

Practice-Research in Odissi Dance: The 3 Bindu Approach to Embodying Sacred Geometry

Rekha Tandon Ph.D.

Performer/Choreographer and Artistic Director, Dance Routes
rekha@danceroutes.com

ABSTRACT

Ideas around sacred geometry in the Indian tradition are most clearly seen in the prolific use of yantras as tools of meditation in tantric art forms. These are typically two-dimensional diagrams or three-dimensional objects, regarded as representing the elemental powers of Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Ether commonly symbolised by a square, circle, triangle, hexagon and a dot or *bindu* respectively. These geometric shapes are combined to create energy fields of varying potencies within which sacred objects are conceived. Temple architecture in India is imbued with such yantras and used as a means of harnessing divine energies through their precision, power and beauty. While Odissi dance has been greatly inspired by the dance rituals of mediaeval Odishan temples, there has been no discussion about the possible role of yantras in actual movement and choreography. This is surprising as the ‘virtual lines’ held between different body parts in static dance postures as used in the dance tradition today, hold strong geometric shapes. This is amplified by movement sequences where the arms, hands, legs and feet create geometric forms in space, making patterns akin to ‘virtual yantras’. This recognition piqued my curiosity and the current paper is a self-reflexive account of a process of engaging with Odissi movement through visualising clarity of shape and form in movement patterns, before embodying them, based on a template of ‘3 Bindus on the body’s central axis’, which was formulated during the course of studio practice.

Keywords -Odissi, Yoga, Tantra, Body Maps, Yantra

1. Introduction

Yantras in the tantric traditions of ritual worship in India represent subtle forces of *shakti* or energy and formed a blueprint on which iconographic representations of different Gods and Goddesses were created. They also formed the basis for sculpting all images of the *alasa kanya* or languorous maiden, that were symbolic of the human soul reaching out to the gods with a heartfelt yearning or in joyous union. It was these images which appeared in profusion on temple surfaces especially from the 10th century onwards, which had inspired Odissi’s dance postures.



Fig. 1 Proportions of the rectangular yantra used to sculpt the human form of the ‘languorous maiden’ from the Shilpa Prakash, a 12 century AD text on Orissan temple sculpture,

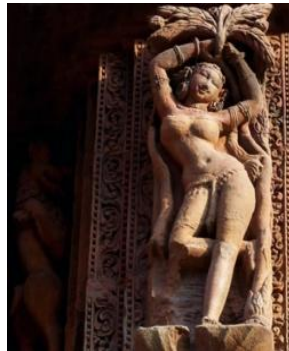


Fig. 2 An example of the languorous maiden motif, holding a flowering tree, 11th century AD, Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

Yantras were needed to provide the ‘energetic portal’ for making divine contact and it was within this environment that the dance ritual by women ‘married to the deity’ in Odisha, had flourished as an important ritual patronised by successive rulers, up to the 16th century.



Fig. 3 A dance performance in progress, 11th century AD, Bhubaneswar, Odisha

The current Odissi tradition re-visioned this dance for contemporary theatre audiences in the mid 20th century¹. I had been introduced to the strong spiritual underpinnings of Indian classical dance by my Gurus in the tradition and by writings in Art History by Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan whose works included discussions on the sacred symbolism of geometry and with whom I was fortunate to be in close proximity in the 1980’s and early 90’s². It was evident that Odissi’s technique adhered to symmetric, geometric movement sequences, especially in *nritta* (often called ‘pure dance’) or non-referential movements designed solely for the purpose of creating beauty. This was a feature Odissi shared with all other classical Indian dance forms across the country. Geometric form, its possible purpose and symbolism, did not however seem to be part of any discourse in dance classrooms in my experience.

The Indian aesthetic tradition is extensive in its textual descriptions and commentaries on the Theory of Rasa and the importance of being the experiencer/taster of the experience being invoked

¹ The efforts to create Odissi as a ‘classical Indian dance style’ has been discussed by several authors including this one (Tandon 2017) pgs 15-23.

² She would come for Odissi practice with Guru Surendranath Jena at Triveni Kala Sangam in New Delhi between 1978 and 1984 while I was a young student beginning my training. She published her book on this subject, *The Square and the Circle of Indian Arts*, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi in 1997.

through a performance³. Excellence in dance is only achieved when the dancer is able to ‘step out of the way’ and allow the dance to unfold its *rasa*, according to the canons of the *shastra*. I wanted to explore an experience of myself as a dancer from the perspective of this *sakshi* or witness self and was looking for a means to do so through extensive but haphazard readings on Indian philosophy, yoga, art and religion. These efforts acquired more shape when I was introduced to Choreological Studies at the Laban Centre for Movement and Dance, London UK in 1994⁴.

At Laban, after many years of Odissi training in India, I encountered a vocabulary with which to articulate and focus on some simple facts which I had always just taken for granted. These included the fact that the Odissi technique had a movement system that privileged the central vertical axis and that symmetry dominated its use of body and space. It also consistently employed a grounded open knee stance as a means to energise the body’s dynamosphere, or the space around the body where its movements are executed. The footwork created an acoustic template with the feet, that the upper body would then express. Basic body stances were limited and fairly consistent, while there were ever-unfolding and sophisticated movements in the torso, face, arms, hands and fingers⁵. Laban was a contemporary dance school where different body languages and approaches to movement were being discussed; looking at these features in my own tradition with reference to other forms from different cultures made me see very clearly that I was dancing within the boundaries of set movement parameters, and this made me question the reason for their existence in Indian classical dance.

2. The Objective

The desire to explore yantras in movement, consciously, was my understanding of how *rasa* could be tasted through a clean technique⁶. The hypothesis was that this just may be a very useful approach to both learning technique for a new student and perfecting it for myself. Personally, the hands and fingers shaped into *mudras* moving from the wrists, felt very much like an artist’s paint brush in the act of painting such yantra-forms. I set out to investigate how holding clear shapes and patterns in the mind imbued with reverence towards them as sacred symbols, would translate into dance in terms of clarity of expression and power in communication.

My personal understanding of the meaning of concepts such as ‘bringing divinity into matter’ has been mostly influenced by Advaita Vedanta, a practice of tantric meditations and the writings of Sri Aurobindo. In these teachings and practices, our fundamental nature is understood to be Consciousness and not matter⁷The premise I had begun with was that if Consciousness is the basic nature of all reality

³ Tandon (2017) pp 92-4

⁴ This has been discussed in Tandon R. (2017) chapters 4 & 5 entitled Strand Body and Strand Movement.

⁵ Except for Kathak where the knees are not maintained in a bent stance, these features are common to different classical Indian dance forms. Several scholars, especially Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, have written extensively on the common moorings of all classical Indian dance forms in the *Natya Shastra*, an exhaustive treatise on dance, drama and music. The much later *Abhinaya Darpana* is also an invaluable and very popular resource in terms of the actual usage of the body in different dance practices today. Neither of these two seminal texts, nor any other regional texts to my knowledge, have broached the subject of yantras as a device to be utilised in the articulation of body movements and hence perhaps this discussion has remained absent in current discourses.

⁶ Looking at energy patterns behind movement has been discussed in Tandon (2017) chapter 7, Covert Structures

⁷ The ‘matter of both the body and mind’ whether it be the body of flesh, or thoughts/ feelings/sensations/perceptions, experienced as arising in the mind, are ‘constantly morphing appearances’ made of the same substance as Consciousness. They exist temporarily like ‘whirlpools’ forming in an ocean of water which is Consciousness. Rupert Spira, among other popular contemporary teachers of Nonduality have used this analogy in several lectures on utube when describing the nature of Consciousness.

(including what I was experiencing as solid matter in the body) how I viewed the ‘matter of the moving body’, would have far reaching implications on dance practice.



Fig. 4 Drawing circles in space in the *chowk* open-knee stance of Odissi

3. The Practice

3.1. Chowk



Fig. 5 Standing on a flat floor called a ‘table plane’ while holding a similar second ‘table plane’ with the arms.

I had experienced the pivotal *chowk* stance of Odissi as providing ‘grounded stability’ for many years, as symbolising the form of Lord Jagannath, presiding deity of Odisha and Odissi, and understood it as representing Earth through tantric symbology.

In my practice after encountering Choreological Studies, I had added the understanding that the arms held in a rectangular shape in front of the heart space, mirroring the flat surface of the floor where the body stood on a ‘table plane’, was forming an additional ‘table plane’. These parallel horizontal surfaces established a framework for viewing the chowk posture as a square-shape and indeed, the technique did become ‘cleaner’ than when dancing without this reference. The arms played with their rich array of directions and levels with repeating reference to this second table plane, which was what gave the technique its visual clarity. Movements originated from the central axis and were also far more free to create fluid circles, diagonals and triangles in the upper body than were the legs and feet in the lower body, even though the geometries of the upper body were very often being echoed by movements in the lower body.



Fig. 6 Dissolving the boundary between the space within the body and the space outside the body

I had also related to dance as a consciousness-transforming practice whereby when ‘caressing and dissolving the boundary between the space within the body and the space outside the body’, my Awareness transited between these two areas without any tangible obstruction. Repeated experiences of this kind when dancing had made me recognise that my ‘sense of self’ could expand beyond the boundary of my physical body quite easily.

3.2. Tribhanga



Fig. 7 Odissi’s archetypal ‘thrice deflected axis’ forming the *tribhanga* posture, echoing the lines of temple sculpture.

When the body was static in the pivotal posture of the *tribhanga*, the arms combined to hold triangles formed by the negative spaces around the body between the elbows and torso. These would reappear and punctuate movements between phrases where the arms moved in changing lyrical patterns. This sculpting of geometric forms was also seen in the positioning of the legs, knees, ankles and feet, as the lower body held its open-knee stance through different permutations and patterns. The lateral deflection of the central axis at the level of the heart, served to ‘tug’ at the emotional core of the body and give Odissi its languorous flavour. Viewing these ‘peripheral geometries’ created by the limbs with

the 'S' curve of the body's central axis as its reference, led to focussing on the point of origin of movements of the upper and lower limbs from specific points on this curving central axis.

3.3. The Axis with 3 Bindus

Many years of dancing Odissi to texts that addressed or described the Gods, cautioned me that while it was now inevitable that I would keep watching for the presence of geometric forms during movements, approaching practice in this prosaic way alone would not be as fruitful as doing so with the intention of 'making an offering of the body'. That is when I turned to working very slowly and improvising extensively with simple ritual gestures while simultaneously verbalising *mantras* in set repeatable sequences.

When holding the body vertical and still in a gesture of *namaskar*, and then shifting body weight in this upright position from one foot to another, the centre of gravity of the body in the abdomen could be located. This was positioned on the central axis and 'consecrated' with the colour red, and called the Red Bindu. The hands when pressed together in the *namaskar* created a point of pressure on the spine at the level of the heart. This was 'consecrated' with a white-gold colour and became the White Bindu. These two points were joined into a line along the body's axis and visualised as extending down into the Earth and up towards the sky. The thread created a sense of being 'suspended' from the heavens and 'linking' the Earth to the Sky. That image allowed the whole skeletal system to relax its weight and 'give in' to gravity and the Earth, while remaining in an upright posture.

About 4 finger widths above the head, I placed another dot on this thread that suspended the body. It became the Black Bindu and served to connect the body's axis with external space at all times. This Black Bindu was particularly useful when 'relaxing' the body into a *tribhanga* posture, as it allowed the centre line above the head to be continued in space outside the body⁸. Remaining aware of this axis through dance sequences helped the sternum to release and the breath to be steady through long movement passages. These three Bindus became my 'shrine' in the body and the place of reference from which all geometric patterns were created during movement. It allowed danced forms to have far more clarity and purpose than before, establishing a strong bridge between intangible thought and the tangible body.

During the process of arriving at this 3 Bindu template, I had been investigating the validity of information I was reading about how to deepen the effects of *Yoga Asanas* from a wide range of textual sources including several publications on yoga, tantra and meditation by the Bihar School of Yoga⁹. Many journals were scribbled and drawn on, creating a written record of 'aha' moments where body postures and movements resulted in a feeling-sensation of deeper grounding, integration, balance and harmony in body and mind simultaneously. This helped me remember for example, how I had felt when I had played with moving levels in the *chowk* stance using my breath, or with the image of parallel lines along both sides of the spinal cord on the door plane of the body. It became a process of witnessing the

⁸ Many dancers in Odissi, especially new students, articulate movements in *tribhanga* with tensions in the neck and shoulders, which the placement of the Black Bindu alleviates.

⁹ I was following the dictum of *saravanan*, *mananan*, and *nididhyasana*, where you read something, cogitate on it and then embody it to see whether it works for you, considered to be the '3 pillars of vedic self-enquiry'.

dance experience and comparing the differences to the movement that resulted between holding an image in mind while embodying it through dance, and doing so without such a mental tool.

4. Articulating a Methodology



Fig. 8 The axis with 3 Bindus

Practice-research in dance has many shades of difference¹⁰, but always requires defining a task or a question and then choosing a credible and shareable means of arriving at an answer that can benefit other dancers looking at similar issues¹¹. All dancers dance with the desire of doing so with excellence and work consistently on improving their skills. Having found good results with my own explorations of geometric forms in movement while aspiring to dance more skilfully, a natural progression became sharing this with other dancers. Christopher Johns (2020) states “Knowledge derived from reflexive narrative is the personal knowledge used by the researcher in pursuit of realising a vision within their everyday practice. It is a particular and contextual knowing yet informed and synthesised with a relevant extant knowledge¹².” Since I had maintained journals recording my progression of ideas about the body held within a kinesphere centred around an axis with three Bindus, these provided a valuable point of reference in this endeavour and map time for me from 2010 onwards¹³. Two early samples are included below:

- 4.1. This body has planes. It forms a ‘door plane’ and stands on the floor which is a ‘table plane’. It stands along the vertical line of an upright spinal cord. This line, a gossamer thread, connects Earth to Sky and suspends my skeleton like a puppet held up by the universe. It holds a virtual vertical line in space when the skeleton moves. I am being the witness. I am viewing my own process so I am not the body. (2010)

¹⁰The approach to understanding Odissi as a movement system used in this paper is rooted in the discipline of Choreological Studies. See Tandon (2017) pp 49-73.

¹¹ Sullivan, Graeme. 2009. “Making Space: The Purpose and Place of Practice-Led Research, p 48”. Article included in Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in the Creative Arts, Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean, editors, Edinburgh University Press.

¹² Christopher Johns, Self-Inquiry Toward Self-Realisation and Its Performance, Qualitative Research Methods Vol 57 Sage Publications, 2020.

¹³ Later, I came across the Indian Philosophy Institute in Pondicherry and their description of First-Person Exploration through journaling in the Introduction to Foundations of Indian Psychology on their website, by R. M. Matthijs Cornelissen, Girishwar Misra, Suneet Varma. It was interesting to discover that what I had been doing instinctively during dance practices, was a well-known technique in yogic studies. Website accessed 4 Oct 2021.

- 4.2. The Taittiriya Upanishad describes the body as five interpenetrating sheaths. The body made of the food I eat; the body made of the air I breathe; the body made of my instinctive mind; the body of Consciousness that holds my individual programming and the elusive anandamaya kosha , where I am bliss...just Awareness, free and unconditioned. Perfect Alignment of the spinal cord joins these bodies on the thread that connects Earth and Sky, Matter and Spirit. Alignment allows me to be Right Here Right Now, in equipoise, balance, harmony. When I move the body in dance, I move an object ... separate from me that sees the body. When it sits in a chowk like Shiva's drum, my elbows and knees open into clear triangles around the Red Bindu. Ready to create rhythmic vibrations in the ether around me through patterned footwork on the floor that are echoed with the arms.(2011)

I would position my journals as a bricolage of performative and reflexive¹⁴ writing within a broader framework of self-reflexive practice-research, as they focus on “creative practice, leading to new knowledge of operational significance for that practice, in order to advance knowledge about or within practice¹⁵.”

Over the last few years since the publication of *Dance as Yoga* (Tandon 2017), the 3 Bindu template has been shared with many students from different nationalities and movement backgrounds. It has served as an efficient tool for internalising classical movement sequences, taking ‘ownership’ of technique as well as heightening self-awareness while practising Odissi¹⁶. As I revisit them even now, more clarity keeps emerging on the sequence of readings and subsequent movement explorations I was following in each practice session and what can be carried into classroom environments today with other dancers. However, this is not a discussion of the work of teaching but merely of my own practice. Hence this remains a self-reflexive account of practice-research in Odissi and not an Autoethnographic one¹⁷.

5. Concluding Remarks

Since 2019, I have worked intensively with international students from backgrounds in yoga and contemporary dance both online and in-person. With everyone, I have been teaching movement by utilising the Axis with 3 Bindus along with parallel lines on the door plane, and geometric patterns, as the ideational blueprint, before the movement phrase to be used in dance is introduced.

¹⁴ See Ben-Asher Smadar, The virtuoso art of bricolage research, “Originally, the term “bricolage” referred to a variety of non-professional occupations carried out in an improvised and amateurish way. It has been used to describe a postmodernist technique of creatively recycling leftover items. The technique can be applied in a variety of fields, including visual art, industrial design, music, architecture, philosophy, and linguistics. The term was coined in the field of social sciences by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), the founder of the structuralist school, considered to be the leading anthropologist of the 20th century.” *JOURNAL=Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol 13, (2022) . <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1068703> DOI=10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1068703 ISSN=1664-1078), Accessed January 2023.

¹⁵ R. Lyle Skains (2018) *Creative Practice as Research: Discourse on Methodology, Media Practice and Education*, 19:1, 82-97, DOI:10.1080/14682753.2017.1362175. p85-6 . <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682753.2017.1362175> Accessed 13 May 2023

¹⁶ Over time, some sets of improvised instructions have been more efficient than others, and these have become part of a toolbox that I now use on a regular basis.

¹⁷ See *Autoethnography: An Overview*, Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams & Arthur P. Bochner (2011) “Autoethnographers must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyse experience, but also must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders.” Accessed online, 30 May 2023.

The results have been that the learning is much more efficient as the geometric scaffolding in the space around the body when internalised, provides an intuitive yardstick for determining correct and incorrect movement. It combines an ‘outside-in’ approach (which is how I had been taught in the tradition myself) with an ‘inside-out’ perspective of movement sequences. Simultaneously, it helps identify areas of blocked energy in individual dancers that need release in the body in order to arrive at a balanced and aesthetically harmonious form during movement sequences.

This approach to Odissi provides the means for far greater self-awareness and self-transformation through its artistic practice. It also opens up space for classical Indian dance to serve as another dimension of yoga with far reaching applications to health, education, creativity and general well-being.

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Rekha Tandon

Rekha is a performer/choreographer, teacher and researcher in Odissi dance. She has a PHD in Dance Studies from the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, London and is Co-founder and Artistic Director of Dance Routes, based beside Auroville in Tamil Nadu. She has authored two books “Odissi – A Dance of Sculpture” and “Dance as Yoga-The Spirit and Technique of Odissi”.

Website: <http://www.rekhatandon.com>