

Sanjukta Panigrahi

If I Lived Again I Would Still Dance

Edited by Julia Varley from an interview in Savvy, Calcutta, January 1996 and a speech at the symposium Theatre in a Multicultural Society, Copenhagen May 1996

I thought that I would go mad if I could not dance. Raghunath and I had angry exchanges for a long time, but finally in 1966 we both moved to Bhubaneswar and started again. Music and dance can get people together where other things cannot. When my career picked up Raghunath started singing more and more with me. I can't deny that he had to make compromises in his career to follow me. Together we had decided to establish Odissi as an individual classical dance style and we worked tirelessly for this.

I have been asked to speak: it is a very hard task for me. I would dance for you for four hours not to speak. I believe in women's liberation but I am also a strong supporter of marriage. It is important that a woman shoulders her responsibilities no matter what her other talents and capabilities may be. There are certain things only a woman can do. A woman has to find her position, not by speaking but by doing her duty and her own work. I believe in tradition but not false tradition where husbands say that women must spend their whole day doing household tasks.

I was born in 1944 in Bershampore, Orissa, India. My father was an engineer. My mother was an amateur singer and appreciation for the arts ran in her family. I was a very special child because I was born after three brothers and my parents were waiting for a daughter. When I was two years old every time I heard any recorded music I would spontaneously move my hands and feet. When my mother saw this, she thought I could achieve what she had not been allowed to do. She wanted me to learn dancing and singing and said so to my father, who was shocked. I am from an orthodox Brahmin family and at that time it was unthinkable for a girl of a Brahmin family to learn dance.

There is a saying in India: people with little shame sing, people with no shame play, people who are totally shameless dance. The Odissi dance from my region used to be part of the religious rituals. Dancing girls were dedicated to the temples to regulate daily ritual services. In the 16th century Orissa lost independence. The new rulers destroyed the culture and the temples and took the dancing girls out of the temples to the court. The devotional form was lost and the dance which had been devoted to the gods slowly became a mere entertainment. The girls became the king's concubines and their reputations were lost.

My father's family thought my mother had gone mad as I would not be able to mix in society later and

would not get married if I danced. My mother was adamant and determined. My father let himself be convinced: I was a special child and it was enough for me to start crying to obtain what I wanted.

I saw my guru Kelucharan Mohapatra and his wife dancing on stage at a theatre. I would imitate their dances in front of the mirror. Like all little girls I was fascinated by their ornaments and costumes. My mother deliberately put in my mind that if I learnt dancing I could also have those pretty things. My guru came home to teach me.

When I was about seven I became popular. People all over Orissa wanted "Baby Sanjukta" to dance at cultural events and festivals. In 1952 I danced at the International Children's Festival in Calcutta. For the first time the dance which was practised only in Orissa was big news in the national press.

I got complaints from school as I was often late: I would stop on the way to dance in the streets for anyone who would ask me to. My father wanted me to leave home so I could concentrate on study and dance together. When I was only eight years old, I was sent to Madras, in southern India, 1200 kilometres away from my home. I did not know the language, I was not accustomed to their food habits. I knew a little English then. Rukmani Devi, the great lady and guru head of the school, said my parents should bring me back again when I was fourteen years old. Again my mother put her foot down and insisted that she should see me dance. I was put on trial for three months: if I cried or made any nonsense I would be sent back home. I stayed in a children's hostel with other children who only spoke their language - Tamil, and they would make fun of me. I used my hand mudras to communicate with. I used to cry every night in hiding. I did not want to be sent back and hurt my mother. I spent six years there. It was the best period of my life, there I learnt what it means to be an artist. When Rukmani Devi gave me the diploma

she said: "Sanjukta you have completed your course, this is the beginning of your life, so take care".

Back in Orissa I started performing both styles, Odissi and Bharata Natyam. Bharata Natyam was more established and better known, but later I decided to concentrate on Odissi to develop it together with my first guru.

My marriage was also a social blow for my family. When my husband's father proposed the marriage, my mother was enthusiastic, because I was a dancer and my husband-to-be a singer, but my father thought it was against all social norms. At that time a wife was supposed to only do housework and it was her responsibility to bring up the children. My mother thought that if I married an engineer or a doctor I would only end up in the kitchen, but if I married an artist perhaps we could work together. At fifteen my father sent me to Bombay to keep me apart from Raghunath, my future husband, and to learn another dance style. My father was worried because artists did not have a secure income, but all was to be as my mother had decided. Raghunath followed me to Bombay and in 1960, when I was sixteen, we got married. It was a shock in Orissa: it was the first time a dancer had married a singer.

As my father had anticipated, we faced many difficulties. There were times when we used to share only one meal a day, times when we walked miles because we could not afford the transport. My dance style was new to the public and we were trying to resurrect it. We had to compose and choreograph, to give lecture demonstrations to show the particularities of this dance. I was not very happy at that time. Something was making me empty, staying in Bombay away from the temple statues of Orissa and from my Guruji's inspiration. The situation was made more difficult by the birth of my two sons: Parthasarathi in 1961 and Sabyasachi in 1963. I was too proud to ask for help from my father and remembered

that my mother had said: "If they work hard and with sincerity and are favoured with luck they will be alright". I was determined that we would overcome all our problems.

In 1964 a government music college was started in Bhubaneswar, my home town, and I got the offer to work as a lecturer in dance. I worked there for two years. I also slowly started getting invitations for performances. Slowly our careers picked up.

Things should have got easier but instead I entered the worst phase in my life. Unlike my family, which is fairly progressive, my husband's people are far more tradition-bound. My father-in-law who was the progressive member of the family, had passed away. My mother-in-law was from a small village and her neighbours started provoking her into wondering why I was dancing instead of looking after her as a proper daughter-in-law should. Finally she spoke to her son about her grievances and Raghunath - who is like a child and completely influenced by his mother - decided we should live in the small village, 450 kilometres from my home. Food habits, clothing, festivals are different there. Divorce in India was out of the question, I did not know what to do. Staying in the hostel as a child I had learnt to be self-reliant, I had learnt to take my own decisions. I had matured very quickly, gaining dance and losing my childhood. I went to the village and tried to do all that was asked of me - doing all the housework, including drawing water from the well. But the constant criticism was that I did not know how to behave and do housework because I was a dancer.

I thought that I would go mad if I could not dance. Raghunath and I had angry exchanges for a long time, but finally in 1966 we both moved to Bhubaneswar and started again. Music and dance can get people together where other things cannot. When my career picked up Raghunath started singing more and more with me. I can't deny that he had to make compromises in his career to follow me. Together we had

decided to establish Odissi as an individual classical dance style and we worked tirelessly for this.

I received many awards, the biggest of them the Padmashree in 1975. I could not believe it when I received the telegram. When the impact of the words sank in I felt I had more responsibility and should work with more seriousness and concentration to justify being given the award. This was the first time a dancer from Orissa was so honoured and everybody in the region was very happy. My husband and my mother were delighted, my father was in tears.

When I look back on my life, I feel I have not been so successful in one area, that of motherhood. When my children were born it was natural in India to think that I would stop dancing to look after them. But my mother was always there to help and she did not want me to stop dancing. I also felt that if I stopped I would give the wrong impression to the younger generation of dancers. I felt a great responsibility and thought I had no right to play with this dance form and just stop after a time. When my children were small I had to leave them to go to perform. People would say I was cruel leaving my children. I had to choose my priorities and I was very sure in my choice. My children grew independent and gradually I started noticing a widening gap. Lately I have tried to make it up to them for this.

Even now in the villages people think dancers are not human and some are respected as gods. People think I don't know how to cook or that it is not possible for me to have a normal family and children who would accept my dancing.

If I had to live my life again, I would not marry so young. I was burdened with responsibilities at a very young age and as a result I have become very serious, disciplined and self-reliant. I sometimes feel intensely lonely. Because my life has been shaped in such a way I cannot open myself or my sorrows to anybody.

If I lived again I would still want to dance. I have reached where I have on my own merit, with my own work and that is something I want every woman to do. Find your priorities, your passions and work towards attaining them. That is where the gratification lies.

SANJUKTA PANIGRAHI (India) is today's most outstanding exponent of Odissi dance. Born in Orissa, India, into a Brahmin family, she was the first girl to pursue Odissi dance as a career, defying the prejudice of her caste. Supported by her family, she began studying at the age of five under guru Kelucharan Mohapatra and trained for six years with the great master Rukmini Davi.



Sanjukta Panigrahi. Photo: Fiora Bemporad