

Sounding the Feminine Divine: Shakti, Laya and Power in Odishi Music

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ABSTRACT

Odishi music, one of India's classical music traditions, is deeply embedded in the religious, cultural and philosophical landscape of Odisha. While existing scholarship has predominantly examined Odishi music through the lens of Vaishnavism and Jagannath consciousness, the Shakta dimension—particularly the sonic manifestation of feminine divine power—remains under-theorized. This paper explores Odishi music as a sonic articulation of Shakti, focusing on laya (rhythmic energy), melodic movement and performative embodiment as expressions of feminine power. Drawing from Indian aesthetic theory, Shakta philosophy, musicology and performance studies, the paper argues that Odishi music does not merely represent the feminine divine thematically but structurally encodes Shakti through rhythm, flow and controlled intensity. By reframing Odishi music as a Shakti-centric soundscape, the study challenges masculine-dominant interpretations of classical music systems and contributes to feminist re-readings of Indian performing arts. The paper also positions Odishi music as an indigenous epistemology of power where devotion, discipline and dynamism coalesce.

Keywords: Odishi music, Shakti, Laya, Feminine divine, Indian aesthetics, Rasa theory, Shakta philosophy

Introduction

Indian classical music traditions have often been analyzed through theological, aesthetic and structural frameworks dominated by masculine metaphors—purusha, discipline, control and transcendence (Katz, 2013; Subramanian, 2006). In contrast, the feminine principle (Shakti)—associated with energy, movement, creation and transformation—has largely been relegated to thematic or devotional analysis rather than structural musical interpretation.

Odishi music, rooted in temple rituals, dance traditions and devotional poetry, offers a unique site to examine how the feminine divine is sounded, not merely sung about. While Jagannath consciousness has received extensive scholarly attention (Mohanty, 2007; Dash, 2014), Odisha is simultaneously a powerful Shakta landscape, home to major centers such as Tara Tarini, Samaleswari and Viraja (Kinsley, 1988; Mishra, 2010).

This paper asks: How is Shakti encoded and experienced in Odishi music through laya, melodic movement and performative energy? By foregrounding rhythm and embodied musical flow, the study argues that Odishi music functions as a sonic theology of the feminine divine.

Shakti in Indian Philosophical and Aesthetic Thought

In Indian philosophy, Shakti represents dynamic power—the force without which consciousness (Shiva) remains inert (Avalon, 1919; Feuerstein, 2000). Shakta traditions emphasize movement, vibration (spanda) and energy as the essence of reality (Dyczkowski, 1987).

From an aesthetic standpoint, Bharata's *Natyashastra* conceptualizes performance as an activation of bhava leading to rasa, where emotion is not expressed but evoked through disciplined artistic means (Bharata, trans. 1996). Later commentators such as Abhinavagupta highlight ananda (bliss) as the ultimate aesthetic experience, closely aligned with Shakta metaphysics (Abhinavagupta, trans. 2005).

Importantly, Shakti is not chaos but regulated dynamism—a principle that resonates deeply with the role of laya in music.

Odishi Music: Historical and Cultural Context

Odishi music evolved in close association with temple rituals, Mahari and Gotipua traditions and Odishi dance (Mohanty, 2007; Patnaik, 2015). Unlike purely concert-oriented traditions, Odishi music historically functioned as ritual sound, mediating between the human and the divine (Dash, 2014).

Key characteristics include:

- Fluid melodic structures
- Emphasis on lyrical expression
- Strong rhythmic grounding
- Integration with dance and gesture

While Odishi music is often framed within Vaishnava bhakti, this interpretation obscures the syncretic reality of Odisha's religious culture, where Shakta, Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions coexist and inform each other (Mishra, 2010).

Laya as Shakti: Rhythm, Energy and Feminine Power

Laya Beyond Meter

In Indian music, laya is not merely tempo but the life-force of musical movement (Ramanathan, 2004). It governs expansion, contraction, tension and release—qualities traditionally associated with feminine cosmic energy (Kinsley, 1988).

In Odishi music, laya is:

- Steady yet flexible
- Controlled yet sensuous
- Cyclical rather than linear

This rhythmic philosophy mirrors Shakta cosmology, where time (kala) is feminine and cyclical, embodied in goddesses like Kali and Durga (Coburn, 1991).

Laya and Rasa Production

The experience of rasa in Odishi music is deeply influenced by laya modulation. Subtle accelerations, pauses and rhythmic suspensions create emotional depth, particularly in karuna, shringara and bhakti rasa (Mohapatra, 2012).

Such rhythmic sensitivity aligns with Shakta aesthetics, where emotional intensity is cultivated through restraint rather than excess (Abhinavagupta, trans. 2005).

Melodic Flow and the Feminine Sonic Aesthetic

Odishi ragas often privilege:

- Smooth transitions
- Oscillatory movements
- Ornamentation that emphasizes continuity over rupture

These qualities contrast with the forceful projection often valorized in masculine-coded musical aesthetics (Subramanian, 2006). Feminine sonic power here is not loudness but resonance, not domination but presence.

Scholars of Indian music have noted that melodic fluidity facilitates emotional absorption rather than intellectual display (Jairazbhoy, 1995). In Odishi music, this fluidity can be read as a sonic embodiment of Shakti—ever-moving, sustaining and transformative.

Abhinaya, Voice and Embodied Shakti

Odishi music is inseparable from performance embodiment, particularly through its close relationship with Odishi dance. Abhinaya—facial expression, eye movement, breath and posture—extends musical meaning into the body (Vatsyayan, 1977).

The feminine divine in this context is not abstract but felt:

- Through breath-synchronized phrasing
- Through controlled vocal modulation
- Through gesture-aligned rhythm

Feminist performance theorists argue that embodied knowledge resists textual dominance and patriarchal abstraction (Butler, 1990; Banerjee, 2018). Odishi music, when viewed through abhinaya, emerges as a feminine epistemology where knowledge is enacted rather than declared.

Gender, Power and the Feminine Divine

While the feminine divine is central to Odishi aesthetics, women's voices have historically been marginalized in formal musical historiography, particularly with the decline of Mahari traditions (Banerjee, 2018; Kothari, 2003).

This paradox—where feminine power is revered symbolically but restricted socially—mirrors broader patterns in Indian cultural history (Kinsley, 1988). However, the music itself retains traces of this suppressed feminine agency through its emphasis on emotional depth, rhythmic sensitivity and embodied devotion.

Thus, Odishi music can be read as a site of cultural memory, preserving feminine power even when social structures constrain female performers.

Reframing Odishi Music as a Shakti Soundscape

This paper proposes a conceptual shift: viewing Odishi music not only as devotional or classical art but as a Shakti soundscape, where power is:

- Cyclical rather than linear
- Relational rather than hierarchical
- Embodied rather than abstract

Such a reframing challenges dominant musicological narratives that prioritize structure over experience and masculinity over movement (Katz, 2013).

Implications for Musicology and Feminist Aesthetics

Re-centering Shakti in Odishi music has several implications:

1. It expands Indian musicology beyond raga–tala formalism.
2. It contributes to feminist reinterpretations of classical arts.
3. It validates indigenous aesthetic frameworks often sidelined by Western theory.
4. It opens interdisciplinary dialogue with religious studies and performance philosophy.

Conclusion

Odishi music sounds the feminine divine not merely through lyrical devotion but through its very structure—laya, melodic flow and embodied performance. Shakti in Odishi music is not spectacle but sustained energy, not aggression but rhythmic authority.

By recognizing this, scholars can move toward a more inclusive, culturally grounded understanding of power in Indian classical music—one that listens not only to notes, but to the energy that animates them.

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