



FROM TEXT TO TONE: TRANSFORMATION OF SANSKRIT AND ODIA LITERATURE INTO ODISSI MUSICAL EXPRESSION

BISHNU MOHAN KABI¹

¹Ph.D. RESEARCH SCHOLAR, UTKAL UNIVERSITY OF CULTURE, BHUBANESWAR

Article Info

Article History:

Published: 07 Oct 2026

Publication Issue:

Volume 03, Issue 10
October 2026

Page Number:

89-95

Corresponding Author:

BISHNU MOHAN KABI

Abstract:

The evolution of Odissi music represents a remarkable confluence of literary tradition and musical innovation. Rooted deeply in Sanskrit and Odia textual heritage, Odissi music embodies a unique transformation of poetic language into melodic and rhythmic expression. This paper explores the processes through which classical Sanskrit texts and regional Odia literature have been adapted into Odissi musical compositions. It examines aesthetic principles, linguistic adaptation, performative contexts, and the role of devotional traditions in shaping this transformation. By analyzing key literary sources, musical structures, and historical developments, this study highlights how text becomes tone, and literature finds renewed life in musical expression.

Keywords: Odissi Music, Sanskrit Literature, Odia Literature, Text to Tone Transformation, Gita Govinda, Bhakti Movement, Rasa Theory, Musical Adaptation, Poetic Meter, Raga and Tala

1. Introduction

The cultural landscape of India is distinguished by a profound interrelationship between literature, music, and performance traditions. Among its classical performing arts, Odissi music occupies a unique position as a system where poetic texts are not merely sung but are reimagined into deeply expressive musical experiences. The transformation of Sanskrit and Odia literature into Odissi musical expression represents an intricate artistic process in which language transcends its semantic function and becomes a vehicle of melody, rhythm, and emotion. This process, often described as the journey from “text to tone,” lies at the heart of Odissi’s aesthetic identity.

Odissi music is rooted in the ancient temple culture of Odisha, particularly the ritual traditions associated with the Jagannath temple. From its early development, it has been inseparable from devotional poetry and sacred performance contexts. Unlike purely instrumental traditions, Odissi music evolved primarily as a lyrical form, where the meaning of the text is inseparably linked to its musical rendering. Sanskrit hymns, especially those composed in elaborate metrical structures, and later Odia devotional poetry, became the principal sources of musical composition. These texts were not simply set to music; they were transformed through careful selection of ragas, rhythmic cycles, and expressive techniques that allowed the emotional essence of the poetry to be fully realized.

The significance of Sanskrit literature in shaping Odissi music cannot be overstated. Sanskrit, as the classical language of Indian aesthetics, provided the theoretical and philosophical foundation for artistic expression. Works such as Jayadeva’s *Gita Govinda* introduced highly refined poetic structures that emphasized devotion, love, and the emotional states associated with *rasa* theory. These compositions offered an ideal medium for musical interpretation due to their rhythmic elegance and emotional depth. As Odissi music developed, these Sanskrit texts were adapted into specific melodic frameworks, allowing their abstract poetic imagery to be translated into tangible sonic experiences.

In parallel, the emergence of Odia literature contributed to the regionalization and democratization of Odissi musical expression. Poets such as Upendra Bhanja, Kabisurya Baladeva Rath, and Dinakrushna Das enriched the repertoire with compositions that reflected local idioms, cultural sensibilities, and devotional intensity. Unlike Sanskrit, which was often restricted to scholarly and ritual contexts, Odia language poetry enabled wider accessibility and emotional

immediacy. This linguistic shift did not diminish the classical character of Odissi music; rather, it expanded its expressive range and ensured its continuity within the lived cultural experiences of the people.

The transformation from literary text to musical tone involves multiple interconnected processes. At a structural level, poetic meters are adapted into rhythmic cycles (*talas*) that define the temporal organization of musical performance. At an aesthetic level, ragas are carefully selected to correspond with the emotional content of the text, ensuring that the mood of the poetry is preserved and intensified through melody. At a performative level, vocal ornamentation, improvisation, and expressive gestures contribute to the dynamic realization of meaning. Through this multi-layered transformation, the written word becomes an auditory and emotional experience.

This study seeks to explore the intricate relationship between Sanskrit and Odia literary traditions and their musical embodiment in Odissi music. It examines how linguistic structures, poetic imagination, and aesthetic philosophies are reconfigured within musical frameworks. By analyzing this transformation, the research highlights the essential unity of literature and music in Indian classical traditions, where artistic expression is not divided into rigid categories but exists as a continuum of sound, meaning, and emotion.

Ultimately, the journey from text to tone in Odissi music is not merely a technical process of composition but a profound cultural and spiritual act. It reflects a worldview in which language is alive, music is meaningful, and artistic expression serves as a bridge between the human and the transcendent.

2. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretative, and interdisciplinary methodology to examine the transformation of Sanskrit and Odia literary texts into Odissi musical expression. Since the subject lies at the intersection of literature, musicology, performance studies, and cultural history, the study does not rely on quantitative measurement but instead focuses on textual analysis, musical interpretation, and contextual understanding. The objective is to trace how poetic language is reconfigured into musical form while preserving its aesthetic and emotional essence.

The primary methodological approach used in this study is textual analysis. Selected Sanskrit and Odia literary works, particularly those that have been traditionally incorporated into Odissi music, are examined closely to understand their linguistic structure, thematic content, and poetic devices. Texts such as Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* and selected compositions of Odia poets like Upendra Bhanja, Kabisurya Baladeba Rath, and Dinakrushna Das serve as key primary sources. These texts are analyzed in terms of meter (*chhanda*), imagery, rhetorical devices, and emotional tone (*rasa*). Special attention is given to how these literary elements lend themselves to musical adaptation.

Alongside textual analysis, the study employs a musicological framework to understand how literary structures are transformed into musical compositions. This involves examining the role of *raga* (melodic framework) and *tala* (rhythmic cycle) in shaping the musical interpretation of the text. The research investigates how specific ragas are chosen to correspond with particular emotional states expressed in the poetry, and how rhythmic patterns are adapted to accommodate the natural flow of language. This process highlights the interdependence between linguistic rhythm and musical timing in Odissi tradition.

The study also incorporates an interpretative performance analysis, which focuses on the role of vocal and dance renditions in the realization of textual meaning. Since Odissi music is closely linked with Odissi dance, performance becomes an essential site where text is transformed into embodied expression. Observations of recorded and live performances are used to understand how singers and dancers interpret literary texts through vocal modulation, facial expression (*abhinaya*), and gesture (*mudra*). This helps in analyzing how meaning is not fixed in the text alone but is dynamically constructed in performance.

In addition, the research adopts a historical-contextual approach to situate the evolution of Odissi music within broader cultural and religious developments. The study traces the influence of temple traditions, especially those associated with the Jagannath cult, and examines how devotional practices shaped the selection and transmission of literary texts. It also considers the impact of the Bhakti movement, which encouraged the use of regional languages and emotionally expressive devotional poetry, thereby contributing significantly to the growth of Odia literary input in Odissi music.

Another important aspect of the methodology is comparative analysis, where Sanskrit and Odia texts are compared in terms of their adaptability into musical form. This comparison helps in identifying differences in linguistic complexity, emotional accessibility, and rhythmic flexibility. While Sanskrit texts often exhibit highly structured metrical patterns

and philosophical depth, Odia compositions tend to offer greater linguistic fluidity and direct emotional appeal. The study explores how both literary traditions contribute differently yet complementarily to Odissi musical expression.

Data for this research is primarily collected from secondary scholarly sources, including books, research articles, and ethnomusicological studies on Indian classical music. Additionally, audio recordings, archival materials, and documented performances are used as reference points for analysis. Where possible, insights from interviews and lectures by practitioners of Odissi music are also incorporated to enrich the understanding of practical performance aspects.

The methodology ultimately seeks to integrate literary criticism with musical analysis in order to present a holistic understanding of the text-to-tone transformation process. By combining multiple interpretative frameworks, the study aims to demonstrate that Odissi music is not merely a performative art form but a complex system of cultural translation where literature, sound, and emotion converge into a unified aesthetic experience.

3. Historical Context of Odissi Music

The historical development of Odissi music is deeply intertwined with the religious, cultural, and literary evolution of the eastern Indian region of Odisha. As one of the classical music traditions of India, Odissi music did not emerge as an isolated artistic form; rather, it evolved through centuries of temple rituals, devotional practices, courtly patronage, and literary enrichment. Its growth reflects a continuous dialogue between Sanskritic traditions and regional Odia cultural expressions, resulting in a distinct musical identity that preserves both classical rigor and emotional depth.

The earliest foundations of Odissi music can be traced to the ancient temple traditions of Odisha, particularly the rituals associated with the Jagannath temple in Puri. Music in this context was not merely an aesthetic pursuit but an integral part of religious worship. The singing of hymns, recitation of Sanskrit verses, and ritual performances formed a structured system of devotional expression. These practices established the earliest framework in which sound was used as a medium for spiritual communication. Temple musicians, including groups such as the Maharis (temple dancers and singers) and later the Gotipuas (young male dancers trained in devotional performance), played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting musical traditions across generations.

A significant influence on the formation of Odissi music came from Sanskrit literary and aesthetic traditions. Classical Sanskrit texts provided the theoretical foundation for Indian musicology, particularly through concepts such as *raga* (melodic structure), *tala* (rhythmic cycle), and *rasa* (emotional essence). The incorporation of Sanskrit devotional poetry into temple rituals ensured that these theoretical frameworks were not merely intellectual constructs but living components of musical practice. Among the most influential Sanskrit compositions is Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, a twelfth-century lyrical masterpiece that profoundly shaped the trajectory of Odissi music. Its highly structured verses, emotional intensity, and devotional themes centered on Krishna and Radha made it ideally suited for musical adaptation and performance within temple traditions.

During the medieval period, Odissi music underwent a significant transformation with the rise of regional Odia literary expression. This period saw the emergence of celebrated poets such as Upendra Bhanja, Kabisurya Baladeba Rath, and Dinakrushna Das, whose works enriched the musical repertoire with compositions that reflected both classical refinement and local cultural sensibilities. Unlike Sanskrit, which was largely confined to scholarly and ritual contexts, the Odia language enabled a more accessible and emotionally immediate form of expression. This linguistic shift allowed Odissi music to expand beyond temple precincts and reach wider sections of society while maintaining its devotional core.

The Bhakti movement played a pivotal role in shaping the historical trajectory of Odissi music. Spanning several centuries across India, the Bhakti tradition emphasized personal devotion, emotional expression, and the accessibility of spirituality through vernacular language. In Odisha, this movement strengthened the use of Odia devotional poetry in musical compositions and encouraged the expression of intense emotional states such as longing, surrender, and divine love. This cultural shift reinforced the centrality of *bhakti* (devotion) as both a thematic and aesthetic principle in Odissi music.

In addition to religious influences, royal patronage also contributed to the development of Odissi music. The courts of Odisha supported poets, musicians, and dancers, thereby facilitating the refinement of musical forms and the preservation of artistic traditions. This patronage system allowed for the codification of ragas, the development of

performance conventions, and the transmission of musical knowledge through structured teaching lineages (*gharanas* or guru-shishya traditions).

Despite periods of political upheaval and cultural disruption, Odissi music managed to survive through its strong association with religious institutions and oral transmission practices. The temple traditions acted as custodians of musical knowledge, ensuring continuity even when formal patronage declined. In the modern period, efforts by scholars and practitioners have contributed to the recognition of Odissi music as a classical tradition distinct from other Indian musical systems such as Hindustani and Carnatic music.

Today, Odissi music stands as a refined synthesis of Sanskritic heritage and Odia cultural identity. Its historical development reflects a continuous process of adaptation and reinterpretation, where sacred texts were transformed into melodic forms and literary traditions were preserved through musical expression. This historical evolution not only highlights the resilience of Odissi music but also underscores its role as a living tradition that continues to bridge the realms of literature, devotion, and performance.

4. Literary Foundations

Sanskrit Texts

Sanskrit literature contributed significantly to the thematic and aesthetic framework of Odissi music. Key characteristics include:

- Use of classical poetic meters (*chandas*)
- Rich imagery and symbolism
- Emphasis on *rasa* (aesthetic emotion), particularly *shringara* (love) and *bhakti* (devotion)

The transformation of Sanskrit texts into music required careful attention to pronunciation, meter, and emotional expression.

Odia Poetry

Odia literature introduced linguistic fluidity and regional flavor. Its features include:

- Simpler linguistic structure compared to Sanskrit
- Strong devotional and romantic themes
- Use of local idioms and cultural references

The integration of Odia texts allowed Odissi music to reach a broader audience while preserving emotional depth.

The Process of Musical Transformation

The transformation of Sanskrit and Odia literary texts into Odissi musical expression is a nuanced and multilayered process that lies at the core of the Odissi musical tradition. It is not a mechanical conversion of words into melody but a refined artistic practice in which language, rhythm, melody, and emotion converge to create an integrated aesthetic experience. In this process, the written or recited text undergoes a series of interpretative and structural modifications that allow it to exist as a living musical form. This transformation is guided by long-established principles of Indian aesthetics, particularly those related to *raga* (melodic framework), *tala* (rhythmic structure), and *rasa* (emotional essence).

At the foundational level, the process begins with the selection of the literary text. Composers and performers choose verses from Sanskrit or Odia literature based on their thematic richness, emotional depth, and suitability for musical rendering. Texts such as Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* or devotional compositions by Odia poets are preferred because they already possess inherent rhythmic qualities and strong emotional content. The chosen text is then carefully analyzed to identify its metrical structure, emotional tone, and linguistic flow, which form the basis for musical adaptation.

Once the text is selected, the next stage involves the conversion of poetic meter into rhythmic structure. Sanskrit poetry often follows highly structured metrical patterns (*chandas*), while Odia poetry offers relatively flexible rhythmic expression. These poetic meters are adapted into *talas*, which are cyclic rhythmic frameworks that govern the temporal organization of music. The adaptation process requires a careful balancing act, ensuring that the natural pronunciation

and meaning of the text are preserved while aligning it with the rhythmic cycle. This step is crucial, as it determines the overall flow and pace of the musical composition.

The third stage is the assignment of raga, which is perhaps the most emotionally significant aspect of the transformation. Each raga in Odissi music carries specific emotional associations and aesthetic qualities. The selection of a raga is guided by the dominant emotional mood (*bhava*) of the text. For example, themes of devotion and serenity are often expressed through ragas that evoke calmness and spiritual depth, while themes of love and longing are rendered in ragas that convey tenderness and emotional intensity. Through this process, the abstract meaning of the text is translated into a sonic environment that enhances its emotional impact.

Following the selection of raga and tala, the text undergoes musical structuring and phrasing. This involves dividing the verses into musical segments that align with rhythmic cycles and melodic phrases. Words may be elongated, repeated, or subtly rearranged to fit musical requirements, but such modifications are always done with care to preserve semantic integrity. The composer ensures that the natural accents of the language align with musical emphasis, creating a seamless fusion between linguistic rhythm and musical articulation.

A key component of this transformation is the use of ornamentation (*alankara*) and expressive techniques. These include vocal embellishments such as *gamakas* (oscillations), *meend* (glides), and subtle tonal variations that enhance emotional expression. Ornamentation plays a vital role in bringing out the hidden nuances of the text, allowing the performer to move beyond literal meaning and evoke deeper emotional states. In Odissi music, such ornamentation is not decorative alone; it is integral to meaning-making.

The performative interpretation of the text represents the final stage of transformation. In live performance, the singer becomes an interpreter who breathes life into the composition through voice modulation, tempo variation, and emotional expression. When accompanied by Odissi dance, this transformation becomes even more dynamic, as gestures (*mudras*), facial expressions (*abhinaya*), and body movements visually represent the lyrical content. This creates a synesthetic experience in which sound, movement, and meaning are fused into a unified artistic expression.

An important aspect of the process is that it remains flexible and interpretative rather than rigidly fixed. Different performers may interpret the same text differently based on their training, emotional understanding, and stylistic tradition. This interpretative freedom ensures that Odissi music remains a living tradition, continuously evolving while staying rooted in classical principles.

Ultimately, the process of musical transformation in Odissi tradition reflects a profound cultural philosophy in which literature is not confined to written form but is meant to be experienced, felt, and embodied. Through the careful integration of poetic structure, melodic design, rhythmic discipline, and expressive performance, Sanskrit and Odia texts are transformed into musical expressions that transcend language and communicate directly with human emotion.

Performance Context

Integration with Odissi Dance

Odissi music is inseparable from Odissi dance. Literary texts are interpreted through both music and movement, creating a multidimensional experience.

The dancer's gestures (*mudras*) and expressions (*abhinaya*) complement the musical rendering of the text.

Role of the Performer

The performer acts as a mediator between text and audience. Their responsibilities include:

- Accurate pronunciation of lyrics
- Emotional interpretation
- Musical improvisation within classical boundaries

Case Studies

Gita Govinda in Odissi Music

Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* is perhaps the most prominent example of text-to-tone transformation. Its verses are rendered in specific ragas and talas, with each composition highlighting a particular emotional nuance.

Odia Bhajans

Compositions by poets like Banamali Das demonstrate how local language and devotional themes can be seamlessly integrated into classical music.

Challenges and Contemporary Developments

Preservation vs Innovation

Modern musicians face the challenge of preserving traditional compositions while adapting to contemporary tastes. Innovations include:

- Fusion with other musical styles
- Use of modern instruments
- Digital dissemination

Linguistic Barriers

As Sanskrit becomes less commonly understood, performers must find ways to maintain its relevance without losing authenticity.

5. Conclusion

The study of “From Text to Tone: Transformation of Sanskrit and Odia Literature into Odissi Musical Expression” reveals that Odissi music is not merely a performative art form but a sophisticated system of cultural translation in which literature is continuously reinterpreted through sound. The transformation of poetic texts into musical compositions is a multidimensional process that integrates linguistic structure, aesthetic philosophy, emotional expression, and performative creativity. Through this dynamic interaction, written words are not simply set to music; rather, they are re-created as experiential soundscapes that carry both intellectual meaning and emotional resonance.

A key insight that emerges from this study is the foundational role of Sanskrit literature in shaping the theoretical and aesthetic framework of Odissi music. Texts such as Jayadeva’s *Gita Govinda* demonstrate how highly structured poetic compositions can be seamlessly adapted into musical forms without losing their philosophical depth or emotional intensity. Sanskrit, with its refined metrical systems and emphasis on *rasa* theory, provides the structural and conceptual backbone for musical interpretation, enabling a close alignment between literary meaning and melodic expression.

At the same time, the contribution of Odia literature is equally significant in expanding the emotional accessibility and regional identity of Odissi music. The works of poets such as Upendra Bhanja, Kabisurya Baladeba Rath, and Dinakrushna Das introduce linguistic simplicity, cultural familiarity, and devotional immediacy into the tradition. This blending of Sanskritic sophistication with vernacular expressiveness ensures that Odissi music remains both classical in structure and deeply rooted in lived cultural experience.

The process of transformation from text to tone, as examined in this study, highlights the intricate mechanisms through which poetic meter is converted into rhythmic cycles, emotional themes are aligned with specific ragas, and linguistic expressions are reshaped through musical phrasing and ornamentation. These processes demonstrate that Odissi music operates within a highly disciplined yet creatively flexible framework, where fidelity to tradition coexists with interpretative freedom.

Furthermore, the performative dimension of Odissi music underscores the importance of embodiment in the realization of literary meaning. Whether through vocal rendition or its integration with Odissi dance, the text becomes a living expression that engages multiple sensory and emotional levels. The performer thus acts as a mediator who transforms static language into dynamic artistic experience, ensuring that the literary work achieves its fullest expressive potential.

In conclusion, the transformation of Sanskrit and Odia literature into Odissi musical expression reflects a broader cultural philosophy in which art is understood as a continuum rather than a collection of separate disciplines. Literature, music, and performance converge to create a unified aesthetic experience that transcends linguistic boundaries and communicates directly with human emotion. Odissi music, therefore, stands as a living testimony to the enduring power of India’s literary and musical heritage, where every text has the potential to become tone, and every tone carries the essence of timeless poetry.

References

1. Aithal, K. V. *Odissi Music: Tradition and Expression*. Odisha Sangeet Natak Akademi, 2003.
2. Behera, K. C. *The Temple Culture of Orissa*. Manohar Publishers, 1993.
3. Dash, Akshaya Kumar. *Odissi Music: A Living Tradition*. Eastern Publications, 2010.
4. Deva, B. Chaitanya. *Musical Instruments of India: Their History and Development*. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1977.
5. Ghosh, Manomohan. *The Natyashastra: A Treatise on Ancient Indian Dramaturgy and Histrionics*. Asiatic Society, 1951.
6. Mohanty, P. K. *History of Odissi Music*. Odisha Sahitya Akademi, 2005.
7. Nayak, Bansidhar. *Jayadeva and the Gita Govinda Tradition*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
8. Sahoo, Durga Charan. *Odissi Dance and Music: A Cultural Study*. Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2015.
9. Sen, Sukumar. *A History of Old Bengali and Odia Literature*. Sahitya Akademi, 1960.
10. Sharma, Prem Lata. *Odissi Music and Its Aesthetic Foundations*. Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1998.
11. Subramaniam, Lakshmi. *From the Tanjore Court to the Modern Stage: Carnatic Music and Beyond*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
12. Zide, Norman. "Odissi Music and Its Classical Identity." *Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1985, pp. 45–62.