

PART 3 – INTERVIEWS

5.

Shri Sarat Das

Attendees:

SD: Shri Sarat Das

RT: Dr Rekha Tandon (Interviewer)

MW: Michael Weston

SD: Actually speaking, the Orissan art, Orissan dance, Orissan song, and all types of Orissan art, is evolved around Lord Jagannath. The Lord Jagannath culture is the culture of Orissa. Whatever we see in the cultural field – it may be dance, it may be song, it may be music, and you may come to the art, and you may come to the sculptural works, everything is started taking from Lord Jagannath, and it is from the temple, and around the temple the undivided Puri district. You see all the artists and the artisans belong to the Puri district – undivided Puri district. Now it is divided into Puri district --- divided into three districts.

And odissi dance, basically, it comes purely from the temple. First, we will say that it is a dance of spirituality, and that it is a religious dance. If we take the mythology, from the mythology it is well established that when the Lord Jagannath temple was established, the dance, the *Odra-Magadhi* style of odissi dance which you know these days was inside the temple. And outside, in some festivals of the Lord, the *maharis* were dancing outside the temple. And Guru Pankaj Charan Das was born in the family of the *maharis*.

RT: Who were his parents?

SD: And the *maharis* – what were *maharis*? They were the ladies, women, and the male members of those families were having a different *seva* called *mardali* and *veenakar*. *Veenakar* means the musicians, and *mardali*, those were playing the *vadya*. So, Guru P C Das has this *mardali seva*, and his forefathers were having *mardali seva*, his uncles... our total family, we are the survivors of Lord Jagannath temple – the dance, the music and the *vadya*. It is from our family, our ancestors. And Guru Pankaj Charan Das was born in the maternal side. It is very near to the temple, just adjacent to the temple. In the front of the temple there is a M R *matha* and Guru Pankaj Charan Das house, ancestral house, is near the *matha*, so it is just one minute walk

from the temple to his house. And at that time, his aunt, his maternal aunts were *devadasis*.

So, when he was a very child, he lost his parents. He became an orphan at the age of one, one and a half years, so he was brought up by his aunt, Ratnaprabhakar Devadasi, she was a famous *devadasi* of that temple. And naturally, what happened, when a boy becomes an orphan at a very early age, his livelihood depends on the *devadasis* and other family members who were there at that time, I don't remember. But Ratnaprabhakar Devadasi was the chief architect of bringing up Pankaj Charan as Guru Pankaj Charan Das.

When he was a child, my father used to tell me, all the time, because Ratnaprabha was a leader among the *devadasis*, one type of... everybody was just caring her, so everyone would come for the rehearsal to his house, rehearsals and other works. At that time, they had to read Sanskrit. A Sanskrit pundit was there to teach them to say about different songs, and meaning of different words, all those things, the usage of different words. And musicians also came for to compose music.

So, when he was a boy, he started learning from those days. He started just shaking his waist, and seeing his interest, he used to go with his aunt to the temple when she went for the dance, he went, and found his interest in dancing. His interest in dance, Ratnaprabha and other *maharis* taught him. And near his house - the big cultural movement was going on at that time at Puri - it is called *bada akhada*, it is the adjacent house of Guru Pankaj Charan Das, the *bada akhada*. So, he used to pass more time at the *akhada*. *Akhadas* were always... you know, Puri culture is everyday *sangeeta, pongodha, sanghada, bhangada*, these four things!

In that *akhada*, every evening, dance *sangeeta karikrama*, and he used to go there to pass his time. So, with them he sometimes sings, sometimes dances, after that his work is to keep those instruments in order, and to... then he started learning. At the very age of five or six, he was a beautiful *akhada* dancer. Once he was also rewarded for his dancing. There was competition among the boys, the young boys, a dance competition, and he always stood first. And he was rewarded by his *matha mahantas*, and all those things as a good dancer. He used to dance on brass *thali*, taking two *thalis* in the hand – a different type of dance, innovative.

Some dances are innovative from hearing you, and he was a very good mimicry artist also. He always imitated... somebody dances, how he dances or she dances, and he imitated. It is his quality from the childhood.

Then when he was a boy of fourteen, fifteen years, he became very famous in Puri as a dancer, and at the age of sixteen or seventeen, he was recruited by the Annapurna manager for Annapurna Theatre. As a small child he also joined in *Rasa*. And he...

RT: Can you talk a little bit about the *Rasa* party, also? What were they like?

SD: Krishna Radha *lila*. And Krishna from childhood to boyhood, then young boy having love with Radha and the *gopis*. *Rasa* means... one meaning of *rasa* is *rahasya*, meaning *majak*, because in Vaishnava *dharma*, they took Krishna as the girl, and also Krishna as the friend, Krishna is the most intimate friend, and Krishna as the lover, because boys also love Krishna. So, in order to get that Krishna *tattva*, and to get involved themselves with Lord Krishna, they sometimes also danced... boys were Radha, Lalita, and other *sakhis*, *gopis*, these types of songs, and somebody would be Krishna, that is *rasa*. They take on the story from childhood to boyhood... different stories about Krishna through song and some dialogue, then sing, then dialogue, this is called *rasa*.

So, he joined *rasa* and other *akhadas* – (*indistinct*) was a guru of *akhada* and *rasa*. And (*indistinct*), he was also a follower of Chaitanya Deva, and Vaishnava, and he also having a little bit of *rasa*. He joined... so, at the age of eighteen he joined Annapurna theatre as a dancer and dance guru...

RT: In Puri?

SD: Cuttack. Because Annapurna 'B' group... Annapurna 'A' group is at Puri... he was recruited by the 'A' group.... 'A' group... but 'B' group is more famous. 'B' group having more, er... 'B' group was in Cuttack, so 'B' group head office was at Cuttack. Cuttack at that time was controlling whole Orissa. You take sport, culture, art, everything because the first capital was at that time Cuttack. Bhubaneswar was not the capital of Orissa.

So, he went to Annapurna theatre as a dance director and actor. You had to do many... at that time Annapurna was recruiting all-rounders. Not specialised people.

So then, after one or two years, Laxmipriya Mohapatra joined, as actress and dancer. So, he started teaching her. She was the first female dancer to dance on stage. Because the dance was inside the temple, and towards 1930, the dance was, er... not totally stopped, but it was very little bit inside the temple. And outside the temple only in the Sri Nahar. Inside the Sri Nahar.

RT: Sri Nahar?

SD: Sri Nahar... means the king's house, the king's palace. That is called Sri Nara. Everything Sri... Sri Mandir, Sri Nahar, Sri Gundecha Mandir... Sri means something auspicious. So, inside the Sri Nahar... at that time, outside dancing. Before that, from long, long back to the establishment of temple, the dance was there. For that we see the dances captured in the different temples.

So, Guru Pankaj Charan Das was the man who first brought this dance inside the temple to stage, to Annapurna theatre when Laxmipriya Mohapatra was dancing. So, that is now considered also as the birthplace of odissi dance. The labour room in Orissa of odissi!

Later other people joined, (*indistinct*) joined, Kelu Mohapatra joined...

RT: Which year was this?

SD: Laxmipriya was in 1945... 1946... er, Laxmipriya was 1945. The first song, we have revived that because it was taught to my sister, and from sister to other dancers also. That dance we have revived. Last year we presented at Rabindra Mandap. And other one dance also. Two dances, solo dance, were taught to Laxmipriya at that time: '*Nahi Ke Karidela Kihosojini*' and another is '*Janare mo rana...*' Those two songs. Then, after that *Gita Govinda* also... '*Yahi Madhava*', then '*Dasavatara*'... Then dance dramas like '*Mohini Bhasmasura*'. Er... in *Devi Nataka*...

RT: Describe these... '*Nahi Ki Karidela*' or any of these first compositions, what...

SD: When Annapurna... When Laxmipriya Mohapatra was dancing at Annapurna, she was first taught... (*He sings*) '*Nahi Ke Karidela...*' This is on *Nayaka Nayika*. Some people have mistaken that as Radha Krishna. No, not Radha Krishna. It is *Nayaka Nayika*. The *nayika* is waiting for the Krishna, er... no, the *nayika* is waiting for the *nayaka*. *Nayaka* never comes. So, she showed this first... it is, er... another time he used to sing and play... in *tabla*. *Pakhawaj* was not used in those days. In *tabla*, and sometimes *kohl*. And Laxmipriya was dancing.

So... (*he sings*) '*Lekhi kamala dala... ..*' *Ketaki* means some flower... (*he sings more*) '*Ketaki konta dhori... ..*' means he wrote the letter on the lotus, er... what is that? Leaf. Lotus leaf. She wrote the letter to the *nayaka*. That I am waiting for you. You come those days at that time... and *nayaka* is not coming, and this is what I have heard, now Guru Banamali Maharana is there, he will speak. At that time... now the popular Hindi songs we are singing on the street... and some people are singing on the street... at that time people used to sing on the street (*he sings*) '*Nahi Ke Karidela ...*' So famous. Only for that, Annapurna also became very famous, for dance. And a girl, because a girl on stage - people are not interested to buy tickets and to see the theatre. Then after that '*Jana ... (indistinct)*' We will go to the beetle shop. Give me two beetles... (*he sings*) '*Janare Mo rana parama mita...*' This is so famous.

Then, Kelucharan Mohapatra joined on the request of Guru Pankaj Charan Das, he was recruited to play *tabla*. He was playing *tabla*, and singing, and she was dancing. He said to the manager, (*indistinct*): 'I am not going to play. It has become very difficult for me, so we have to recruit a player so that it will be more...'

RT: Which year was this?

SD: 1946. So, Kelucharan Mohapatra joined as a player in *Devi Nataka*, that year... it was 1945-46 that Kelucharan Mohapatra joined, which year I can't remember... there also... When... there was *Devi Nataka*... Guru Pankaj Charan Das, he was the Mohini... Laxmipriya was the Mohini and Guru Pankaj Charan Das was *Bhasmasura*, er... *Nataraj*. And *Bhasmasura* was done by Radha Krishna Bhanja... the musician from Baripada who died, Radha Krishna Bhanja was doing *Bhasmasura*. So, Radha Krishna

Bhanja became ill. (But) the play is there. After two days, the play is there. What to do? He suffered cholera. Diarrhea. So, Guru Pankaj Charan Das said: 'Kelu, when I will dance, you will play. When you will dance, I will play. You do the *Nataraj*. Because the *Nataraj* was done by me. So, you do the *Nataraj* and I will play. And I will teach you.' 'OK. I will try.' So, he then first danced *Nataraj*, and Guru Pankaj Charan Das became *Bhasmasura* and Laxmipriya became *Mohini*, and that was the entry for Kelucharan Mohapatra to dance.

Then, seeing that he danced very well, very good, (he was) very satisfied: 'Kelu, I will teach you another dance, '*Dasavatara*', that is in the next year.' That *nataka* is called '*Sadabojo nataka*'. Then he taught '*Dasavatara*' in duet to Laxmipriya Mohapatra and Kelucharan Mohapatra. Then, it went on, Kelucharan Mohapatra learnt some of the *abhinayas*.

Then he, in 1949, for some reason he left Annapurna.

RT: OK. So, before that, can you talk about a piece he would have taught Laxmipriya at that time?

SD: Yes, yes. What I know, I asked all the songs specifically to Pankaj Charan Das that actually, what you are teaching, your dance style, is purely *mahari*, based on *mahari*, or anything else? He said that whatever I learnt, I learnt from the *maharis*. The basics. The look. The *sthanis*. The movement. The feet movement. And why these movements, the leg will not go like this, why the leg will go like this, and some *bhramaris*, some *chalis*, it is called *kuntana chali*... some *sooriya chali*, this type... *sooriya chali*. Then I followed the sculptures of different temples. I went around Puri temple, Bhubaneswar, all the temples, and in Orissa all the temples I saw the sculpture like this. So, what will be the position to come to this, from the normal position to get this position, the dancer must have gone like this (*he swings his arm up sideways*), then this. So, I improvised all those things and used in dance. And also, something from *rasa*. And something from the *sahi yatra*.

In Puri, you know, in Puri, in twelve months it is always in festive mood. 13 festivals in 12 months! So, the cultural activities always going on in Puri. Now also, it is 10% left. When I was a child, I have seen 50% was there. And I am now 50 years old. Now it is 10%, but 10% is so beautiful. So, you just think of 100%! Imagine in *sahi yatra*... have you seen *sahi yatra*? In *sahi yatra* there is Ravana, Naga, Medha, Mahiravana, Rama, Laxman, monkeys... all those. So, there also, they have learnt this dance. The Ravana... It is not that a man will come and be Ravana. No. The Ravana will take 1 month training, how to dance in *akhadas*. There are many *akhadas* and *jagakhadas* – 12 houses, and all the sites. So, there they took training, and Medha *nacha*. Many *pallavi* movements he says I have taken from Medha *nacha* (*he demonstrates... din a din a thinaka...*) This type of dance I have taken from the *sahi yatra* Medha *nacha*. And when I am doing '*Tandava*', it is from the steppings of 'Ravana Naga ...' He used...

So, self-improvisation is there. And the things that are already there, like *mahari* dance, *sahi yatra*, *rasa*, all are combined. His major movements are from those *mahari* dance. Because the *abhinaya mahari*, *shudha nritya* was there, *mahari*, more is *abhinaya* dance. In *Barasingarabesha*, different songs they do *abhinayas*. So, the first two *abhinayas* that he taught at Annapurna, it is based on *mahari* style, and some style which is called from this *jato*. It is mixed up.

RT: *Jato* meaning *jatra*?

SD: *Jatra*, *yato*... *sahi yato*... In *shudha nritya*... Pankaj Charan Das style, and *pallavis*, it is totally on *mahari* style. In *abhinaya*, also the movements are from *maharis*. *Maharis*, when they are dancing, we are now doing crude form of *maharis*. Because in the nineties, my grandmother, means the mother-in-law of Guru Pankaj Charan Das, was the famous *devadasi* called Muktabari, or her name is Haripriyadevadasi. Sometimes is called Dungarimahari or Mukta... because the temple name is Mukta. Because a name is given to the *devadasi* in the temple also. That culture also in the Oriya families. When the girl's marriages, a name is specially kept from the girl's house. So, these *maharis* were also given a special name when they marry to the Lord.

So, he wanted that... (s)he said to Guru Pankaj Charan Das 'You brought the thing from the temple, you made it so big, but the root is going to be spoiled. Because we cannot keep, we cannot revive the rituals in the temple. But if you want, you can revive, and keep alive, that dance form in crude form.' So, he first taught in *abhinaya*, written by Muktabari, (*he sings*) '*Joodabandhina*' This song describes how the *devadasi* takes the makeup, the costume, and goes to the temple. (*He demonstrates as he speaks*) First the *jooda*, then on that I give some silver ornaments, then the *tahia ketakikia*, then the *jori kanchola*, then *chandan*, then *alata*, *kajol*, all those things he describes... (*he sings again*) '*Jooda pore de... ..*' So, he revived this crude form of *maharis* also.

And *maharis* also used to do different types of duet dance, group dance during Jhulana, during Janmastami, when *the maharis* went with Goddess Laxmi to break the chariot of Lord Jagannath, because Laxmi becomes angry because Lord Jagannath has not taken Her with Him. On the fifth day, Laxmi goes to break the chariot. He became angry. So, the *devadasis*, the *maharis* would go with Laxmi. That type of dance. Every... every step, every movement when the Lord comes out of the temple, the *maharis* used to be with Him. That is called Patuara Seva. Two types of *maharis* – *bhitara* and *bahara*. Then they are divided another six parts – *gaoni*, *nachoni*, and *bhitara*, *bahara*, those who do inside the temple, they are *bhitara*, and those that come outside, *bahara mahari* or *bahara nachoni*. And that is the Patuara Seva. Banmali (Das) is perhaps 18th or 19th century, the poet. He has written...

RT: The Patuara would actually happen on the street?

SD: Street.

RT: What kind of movements would they do?

SD: We'll show. My girls will show. Banmali has written... (*he sings a song describing the time of ritual procession...*). (31.48) The Jagannath, Balabhadra, when He comes out of the temple, there are representative idols of Madanmohan of brass. It is not possible to bring Jagannath from the temple. Only once does he come and that is during the car festival. All the time his representative idols, Madanmohan, come. It is then written in 18th or 19th century by Banmali. So that is Patuara Seva... *Chandaradeepa* - *chandara* means one kind of you have now crackers – phooljari – very bright lights... at that time there were no street lights, so this *chandaradeepa*, it is (*he makes the sound of crackers*) '*jha jha jha jha...*' in that light the procession is going on of the gods. And the *devadasis* were doing, and the Patuari... (*indistinct*)... Patuari...and the side they will block the people not to enter, and the *maharis* will dance inside, and there were different places called *panthighara*, the rest house, there will be a roof of coconut palms, roof, and the God would wait there. And there will be dance. That is called... now people are calling it *pontiseva*. That is not *ponti*. That is *panthi*... *Panthi* means stanza of a poem, the stanza of a poet. Because it is not possible to do the whole poem at one place. A little bit dance and... and when God is there people will bring some offerings, then they... then the procession would again go. Because they have to carry such a big... they call it *vimana*. The people used to carry it. They have to take rest.

Then a poem will start from the temple to Narendra (tank). Two poems. Then the *devadasis* used to dance in the red...

RT: Chariot?

SD: Boat. (There were) two types of boat - white and red. And later, when the *devadasis* dance was totally stopped outside the temple, this Patuara Seva only remained for sake of a ritual. Just somebody will go like this... No activities. Then the *gotipua* dance, boy dance, (was) in white boat. Made for Panchapanda - Pancha Mahadev, because in Mahadev temples, and Shakti *pitha*, the *devadasis* were there, but they were different from the *maharis* of Lord Jagannath temple.

RT: Talk a little about the direction odissi took, diverged, through Pankaj Charanji's direction and Guru, um...

SD: Actually speaking, in Jayantika, academically they don't decide what will be the dance. They decided what will be the regular costume, what will be the regular make-up, and what will be the regular ornaments. Then the repertoire. Repertoire means *mangalacharan*, then *sthayi*, some people said... Pankaj Charan Das and Deb Prasad Das decided no, that will be *sthayi*, permanent dance. *Sthayi* means permanent movements and permanent postures, permanent instrument playing, everything what is in odissi used, that is song and dance, so it will be in the name of *sthayi*. And Kelucharan Mohapatra said no, his is *battu*. Because in Battukeshwar Mahadeva, in his form the dance was... *shudha nritya* was there so I will call it *battu*. So, there is not much difference then. Difference is taking... because they took, they admitted that... when the repertoire is prepared, the *mangalacharan*, taking the

mangala aarthi dance was done in Lord Jagannath temple, so it is called the *mangalacharan*. *Aarthi*. *Mangala aarthi*. Then when it was the *dhoop nata*, *shudha* dance was there. Then it is called *pallavi*. Then in the evening it is *abhinaya*. And the *moksha* at night. So, these are all, the dance gurus all agreed, but a little bit difference was there, taking this *gotipua* concept.

Because Guru Pankaj Charan Das always, during his career, he objected that 'you people say that the *gotipua* had a lot of contribution to odissi. I was never a *gotipua*. And all the gurus today have learnt from me, so how the *gotipua* has influenced the dance?' His argument was in that line.

And I never learnt from a *gotipua* guru. Neither have I ever danced as a girl. I danced at the *akhada* as a boy. I danced as a boy. So, I never danced as a girl. And whatever the *gotipua* you say, whatever the *gotipua* dance is doing, they are not using odissi dance. This acrobatic movements, this type of jumping, this type of taking of somebody on the shoulder, and hand, this...

RT: How is the *akhada* different from the *gotipua*?

SD: *Akhada pillas* means... *akhada pillas* means a boy dances as a boy. This *gotipua* concept, how it came, when this *devadasi* dance was about to be stopped at temple, and *devadasis* were not available for entertainment to some of the rich persons, and the *Mahanta* of the different *mathas*, they had an idea that if a boy ... they took some *akhada pillas*... *akhada pillas* and dressed them as girl, and took them to the *matha* for dancing. People were astonished. 'Why, a girl is inside the *matha*.' No, no. A *goti pillas*. No, no, he is not a girl. A *goti pillas*. So, that is *goti pillas*. *Goti pillas* means one boy, not a girl.

RT: But it is the same kind of dance.

SD: Same kind of dance.

RT: So, what...

SD: But not in a group. A solo dance. Now, *gotipua* dance, now what you are seeing it is a group and they are doing some kind of circus. That is not the dance which we mean as *gotipua*. That was not at that time, this group and some circus magic. Very little. And in villages, when a big *zamindhar* grandson's birthday, there would be some function going on, these boys used to dance as girls, because to attract people! People were more attracted to girls than boys! So, to attract people these *akhada pillas* also dressed as girls and danced. And *gotipuas* have nothing to do with this spiritualism. Because *mahari* dance was a devotional dance. And odissi dance is a devotional dance, as to what my knowledge goes. Because whatever we offered in those days, we took the name of Lord Jagannath first. Before offering the dance on stage, all the dancers took Lord Jagannath Swami Nayanpathi Gami... It means the dance is meant for the Lord. So, the *gotipuas* have nothing to do with this spiritualism. They are meant for very cheap entertainment. (*Indistinct*)... what we

say, ...*indistinct*... the sea, all the *samuga* (oysters) never bears those little *mukta* (pearls). So, only *mukta* is available in some special *samugas*. Like that, the odissi is the pearl. Was remain in *maharis*, not in *gotipuas*. They are seashells. There are a lot of seashells! But not all seashells you find a pearl.

So, there is a little bit difference, taking... because he was the top most guru at that time. in Jayantika, I say. And Kalicharan Patnaik, and Dharendra Patnaik, those were practically not dancers, nothing to do with the dance, they are literally (not) dancers, and they hold some key positions in the society, as a learned man, as a philosopher. They used to impose some of their philosophy on these gurus. So, these gurus were not formally educated, not having formal education. So, they have to say 'Yes, yes, what Kali sir is saying, it is alright. What Dhiren sir is saying, okay, we will do that...' But he is a man who never bows down. So, he left. 'You do. What is coming to your mind, you do! I will do the dance. I will search. You go and research. You go and research and I will research...' This type of... he was a headstrong man. That is the reason...

RT: So, what was it in the *gotipua* elements that they were putting into odissi that you objected to?

SD: The *gotipua* elements, where would they bring? Whatever is... the dance is started from Guru Pankaj Charan Das. So... he taught Laxmipriya Mohapatra and Kelucharan Mohapatra, and another guru was there, Mahadev Rout. He came with a little bit background of *gotipua*. But Kelucharan Mohapatra and Pankaj Charan Das both were in the *rasa dal*. But I am astonished why these philosophers have never written, or never said anywhere, the *rasa* has some contribution to the revival of modern odissi classical dance. Have you ever seen or heard any philosopher say that the *rasa* has contributed?

RT: I have heard, but not very loudly!

SD: (*Laughing*) You are correct! But you see, because Kelucharan Mohapatra worked in *rasa dal* for around five or six, or seven years, and in each choreography composition, you will see a maximum influence of *rasa*. In Guru Pankaj Charan Das choreography, you will see the maximum influence of *sahi yatra*, and other folk dances, whatever that remained in Puri districts.

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