Odissi dance is the typical classical dance form of Orissa and has its origin in the temples. The rhythm, the bhangis and mudras used in Odissi dance have a distinctive quality of their own. Odissi dance deals largely with the love theme of Radha and Krishna. It is a lyrical form of dance with its subtlety as its keynote. The intimate relationship experienced between the poetry and music in Odissi is a feature on which the aesthetics of the style is built. It is a "sculpturesque" style of dance with a harmony of line and movement, all its own.

The history of Odissi dates back to somewhere between the 8th and the 11th century when the kings took great pride in excelling in the arts of dance and music. It is during these centuries that inscriptions referring to "Devdasis," the women who worshipped the deity, were carved at the Brahmeshwar temple. "Devdasis" apparently played an important part in the temple ritual and were required to perform from early evening to the bedtime of Lord Jagannath, the temple deity of Puri.

Jayadeva's "Geeta-Govinda," the bible of an Odissi dancer, written in the 12th century, has stupendous influence on the arts of Orissa. The "Ashtapadis" were marked with specific ragas and talas. Around the 15th century, during the reign of Surya Dynasty, the element of "abhinaya" or expressional dance entered Odissi. During the same time Maheshwar Mahapatra wrote his "Abhinaya Chandrika," an elaborate treatise on Odissi dance style, which is still used by dancers today. By the 16th century, there were three kinds of dancers in Orissa: the "Maharis" in the temples, the "Nachunis" in the royal court, and the "Gotipuas" in the gymnasiums - who performed for the public. The religious revival of the 18th century saw a return of temple patronage to the arts; but the "Maharis" were slowly disappearing and their place was being taken by the "Gotipuas", young boys dressed as girls. These boys were trained in physical culture in the "Akhadas," and it was them who preserved the basis for restructuring of the ancient dance tradition.

The technique of Odissi is based upon the "Chowka," a manly posture, and the weight of the body is distributed equally on both the sides. It is the posture of Lord Jagannath of Puri and reflects the balanced, all-encompassing and universal quality of "dharma" of Lord Jagannath. It is a "Sambhanga" or equally distributed position in terms of weight.

Next comes the "Abhanga" position, in which body weight is displaced to any one side due to deflection of one or the other knee, in either a standing or half sitting posture. Then comes the "Tribhanga" position, the three-bend posture, in which a series of triangles are formed in the body. The bends are made at the knees, the torso and the neck. It is an extremely feminine posture represented in sculptures of female figures and is based upon the Hindu concept of iconography.

What is interesting about Odissi is that body position is not merely a part of the vocabulary or framework. The posture by itself conveys a particular mood or message. The names of these postures express the moods they represent.

Items presented for an Odissi recital form a pattern of development, which is both physically practical and also aesthetic. The "Mangalacharan" is an offering made at the start of the program. "Rangamancha-pravesh" is the entry to the stage with floral offering. "Rangabhumi pranam" is the salutation to the stage and the earth, and is the first concept or idea. This is followed by the "Ishtadeva vandana" - an obeisance made to the dancers' favourite deity. The "Trikhandi-pranam" follows, where salutations are made to the god, the guru, and the audience, thus concluding the item with "Anjali-hasta" - a gesture of greetings and devotion.

The costume of the Odissi dancer is a silk saree draped in a practical and comfortable style. The dancer wears the head ornament called the "Mathami" or "Kapa" on the ears, "Kankana" on the wrists, armlets called "Bahichudi" or "Tayila" and an elaborate belt. She wears on her ankles bells strung together on a single cord. A "Padaka-tilaka," a necklace with a locket rests on the chest. An Odissi dancer has elaborate hair-do in a knot adorned with the "Tahiya" which represents a temple tower. Garlands of flowers are woven into the hair. Palms and soles are painted with a red liquid called the "Alta". The musicians accompanying the dancer are mainly the pakhawaj players, the flutist, and a singer.
Dance is an expression of man's joy through rhythmic and spontaneous movements. This pure expression and energy, when put in a classical mould must strictly adhere to the codes of a systematized technique, and Odissi bases itself on a wealth of such techniques which make this dance aesthetically appealing and visually delightful.

This dance tradition was kept alive by the devadasis. Those who were attached to the Jagannath Temple were all Vaishnavites and those at Bhubaneswar were attached to Shaivite temples. Before the introduction of the Gitagovinda in temples, the devadasi used to dance to the recitation of hymns and bols of talas. But after Gitagovinda became part and parcel of the rituals, the devadasis performed abhinaya with different bhavas and rasas.

The Gotipua system of dance was performed by young boys dressed as girls. In this tradition one can detect jerking movements in place of smooth translations from one posture to another. Ray Ramananda the Governor of Rajmahcndri was a musician, dancer and dramatist who taught dancing to a group of boys selected to enact his dance drama, jagannath Vallabha Nataka. It was performed in the Gotipua style.

The different items of the Odissi dance style are Mangalacharna, Batunrya or Sthayi Nata, Pallavi, Abhinaya and Moksha. In Mangalacharana the dancer dedicates herself to the Lord and begs forgiveness of the Mother Earth for stamping her feet upon her; she apologizes to her audience for any shortcomings and offers salutations to the Guru. Batu Nrytya is pure dance. It begins with a series of sculpturesque poses symbolizing the playing of the veena, drum, flute or cymbals. Pallivi is extremely graceful and lyrical. The tune is in some raga and is sung to the accompaniment of Sargam and Bols. Through facial expressions abhinaya depicts rasa and bhava to bring out the meaning and mood of songs. Generally the songs written by poets, Banamali, Upendra Bhanja, Baladeva Rath, Gopala and Jayadeva are sung. Moksha Nutiya is the last item, performed to the accompaniment of rhythmic syllables. It has a fast tempo. The soul of the dancer is supi to merge with the Divine as the dancer becomes ecstatic. Odissi dance is an effort to come near God and experience true bliss.

Source: Patnaik, D. N. *Odissi Dance*