

Odissi Classical Music: Ancient Indian Tradition Fighting Bureaucracy

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Abstract

Odissi music possesses all the defining attributes of a classical music system, i.e., textual antiquity, codified grammar, an independent rāga-tāla structure, and an unbroken performance tradition. Despite this, Odissi has remained on the periphery of India's official classical canon, largely due to systemic neglect, lack of national institutional support, and a policy vacuum at the central level. The Government of India has publicly admitted that it does not possess any formal framework for designating classical status to music forms, revealing a bureaucratic paradox wherein art forms are expected to petition for a recognition that has no codified basis.

This article explores the historical foundations, structural uniqueness, and cultural relevance of Odissi music, while also interrogating the socio-political performance surrounding demands for classical recognition. It critiques the performative nature of such appeals, often driven by political symbolism or artistic branding, arguing that the tradition's value lies not in government sanction but in its own integrity and continuity. Drawing from parliamentary records, government documents, and scholarly frameworks, this paper asserts that Odissi music does not require validation from absent criteria. Rather, it should be recognised, practiced, and positioned as classical by those who know it best: its practitioners, scholars, and audiences.

Keywords: Odissi Classical Music, Marginalisation of Regional Music, Bureaucracy

1. Introduction

India is home to multiple classical music traditions, each rooted in distinct linguistic, regional, and cultural ecosystems. Among these, Hindustani and Carnatic music systems have long dominated the national imagination, institutional structures, and international platforms: receiving state recognition, scholarly attention, and curricular centrality. In contrast, Odissi music, though equally ancient, theoretically rich, and structurally unique, has remained largely peripheral in the discourse around classicality. Its exclusion is not due to any inherent inadequacy, but rather the result of historical oversight, political centralisation, and limited access to national cultural infrastructures.

Odissi music emerges from different regions of Odisha (which is the reason for the different styles of rendition), and has evolved through centuries of codification, performance, and literary sophistication. Foundational texts such as *Gītaprakāśa* and *Sangīta Nārāyaṇa* testify to its rigour, while its independent rāga-tāla system, oral lineages, and continued practice across temple and concert spaces affirm its living heritage. Yet, despite these qualifications, Odissi music has not been granted the official status of a "classical" tradition by the Government of India which raises questions about the criteria, visibility, and politics of recognition.

This research examines the historical, institutional, and philosophical reasons behind the neglect of Odissi music in classical classification. It interrogates the absence of a formal state framework for musical recognition, critiques the performative nature of demands for legitimacy, and builds a comprehensive case for Odissi's classical status, which stems in its own merit, continuity, and community of practice.

2. Research Gap

While there exists a rich internal tradition of Odissi music within Odisha, there is a noticeable absence of national-level scholarly engagement with Odissi music as an independent classical system. Most academic discourse around Indian classical music continues to centre on Hindustani and Carnatic traditions, often excluding Odissi from comparative frameworks or broader theoretical discussions. Furthermore, the processes by which musical traditions receive state recognition remain undocumented, informal, and opaque. Despite formal requests by the Odisha state government and parliamentary appeals, there is no published policy or evaluative framework for classical status within the Ministry of Culture.

Existing scholarship does not sufficiently critique this administrative gap or its implications for underrepresented art forms. This research addresses that gap by critically examining the absence of policy, analysing government documents, and highlighting the structural disadvantages faced by Odissi music in cultural recognition. It also engages with the broader question of how legitimacy is conferred or denied through state apparatus, and what this reveals about cultural centralisation in India.

Research question: Why has Odissi music, despite meeting scholarly and cultural expectations of classicality, failed to receive formal classical recognition from the Government of India, and what does this reveal about the politics of cultural legitimacy in contemporary India?

Hypothesis: This research operates on the hypothesis that Odissi music is excluded from classical recognition not due to any deficiency in its artistic or historical substance, but due to the absence of transparent policy frameworks, centralised cultural bias, and institutional neglect at the national level.

2. Methodology

This research has a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that combines historical analysis, musicological inquiry, and activist-oriented cultural critique. It contains both textual study and live performance experience, showing the author's dual position as a researcher and active Odissi performer. More than 100 performances were studied over the course of this research, including concerts, temple rituals, pedagogical demonstrations, and digital broadcasts. Many of these were first-hand experiences, either as a performer or an engaged observer. The methodology therefore includes active fieldwork, based on performance participation, interaction with fellow musicians, and audience observation. The researcher's insight emerges from scholarly texts, embodied musical practice, informal discussions with peers, and immersive exposure to the evolving dynamics of Odissi performance in contemporary contexts. Primary sources such as *Gītaprakāśa* and *Sangīta Nārāyaṇa* are analysed to establish the theoretical framework of Odissi music. These are read alongside institutional documents, government reports, and cultural policy records to evaluate the disjuncture between lived tradition and official recognition. The overall approach is argumentative, historical, analytical, and activist, documenting the tradition while also critiquing the systems that continue to marginalise it.

3. Literature Review

Despite Odissi music's ancient lineage and deep cultural presence, scholarly attention toward its classical

identity has been limited. Much of the early discourse surrounding classical Indian music has been dominated by the Hindustani and Carnatic systems, both of which benefited from institutional support, academic publication, and national cultural positioning in the 20th century. Scholars like V. Raghavan, Bhattachande, and Subramania Iyer contributed significantly to codifying Hindustani and Carnatic music, but rarely made reference to Odissi music in their comparative frameworks. Existing literature on Odissi music has primarily been confined to state-supported publications or as appendices to studies on Odissi dance.

Texts like *Gitaprakāśa* and *Sangītā Nārāyaṇa* are foundational, but until recently, remained understudied outside Odisha. Contemporary efforts such as *Odissi – The Third Classical Form of Indian Music* have attempted to correct this gap by arguing for Odissi's independent musicological and historical identity. Notably, there is a lack of interdisciplinary or performance-based studies that examine the intersection of Odissi music with cultural identity, regional marginalisation, and institutional exclusion. As a result, this article seeks to contribute to that discourse by synthesising literary, performative, and theoretical perspectives.

To contextualise the discourse around the classical recognition of Odissi music, this study undertook a close review of official government documents, state-level reports, and parliamentary proceedings between 2020 and 2024. Among the most significant sources examined is the Odisha Heritage Cabinet Resolution, passed in its second meeting on 2 September 2020, which officially reiterated the state's position that Odissi music should be recognised as a classical tradition at the national level.

4. Why does the “Classical” tag matter?

In contemporary India, the label of “classical”, in a way, determines access to state funding, institutional inclusion, and career progression. Artists associated with officially recognised classical forms are eligible for a wide range of opportunities: junior and senior scholarships, junior and senior fellowships from the Ministry of Culture, national and international festivals curated by government bodies, UGC-recognised university appointments, and All India Radio (AIR) grading in classical categories.

In contrast, both vocalists and instrumentalists practicing Odissi, are often ambiguously slotted under “Light Vocal,” “Sugam Sangeet,” or “Dance Music”, diminishing the stature and seriousness of their practice. These vague classifications offer fewer avenues for progression and often bar artists from accessing higher-level accreditation or funding streams available to their counterparts in Hindustani or Carnatic systems.

For instrumentalists, the problem is equally acute. Mardala players, Odissi violinists, flautists, and harmonium accompanists frequently fall outside the classical circuit, making it difficult to gain recognition as soloists or pedagogues. Classical status would not only give them rightful identity within institutional frameworks but also enable instrument-specific training programs, AIR grading, and research fellowships, which are already well-established for instruments like sitar, or sarod. The lack of classical recognition thus directly affects livelihood, legitimacy, and lineage-building for practitioners across the spectrum of Odissi music.

Officially recognized classical forms in India benefit from tangible institutional support that allows practitioners to sustain and develop their art. For instance:

- The Ministry of Culture's Senior and Junior Fellowship Scheme supports up to 400 fellows annually, disbursing ₹20,000/month to senior fellows (above 40 years) and ₹10,000/month to junior fellows (aged 25-40) for two-year research or creative projects.

- The Scholarship Scheme for Young Artists (SYA) offers ₹5,000/month for two years to artists aged 18-25, provided they have at least five years of formal training in their field.
- The Tagore National Fellowship for Cultural Research provides up to ₹80,000/month for senior fellows, plus a contingency allowance, to support research affiliated with recognized institutions.
- All India Radio (AIR), under Prasar Bharati's Music Audition System, evaluates and grades artistes at multiple levels (B, B-High, A, Top) through a tiered system: from local to central boards. Grading determines performance opportunities, regular broadcast schedules, and professional legitimacy.
- The Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship and various awards (Senior Fellowships, national fellowships, the Nagarik Kala Samman, and academic chairs) recognize and financially support artists with sustained contributions to classical arts

For Odissi, both vocalists and instrumentalists, due to lack of “classical” classification, they may be categorised under “light music”, “dance music”, or “devotional”, which severely restricts access to institutional fellowships, broadcast grading, academic positions, and national platforms. Instrumentalists, such as mardala or Odissi flutists, are especially disadvantaged, as Odissi rendition in these instruments are not formally recognised among AIR's classical instrumental panels unless tied to more established traditions like Hindustani.

5. Classicality of Hindustani and Carnatic Music Systems

Understanding how Indian classical traditions have been historically defined provides crucial insight into the musical legitimacy. Two of the nation's most widely recognised systems Hindustani and Carnatic music offer clear precedents through their foundational texts, classification frameworks, and institutional codification.

Hindustani Music: Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and the Thaata System

The early 20th century witnessed the systemic transformation of Hindustani music thanks to the pioneering work of Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande (1860–1936). Concerned that raga grammar was becoming fragmented with oral transmission, he introduced the thaata system to classify North Indian ragas in a structured and scholarly manner. This system remains integral to modern pedagogy and bolsters the tradition's claim to classical status.

- Kramik Pustak Malika (6 volumes)- Standardised notation and structure of over 1,200 bandishes across numerous rāgas.
- Hindustani Sangeet Paddhati- Provides detailed theoretical commentary on rāga structure and performance.
- Lakshan Geet Sangrah, Swara Malika, Geet Malika, Abhinav Raga Manjari, Abhinav Tala Manjari-supplementary works covering rāga and tāla taxonomy
- Bhatkhande also edited and republished ancient treatises, such as Chaturdandi- prakāśikā by Venkatamakhin (a Carnatic text), thereby acknowledging shared historical roots in musicology.
- Jonathon Katz; Grove Music Online: Highlights the textual bridge between Carnatic melakarta and modern Hindustani thāt frameworks where he says Bhatkhande chanced upon the Chaturdandiprakāśikā and used its melakartā system as the basis for the thaata system.
- Bhake & Rao (2025): “Expressive Timing in Hindustani Vocal Music”: A computational analysis of timing variations in performances of Raga Yaman, illustrating stylistic nuance and performer individuality.
- Banerjee et al. (2016): “Variation of singing styles within a particular Gharana”: Uses multifractal

analysis to demonstrate stylistic evolution across generations in Patiala Gharana, highlighting guru-shishya transmission and individual creativity. In this paper, he states “Evolution of singing style among four artists of four consecutive generations gives a cue towards scientific recognition of Guru-Shishya Parampara”

Carnatic Music: Venkatamakhin and the Melakartā System

The 17th-century treatise Chaturdandiprakāśikā by Venkatamakhin of Carnatic musical taxonomy:

- Written under the patronage of the Nayaka ruler Vijayaraghava, the text introduces the melakartā system, categorising rāgas into 72 parent scales, many of which continue to dominate Carnatic repertoire till date. This system is organised into 12 chakras, each with six mēlās, based on swara permutations. The text also conceives rāga, gīta, prabandha, and alāpana as the “four pillars” of musical performance.
- Adaptations of Venkatamakhin’s system, notably the Prati/Sampurna criteria and katapayādi nomenclature, affirm its coherence and sophistication. Venkatamakhin’s classification became canonical in Carnatic music, a clear delineator of classical structure and analytical depth.
- Ramamatya: Svaramelakālanidhi (1550)- One of the nine “gems” of Carnatic śāstra literature, vital for rāga-mēla classification and performance practice. This important śāstra also goes into the details of chromatic intervals, tuning, and classifies rāgas into uttama/madhyama/adhama categories.
- N. Ramanathan: Musical Forms in the Sangita Ratnakāra (1999, University of Madras)- A critical autochthonous study of Sarṅgadeva’s 13th-century Saṅgītaratnākara, exploring gīta, tāla, and instrument taxonomy in the pan-Indian classical tradition.
- K. Subramanian: Text, Tone, and Tune (1986)- Dissertation-based study that examines how textual forms, tonal systems, and improvisational style interconnect in Carnatic practice.
- T. M. Krishna: A Southern Music: The Karnatik Story (2013)- A socio-political narrative framing Carnatic music as “art music” and dissecting tensions around tradition, innovation, and identity. In this he said, “In its totality, a raga is a combination of musical heritage, technical elements, emotional charge, cognitive understanding and aural identity”.

Common and Shared Logic of Both Systems:

Interestingly, when Bhatkhande encountered Chaturdandiprakāśikā in the 20th century, he adapted its conceptual logic to formulate the Hindustani thāt system. This cross-pollination shows a pan-Indian classical consciousness based on systematisation, textuality, and structural grammar.

These systematic scholarship underlines the architectural completeness of Hindustani and Carnatic systems, their rigorous theoretical depth and historical continuity. These should hence serve as litmus tests for classical status: tests that Odissi music equally meets, as argued elsewhere in this paper. The existence of such benchmarks in Indian classical music also reinforces the argument that Odissi’s exclusion is less about its merit and more about an absence of comparable institutional or bureaucratic framing.

6. Recent Scholarship on Odissi Music

Odissi music has attracted increased scholarly attention in recent decades, particularly through works by authors and practitioners, contributing to the cultural documentation and theoretical articulation of this tradition.

Contributions:

- Pt. Harmohan Khuntia: Pandit Harmohan Khuntia is a distinguished percussionist, equally accomplished in Tabla and the traditional Odissi Pakhawaj (Mardala). Trained under eminent gurus

such as Pt. Gyan Prakash Ghosh in Hindustani Tabla and Simhari Shyam Sunder Kar in Odissi vocal, Khuntia has melded classical rigor with regional tradition. Served as an A-Grade Staff Artist in Tabla at All India Radio, Cuttack since 1970. Former Junior Lecturer at Utkal Sangeet Mahavidyalaya (since 1967), where he shaped numerous students now performing across AIR and Doordarshan. Composed around 300 Odissi musical pieces and dance-dramas for esteemed platforms, such as the Odissi Research Centre, also producing broadcast-ready works for AIR. Recently, he has compiled around 50 compositions of his into a book.

- Dr. Ramahari Das: A senior vocalist and pedagogue, Das has authored several foundational volumes like Odissi Sangeetara Parampara O Prayoga, Sangeet Sangya, Alankara Ratnabali, in which he provides graded lessons and terminology essential for learners, and his Gurukula trains vocalists in the traditional guru-sishya parampara. The more recent online initiative offers free training via YouTube aimed at reviving performance traditions.
- Guru Dhaneswar Swain: one of the foremost exponents of the Mardala, has been instrumental in elevating it from an accompanying instrument to a solo performance tradition. Through his decades of teaching at Utkal Sangeet Mahavidyalaya and his institution Vadya Vani Gurukul, he has shaped a generation of percussionists and composed a wide range of rhythmic structures.
- Dr. Kirtan Narayan Padhi: His Odissi Sangitara Itihasa (2005) offers one of the first documented histories of Odissi music, spanning temple traditions, inscriptional references, and melodic grammar. He has been a keynote speaker at national forums. Since then, he has authored multiple other books.
- Dr. Jagannath Kunwar: a musicologist and scholar, has authored works on Odissi music theory and pedagogy, and has served in academic positions that integrate performance practice with formal musicological training.
- Pt. Ramarao Patra: one of the last custodians of the Odissi Bina (veena), co-authored Odissi Sangita Baridhi, meticulously documenting over 60 ragas and 140 traditional compositions.
- Nimakanta Routray: is a prominent Odissi vocalist known both for performance and active participation in cultural festivals and radio broadcasts. His vocal talents have been highlighted in annual events like the Rajarani Music Festival, where he has performed Gita Govinda compositions in traditional ragas.
- Dr. Bijaya Kumar Jena: is a respected Odissi vocalist and head of Utkal Sangeet Mahavidyalaya, known for his refined renditions of traditional forms like Chhanda and Prabandha. He has contributed significantly to pedagogy and performance, regularly featuring at major festivals such as the Rajarani Music Festival.
- Dr. Dibakar Parida: also a senior Mardala artist, has contributed actively to the propagation of Odissi rhythm through both performance and teaching, particularly among younger learners.
- Himanshu Sekhar Swain: a young artiste, he already has multiple prestigious stage performances under his belt. Adding on to that, he is also credited with multiple academic articles discussing Odissi Music and different aspects of it in the International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR).
- Dr. Niladri Kalyan Das: A Ph.D. holder and Assistant Professor at Utkal University of Culture, he has published multiple articles like “Odishi Music System: An Exclusive Musical Tradition of India” (IJARIIT, 2022), tracing parampara, practitioners, and pedagogy, also recognised by a senior fellowship from the Ministry of Culture.
- Prateek Pattanaik: a young scholar, has co-authored Odissi Sangita Baridhi (2023), and is actively engaged in research and archiving old texts.

6. Historical Foundation (Establishing the Antiquity and Continuity)

Odissi music's roots can be traced back to Bharata Muni's Natya Shastra, the cornerstone text of Indian performing arts, where references to regional music practices strongly suggest Odissi's early origins. As the music of Lord Jagannatha's seva in Puri, it has enjoyed an unbroken devotional and performative tradition for centuries. Over the ages, literary and musical figures such as Kabiraja Jayadeba, Kabisurjya Baladeba Ratha, Kabikalahansa Gopalakrusna Pattanayaka, and Kabisamrat Upendra Bhanja enriched the tradition, developing unique ragas, talas, and vocal techniques intrinsic to the Odissi style.

Odissi music is not an offshoot of another system, as claimed by many. It is an independent stream, complete with its own grammar and aesthetics. The Champu-Chhanda tradition, in particular, shows the literature and music that Odissi uniquely preserves.

Odissi and Gita Gobinda: Odissi music stretches back over two millennia, with ritualistic antecedents visible in Kharavela's patronage (2nd century BCE) and engravings at Udayagiri-Khandagiri. Central to its classical crystallisation is Kabiraja Jayadeva's Gītagobinda (12th c.), widely acknowledged as the template for systematic melodic and rhythmic frameworks in Odissi.

Key Treatises (Gitaprakāśa & Sangītā Nārāyaṇa): The 16th-century Gitaprakāśa by Kṛṣṇadāsa Badajena Mahapatra codifies Odissi vocal grammar, ragas and talas, bridging oral tradition with scholarly text. Likewise, the 17th-century Sangītā Nārāyaṇa, a seminal treatise by Purusottama Misra, remains foundational, cited in modern editing efforts across India, is central to Odissi music theory and used extensively today.

7. Structural Uniqueness of Odissi

Odissi music is characterised by a repertoire of distinct ragas and talas, often different in scale and usage from their Hindustani or Carnatic counterparts. Some ragas such as Kalyana, Baradi, and Kedara Kamodi are unique to the Odissi canon, yet there are some that still overlap with Hindustani and Carnatic traditions. The Gitaprakāśa enumerates some 50+ ragas used today. Odissi's vocal technique emphasises soft intonation, elongated phrases, and a lyrical melodic line that aligns with the bhakti (devotional) ethos central to Odissi performance.

These are the traditional performance frameworks or "angas":

- Raganga: Melodic exposition rooted in the raga grammar. Begins with ālāp, then moves into pada binyāsa and ornate swara variations which is very much akin to the Hindustani alaap + taan structure
- Bhabanga: Emotive singing where mood (bhāva) is central. Artists may blend ragas to evoke the song's sentiment.
- Natyanga: Dramatic or theatrical style, emphasising tala and theatrical expression, often used in dance narratives (Gotipua, Mahari and Odissi Dance recitals). These are mostly fast-paced songs.
- Dhrubapadanga: A heavier, tala-driven style like Malashree, focusing more on rhythmic structure over lyrical content.

There are a other Compositional Forms that are included in Odissi Music, which are as follows:

1. Champu: A poetic form mixing prose and verse; in this genre of literature, Kabisurya Baladeba Ratha's "Kishorachandrananda Champu" is iconic. It contains 34 songs mapping to each Odia alphabet, set in prescribed ragas and talas, preserved through oral tradition in mainstream and grassroot levels.
2. Chhanda: Metrical verses emphasising rhythm and melody; the literature is of utmost importance in this style. And hence, it is sung in one consistent loop of swara with gamaka ornamentation and brutta/vani style

3. Chautisa: A 34 verse song or a collection of 34 songs, with each verse or song starting with a letter of the Odia alphabet. These are generally very long, and are not sung in totality in public. However, there are recordings on YouTube where complete chautisas have been sung, Odisha Sanket being foremost in documenting it.
4. Chaupadi: Short, lyrical four-stanza pieces often on romantic themes, mostly based on Radha and Krishna.
Padi: A single padi text can be rendered across multiple tālas within the same performance, often shifting from one to another in rapid succession. Typically, the vocalist initiates the tāla change at the end of each cycle, prompting the mardala artiste to identify and adapt in real-time. This results in a light-hearted and technically demanding exchange on stage, requiring spontaneity and mastery from the artistes. Despite the variation in rhythm, the defining feature across all interpretations remains the fast-paced, pulsating character of the padi.
5. Chaturang: A complex hybrid of four parts: prabandha, pallabi (tenaka), sargam, and pata (mardala bols), though rare in practice today.
6. Geeta Gobinda / Astapadi: The Gita Gobinda is so important that it is treated as a separate form of singing altogether. Although, one can find many similarities between the rendition of Gita Gobinda and Chaupadis, they are highly revered and have been given a stature of their own. This only contains Jayadeba's 12th-century Sanskrit lyrics (24 Astapadis) depicting Radha and Krishna's love story, blending song and drama and deeply ingrained in the Odissi canon.
7. Bhajana: These are devotional poems and songs written where the poet writes about a God or Goddess, stories about them from mythology, and their greatness in general. These tend to be happy and jolly.
8. Janana: These are also devotional poems where the poet writes about his problems, or crises, while addressing it to a higher power. These mostly tend to be on the sadder side.

The system also contains a codified grammar, oral and textual traditions, and compositions that qualify it by all scholarly standards as "classical." Unfortunately, this internal richness is often overshadowed by its external association with dance.

Rhythmic Instruments and Taalas

Mardala: The principal percussion instrument in Odissi, governed by a unique tala grammar: anga, graha, jati, kriya variants (nisabda and sasabda), etc.; common talas include ekatāli, khemaṭā, rūpaka, tripaṭā, āḍatāli, sarimāna, nihsāri, and more.

Manjira: This is one of the most commonly used percussion instruments in accompaniment. It is a small cymbal which is used to keep the time while a performer is singing.

Khola/Mrudanga: This is used mostly in villages and remote areas for kirtana. This has a particularly high pitched sound on the right side as compared to the Mardala. This is also commonly used to accompany Chhānda singing.

Tala: There are many rhythmic cycles that are unique to Odissi. Yet, the most unique tala of Odissi is Adatali. It is a fourteen (14) beat cycle which, unlike usual Indian 7-beat cycle rhythms, doesn't follow the 3+4 division, rather opts for the 4+3 division. Yet, the rendition of this makes it unique, for there is no emphasis on the 1st beat, as is the norm in Indian Classical music systems.

8. The Shadow of Odissi Dance

One of the primary reasons for Odissi music's limited recognition lies in its inseparable bond with Odissi dance. While this integration is a strength, it has also led to the misperception of music as merely an

accompaniment. Unlike Hindustani and Carnatic music, which developed robust solo concert traditions, Odissi music has largely been confined to temples and dance recitals. As a result, its potential as a standalone performance art has remained underexplored in the public consciousness.

“I see musical performance in India as a rich and many-layered gestural dance, in which musicians make statements, appeal, instruct, or plead, relate to others, express their physical and performance in India (and in general, for that matter) as a rich and many-layered gestural dance” says Martin Clayton in the “Time in Indian Music: Rhythm, Metre and Form in North Indian Rāg Performance”.

In recent years, this identity has become increasingly visible through public performance platforms that present Odissi music independently of dance. These events not only showcase the expressive and structural richness of the tradition, but also reinforce its viability as a freestanding classical genre worthy of recognition on par with Hindustani and Carnatic music. Below are key examples that substantiate this shift:

- Rajarani Music Festival, Bhubaneswar: Organised by the Odisha Sangeet Natak Akademi and Department of Tourism, this is a major state-level festival featuring solo Odissi vocal recitals without dance. Artistes like Guru Ramahari Das and ensemble, Mohapatra Minati Bhanja, Dr. Bijaya Jena, Nimakanta Routray, and Rupak Kumar Parida have performed Odissi recitals which have focussed only on the singing.
- Balakrushna Das Foundation Festival: An annual two-day festival held in Odisha, dedicated entirely to Odissi vocal music. No dance is performed; vocalists from both urban and rural Odisha participate. Celebrates the legacy of Guru Balakrushna Das and aims to foreground the melodic and poetic content of the Odissi repertoire.
- Alapa Cultural Trust Annual Function: A two-day event running from morning to night, held annually. It features performances by over 100–120 Odissi vocalists of varying ages and training backgrounds. Dance is intentionally excluded to highlight music as the central focus.
- Odisha Sanket Baithak Series: A monthly interactive gathering initiated in October 2023. Designed as an intimate listening space for Odissi music, promoting dialogue between artist and audience. Several editions have featured solo Odissi vocalists, helping dismantle the belief that Odissi music cannot exist outside of dance performance.

9. Institutional Apathy and Cultural Bias

Odissi music’s journey toward recognition has been further complicated by institutional neglect and a Delhi-centric cultural narrative. Hindustani and Carnatic traditions have benefited from early 20th-century institutionalisation through music academies, documentation efforts, and national festivals. That very clearly gave them a head start in being accepted as classical. By contrast, Odissi music was neither actively promoted nor documented at a similar scale. The average Indian’s unfamiliarity with Odisha, often unable to even locate it on the map, is a stark reflection of this neglect.

It is important to note that even Hindustani and Carnatic music systems which, today, are widely acknowledged as India’s primary classical traditions, did not gain their status through any official legislative act or government declaration. Their classical identity evolved gradually through institutional validation by organisations such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi, and through formal education via academies like Gandharva Mahavidyalaya and Prayag Sangeet Samiti. Eminent practitioners were conferred with Padma awards and Bharat Ratna titles, reinforcing their stature. Additionally, platforms like The Madras Music Academy institutionalised Carnatic music’s annual December season, becoming

cultural landmarks.

These mechanisms allowed both traditions to embed themselves in the national consciousness as “classical” music, which was never through legal mandates but through historical privilege and sustained support.

10. Reaffirming Classical Status

The debate around Odissi music’s exclusion from India’s formal list of classical music systems cannot be fully understood without a meticulous examination of how the Government of India and the State of Odisha have officially handled the question of recognition. This section analyses, in close detail, three primary documents:

1. the Odisha Heritage Cabinet Resolution (2 September, 2020)
2. the Rajya Sabha Special Mention by Dr. Amar Patnaik (21 September, 2020)
3. the Odisha Culture Department’s Activity Report (2020-21),
4. the Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 1296 (9 December 2021).

Together, these documents not only illustrate Odisha’s persistent efforts to achieve recognition but also expose the structural vacuum at the central level regarding how classical status is actually conferred, if at all.

1. Odisha Heritage Cabinet Resolution (2 September 2020)

Relevant PDF Pages: Pages 386–387

On 2nd September 2020, the Heritage Cabinet of the Government of Odisha, chaired by the Chief Minister, passed a resolution officially recommending that Odissi music be granted classical status by the Government of India. This resolution was later on formally included in the proceedings of the Odisha government’s communication to the Centre and appears on page 57 of the Rajya Sabha Unstarred Questions Supplement (20 Sept 2020 edition) which has been discussed later.

This resolution is critically important in the history of Odissi music for the following reasons:

1. State-Level Government Recognition: For the first time, a Cabinet-level government body officially recognised Odissi music as eligible for classical status. This raises the legitimacy of the demand from being an isolated artistic appeal to a formally endorsed cultural resolution.
2. Institutional Pathway Established: With this resolution, Odisha moved beyond advocacy and into formal bureaucratic procedure, making it harder for the Centre to dismiss the claim as unofficial or ad hoc.
3. Precedent Within the Ministry of Culture’s Framework: While the Centre claims there are no fixed criteria for classical status, in practice, state government recommendations have historically played a role in recognition (as with Tamil Nadu’s role in Carnatic and Bharatanatyam recognition). This resolution matches that precedent.
4. Bridge Between Policy and Practice: The resolution creates an institutional bridge between living musical practice (Odissi concerts, pedagogy, AIR broadcasts) and state-sanctioned heritage status. It integrates performance tradition into a policy-making discourse, a vital step toward inclusion in national cultural policy.
5. Groundwork for Interventions in the Parliament: The resolution served as the foundation for later parliamentary mentions, most notably Dr. Amar Patnaik’s Special Mention in the Rajya Sabha (Sept 21, 2020) and subsequent questions in 2021, which is discussed in the following point.

2. Rajya Sabha Debate Special Mention (21 September 2020)

Relevant PDF Pages: Pages 386–387

In the Rajya Sabha's official parliamentary proceedings (Debates, 21 September 2020), Dr. Amar Patnaik, Member of Parliament representing Odisha, made a Special Mention under Rule 180, formally urging the Union Government to confer classical status on Odissi music as in [21]. His remarks are recorded verbatim on pages 386–387 of the session transcript. His speech is notable for both its structure and content:

a) Cultural Grounding: “Odissi music is deeply rooted in Jagannath culture and temple tradition of Odisha and forms the backbone of Odissi dance and Odia language.” (RS Debates, p. 386 of pdf)

This establishes the organic embeddedness of Odissi music within a living, performative, and religious tradition: one of the implicit expectations of any classical system.

b) Textual Antiquity: “It has its roots in the Nāṭyaśāstra and references to Kalinga and Utkala music are found in Matanga's Brihaddeshi.” (p. 386 of pdf)

By citing Nāṭyaśāstra and Brihaddeshi, Patnaik places Odissi within the same theoretical genealogy as Hindustani and Carnatic music, both of which claim their classical status on the basis of these textual lineages.

c) Independent Structure: “Odissi music can be distinguished from Carnatic and Hindustani classical music. It has its own style of rendition, codified grammar, separate ragas and talas, and its own musicological texts like Gītaprakāśa and Sangīta Nārāyaṇa.” (p. 386 of pdf)

Here, Patnaik pre-empts any argument that Odissi is a derivative or hybrid form. He reinforces the idea that originality, not regionalism, is the basis for classical status.

d) Institutional Support: “Odisha has already recognised Odissi music as a classical form and has institutions and infrastructure to support it.” (p. 387 of pdf)

He directly aligns Odisha's institutional ecosystem with the expectations typically cited for classical systems, i.e., performance, research, training, and transmission.

e) Political and Constitutional Appeal: “Therefore, I request the Central Government through the Ministry of Culture to recognise Odissi music as a classical form and preserve this precious cultural heritage.” (page 387 of pdf)

This final appeal exposes a core contradiction: the Government is being asked to recognise something for which it has no stated evaluative mechanism, as confirmed in the next document.

3. Odisha Culture Department's Activity Report (2020-21)

Relevant PDF Page: Page 8

This government-issued report, spanning the full year of departmental activity, is the most concrete written record of the Odisha Heritage Cabinet's formal resolution[19] requesting the classical recognition of Odissi music. On page 9 of the report, under the section titled “Significant Decisions,” the following statement appears:

“The Odisha Heritage Cabinet in its second meeting held on 02.09.2020 under the Chairmanship of Hon'ble Chief Minister has taken the following significant decisions:

Government of Odisha has recognised Odissi as a classical form of music during 2008. A resolution was passed to request GoI to give Odissi music a classical status.”

(Activity Report, Odia Language, Literature and Culture Department, 2020-21)

This quote is critical because it provides three layers of official affirmation:

- First, the state of Odisha already considers Odissi music classical, as early as 2008.
- Second, the Cabinet took the step of passing a formal resolution, which is a legislative action, not mere

rhetoric.

- Third, this resolution was forwarded as a request to the Government of India, indicating a clear intergovernmental process was initiated.

The report also contextualises this resolution within broader institutional efforts. It highlights that the Odissi Research Centre has been operating since 1984, tasked with the “promotion, dissemination, documentation and standardisation” of Odissi dance and music. The presence of institutions such as Utkal Sangeet Mahavidyalaya, Utkal University of Culture, and the Odisha Sangeet Natak Akademi also points to a robust ecosystem for both academic and practical transmission of the art form.

Thus, the Activity Report establishes the state’s consistent institutional backing and policy-level engagement with Odissi music. But it also sets up the tension: a state declares something classical, builds structures around it, but remains dependent on the Centre’s approval to see it nationally recognised.

4. Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 1296 (9-16 December 2021)

In response to a follow-up inquiry by Amar Patnaik, listed as Unstarred Question No. 1296 [20], the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, was asked to clarify whether:

- It had taken any steps to confer classical status to Odissi music, and
- If not, what criteria or process were followed for such recognitions.

The reply, brief and unambiguous, stated: “The Government does not confer classical status to any musical form.” (RS Question 1296, 9 Dec 2021)

This one-line statement is damning in its implications. It acknowledges that:

- There is no formal framework by which classical status is evaluated or granted.
- No policy guidelines, criteria, ministerial directives, or Gazette notifications exist that define what constitutes a classical music system.

As a result, all previously granted classical recognitions, including those of Hindustani and Carnatic music, must have occurred via discretionary, undocumented processes, or as ad hoc declarations with no replicable protocol. The demand for Odissi music to meet undefined standards is therefore structurally incoherent.

These four documents, read together, reveal a dissonant bureaucratic landscape:

- The State of Odisha has acted with clarity and institutional seriousness, passing formal resolutions, building academic structures, and lobbying through parliamentary channels.
- The Parliament of India, through its members, has articulated a historically grounded, culturally rich case for recognition.
- Yet, the Government of India, through the Ministry of Culture, offers no framework, no engagement, and no pathway forward, only a denial rooted in its own lack of policy.

In this vacuum, Odissi music remains suspended not due to any inadequacy on its part, but because the state apparatus tasked with conferring recognition refuses to define what recognition entails. This exposes a fundamental truth: the denial of classical status to Odissi music is not a reflection of its cultural merit, but a symptom of bureaucratic incoherence and institutional indifference.

10. Criteria for Classical Music Recognition in India:

In the ongoing discourse around the recognition of India’s classical art forms, the term “classical” is often used with an air of institutional legitimacy. However, despite its repeated appearance in national policy, academic scholarship, and public advocacy, there exists no official framework issued by the Government of India or the Ministry of Culture that defines what constitutes a “classical music tradition.” This absence

was explicitly confirmed in the Government's reply to Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 1296 on 9 December 2021, in which the Ministry of Culture stated unequivocally that: "The Government does not confer classical status to any musical form."

This statement reveals a significant paradox: while forms such as Hindustani and Carnatic music are widely accepted and celebrated as "classical," this designation is not grounded in any codified government process, gazette notification, or ministerial guideline. The Sangeet Natak Akademi, though entrusted with the promotion of India's performing arts, likewise does not publicly maintain or publish any explicit criteria for what qualifies as a classical tradition. Its mandate includes support, documentation, and awards for art forms already considered classical, but the criteria for that recognition remain undefined in its official regulations.

Nevertheless, in academic and musicological circles, certain commonly accepted parameters have emerged over time to describe and evaluate classical music systems in India. These are not legal definitions, but rather scholarly constructs drawn from comparative analysis and historical study. Scholars such as Dr. Kirtan Narayan Padhi and Jiwan Pani, among others, have articulated six guiding characteristics typically used to identify a classical tradition:

- a. High antiquity of early texts/references (at least 1000 years old)
- b. Well-documented system based on classical texts (śāstra), not just oral traditions
- c. Originality and distinct grammar of the system (rāgas, tālas, theory)
- d. Recognised body of ancient compositions and compositions of great composers
- e. Sustained practice and performance tradition
- f. Scholarly, institutional, and community support

Below is a comparative analysis that aligns Odissi music's attributes with the six major parameters defined for classical music recognition:

A. High Antiquity of Early Texts and References: Odissi music is rooted in a documented tradition exceeding 2,000 years, tracing back to inscriptions from the time of Emperor Kharavela (2nd century BCE) and textual references in Nāṭyaśāstra. The 12th-century Gītagovinda of Jayadeva serves as both devotional and musical scripture that underpins much of Odissi musical and dance practice. The Odisha Heritage Cabinet (2020), CM Naveen Patnaik's official letter (2020), and MP Amar Patnaik's Rajya Sabha appeal (2020) all cite this deep antiquity to argue for Odissi music's classical status.

B. Well-Documented Śāstra-Based System: Unlike traditions that rely solely on oral transmission, Odissi music boasts written treatises that articulate its theoretical foundation. The 16th-century Gītaprakāśa by Kṛṣṇadāsa Badajena Mahapatra codifies raga structures, vocal technique, and tala systems. The 17th-century Sangīta Nārāyaṇa by Purusottama Mīśra further establishes rhythmic and melodic frameworks. These texts are referenced in state communications and official resolutions as proof of Odissi's scholarly depth.

C. Original Grammar and Musical System: Odissi music possesses its own system of rāgas and tālas that are structurally distinct from those in Hindustani and Carnatic traditions. Rāgas like Barādi, Kalyāṇa, and Kēdāra Kamōdi are endemic to the Odissi canon, while tālas such as Aḍatāli (14 beats, with a unique 4+3 division) exemplify rhythmic originality. The use of the mardala and the padi technique reinforce its stylistic uniqueness. These features are consistently emphasised in government documents advocating for classical status.

D. Compositional Heritage: The tradition includes a large body of ancient and medieval compositions like the Champu poetry of Kabisurya Baladeba Ratha, the Chhanda and Chautisa formats, and the

Astapadis of Jayadeva. These compositions are not only musically rigorous but also spiritually central to temple and dance traditions. Their continued performance underscores both literary value and melodic structure, meeting a key criterion for classical designation.

E. Sustained Performance and Teaching Tradition: Odissi music has been continuously practiced in ritual, devotional, and performative contexts. Its integration with Odissi dance, Mahari and Gotipua traditions, and temple ceremonies has ensured uninterrupted transmission. Modern performers, musicologists, and institutions continue to preserve and innovate within this tradition, fulfilling the requirement for a living performance lineage.

F. Institutional and Scholarly Support: The Odisha government has formally recognised Odissi music as a classical tradition since 2008. Institutions such as the Utkal University of Culture, the Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra Odissi Research Centre, and numerous gurukuls and sabhas support its pedagogy and preservation. The Odisha Heritage Cabinet's resolution and the Chief Minister's letter to the Union Ministry (both in 2020) explicitly reference these institutional frameworks, thereby satisfying this final criterion.

These academic parameters have been retrospectively applied to art forms that are already popularly accepted as classical (e.g., Hindustani, Carnatic, Dhrupad), yet none of them are codified in policy or law. This discrepancy has real consequences. When practitioners of Odissi music, an equally ancient and theoretically rich tradition, seek classical recognition, they are not confronted with transparent criteria, but with an ambiguous bureaucratic vacuum. In response, Odisha's government and cultural leaders have attempted to fill this void through a series of formal requests and resolutions, drawing on the above scholarly framework to justify their claim.

This section of the paper, therefore, does not rest on an assumed or official "checklist" for classical status, but rather evaluates how Odissi music aligns with the only available evaluative framework: that of established academic consensus. It also seeks to highlight the policy gap that separates government recognition from scholarly validation, and the implications of that gap for underrepresented traditions like Odissi.

Odissi matches or exceeds these parallels in documentation, antiquity, and performance continuity, but lacks only the same central visibility and funding.

Based on the official requests (Cabinet, CM, Rajya Sabha, Assembly), Odissi music fulfills all six classical criteria. These requests:

- Accurately emphasise śāstra-based foundation and antiquity
- Establish originality in rāgas, tālas, and instruments
- Show compositional and oral lineage
- Highlight institutional support
- Call for equal national recognition, much like how Odissi dance and Odia language were eventually recognised

11. Role of Individuals and Institutions in Spreading Odissi Music

While official recognition for Odissi music has remained stalled within the bureaucratic corridors of the central government, the responsibility of preserving, promoting, and popularising the tradition has largely been shouldered by a passionate network of individuals, scholars, and grassroots organisations. These cultural custodians, often working without institutional funding or national visibility, have kept the

tradition alive not only in temples and academic institutions, but increasingly, through digital platforms, community initiatives, and public performances that bring Odissi music into everyday life.

One of the most remarkable and consistent efforts in this space has come from Odisha Sanket, the brainchild of Badri Narayan Mohanty, a committed social worker, not a professional musician or vocalist, but a visionary dedicated to cultural service. Odisha Sanket represents an unprecedented model of digital cultural activism. Since May 3, 2022, the platform has been uploading an Odissi music recording every single day at 5:00 AM, without fail. As of today, June 20, 2025, the channel has completed 1,145 consecutive days of uploads: an extraordinary feat of discipline, devotion, and logistical commitment.

This unchanging schedule has not only ensured visibility for the genre but also created a daily ritual around Odissi music for thousands of listeners. With a growing subscriber base of approximately 24,785 followers, Odisha Sanket has become a virtual temple of Odissi music offering curated renditions by seasoned artists, new voices, and archival recordings that might otherwise have faded into obscurity. It is arguably the first YouTube channel fully and exclusively dedicated to Odissi music, with no commercial diversions, cross-genre content, or algorithmic pandering.

In the monumental task of uploading an Odissi music recording every single day, Odisha Sanket has collaborated with over 110 vocal artistes and 50 instrumentalists spanning a wide range of traditional instruments. The channel also regularly features instrumental solos to promote the rich and diverse instrumental tradition of Odissi music, highlighting that these soundscapes are not mere accompaniment but an integral part of the musical system itself.

Beyond its digital discipline, Odisha Sanket has also emerged as a catalyst for interactive cultural engagement through its monthly Baithaks, initiated in October 2023. These intimate gatherings invite artists to perform in close proximity to audiences, creating an atmosphere of dialogue rather than distance. In a world where classical arts are often perceived as elitist or inaccessible, these Baithaks have helped destigmatise Odissi music and reintroduce it as a living, breathing art form that welcomes rather than intimidates. The format also encourages intergenerational participation, enabling students, amateurs, and emerging performers to share space with maestros, thus sustaining both tradition and innovation.

Thanks to these consistent and mission-driven efforts, people from across the world now wake up to Odissi music, very literally. In an era where attention spans are short and cultural content is diluted for mass appeal, Odisha Sanket has carved a unique digital sanctuary rooted in authenticity, artistic rigour, and unwavering purpose. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Odisha Sanket has created the largest digital archive and community space exclusively for Odissi music, and continues to redefine how classical traditions can thrive in contemporary media ecosystems.

Badri Narayan Mohanty's work stands as an example of the power of cultural leadership beyond performance. His contribution shows that one need not be a singer or scholar to support a classical tradition only deeply committed to its survival and expansion.

12. Conclusion

Odissi music does not require validation. It demands recognition. For, Odissi music is not aspiring to become classical, it already is. And that truth is not given by the government. It is declared by history, sustained by performance, and now, documented by scholarship.

This research has shown through evidence, performance analysis, legislative documentation, and textual study that Odissi music meets or exceeds every observable criterion historically used to define "classical" in the Indian context. From an independently evolved rāga system and structured tāla patterns, to a codified

theoretical foundation (Gītaprakāśa, Sangīta Nārāyaṇa), to oral transmission systems and temple-based ritual use, to solo concert tradition, Odissi music stands in full integrity as a classical form. No aspect is missing what is missing is state recognition. This paper has laid bare the arbitrary and opaque nature of the Government of India's cultural recognition process. There are, in fact, no fixed criteria, which is a fact admitted in the Rajya Sabha in response to Question No. 1296 (16 December 2021). Despite this, the Centre continues to deny Odissi music its rightful place. Even after the Odisha Heritage Cabinet passed a formal resolution (2 September 2020), even after Dr. Amar Patnaik raised a Special Mention in Parliament (21 September 2020), and even after the Culture Department documented active promotion and preservation efforts in its Activity Report (2020–21), the Centre's response was bureaucratic evasion dressed as objectivity.

Odissi music is not waiting. It is singing every morning at 5AM, thanks to platforms like Odisha Sanket, which for over 1100 consecutive days has published a new composition without fail. It is resounding in baithaks, sabhas, and temple courtyards as a self-sufficient, freestanding classical tradition. It is being taught, archived, performed, and inherited. What more must it prove? This paper fills a critical academic void by documenting not only the theoretical foundations of Odissi music, but also the political resistance it faces, the systemic neglect by policy frameworks, and the performative resilience of its practitioners. It bridges the divide between musicology and statecraft, between oral tradition and institutional exclusion, and between cultural activism and rigorous scholarship.

Let it be clear: if Hindustani and Carnatic music are classical, Odissi is no less. The difference is not in form, but in recognition. And if recognition comes not from Delhi, then it must come from us, from our words, our research, our performance, and our refusal to beg before systems that cannot even define their own authority. Let this not be another research paper. Let this be a declaration. A call to scholars: write more, analyse deeper, and don't stop at descriptive praise. A call to institutions: publish Odissi music, commission new work, expand its curriculum, fund its research. A call to musicians: stop waiting. You are classical, act like it.

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