themes of divine love, cosmic harmony, and spiritual quest through their performances.
6. **\*\*Oral Traditions and Guru Parampara:\*\*** Beyond written texts, Odissi dance is transmitted through oral traditions and lineage-based learning systems known as *guru parampara*. Through direct discipleship and oral instruction, *gurus* (teachers) impart their knowledge, wisdom, and artistic insights to their students, ensuring the continuity and authenticity of Odissi's textual sources and interpretive traditions.

### Interpretations and Contemporary Perspectives:

In the contemporary milieu, Odissi dance theory continues to evolve through the contributions of scholars, practitioners, and custodians of tradition. Noteworthy figures such as Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan and Dr. Dinanath Pathy have undertaken scholarly analyses, shedding light on Odissi's historical development, regional variations, and aesthetic innovations. Meanwhile, dance gurus such as Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra and Guru Mayadhar Raut have played pivotal roles in preserving and propagating the oral tradition of Odissi, imparting their wisdom through teaching, choreography, and artistic collaborations. Through their efforts, Odissi continues to thrive as a dynamic and evolving art form, bridging past and present, tradition and innovation.

### Philosophical and Spiritual Dimensions:

At its core, Odissi dance transcends mere physical movements, offering a profound exploration of philosophical and spiritual themes. Rooted in Hindu mythology and religious narratives, Odissi repertoire often portrays themes of divine love, cosmic harmony, and the eternal quest for self-realization. Through intricate choreography, evocative gestures, and emotive expressions, performers seek to embody the essence of transcendence, inviting audiences on a transformative journey of

---

introspection and spiritual awakening. The dance becomes a sacred offering, bridging the mundane and the divine, as performers and spectators alike are transported to realms of heightened consciousness and aesthetic bliss.

### **CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS:**

In the modern context, Odissi faces a myriad of challenges and opportunities as it navigates the complexities of globalization, technological advancements, and changing audience preferences. Contemporary practitioners and scholars are tasked with preserving the authenticity and integrity of Odissi while simultaneously exploring new avenues for artistic expression and engagement. Innovations such as fusion collaborations, interdisciplinary performances, and digital platforms offer exciting possibilities for expanding the reach and relevance of Odissi in today's interconnected world.

### **CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS IN ODISSI DANCE TODAY**

In the contemporary landscape, Odissi dance faces a myriad of challenges and opportunities. While traditionalists advocate for the preservation of classical repertoire and stylistic purity, others embrace innovation and experimentation as a means of relevance and revitalization. Contemporary dancers and choreographers explore new themes, interdisciplinary collaborations, and digital platforms to engage audiences and expand the boundaries of Odissi's artistic expression. As Odissi continues to evolve and adapt to the modern world, it remains a dynamic and vibrant art form, perpetuating its rich cultural heritage while embracing the spirit of innovation.

### **CONCLUSION: EMBRACING THE LEGACY OF ODISSI**

In conclusion, the theoretical foundations of Odissi dance are deeply rooted in ancient scriptures, philosophical treatises, and regional traditions. Through interdisciplinary exploration, we gain a deeper understanding of Odissi's historical evolution, aesthetic principles, and cultural significance within Indian classical dance. As Odissi continues to captivate audiences worldwide and adapt to changing times, it remains a testament to the enduring legacy of India's rich artistic heritage. By embracing tradition and innovation, Odissi embodies the timeless beauty and profound wisdom inherent in the art of dance, perpetuating its legacy for generations to come.

By delving into ancient texts, historical records, contemporary interpretations, philosophical dimensions, and spiritual aspects, we gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of this classical art form. As Odissi continues to captivate audiences worldwide and adapt to modern sensibilities, it remains a testament to the timeless beauty and profound wisdom inherent in India's artistic heritage, perpetuating a legacy that transcends boundaries of time and space. In celebrating Odissi, we not only honor the past but also pave the way for its continued evolution and enrichment in the future.

### **REFERENCES:**

1. Prasad, Leela. (2005). "Odissi Yatra: The Journey of Guru Mayadhar Raut". Harman Publishing House.
2. Pattanaik, Devdutt. (2007). "Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols, and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent". Inner Traditions.
3. Mohanty, Bijay Kumar. (2011). "Odissi: The Classical Dance". D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd.
4. Sinha, Susheila. (2013). "Dance and Music in Temple Worship: A Study of the Representation of Music and Dance in Temple Sculptures and Architecture in Orissa". D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd.
5. Prasad, Kedar Nath. (1994). "The Cultural Heritage of India: The Arts". The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture.
6. Devi, Ragini. (1990). "Dance Dialects of India". Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.