

## KELUCHARAN MAHAPATRA

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When I saw Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra on the stage for the first time, I was disappointed. To my callow mind he seemed a wizened old man. Two beady eyes gleamed under a bald head, a smile creased his face as he greeted the audience. His dress was simple—a brown dhoti with a black border.

‘Why, he looks like a pixie!’ I thought. ‘How can he be a great dancer? He has neither the face nor the figure for it. No charisma.’

But when he began to dance, all feelings fled except for wonder—wonder at the magic he made so effortlessly. His *pallavi* (a number of pure dance) was radiant. But there were no words at all to describe his *abhinaya* (depiction through expressions of the face and body).

I was used to young men and women handling the Radha—Krishna theme. But Kelubabu’s Radha was altogether different. Shy and tremulous, she shone with a beauty from within and without. How deep her sighs as she waited for Krishna under the fragrant trees! How angry the lift of her eyebrows when she saw him flirt with other women!

And Krishna ... shimmering in every limb, every song, and every movement!

With other dancers *sringara* (theme of love) was good acting. With Kelubabu, you could not believe he was conscious of what he was doing. When I grew older I realized that such spontaneity comes not from instinct alone, but from profound reflection—and the commitment of a lifetime.

‘My dancing and teaching are based on deep thinking,’ says Kelubabu. ‘Not only thinking about what I learnt from my gurus, but also by linking it to painting, sculpture, music and poetry. My work always falls short of what I see in my mind. But I am very conscious of the need to pass on to others what I see and what I know.’

Today the term ‘Odissi nritya’ evokes visions of a classical dance form performed in prestigious venues across the world. Artists, connoisseurs and critics have acclaimed its elegance and precision, and its capacity to explore emotions both deeply and delicately.

But as recently as fifty to sixty years ago, Odissi dance was shunned even in Orissa, where the art had grown around temples, especially at the Jagannath Mandir in Puri. An Oriya saying denounced music as the pursuit of the shameless. Dance was worse—it was practised by the decadent. The ancient dance form called Odhra-Magadha in the *Natyasastra* (circa first century AD), and painted in the Rani Gumpha caves (second century BC), was stigmatized as lewd and lowly.

True, the fire had died. But the embers glowed in two living forms—the dance of the *Maharis* and the *Gotipuas*. The Maharis were women dancers attached to the temples. Their dance was part of ritual worship—both before the sanctum and in the festival procession of the gods round the streets. The Gotipuas were young boys who dressed as girls to enact through dance the stories of Krishna. They represented *the gopis* of Vrindavan.

Both the Mahari and the Gotipua traditions had their roots in the centuries-old Bhakti cult. The great poets and songsters of Orissa—the birthplace of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Jayadeva—were key figures in this pan-Indian movement of self-surrendering devotion.

Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra inherited this multifaceted tradition. Trained in childhood in the Gotipua and *Raas* styles, he became the single most important contributor to the renaissance of Odissi nritya. In the process he became the foremost artist and guru in that genre.

Kelubabu is known both as traditionalist and innovator. His researches into art forms related to dance have enriched the repertoire of Odissi in music and poetry. His intuitive response to temple sculpture and to the *pata chitra* art have added new dimensions to his choreography.

Above all, Kelubabu has been an inspiring and demanding guru to a large number of disciples from all over India and many parts of the world.

Today Odissi has performing artists of quality. But there is no other guru of Kelucharan Mahapatra's stature to perpetuate the tradition.

If you ask him about this Kelubabu will say, 'Don't imagine that a great art form depends on a few individuals here and there. As long as the gods in our temples stand, our arts will draw their life force from them. As for Odissi, it has survived greater periods of decline. I don't think we need to worry about its future. If a single guru appears in a hundred years, it means all the masters are alive in him.'

Who can question the faith of a master?

### FROM THE EARTH TO THE STARS

My earliest memories are of a merry and carefree childhood among the trees and the green fields of my little village. This was Raghurajpur near the temple-town of Puri in Orissa. Yes, the same Puri, famous throughout India as the home of Lord Jagannath. Thousands of pilgrims gather there during the annual festival to see Lord Jagannath, flanked by his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra. They go round the streets on a splendid chariot. Like most people in Orissa, my family too worshipped Lord Jagannath with a whole-hearted devotion.

My mother was a simple and pious woman. She had lost a child before me. Therefore, when I was born, she took me straight to the village temple and placed me at the feet of the Goddess there, saying, 'Devi, this boy is riot mine. He is yours. As his mother, it is your duty to protect him.' Perhaps it was this simple prayer which saw me through several bouts of illness in my childhood. And though I was sickly, it kept me cheerful.

I remember my father vividly. As a child I was fascinated by the things he did. By profession he was a *pata chitrakar*, which means a painter. He drew pictures of gods and goddesses, especially the stones of Krishna, and sold them to make a living.

Sometimes, when I came back from playing games, I would sit next to my father and watch him draw outlines of figures. A few strokes of colour and they would leap to life before my eyes. Another thing he did excited me even more. He could play the drum. This was the *nadya-khol* or *mridang*. He used to play it at die temple *sankirtan*. Sankirtan

is the group-singing of devotional songs. Sometimes, as he sat and painted quietly, I would remember the thrill of the drums. He had a small box for paint brushes. That box had resonant sides. Slowly I would start tapping upon it. My father would look up, smile indulgently and say, 'Come on, I'll teach you —Dhirkitataka, dhirkitataka, khimrikita, khimrikita!'

I would play those sounds on my box drum. The room would resound with our enthusiastic-drumming—'dhir kud, dhir kud, dhir kud...'

Orissa is a land full of music and dance. Our village too had its dance troupes, two of them. They performed a traditional dance called Gotipua nritya in which young boys took part. They were dressed up as gopis, or the cowherd girls of Vrindavan. Our village had a famous *jatra* party or folk theatre as well.

I grew up in this world full of song and dance, drums and bells. My heart echoed to the 'tham tadinamta' from the sankirtan, the 'tha-thai-thai' of the gotipua groups and the popular songs of the jatra. Within the house there was of course father's mridang. I was always dancing and imitating the dancers I saw.

My grandmother loved me dearly. She would encourage me by asking me to dance for her. At once I would leap and twist and prance. She would be doing some household work—cleaning rice, stringing flowers, or even praying—and would drop her work and watch my antics with delight. When I stopped to catch my breath she would burst out, 'This boy must certainly become a dancer. He is a born artist!'

Sometimes I would imitate the singing and the acting I saw in the jatra plays at the village. I hardly understood the meaning of what I did, but my imitation was very good, full of my own enjoyment of what I was doing. My father saw my capers and realized that I had a keen sense of rhythm. He would say, 'At this young age he learns quickly. He has no inhibitions. Perhaps I should send him to be trained properly by some great dance teacher in Puri.' But my mother would not agree to send me away so far from her. I was too young and too precious!

Our village had its little school. There the day began with a long recitation of shlokas. When the lessons would start. And to me, they seemed to go on forever. My heart was not in my studies at all. I was always lost in my own world of 'sa-ri-ga-ma-pa' and 'dhim ta dhim'. I would sit in the class and dream of dancing. How could any teacher be pleased with me?

One day I was dancing as usual at home, when Bhalabhadra Sahu, the village dance master, dropped in. He watched my wild gyrations for a few minutes. His eyes grew wide in surprise and his eyebrows rose. He turned to my mother and exclaimed, 'Arey! This is wonderful! Your son seems to have the gift. If you send him to me, you will see what I can do.' My mother said, perhaps only in fun, and not as a serious commitment, 'Han, han! He is crazy. Take him. He is always jumping and spinning like a top.'

These words stuck in my mind. I thought they gave official sanction to do what I desperately wanted to. From the next day I started going very quietly to the dance class in Bhalabhadra Sahu's house. I sneaked past the village school where the children were reciting their daily lessons. How glad I was to escape that!

On the very first day, as soon as I stepped into his class, Guruji told me, 'Join the dancers and learn the step properly. Those words electrified me. I forgot myself. I

became totally one with the dance. And yet, all through that time, and even in my moments of greatest joy, I was quite aware that if my father caught sight of me among the Gotipua trainees, he would forbid me to continue. So I did not tell anyone that I had made the switch from village school to dance class, and people at home thought I was still reciting lessons at school.

Everyday, promptly at 10 o'clock in the morning, my father would stand on the doorstep and bellow, 'Keloooo! That call would reach me anywhere in the village. It was the signal for the morning meal. I would drop whatever I was doing and come running home. Father and I would sit on the floor. Mother would serve us food. We would eat together and I would return to the dance class. My father never once ate without me by his side. Such a seemingly little thing to keep in mind. Now I know it was a sign of his deep affection for me.

At thirteen, I had received three years of secret training. My guru decided that the Durga puja festival would be the right time to launch me on the stage. Now this created a very big problem. I had to dress like a gopi. I had to wear a girl's costume and ornaments and pierce my nose and ears to put rings on them!

My mother could deny me nothing. Moreover, she had nothing against Gotipua nritya. She only saw the devotion in it, not the vulgarity. As usual, she came to my rescue. She found a clever excuse for my need. 'I have lost several children,' she told my father, 'surely due to some evil influence. I am afraid some harm will come to our darling Kelu too. So I have taken a vow to pierce my son's nose and ears before the goddess in the temple.'

My father was horrified by this strange vow. But he could not object. He did go on postponing the day of the ceremony, until, one day, when he was away in Puri to sell his paintings, my mother got the job done.

On his return, as if the sight of his child with pierced nose and ears was not enough, Guru Bhalabhadra Sahu came home to break the 'news' to him. Of course, Guruji thought my father would be delighted. 'Chintamani,' he said, 'Your son is now fully trained as a Gotipua. With your blessing, he is going to make his debut on the stage on Durga puja day.

'Nonsense! What are you saying?' Father was shocked.

Guruji went on happily. 'It's not nonsense! I'm saying that your son Kelu—'

Father cut in rudely, 'How did he learn to dance?'

'He has been learning for three years now. He is one of my best pupils;

Mother joined in: 'What is wrong with that?' Poor woman she tried to calm him down but father turned to her in red-hot fury, 'So you knew about it? How dare you allow Kelu to do this? What do these people know about dancing that you sent Kelu to learn from them?'

My guruji's face looked black. Father continued to shout things which were hurtful and bitter.

'You call these vulgar movements dancing?' he roared. 'I shan't let my son wink at the audience, twitch his lips and wiggle his bottom on the stage. I will never allow him to

do this Gotipua dance. I know you have taken great pains train to him. But if he dances at all, I want it to be good and pure and noble. Never this!’

I was terrified by that explosion. But I learnt later that what father said was true. Well, I never went back to the village dance class again.

But something good did come out of that scene. Father realized I had set my heart on dancing. He decided to send me to the right guru.

This was Mohanchandra Devgoswami who was a learned and respected teacher of Raas nritya in Puri.

Raas nritya is a group dance with some bits of drama in-between. It describes, with a lot of feeling for the characters, Krishna’s life from his birth to the killing of Kamsa. Krishna’s pranks in Vrindavan are depicted in detail. In other words, you can say that Raas nritya is another way of worshipping Krishna—not with flowers and lights, but with song and dance and acting.

Soon I learnt all the roles that were to be played on the stage. It was the story which linked the dance and made it come alive. I was completely lost in it, lost in the glory of Krishna. Living with Krishna all the time—in rehearsals, performances and dreams—I began to believe that all the stories we acted out were true. I could no longer separate the story from my life.

But Raas nritya is like that. It can arouse so much emotion as to get the spectators into a frenzy. They would come and fall at the feet of the actors who played Radha and Krishna!

Overwhelmed by all these experiences, one day, some of the young boys in the troupe went to the railway station to catch a train to Vrindavan. I was only thirteen. I thought that at the end of the journey, I would meet Radha and Krishna, if not earlier on the railway platform, at least under some shady tree near the river Yamuna! I would join the real gopis in their dance around Krishna!

Our guru got to hear of our escapade. He was frantic. He sent people to find us and bring us back. His relief in getting us back made him shout at us all the more. ‘Idiots! Fools! Are you mad?’

You ran off to see Krishna? You can do it right here in Puri, Lord Jagannath is our Krishna! Oh, you stupid boys! Will the Lord whom even the saints and gods cannot see easily, will He come before you in human form?’

When I heard this it was as if I woke up from a beautiful dream. I found real life miserable in comparison. I became totally depressed. It took me a long time to get over that feeling of being terrible let down, what adults called getting disillusioned. It is a part of growing up for everyone.

But much later, I realized that we can see Krishna. God can take a human form and come down to us through art. All my life, my dancing has been a remembering of my childhood dream. It is my attempt to recreate Krishna’s playful actions—Krishnaleela.

Many students came to join us and many went away. But I stayed with Mohanchandra Devgoswami through the years. In those days we were taught to see the guru as father, mother and God. His word was law. The more we served him, the better we could learn; the more he blessed us, the greater our good fortune. I served my guru in every way I

could, and was always by his side. I was in charge of managing his household and keeping accounts. I slept near him so that I could be on hand if he called at night. I would make his bed, wash his clothes, run errands, press his feet—do anything he wanted. It was 'Kelu-do-this', 'Kelu-come-here' all the time!

Meanwhile, my father had had a heart attack and died. He left a message for his children. They were sad words from a man who owned up to his failures: 'I die in utter poverty, leaving only my love for my sons. Tell them to be confident, never over-confident. I have been drowned in debts. Tell them they must never borrow money, that our name should never be dishonoured. 'After this my guru taught me with greater love. Whatever I am today is entirely due to his blessings.

Yet I left him.

It started with what you might think was a small mistake. I did something forbidden—nothing bad, just a bit of mischief. But the results were shattering.

In those days cinema was just a word to me. Everybody talked about it and I was curious to find out what it meant. That was when *Kangan*, a 'superhit' of those times, was being shown in Puri. I knew that my guru would never let me go to the movie theatre. So, at night, while he was asleep, I tiptoed out of the house to see the second show. I did make sure that a fellow student of mine was there to take care of our teacher, if he should call.

Just after midnight Guruji woke up. 'Kelu, where are you?' he said. My friend tried to cover up for me, saying that I had gone downstairs. 'Let me press your feet,' he said. But my guru did not want anybody else. He wanted me.

'Why did Kelu go down? Did I say something to hurt him?' Lighting the lamp, Guruji came down in search of me. The commotion awoke everyone.

I was back by then and standing outside the door, wondering how to slip in unnoticed. That is when I heard someone say that I might have stolen all the money and run away. So my friend was forced to tell the truth. 'Don't say that. Kelu has just gone to see a film.'

Guruji heard that. Perhaps because he felt a sense of relief, he spoke some words which shocked me deeply. The keys dropped from my hands. All at once there was complete silence within the house. Everyone knew I had heard those words of abuse.

From that moment I became convinced that I could not stay under my guru's roof, ever again.

The door opened. Guruji was standing motionless. I picked up the keys, walked up to him slowly, and placed the keys at his feet. Guruji turned his face away. He might have been embarrassed. But I saw it as rejection. That decided my course of action. I went out and sat on the road.

At dawn I sent word to my mother to come. The sun rose high. It got hotter and hotter. I was still sitting there in the afternoon when I heard my guru say, 'Gall that *badmash*, that bad boy, and feed him.' But no one dared to approach me.

At last my mother arrived. I told her I was coming home for good. I refused to explain any further and took leave of my guru.

For years my guru had been afflicted with leprosy. For eight years I had nursed him, cleaned his wounds, put medicine on them and prayed for his welfare.

‘There is no one to serve me as you have done,’ my guru said to me. ‘Are you really going to leave me like this, sick and full of suffering?’

My silence made him angry. He cursed me, ‘You heartless fellow, you will also suffer the same fate!’

As I took the dust from his feet in final farewell, I thought about those words. I felt that his curse would come true only if I did something wrong. Otherwise, the dust from my guru’s feet would keep all evil away. It would guard me from misfortune.

I am not going to tell you about my years of suffering after this. They were many and long. I could not get enough work to support myself and my family. Dancing was impossible. I toiled in the fields; I worked in a betel leaf plantation. There I carried pots arid pots of water each day, and cried over my fate.

Later J found work in a theatre company in Puri. By a great stroke of luck, the manager of the drama troupe discovered that I could dance. He started casting me in key roles which demanded singing and dancing.

It was slow and uphill work to establish myself as a dancer and as a teacher of this very great and ancient style of Indian dancing called Odissi. In fact, it has taken a whole lifetime. Which is quite all right. Because dance has not only made my life purposeful, it has been my whole life.