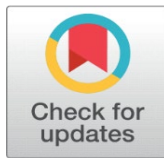


PLACING WOMEN INTO THE HISTORY: DANCERS AND MUSICIANS AS REPRESENTED IN THE PALM LEAF PAINTING OF MEDIEVAL ODISHA

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ABSTRACT

Painting is an integral part of historical studies. In order to comprehend medieval women's history, it is essential to rely on paintings as there are insufficient sources related to the subject. Studying medieval Orissa, particularly women's history in Orissa, is challenging due to a shortage of sources and neglect towards women's history. Medieval painting is considered the most vital and rich historical source. Like literature, painting of the periods also holds the same value as archaeological evidence for historical reconstruction. The social and cultural aspects of society were represented in the paintings of that period. Medieval women were renowned for their contributions to music and dancing. The advancement of musical and dancing culture in ancient and medieval Orissa was largely due to the contribution of women. Palm leaf paintings, stone sculptures, and mural paintings have depicted them with clear visibility. The palm leaf paintings of medieval Orissa, which were produced in large numbers during these periods, depict women's talents and skill in playing musical instruments and dancing. This paper is intended to examine the role and status of women in society through the examination of palm leaf paintings from the medieval period.

Keywords: Palm Leaf, Paintings, Orissa, Women, History, Music, Dancing

1. INTRODUCTION

Dancing was a common practice in medieval Oriya society. It might have prevalent in the temple as god's dancing women or public as people's dancing women. However, dance had its importance in society. Women were the main characters of this art tradition. For their livelihood or religious belief, they were adopting this profession. Eighteenth century mural paintings of Orissa also reflect the socio and religious life of Oriya women. Dance and music culture of the period has been depicted through the religious themes on the wall of the temples and Mathas.

Orissa has a rich tradition of painting. It is also an age old tradition in comparison to the sculpture and architectural art of Orissa. Pathy says that Orissan Painting is unique and different from other Indian paintings such as Deccani, Ajanta, Mughal, Rajasthani. These Indian paintings have emerged with vitality and vigour in the history of Indian painting, but at the same time, they have gone into oblivion with time. However, the Orissan School of painting emerged in the prehistoric era, achieved millstone during the medieval era and continued in the present era. Painting is still active and practised by a group of people, who are called *chitrakaras* or painters. That is why Orissa painting and its antiquity itself show the glory of Orissan visual art.

Orissa painting has its own identity and uniqueness. From the prehistoric period to the medieval period painting of Orissa has its place in the Indian painting culture. Although it was not popular in India, it had a religious identity and its prehistoric origin in Orissa. Jagannath culture was also deeply connected to the painting culture of Orissa. Because the god's image was made from wood, wood idols are painted with different colours like black, white, yellow, red etc. Thus in Jagannath culture, painting is an integral part. Not only images of gods but temples, chariots, ritual cloths and places all are related to painting.

J. P. Das also argues that Puri painting or pata painting originated with the emergence of the Jagannath cult. A class of people who dedicated themselves to the temple rituals and these people formed a community called chitrakara, initially developed in the pilgrimage town of Puri itself. Palm leaf manuscript illustration of medieval Orissa has been treated as visual art for preserving and remembering the past; even it has not been considered a history of visual art for research and study purposes. The irony is that all medieval manuscripts and literary works and kavya were written on palm leaves, are taken as a literary source of history.

2. REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AS DANCERS AND MUSICIANS IN THE PAINTING

Palm leaf painting of Orissa which reached its glory during the seventeenth and eighteenth century Orissa also gave importance to women in the painting. Most of the palm leaf painting of the period is manuscript illustrations. The eighteenth century was a period of riti yuga, and literary works depicted women as a source of luxury items or central figures. Thus palm leaf painting or folios having numbers of women figures in one single folio. *Gitagovinda* palm leaf illustration has given importance to women characters in the paintings. Radha, gopis, and other women figures are depicted on the leaves, according to the story. One of the folios of *Gitagovinda* manuscript painting of Dhanajaya depicted some women dancing and playing musical instruments. This depiction has given a clear idea of the devadasi tradition prevalent in medieval Orissa. (See plate – 1)



Figure-1: *Gitagovinda* palm leaf manuscript shows Devadasis or dancers are performing dance and music
 Source: Author Collection from Odisha State Museum, Bhubaneswar, Palm Leaf Manuscript Section)

Gitagovinda of Jayadeva is a twelfth century composition of the love story of Lord Krishna and Radha. It has twelve cantos and classical ragas. The structure of this composition is poetic in form. Gajapati Prataprudradeva made this *Gitagovinda* song compulsory in the Jagannath temple as a ritual and for devadasis, performing dance to Jagannath's entertainment. This poetic work also influenced artists of the eighteenth century. This work is the combination of songs and narratives of the story of Radha Krishna. Their love, separation, union are the main features of this work. The eighteenth century illustrated palm leaf manuscript of *Gitagovinda* was marvellous. There are number of illustrated palm leaf manuscripts of *Gitagovinda* that preserved in Odisha State Museum, Bhubaneswar. Even colourful palm leaf paintings were also produced by the Oriya artists of the period.

Jayadeva, the author of *Gitagovinda*, probably married a devadasi of Lord Jagannath of Puri. His wife was an expert in dancing. His work *Gitagovinda* is based on Radha-Krishna's eternal love reflected through the palm leaf painting. Painter Dhananjaya's artistic talent is influenced by the poetic rhythm of his heart and shows the elegance of images and narration of the story. The number of illustrated *Gitagovinda* manuscripts of the said period has been preserved in Odisha State Museum, Bhubaneswar. However, Dhananjaya's *Gitagovinda* palm leaf painting of the eighteenth century is unique and elegant. Illustration has given pure artistic touch when drawing the story of Radha Krishna. The *bhangis*, *abhinaya*, and expression of female dancers in palm leaves made them famous and talented in society. Dance in the medieval period

was mainly related to religion and religious institutions. This connection provided a robust platform for female dancers to achieve high positions in society. *Gitagovinda* palm leaf manuscript illustration has given a clear picture of the dance culture of eighteenth century Orissa. Dance is the central theme in this painting. Dancing girls and girls playing musical instruments, dancing postures are portrayed in this illustration. It is believed that *Gitagovinda*, which has written on Radhakrishna love, has given priority to the dancing culture of the temple of Orissa. The illustration of *Gitagovinda* of the eighteenth century depicted two types of dance forms: Radhakrishna dance and women's group dance. In this group dance, one woman is dancing in the centre while others are playing musical instruments of *jhanja*, *bina*, etc., like the temple sculpture of medieval Orissa.

In the *Gitagovinda* palm leaf painting, women characters occupied a central place in the folios of manuscripts. Radha, her companions and *gopis* are typical characters of this illustration. Though the characters depicted on palm leaf are from Mahabharat, costumes, ornaments, traditions, behaviour, and activities portrayed through this painting are adopted from Oriya culture. Folio No -III of this work depicted the story of Krishna, who is dancing amid *gopis*. Radha and her *sakhis* are watching this scene. On the whole, we can say that this story is called Radha Krishna Lila or a love affair between Radha and Krishna.

Most of the folios of *Gitagovinda* dedicated to dance and music. According to the story, Radha-Krishna were playing romantic games or *rasakrida* through the musical rhythm. Music in the medieval period was not just for entertainment; it was like the sounds of the heavens and the rhythm of life. The rise of the Jagannath cult, which directly gave importance to Radha Krishna's love, indirectly encouraged ritual dance and music. On the other hand, we have evidence regarding devadasi culture prevalent in medieval Orissa. Dancing and singing were incorporated into temple service, and as a result, music became a holistic ritual.

Through this palm painting, a general idea of medieval Oriya women's dressing style, ornaments, and artistic nature is shown. Palm leaf painting of the periods also portrays the female dancing tradition of the period. Literature of the period, like *Prastabchintamani* of Nilambar Bidyadhara, describes the classical dance form that prevailed and performed in the court and entrainment purpose.

Gitagovinda palm leaf painting, but *Ushabilasha*, *Ragachitra*, *Ushaharana*, *Bidagdha Madhav Natak*, *Chitrakavya Bondopadhaya* palm leaf manuscript illustrations of the eighteenth century that have given importance to the art of dancing, dressing style and decorations. In the *Gitagovinda* palm leaf painting of Dhananjaya, we found that women wore *lehenga* and *choli*, not an Oriya costume. This *lehenga* and *choli* culture was prevalent in the south Indian regions. In this palm leaf illustration, *gopis* used long *lehenga* and *choli*, and women are also seen wearing long plaits and buns. Most of the folios of the illustrated manuscripts have portrayed women figures and their dancing and musical qualities. Female figures are also seen playing *manjira*, *vina*, *mridhanga*, etc. (see plate- 2)



Figure-2: *Ushabilasha* palm leaf painting, it depicts musical and dancing skill of women of the period

Source: Author Collection from Odisha State Museum, Bhubaneswar, Palm Leaf Manuscript Section

Gitagovinda, *Rasika Haravali*, *Ushavilas*, *Bidagdha Madhav*, *Ragachitra*, *Ratibandha*, *Vaidehisavilas*, *Lavanyvati*, etc., are illustrated manuscripts, painted in both colour and non colour design and have several dance scenes. Dancing painted in palm leaf dancing is the same as depicted on the wall of Brhmeswar Temple, Rajarani temple, Konarak Temple. It is a replica of a stone art painting. The palm leaf illustration or painting copied the sculpture technique, which was made by using Iron chase.

Ushabilasha kavya of the sixteenth century and *Rasikaharabali* kavya of the eighteenth century were illustrated during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively. Both these palm leaf painting works have been preserved

in the Reitberg in Zurich library. These paintings have represented Oriya women and their dancing skills. Synchronisation, movements, rhythm has been painted with artistic vision.

Ushavilasa palm leaf painting has depicted women with dancing postures and rhythm. The heroine of the *kavya*, Usha, dancing with female dancers, and all dancers are seen wearing sari without a blouse. Their bosoms bulge out when they were dancing or playing *mrudunga*. All dancers are ornamented girdles. They are dancing with the rhythm of *mangal gita* or *mangal nrutya*. The depiction on folios shows that women of the period were so talented in dance and musical instruments. The art of dancing, instrument playing, rhythm and decoration of body gives the idea of the Odissi dance that existed in medieval Orissa. The present day Odissi dance style, rhythm, *angabhangi* and *abhinaya* are seen in the palm leaf painting of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The dancing image of the folios of the medieval period is very similar to the modern day dancing posture and decoration. Dancer of the folio has *puspachuda* or crown on the head, which is very common in Odissi dance, is seen used by female dancers of the eighteenth century over their head. Thus this classical dance of Orissa, which is famous as Odissi in modern times, was a familiar dance form in the eighteenth century. (See plate -3)



Figure-3: *Gitagovinda* palm leaf folios shows women are expert in classical dance and music

Source: Author Collection from Odisha State Museum, Bhubaneswar, Palm Leaf Manuscript Section

Ushabilasha palm leaf illustration has given some idea about the women's skill in music and dance. It looks like they were experts in their field of music and dancing. Illustrated Folios of *Bidhagdha Madhav*, an eighteenth century painting book, shows that women dancers dance in public forums. It was a tradition of society. Palm leaf dancing figures of women also indicates that modern Odissi dance is derived from the medieval dance of Orissa. *Ushavilash* palm leaf manuscript painting has depicted the life of women in society. After finishing all household works, women spent their time playing indoor games. Women were also spending time by doing painting, making the portrait, dancing and providing service to all. It was only during Kharvela's rule, women were enjoyed equal positions like men in society, and this period is a golden era for women of Orissa.

Ragachitra, an illustrated palm leaf manuscript of the eighteenth century Orissa, has been preserved in Orissa State Museum, Bhubaneswar. This palm leaf painting book has portrayed the male and female figures with musical theme or raga of Indian classical music. Folios of this manuscript have depicted the Oriya women's talent in music, dance, love and sorrowfulness life of the period. Besides, Women's dressing styles, ornaments and hair designs are seen in the figures have painted in this manuscript. (See plate -4)



Figure-4: *Ragachitra* palm leaf paintings of Raghunath Prusti (Eighteenth century), showing women are dancing

Source: Author Collection from Odisha State Museum, Bhubaneswar, Palm Leaf Manuscript Section

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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