

# CLASSICAL STATUS OF ODISHI MUSIC: A STUDY

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**ABSTRACT:** The advocates of Odissi assume *a priori* the legitimacy of the classical status of the two major musical systems and the criteria (whatever it may be) used to define that status; but they also throw into question the ability and appropriateness of those systems to represent or index the totality of the Indian nation musically. Turino has written that nationalism “involves the fashioning of a *somewhat* distinctive cultural unit within an overall framework of similarity”. A parallel process can be seen in play regarding the similarly cosmopolitan concept of “classical” in India. As discussed earlier, the conceptions of Hindustani and Karnatak music as national, classical music evolved in relation and sometimes opposition to Western colonialist discourse on the subject. Similarly, in the cultural discourse of Odisha, Odissi music is defined in relation and opposition to Hindustani and Karnatak music: Odissi music discourse seeks to position the music as a “*somewhat* distinctive unit” within the “overall framework” of Indian classical music. Of course, it cannot be seen to be too similar to either of the dominant traditions or it will be subsumed by them; but neither can its difference be too forcefully asserted or it will continue to stand outside the classical framework. Ultimately, however, the question of whether Odissi music is similar and different enough cannot be answered through purely musical considerations; the musical question is itself part of a larger question of identity that needs to be addressed.

**Keywords :** Music, Hindustani, Classical, Karnataki, System, Tradition, Culture, Odia, Language, Style.

Indian historians have recognized that, since colonial times, there have been multiple coexistent “nationalisms” in India, the two most prominent being the various nationalisms based on regional-linguistic identifications and a nationalism based on a pan-Indian identification. These nationalisms have been given various terminologies, but here the terms “regional nationalism” and “pan-Indian nationalism” shall be used. These two forces, which emerged more or less concurrently, are by no means mutually exclusive; indeed, early nationalists found no contradiction between the two. This is not to say, however, that the two movements never conflict—there is the potential for pan-Indian nationalism to become overbearing and aggressive and for regional nationalism to become chauvinistic and even secessionist. A balance must constantly be sought, and it is useful to acknowledge the tension between the parts and the whole of India and to inquire into the processes of attempted compromise and resolution. With this in mind, the tension between the social-cultural region of Odisha and that of India *in toto* needs to be explored further. The identifications (whether national, social, cultural) of an individual or group are always, in varying degrees, contingent, and capable of changing over time and across contexts. The relationship of Odias—like the relationships of many of India’s regional-linguistic groups—to the federal-nation of India, as the arbiter of a dominant culture and central government, has been troubled. Odias are supportive of the idea of India in general, and many Odias were involved in the Indian Independence movement. But Odisha is a poor state, one that has not historically received much aid or interest from the central government. In addition, the culture of Odisha is often overshadowed by that of neighboring West Bengal—Kolkata being one of the primary cultural centers of India. Regarding music, then, it is not uncommon to see such statements as these: As for Odissi music, there is a systematic conspiracy to relegate the singers to the background.... There is no genuine concern for Odissi music. Odissi musical tradition remains an obscurity. Traced back to the second century when the then ruler of Odisha (Kalinga) patronized the art form, it never really could muster the attention it deserved. While Odissi dance found a winning patronage. Odissi music kept languishing on the fringes.

Music Syllabi across the country teach two systems of music: Hindustani and Carnatic. They usually miss the third, a music system that has distinctive features of its own and lies between the two. (Mohanty 2007: 108) Kalicharan Pattanayak, a poet, dramatist, and cultural revivalist took on the argument that Odissi music is merely a regional music; as follows:

Hindustani music is performed in India’s western region, Karnatak in India’s southern region—these are two Indian regions, are they not? But if these are the only regions of India, is Odisha then exterior to the country? In this argument Odisha must also be a region of India. If it is true that in the western and southern regions Hindustani and Karnatak music are performed, what sense is there in denigrating Odissi music as *only* a regional music? From such statements we can begin to detect a particular viewpoint. The first component of this is—as previously discussed—the belief that Odissi music is an ancient and distinct classical system, comparable to the Hindustani and Karnatak systems. The second significant aspect, intertwined with the first, is a sense of unfair neglect. This is an attitude rooted in Odia nationalism, and for a better understanding of the situation we must look at the origins of nationalism in Odisha.

In the early 19th century, the British began taking over the administration of the areas that would become Odisha, binding them variously to the Bengal, Madras, and Central Provinces. One consequence of this was that Odia-speakers became minorities of three different provinces. For Odias this was not a beneficial development. In the case of the substantial Odia-speaking region attached to Bengal, the Odias were excluded from all administrative posts which were now filled up by outsiders and mostly by Bengalis because of their knowledge in English. This resulted not only in an influx of Bengalis to Odisha but became ultimately responsible for a serious attempt by the Bengalis to make their language the medium of instruction in the educational institutions of Odisha and [the] virtual extinction of the Odia language.

The administrative officers, mostly being outsiders, had practically no sympathy for the inhabitants of Odisha.... The Odias

were harassed both by the officers and clerks. Things continued in this direction until the great Odisha famine of 1865–1866. When the British, who previously had paid little attention to Odisha, eventually learned of the extent of the suffering they became sympathetic toward the region. As a result, Odisha gained several new Western-style educational institutions into which Odia students were recruited. Unfortunately, the teachers qualified to instruct in these institutions were mostly Bengalis who rankled at having to teach Odia-speaking students; this difficulty was compounded by the fact that there were few Odia-language textbooks. Thus, it came to seem to many Bengalis that eliminating, or at least modifying, the Odia language (e.g., having it written in Bengali script) would be the best solution. The seeming condescension and arrogance of the Bengalis toward Odias eventually sparked a full-fledged language controversy, with Bengalis arguing for the superiority of the Bengali language and educated Odias intent on defending their “mother tongue.” Scholars describe this period: These writings and debates (over language) caused acute tension in the public life of Odisha. But one most significant outcome and beneficial aspect of this language controversy was the emergence of a strong race consciousness among the Odias. It created an unprecedented awakening in the dormant mind making them aware of their backwardness, sufferings and humiliation. That Odisha possessed a glorious history and cultural heritage, that their language and literature had a rich legacy, that Odisha should be for the Odia-speaking people, and that they alone should get employment in the Government—these feelings created a sort of vigorous national awakening in their mind. The threat to their language and culture brought forth in them an unprecedented sense of unity and determinism. With the aid of certain sympathetic British officials and naturalized elite

Bengalis, Odias achieved some success in asserting the legitimacy of their native language. Numerous printing presses were started to print Odia-language newspapers and books, and there was a flowering of internal interest in Odia culture, especially literature. Similar struggles took place elsewhere in Odisha where Hindi or Telugu were the administrative languages. These battles and the resultant cultural developments went a long way toward creating a sort of “imagined community” of Odia speakers, a community of people who may not have directly known one another but who were connected nevertheless by a common language. Few bonds among people are more fundamental and powerful than a belief in their ability to communicate with each other in a common tongue; this period marks the beginning of that belief on a “national” level in Odisha and consequently of Odia nationalism. Later on, this language-based nationalism—the sense that Odias, as a language group, are distinct from but equal to Bengali- and Hindi-speakers and others—was transferred to other cultural realms, notably dance. It is unclear to me why precisely dance, more so than music, became so much the focus of post-Independence Odia cultural revivalists (or classicists). But the drive to have Odissi dance recognized as classical was clearly successful. This may have had to do in part with the fact that near the time of Indian Independence there were already four dance forms commonly recognized as “classical.” These styles—Bharatanatyam from Tamil Nadu, Manipuri from Manipur, Kathak from northern India, and Kathakali from Kerala—were region based, had ostensibly long histories, and in most cases were believed to conform in theory to certain rules of performance laid out in ancient treatises such as the *Natyashastra*. And within this plurality of styles, it would become possible to fashion a space for Odissi dance. Although the various Indian dance styles are historically linked to particular

geographic areas, the classicization of certain styles has allowed many of them to be dispersed throughout India (and the world), and no single dance form has come to exemplify the concept of classical dance in the context of India. Indeed, it is common now to recognize at least eight separate classical Indian dance forms, with additions in recent years from Assam, Andhra Pradesh, and again Kerala. While there may be difficulties associated with asserting the classical status of another dance form, there is apparently still space on the map for alternatives to present themselves. In dance the regional can be classical, and the classical often becomes national (in the pan-Indian sense); thus, a Delhi-ite or Bengali can study Odissi dance or Bharatanatyam as a hobby and feel connected to the wider sphere of pan-Indian culture. In music the situation is rather different. Because of the pre-Independence efforts of scholars and musicians in north and south India there came to be prominent two forms of classical Indian music: a northern style with major centers in Delhi, Bombay, Kolkata, Banaras, Lucknow, and Baroda; and a southern style centered mainly in Chennai but which had other important centers in Mysore and Hyderabad. Given the preexisting linguistic-cultural-geographic distinctions between northern and southern India the gradual mapping of music cultures onto this bifurcated geographic space came to be seen as natural and incontestable (to the detriment of Kalicharan Pattanayak’s argument).

In the sphere of art music, Hindustani and Karnatak music now occupy all available space; even in early 20th century Odisha, as mentioned earlier, this perspective seems to have been widely accepted. For another form of music to be claimed as classical in this context thus seems reflexively unnecessary and challenges the underlying framework of India’s musical geography: where exactly is the third space in a north-south bifurcation? As a consequence of this, and contrary to the situation in dance, in music the regional is *only* regional, and it is quite doubtful whether at present a non-Odia Indian could study Odissi music and feel a connection with the larger nation of India.

The present push for the classical status of Odissi music has at least one indirect precursor in the Tamil Isai Iyakkam—or movement for Tamil music—which formed in the 1930s. This movement, at least in the descriptions supplied by Lakshmi Subramanian and Amanda Weidman, did not really propose a separate, *independent* classical tradition as the advocates of Odissi do, but rather attempted to redefine Karnatak music, rooting it more firmly in Tamil’s own unique language and music traditions.

The movement, which on a large scale appears to have been unsuccessful, advocated a greater use of Tamil language compositions by performers and the popularization of ancient Tamil styles. Subramanian writes tellingly of the ultimately disappointing outcome of this movement: This failure had as much to do with a limited conceptual framework that eventually deferred to the norms of the nationalist paradigm and the categories of classicism it imposed, as it had to do with the fact that at no time did the Tamil Isai confer on classical music the central role in the articulation of an expressive space for Dravidian identity that the brahmin elite of Madras city gave to it for themselves. Sadly, this could be equally applicable, with some changes in regional terminology, to the present inability of Odissi music to find a wider audience.

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