

[Odyssey of an Odissi Dancer](#)

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CULTURE

Odyssey of an Odissi Dancer

An interview with Masako Ono, a skilled dancer who voyaged from Japan to India to learn the ancient art she so loved, and remained there to teach it

Anantha Krishnan, Chennai

Not many could walk into an entirely new land, learn all the facets of its culture, adopt it as "home away from home " and become a professional in a native art. And that is exactly what Masako Ono of Japan has done in India's eastern coastal state of Orissa. Certainly one of the most notable contributions Orissa culture has made to the world is the exquisite traditional dance form called Odissi. Perhaps the most lyrical style of Indian classical dance, Odissi is exemplified by its graceful gestures and movements which vivify the sensuous sculptures found in some of Orissa's Hindu temples.

With the towering structure of Lingaraj temple visible miles away, navigating through the bustling streets of Bhubaneswar, the capitol of Orissa, I find myself in front of a two-story house with a neatly manicured garden in front. The rhythms and jingles emanating from the house suggests that a dance class is in progress. Stepping in, one would be surprised to find not another Indian Odissi teacher, but instead a relatively tall, slim and doe-eyed Japanese lady teaching the movements. Masako Ono, through sheer determination and dedication, has mastered the art she fell in love with and has made Bhubaneswar, a city vastly different from her native Tokyo, her home.

Masako performs often in India and abroad and reaps the recognition she well deserves. We interviewed Masako in her home, retracing the journey that brought

her to where she is today.

Her beginnings in Indian dance

I started dancing when I was five. I learned Western classical ballet, jazz and hip-hop. One day at elementary school, I saw a picture of the Taj Mahal and was stunned by its beauty. My fascination for India continued and I majored in Indo-Pakistan studies. I learned Hindi and Urdu and came here for a brief visit. One of the first things I saw was dance--Bharatanatyam and Kathakali.

After returning to Japan, I took a Bharatanatyam class from a Japanese teacher in Tokyo. One of the students in the class handed me a videotape of an Odissi performance by

Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, and it changed my life. I was taken by the graceful movement and the aura he brought to the atmosphere. I said to myself, "I've found what I want to do in my life."

The Indian Embassy gave me a brochure for Nrityagram, a dance school based near Bangalore. I came to India again and visited Nrityagram, only to find that it was closed. I was depressed and went back to Japan and wrote to Protima Gauri Bedi, the school's founder. There was no reply for a while. Just as I was about to give up and take a job offer in Tokyo, I got an invitation from Protima to join Nrityagram. Torn between dancing and fulfilling my responsibility by finding a job and taking care of my mother, I was pleasantly surprised when she told me to follow my dreams. I withdrew all my savings and took the first flight to Bangalore.

Life at Nrityagram

Nrityagram is located in the middle of a jungle, at least for me, with no proper roads, so rustic. When I reached Nrityagram in 1996, Protima asked me a few blunt but deep questions which today still help me to continue my journey: "What do you

want?" "I want to learn Odissi dance." "Are you going to be a professional dancer or learn a bit and go back to Japan?" "I will try to be a professional dancer." "You just want to be an Odissi dancer or you will be an Odissi dancer?" At this point I realized what she was getting at, and I knew I had to declare, "I will be a professional Odissi dancer."

Life at Nrityagram was intense and rigorous, yet so joyful and educative. In short, I learned everything there. It helped me hone my inborn talents. In addition to Odissi, I learned yoga and Pilates. There were also workshops on Flamenco, African dance, contemporary dance and martial arts like Kalaripayattu.

The challenges of blending in to a new country and culture

I could hardly speak English when I first arrived. It took me almost ten months before I started to be comfortable with it. There were twelve students at the campus, all Indian girls. Initially, I felt it was going to be very difficult to make friends with them because of my bad English. But they were just angels, so kind, caring and understanding.

Coming to Bhubaneswar

I had been visiting Bhubaneswar since 1998 for long stretches to take Odissi classes from teachers who are based here. After my training at Nrityagram, I was a bit restless and wanted to be at the birthplace of Odissi to get better exposure. I received intensive training under the legendary Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra and three other remarkable teachers. Each of them has something unique in their style, and that helped me in becoming a well-rounded dancer. I have been living here for two years now, giving performances and lectures, teaching yoga and Odissi.

What makes Odissi special

When I did other forms of dance, it was mostly body and movement, and I had to be

aware of these two aspects only. Since there was more freedom, a misstep here or there could easily be covered up and gotten away with, but with Odissi, there's no such luxury. Odissi has to be performed strictly according to the prescriptions in the Natyashastra [scripture on the science of dance and drama]. Moreover, this age-old dance form is so intertwined with the Indian spiritual psyche, the mind-body-soul aspect is very much in play when you dance. The expression of emotions, in a controlled manner, makes it unique and demands very high discipline from the dancer.

On audience response in India and Japan

Overall, it is very positive. In India, they are pleasantly surprised that someone from abroad could learn their art and perform at this level. People come up to me in large numbers after my show and express their appreciation. To be honest, I do get critical comments from my teachers, fellow dancers, reporters and organizers, and that helps me to motivate myself.

In Japan, because of unfamiliarity, I feel the audience is in a mixed emotional state: on the one hand, they love watching Odissi, and on the other, it takes time for them to come to grips with the costumes and movements, as they are more familiar with Western classical dance.

Ethnic discrimination in dance

There is a common belief that any ethnic art is more suited to people who belong to that ethnic group. If that were true, we would not see such accomplished Western classical musicians in China, Japan and other countries. It is hard to get accepted in the beginning, but today, I don't feel any different from an Indian dancer. No doubt, it takes double the effort and hard work to overcome the differences, both in your own mind and in performing the art.

Her fusion choreography

After dancing for seven years, I felt I had reached a stage when it was time to analyze my own dance. I never questioned what I learned at Nrityagram, but if I were to continue to perform in the same style, it is almost like copying. That led me to experiment, while very much keeping the essence of Odissi. Lately, I have been collaborating with dancers, musicians and artists from India and abroad. These collaborations help me refine my choreographic skills. I have also been working on blending Odissi, yoga and tantra in my pieces. These would be staged as fusion dances and not as Odissi performances.

Her dancer's diet

I follow a vegetarian diet. It keeps me light, as the digestion is faster. My belly is always flat. I find it makes it easier to bend and twist the body and to leap higher.

Her future goals

As an artist, I will continue to strive to inspire, encourage, energize and move people through my dance. I hope to be innovative in my fusion collaborations, to impart the knowledge I have gained to my students, to promote the image of Odissi abroad as a classical art and dispel the notion that it is "ethnic " or "folk art " and to do something special for my dear mother. Without her support and backing, I would not be sitting here talking with you.

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