FILM GUIDE

Given to Dance: India's Odissi Tradition

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GIVEN TO DANCE:
INDIA'S ODISSI TRADITION

Film Guide

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SYNOPSIS
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The film deals with the evolution of Odissi dance, associated with the Temple of Lord Jagannath of Puri, in the eastern seacoast state of Orissa. In the past, a few highly select families ritually married their young daughters to Lord Jagannath. Their daughters were then trained as devadasis (female servants of the Lord, supported by the Temple) to sing and dance for the Lord in the Temple. The British colonial administrators mistakenly labeled the devadasis "temple prostitutes." Today, public pressure has ended the tradition of the devadasis. The film interviews a few of the last remaining devadasis, now in their sixties and seventies. We hear them describe how they were married to the Lord and what they experienced when they danced for the Lord. We meet gotipuas, boys who dress as girls and provide a more popular form of dance outside the Temple. And we meet sophisticated, English-speaking contemporary performers of Odissi dance, who organize and attend Odissi seminars and workshops and talk about self-fulfillment and art for art’s sake. The film captures the dynamics of an elaborate dance tradition undergoing not one -- but two -- reinterpretations of its essential features, and the complexities of women’s roles within those changes.

SUGGESTED USE

Anthropology/Sociology of Religion
Art History
Comparative Religion
Dance
Folklore
History of Religions
History of South Asia
Literature
Religions of South Asia
Sociology
South Asian Studies
Women’s Studies
World Religions
Note - The questions are arranged in the sequence in which the film presents the relevant material.

1. Is it true that the English word "juggernaut" comes from India?

"Juggernaut" is an English corruption of the name of Lord Jagannath, the major deity of the temple at Puri. One of the first Englishmen to visit the Puri temple of Lord Jagannath was Lord Burton in 1633. Burton described the "wickedry and idolatry" associated with the worship of Lord "Jagernat" and the zealous suicides associated with the Lord’s cart festival (apparently based primarily on second-hand sources). From Burton’s description, as well as those of such 17th century India travelers as Bernier and Bowrey, Europeans came to associate the term "juggernaut" with Lord Jagannath’s giant festival cart reputedly crushing humans who willingly sacrificed themselves under its wheels. In time the word "juggernaut" entered the English language meaning: "a massive inexorable force or object that crushes whatever is in its path" (Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, 1977).

2. Who is Lord Jagannath?

Jagan-natha in Sanskrit means 'lord of the world.' The worship of Lord Jagannath is associated with the geographical region around the town of Puri in India’s contemporary state of Orissa. Some scholars believe that Jagannath was once a tribal deity. The fact that when the previous image of Jagannath is destroyed every twelve years and a new image constructed, only members of a particular tribe are allowed to participate in the construction, lends support to this belief.

According to one account, Lord Krishna, in one of his incarnations, was killed by a hunter who left Krishna’s body to rot under a tree. A pious person found Krishna’s body, cremated it, and placed the ashes in a box. Some time later the king of the land was informed of the sacred ashes in the box and was directed by Lord Vishnu to request the divine artisan, Vishvakarman, to make an image out of the holy ashes. Vishvakarman agreed, but on condition that he be left undisturbed until he had completed the image. Weeks passed. The king became impatient. He found Vishvakarman. Vishvakarman was so angry at being disturbed that he refused to complete the image, leaving it a stump without eyes, hands, or feet. Lord Brahma provided the stump with large eyes and a soul and served as chief priest at the image’s consecration.

According to another tradition, the stump image of Lord Jagannath first appeared in a shrine in Puri around 300 C.E. The present temple was erected around 500 C.E., and then significantly enlarged by a Ganga raja around 1200 C.E. According to Benjamin Walker:
The sacred enclosure of the temple of Jagannatha at Puri is 652 feet long by 630 feet broad, with a stone wall 20 feet high surrounding it. It contains more than one hundred temples and shrines, dedicated to Krishna, Vishnu, Siva, the Sun-god and other deities. The tower of the main temple rises to a height of 200 feet, and inside stand the sacred images of Jagannatha, and of Balabhadra (Balarama) and Subhadra, the brother and sister of Krishna. The images themselves are, in the words of B.K. Ghose, 'bulky, hideous, wooden busts,' no more than outsize grotesque heads resting on stumps, with arms projecting forward horizontally from the ears. A large diamond gleams on the head of Jagannatha. Pilgrims offer fabulous gifts to the temple...

The temple has a retinue of 6,000 priests, attendants, warders and guides, who are divided into 36 orders and 97 classes. There are different sets of attendants to awaken the gods, to dress them, to feed them, to put them to bed, and numerous bands of dancing girls to entertain them. A total of 20,000 men, women and children work for or are dependent on the shrine." The Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism, New York: Praeger, 1968, Vol. I (A-L), p. 491.

3. What truth is there to the report that pious pilgrims ended their lives beneath the oncoming wheels of Lord Jagannath's chariot?

During the second day of the month of Ashadha (June-July, at the onset of the monsoon season) Lord Jagannath's image is taken from the main temple in Puri and placed in an especially-constructed giant, decorated wooden chariot "forty-five feet high, thirty-five feet square, with sixteen wheels each seven feet in diameter..." (Benjamin Walker, Ibid.) and is pulled about a mile to a smaller temple, where it remains for a week, before being returned to the main temple. Jagannath in his chariot is accompanied on this trip by his brother, Balabhadra, and sister, Subhadra, each of whom is also drawn on a large chariot.

Pilgrims occasionally did voluntarily allow themselves to be crushed under the wheels of these chariots, perhaps in the belief that they would thereby attain immediate release (moksha) from the cycle of reincarnation. During these festivals, other pilgrim deaths also occurred from trampling, heat exhaustion, epidemics, etc. Evidence suggests that during the annual chariot festival more deaths occurred through such accidents than through religiously-motivated suicides under the chariots' wheels. Western critics of India or of Hinduism often exaggerated the frequency and violence of these suicides, some of them hoping thereby to raise more support for Christian missionary activities in India.
4. Where do the words "devadasi" and "mahari" come from, and what does it mean to be a "bride of the god?"

Deva-dasi in Sanskrit means "female servant of the deity." Mahari is the word for deva-dasi in the local Oriya language. According to the maharis interviewed for this film, in order to become a mahari, when a girl was small her parents had to give her for adoption to some current mahari, who became the little girl's "mother" and began teaching her temple singing and dancing. At an appropriate age, if the king of Puri consented, the girl "married" Lord Jagannath in a formal and expensive wedding ceremony, during which the Lord's cloth was tied to the girl (much as a husband's cloth would be tied to his wife in a more typical wedding ceremony). From then on, the girl was a mahari -- a "bride of the god." A Mahari was considered especially "auspicious" because she could never be widowed (since her husband, Lord Jagannath, was a god and hence immortal). Throughout her life she could place red powder in the parting of her hair (a sign of a married woman), and wear bangles and jewelry. She represented a permanent, transcendent state of (metaphoric) sexuality and fertility, whose presence at public events was "auspicious."

5. How could parents, like those of Hari Priya, give their daughter to a temple for adoption?

There are several reasons why parents might give their daughter to a temple for adoption: (1) Poverty. Poor parents might offer their daughter to a temple to relieve the economic strain on their family and possibly enhance the survival chances of the daughter herself. (2) Widowhood or widowerhood. A widow or widower might offer a daughter for adoption because of the difficulties of raising a child in a single-parent home. (3) Desire for spiritual benefit. "Donating" a daughter to a temple was believed to earn merit for the donors. (4) Desire for a son. Firstborn daughters may have been given to a temple in the hope that such an act would assure her parents the birth of a son. (5) Fulfillment of a vow. A family might make a vow during a time of crisis (e.g., epidemic, illness, etc.) to "donate" a daughter to a temple in return for divine assistance in overcoming the crisis. After overcoming the crisis, the family was obligated to "donate" a daughter to a temple.

5. What is Hari Priya doing on camera with her needle and thread?

Hari Priya is preparing a flower garland for temple pilgrims. Pilgrims purchase such garlands for use as offerings to the temple deities.

6. What are the differences between the dance forms of Bharata Natyam, Kathak, and Odissi that Madhavi Mudgal says she studied?

Each of these dance forms has its own origins, sets of basic bodily
movements, and styles of choreography. A somewhat parallel statement by a dancer in the United States might be that she had studied ballet, chorus-line, and modern dance. For further information about the differences between these (and other "classical" Indian) dance forms, see Cliff R. Jones, "India's Dance and Dance-Drama," in Joseph W. Elder (ed.), *Chapters in Indian Civilization, Volume II: British and Modern India*, Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt, 1970, pp. 113-136.

7. How typical is it for a dance student to begin studying with a guru's student before finally studying with the guru, as in the case of Madhavi Mudgal?

Students of dance and music are generally identified as members of the gharana ("household") of their particular guru. Since all students of the same guru belong to the same gharana, it is not uncommon for a young student to begin studying dance or music with his/her guru's student. After the young student has grasped the basic elements of the dance or music form and has shown some talent, s/he might "graduate" to study directly with the guru.

8. How significant is Hari Priya's statement to Madhavi Mudgal that "you dance outside, on the stage. To you dance is art and knowledge. We [maharis] danced only inside the temple, as service to God?"

Hari Priya is describing one critical difference between contemporary Odissi dance and Odissi dance as it was performed by maharis like herself inside the temple of Lord Jagannath. Contemporary Odissi dance (as performed by Hari Priya) came into existence after a 1957 conference in Madras and a 1958 seminar in New Delhi, attended by scholars and dancers, "defined" the major components of the dance.

9. In what language are Hari Priya and Madhavi Mudgal conversing?

Madhavi Mudgal (the contemporary Odissi dancer) is speaking Hindi, while Hari Priya (the mahari) is speaking mostly Oriya. Nevertheless, there is enough overlap between the languages so that the two women can generally understand each other.

10. Who are the Apsaras and Gandharvas (the "mythic counterparts of the maharis")?

The Gandharvas were mythical heavenly male musicians who survived from Vedic times as servants of Lord Indra, the king of the gods. The Apsaras were their female counterparts, who were beautiful and libidinous, heavenly courtesans, and mistresses of gods and men. The Gandharvas and Apsaras were also considered to be divine dancers and singers.
11. Who is Bharata, and what is his manual on theatrical arts?

Bharata is a semi-legendary figure generally considered to be the author of a famous early treatise on the performing arts. The Natya Sastra, as the work is called, was written in Sanskrit sometime between the 2nd and 4th centuries C.E. and has since undergone multiple revisions. The Natya Sastra is a wide-ranging work covering poetry, drama, dance, music, and criticism. According to legend, the work was Bharata’s attempt to reproduce in writing a vision of the Lord Indra’s celestial court performing a drama.

12. What are the likely relationships between sculpted dance positions on temple walls and actual postures assumed during the dance by contemporary Odissi dancers?

The earliest sculpted representations of dancers who could be interpreted as dancing in the Odissi style appear on the stone walls of the Konarak temple, constructed presumably between the 13th and 14th centuries C.E. Contemporary Odissi dance instructors refer to those sculpted representations as models of postures to be assumed by dancers during a dance performance.

13. What does Madhavi Mudgal mean when she says, "Sculpture and written texts describe formal positions in Odissi. But rhythm and movement come through oral tradition -- from teacher to student?"

The Sanskrit texts and the sculpted figures on temple walls can at best describe static positions assumed by dancers during the course of the dance (e.g., the squared-off chowka stance). The manners in which the dancer moves from one position to the next must be created. It is at these points that instruction from a guru (i.e., "rhythm and movement") become most important, as can be seen in the guru’s dance workshop sequences.

14. How have the dates been established for the building of the Jagannath temple?

The dates are based primarily on royal inscriptions, recorded on copper-plates or on stone, commemorating the acts of kings. Temple inscriptions (describing, for example, royal donations) have also been used. A series of prominent inscriptions in Puri attribute the building of the great Jagannath temple to king Anantavarman Codaganga (1078-1147 C.E.) of the Ganga dynasty. However, evidence suggests that there was already a temple at that location that the king renovated and enlarged. And king Anantavarman Codaganga’s renovation plans had not been completed before his death.

15. What does Hari Priya mean when she says, "We [maharis] danced according to the time, the month, the year, and the season?"

The maharis’ style of song and dance varied within the same day between the morning (when they danced while Lord Jagannath ate
behind a curtain) and the evening (when they sang before his shrine). In addition, the ritual duties of the maharies varied according to the time intervals Hari Priya mentions (month, season, and year). For example, the maharis sang a special set of songs at the time of the chariot festival at the onset of the monsoon rains. At this critical point in the agricultural cycle, Lord Jagannath’s favor and the various symbolisms (procreative, sexual, life-providing, water-associated, and fertility) of the maharis are most important.

16. Why do cooks inside the Jagannath Temple prepare food, and why is the food ritually offered to Lord Jagannath before being eaten by humans?

Cooks inside the Jagannath Temple prepare food both for the 36 categories of temple servants (who are supported, in part, by this food) and for the pilgrims who come to the Temple. Offering the food first to Lord Jagannath is related to the Hindu notion of prasad. Prasad means "that which is given by divine favor." It refers to food offered to a deity (often by priests in a ritual setting) for blessing. The deity "enjoys" the offering (metaphysically) and, by doing so, blesses the food, imbuing it with divine favor. The food is subsequently consumed by the temple servants or pilgrims, conferring blessing upon them.

17. What activities do non-Brahman priests perform in Lord Jagannath’s temple?

The most important non-Brahman priests in Lord Jagannath’s Temple are the daitas. Daita is Sanskrit for "demon." In Orissa it refers to priests believed to be descended from the original tribal worshippers of Lord Jagannath. These non-Brahman priests are in charge of most activities that require close contact with the image of Lord Jagannath (for example, the daitas cook Lord Jagannath’s food). When Lord Jagannath is "sick" every year just before the chariot festival, they alone can attend to him. And during the navakalevara ceremony every twelve years, when the previous image of Lord Jagannath is destroyed and a new wooden image is created, the daitas play a central role in removing (and destroying) the old image, fashioning the new image, and transplanting Lord Jagannath’s essence from the old to the new image.

18. What might be the significance of drawing the curtain before the shrine of Lord Jagannath while he is being fed, preventing him from seeing the dancing devadasi?

Frederique Marglin, in her book Wives of the God: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri (p. 95 ff.) suggests that the curtain is drawn to separate the deity from the sexual impurity of the dancing devadasi. The same sexuality that is key to the life-maintaining auspiciousness of the devadasi causes her impurity and makes it necessary to shelter the feeding deity behind the curtain. The
mutual yet opposing forces of female sexuality's impurity and auspiciousness are thus "safely" incorporated into the feeding ritual.

19. What is known about the sari-binding ceremony whereby a girl who had been adopted and trained by the maharis became a devadasi and was entitled to perform the rituals before Lord Jagannath's shrine?

The devadasi "mother" of the pre-puberty girl had to send a written petition to the king requesting the sari-binding ceremony. The king's officers then checked the girl's knowledge of singing and dancing and her original caste (devadasis could not come from castes so low they were forbidden to give water to brahmans). After the facts were found to be satisfactory, an auspicious date was chosen for the ceremony. On that day, the girl wore new bangles and clothes and had an initiatory mantra ("instrument of thought," sacred sound, syllable, word, or verse) whispered in her ear by the devadasis' guru. She was then taken to Lord Jagannath's Temple by other devadasis, where they stood at the Victory Victory Gate (see #4 on Simplified Diagram of the Temple). There, in the presence of the Temple's Chief Priest, a cloth was tied around the girl's head by a temple servant. The cloth was a piece of a sari that had been worn by the image of Lord Jagannath. A garland (that had also been worn by the image of Lord Jagannath) was placed around the girl's neck. The girl then circumambulated the Temple and returned to her home, accompanied by musicians and women doing the hula-huli (making a high-pitched auspicious sound by raising their voices while moving their tongues rapidly from one side of the mouth to the other). At home, the girl was greeted by a brahman priest who called on various deities to protect the girl in her new role. The cloth was then untied from the girl's head, and it and the garland were placed in the home shrine. That evening the girl was taken to the palace to visit the king. She touched the king's bed and looked into the king's eyes.

From that day forward, the girl was considered to be a devadasi married to Lord Jagannath. She could now perform the morning dance ritual before Jagannath's shrine. However, only after she attained puberty and participated in a large feast celebrating her coming of age could she perform the evening singing ritual before the shrine of Lord Jagannath.

20. Who was Jayadeva, what is the Gita-Govinda that is attributed to him, and is there any truth to the story that he composed the Gita-Govinda out of his love for a devadasi of Puri?

Jayadeva was a 12th century C.E. Bengali poet, author of the Gita-Govinda, a Sanskrit poem describing the legendary love of Lord Krishna (Govinda) and the village maiden Radha. It is impossible to determine if there is any truth to the legend that Jayadeva composed the Gita-Govinda out of his love for a devadasi of Puri.
(whom he married). Today, as well as in the past, Odissi dancers frequently perform abhinaya (story-enactment) dance to the words of the Gita-Govinda set to music. Before the shrine of Lord Jagannath, the devadasis performed only pure dance, which has no story line but is said to embody the quality of sringara -- or romantic love.
SIMPLIFIED DIAGRAM OF LORD JAGANNATH’S TEMPLE AT PURI