

**Rukshana Zaman**

## **SASHIMANI: *THE GOD-KING'S LAST WIFE***

### **Introduction**

The lives of the *maharis* have not much been discussed in literature though a lot has been said about the *Devadasi* tradition. One of the publications in 2005 had stated that there were no surviving *maharis* in Puri. As the *mahari* dance form played a crucial role in shaping and reconstructing the Odissi dance, personally I was quite disheartened while reading the publication related to the *maharis* in Puri. I felt my research work would be incomplete without the understanding of the *maharis*. Fortunately for me Ruprashree Mahapatra one of the dancers following the *Mahari* tradition of dance guided and helped me trace Sashimani. The task though was not quite easy. It took quite a few attempts to locate the house where Sashimani was staying in the bylanes of Puri near the Jagannath temple. I first met Sashimani in the year 2005 a fragile old lady suffering from an uncontrollable cough. She was wearing an unstarched cotton saree without a blouse, though a common practice among many rural dwellers of India she became conscious of the fact, when I requested permission to click a photograph as she immediately wrapped a shawl around her. During the interview Sashimani introduced herself as, 'I am Sashimoni *mahari* (emphasizing on the term *ma-ha-ri*) wife of Lord Jagannath' with pride in her voice. Folding her hands together in *namaskar* she closed her eyes in mute surrender to her Lord while muttering his name. There was a sheen of tears in her eyes when she opened them again to look at me. Sashimani at the age of 80<sup>1</sup> years during my fieldwork was the only surviving *baharo gauni mahari*, a *mahari* who performed in the *natya mandap* (open dance hall) in the outer sanctum of the temple of Lord Jagannath in Puri.

### **Who were the *maharis*? Mythological and historical account**

Sashimani recounted that the *Maharis* trace their origin to the celestial dancers Rambha and Urvashi. Legends had described that Raja Indradyumna invited Brahma from the heavens to inaugurate the temple of Lord Jagannath at Puri. Vishwakarma, Padmanidhi, Shankhanidhi, Narada, Ha Ha, Hu Hu and other Gandharvas accompanied Brahma. The celestial dancers popularly

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known as *apsaras* – Rambha and Urvasi came from the court of Indra also accompanied Brahma for the consecration of the temple (Kothari, 1990). During the initiation of the Temple Rambha and Urvasi danced as part of the ritual proceedings and when they left they taught the dance form to the *maharis*. The *maharis* later continued the performance in the temple of Lord *Jagannath*.

Legends apart *Madla Panji* (chronicle of the Temple of Lord *Jagannath* in Puri) has records of the appointment of various musicians and dancers in the temple of Lord *Jagannath* towards the end of the Ganga dynasty. The institution of *Maharis* dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Sookdeo, 1994: 50). The Surya rulers under Kapilendradeva followed the Ganga rulers. *Madla Panji* has references that it was during the time of King Kapilendradeva, the *Maharis* danced twice in the temple. First at the time of *bhoga* (the food offerings to the Lord at the midday meal) popularly known as *Sakala Dhupo* (midday meal) in the *natya mandapa* where the devotees could also view the performance. The second performance used to take place at the time of *Bada Singar* (after the ritual adornment of the Lord and before he was put to bed) which starts after midnight, performed behind closed doors. During this performance not even the *panda* (priests) were allowed inside the sanctum sanctorum. The *mahari* as the consort of the Lord was allowed to stay with him and put him to sleep through her dance and music.

Historical documents have recorded the time when the *Maharis* were appointed in the temple of Lord *Jagannath* but it fails to trace the origin of the *Mahari* cult. Herein, I am putting forward the view of Beni Madhav Padhi, a historian and one of my key informants who gave valuable insights to the origin of the *maharis* and the dedication of girls to the temple. Padhi (1998, 1992) had stated that during the historical times when Odhisa was known as Kalinga there was a tribe in southern Odhisa known as *maharo* (cattle breeders). The young *maharo toka* (boys) and *mahari toki* (girls) would take the herds to the forest to graze. While the cattle's grazed in the fields the boys engaged in different types of games and the girls would indulge in singing and dancing. The villagers slowly discovered the uniqueness in the art form and allowed performances for the village deity. As per the tradition of dedicating the first harvest to the *kuldevata* (clan deity) in Odhisa, the dedication of the *mahari* girls and the art form also started first with the village temple. Later the dedication of *mahari* girls was extended to the temple of Lord *Jagannath*, leading to the nomenclature *mahari* from the *maharo* tribe. The dedication of dancing girls has also been mentioned in other temples of Odhisa, the earliest is found in the Brahmeswara temple inscription by Queen Kalavati. The inscription records the dedication of women for the service of Lord Siva in the temple (Mallick, 1997:23, Patnaik, 1990:30). In recent times the term *Mahari* has been contextualized as 'Maha Nari' (great women), 'Manohari' or 'Madhuri' (one who touches one's heart) by scholars like D.N. Patnaik, Sunil Kothari etc.

### Sashimani's early life

The *Maharis* wedded to Lord Jagannath do not marry mortal man and thus, as per the custom a *mahari* adopted a girl who carried forward the legacy. The *maharis* were divided into two groups. The *baharo gauni mahari*, performed at the *natya mandap*, during the Lord's midday meal known as *Sakala Dhupo*. This performance being held in the *natya mandap* was open to the viewership of the devotees who came for a *darshan* of the Lord. The *bhitoro gauni mahari* were the other group who performed at *Bada Singar* in the inner sanctum sanctorum of the temple behind closed doors after midnight when the Lord was put to bed. No one was allowed to view this performance. The adoption of *maharis* followed strict rules and patterns. A daughter adopted by a *baharo gauni mahari* would follow her adopted mother's lineage and was not allowed to learn the *seba* of the *bhitoro gauni mahari* and vice-versa. A rigid hierarchical pattern was seen herein. Any girl or woman could not proclaim herself as a *mahari* unless being adopted by an existing *mahari*. A fact which had much implication during the 1980's which would be discussed later.

Sashimani talking about her adoption stated, 'My biological mother gave me to Surajmani *mahari* when I was one year old. I exactly don't know why I was given for adoption as I was very young and later never felt the need to ask Surajmani.' However, during the course of the interview she had reflected on the possibilities of her dedication to the temple by her biological mother. Sashimani pondered that maybe her biological mother was a great devotee of Lord Jagannath and so when she was born was dedicated to the temple. Sashimani's view on her dedication to the temple also echoes on Padhi's work and the custom of those days to give ones daughter to the temple for the service of the Lord. Sashimani had reflected whatever the circumstances of her dedication to the temple one thing she knew for sure that she was born in an upper caste Hindu family as only girls belonging to the upper caste group, from whose hands a Brahmin could partake water and food could be recruited as a *mahari*. The other criteria Sashimani emphasized was that a girl pure in body without any physical deformity or marks like moles could be dedicated to the temple (Zaman, 2013).

The custom of dedicating daughters to the service of the Lord and also a priest being able to partake food and water from the hands of a *mahari* reflected on the status ascribed to the *maharis* of Odhisa in the earlier days. The *Devadasis* of Southern India who were also temple dancers did not enjoy such high status as they could not offer food or drink to a temple priest. In Odhisa the custom of dedication in the service of the Lord also extended to the boys. Late Guru Gangadhar Pradhan was also dedicated for a period of ten years to serve their family deity of Lord Balunkeshwar at Dimirisena at the age of five years. Gangadhar at birth neither cried nor moved and as two earlier siblings had also not survived; his father vowed that if this child

survived he would be sent to the service of the Lord for five years. At the age of three Gangadhar again met with a fatal accident and for his survival Gangadhar's father extended the vow by another five years. The pattern of dedication to the temple is unequal as boys after serving their term in the service of the Lord is free to return home to his family and lead a life as he desires. Whereas, a girl once dedicated to the temple is attached to the temple forever. One of the views reflected by devotees and the *pandas* (priests) is that since the girl is married to the Lord and is regarded as the Lord's consort, 'ever auspicious' her life remains dedicated to the temple till her death.

### **Sashimani's initiation in the *mahari* tradition**

Various ceremonies and rituals were there for recruiting a girl for *mahari seba* stated Sashimani, the first step was that a *mahari* having adopted a girl would give a petition to the King for the daughter's *saree bandhan* (the ceremony of tying a sari to mark the marriage of a *mahari* to Lord Jagannath) thus, requesting him (the King) to accept her daughter for the service of the Lord as a *mahari*<sup>2</sup>. The initiation ceremony was practiced by the *Devadasis* of south India too known as *Pottukattu* (tali-tying). The process of application to the Raja for seeking permission to become a *Devadasi* was also followed by them. The ceremony was known as *muttirai* (Kersenboom-Story, 1987: 87-89). The ritual of *saree bandhan* marks the initiation of a girl as a *mahari*. For Sashimani, the ceremony was performed when she was seven years old. At the initiation ceremony Sashimani was presented with a *pattasari* (a sari made of locally available silk) by the temple authorities. The *pattasari* is the mark of a *mahari* as it has to be worn during the temple performances. The *saree bandhan* was thus, a stepping stone for a girl into the world of the *maharis*. Even though she is adopted by a *mahari* at an early age her acceptance to the *mahari* fold is marked only by her *saree bandhan* ceremony (Zaman, 2013).

Describing her *saree bandhan* ceremony Sashimani had stated that she entered the temple in a ceremonial procession via the southern gate of the temple, which the *maharis* use during their performance. At the *natya mandapa* near the *Garuda Stambh* (pillar with the mythical eagle that carries Lord Vishnu according to Hindu belief) and at the gate of the *Jaya-Vijaya* the ceremony took place. A *sevat* (a person engaged in the service of the Lord) in the presence of the Pattajoshi Mohapatra took a piece of cloth from the deity and tied it round Sashimani's head signifying her marriage to Lord Jagannath. As a representative of Lord Jagannath the *sevat* then garlanded her with a flower garland. This was followed by the painting of a Vaishnavite Chita (a mark on the forehead, starting from the point in between the two eyebrows and extending to the middle of the forehead in the shape of a 'Y') on the sandal paste base which had already been painted earlier. Finally her forehead was marked with vermilion which signified her married status as the bride of Lord Jagannath and made her *nityasumangali* (ever auspicious)

who will never be a widow. She was then made to perform *parikrama* (go around the temple in a circle) holding un-perched rice and betel nut in her hands like a new bride (Zaman, 2013). It is important to note here that in earlier times people used to invite the *maharis* for wedding ceremonies to bless the brides. Among the Hindus every married woman aspires to die a *suhagan* (a woman whose husband is alive). The term *suhagan* traditionally laid emphasis on the red vermilion that marked the forehead, the *mangalsutra* (derived from the Sanskrit word *mangala* meaning 'holy' or 'auspicious' and *sutra* meaning 'thread', usually woven in black beads with golden designs in between, tied around the bride's neck by the groom during the marriage ceremony) and coloured glass bangles that symbolically represented a married Hindu woman. A lady who dies a *suhagan* is held in high esteem as it is considered a direct passage to heaven and a sign of good *karma* (deed or action during one's lifetime). A widow considered inauspicious by the society many a times is forced to lead a life of isolation and seclusion giving up on all the worldly pleasures.

The rituals associated with the saree *bandhan* ceremony does not end in the temple, the last part takes place in the King's house. In the evening of the *saree bandhan* ceremony, Sashimani recounted that she was taken to the palace of the Raja by her mother and other relatives; "I was made to sit with the Raja and then taken to his bedchamber. Here I was asked to touch the bed of the Raja '*sheja mada*', followed by '*chakshyu milan*' (meeting of the eyes) with the Raja." This part of the ritual in the palace is important as the Raja of Puri is venerated as the moving image of Lord Jagannath. The *sheja mada* and the *chakshyu milan* ritual symbolize the identity of the *mahari* as the King's consort (Zaman, 2013). This is a significant aspect of a *mahari's* life as she is not only the wife of the Lord but also the wife of the King of Puri, regarded as the living representation of the Lord. *Madla Panji* in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century records King Purushottamdeva's wife Padmavati a great devotee of Lord Jagannath being honoured with the title of 'Gopa Sadhi' for her services rendered as a *mahari*. The dedication of a queen as a *mahari* is evidence enough as to the status bequeathed on the *maharis* of the Jagannath temple during the earlier days.

### **Sashimani's reminiscences of the temple seba's**

A *mahari* begins her ritual performance in the temple only after her menarche. Sashimani at the age of twelve started her ritual performances as *baharo gauni mahari* in the temple of Lord Jagannath. She did speak about her menarche but did not elaborate on the rituals associated with the puberty rites. Marglin on the other hand had described in detail that at menarche, either the King or one of the temple priest pays for an elaborate feast meant for the family and friends of the *mahari* (Marglin, 1985:74-77). If the feast is being given by the King then the *mahari* has to spend the first night with the

King as his wife. This ritual accentuates the status of a *mahari* as the consort of the King who has to perform duties as his wife if the King so desired.

The protected life that the *maharis* lived also reflected on their status as the consort of the King. Sashimani had stated that during the days of the King Ramachandradeva a street was built near the temple which was named as *mahari palli* where all the *maharis* had their residence, to help them preserve their purity by living in separate quarters. Two officers were appointed to regulate the services of the *maharis* - the Mina Nayak and the Sahi Nayak. The *maharis* were escorted to the temple by the officer Mina Nayak and he was also responsible for bringing them back to their residence after the performance in the temple. A Sahi Nayak's duty was to see that the *maharis* led a chaste and honourable life. The royal fireman used to cast light on the streets of *mahari palli* and also govern the duties of the *maharis*. On the day of performance in the Temple, Sashimani stated that she too used to be escorted to the temple by the Mina Nayak. While walking from her house to the temple the face used to be veiled and she had to look at the tip of her toes, she was not allowed to look up at anybody and only when she would reach the temple she would look up and cast her eyes on the Lord.

Sashimani as a *baharo gauni mahari* performed in the *natya mandap* facing the south. Significantly, the *mahari* during the performance does not face the deities who were in the inner sanctum to the east. The connotation of this direction Sashimani had explained as, 'We perform not to entertain the Lord but we are serving Him. To dance at midday meal is a *seba*, I am trying to appease Lord Jagannath to have his food and not entertaining him.' While the dance performance goes on in the *natya mandap*, the deities are offered food their midday meals by priests behind closed doors in the inner sanctum of the temple. During the entire performance the Rajguru (chief preceptor or religious instructor of the King) stands by the *mahari* holding a golden staff next to the drummer. The gold staff/cane signifies the authority of the King, his representation during the dance. These two persons are the only ones accompanying the *mahari* dancer.

Sashimani had recounted that during her time there were at least fifty other *maharis* who used to serve the Lord. Reminiscing on the days when she had to perform *seba* she had stated that on the day of her *seba* she had to keep a fast and after her ritual bath could only partake the *Mahaprasad* (56 food items offered to lord Jagannath). She emphasized that on the day of *seba* one had to be *suddha* (pure) in body and soul. That day while putting on her makeup she had to think only of her Lord and not about beautifying herself. Labanya *mahari* in her manuscript belonging to the 18<sup>th</sup> century had reflected on the same, the relevant portion of the same is cited below.

During the make-up session, the *devadasi* is not supposed to be concerned with the beautification process but expected to be in a spiritual and devotional frame of mind. "Calm, slow and thoroughly absorbed, full of *bhakti bhava*" –

young lady had to concentrate on how to become worthy in body and soul, of the projected encounter with her Lord. She had to review in her mind the choice of songs to be offered and the *bhavas* (emotions) to be expressed. (Citaristi, 1987<sup>3</sup>)

### **Sashimani's struggle for sustenance**

The *devadasis* throughout India were exploited over the centuries which led to a loss of their income and prestige. This led to a number of legal measures to ban this institution. The first to raise a voice against this maligned institution of *devadasis* was Harisingh Gaur who moved a bill in the Bombay Assembly. He was supported by Muthulaxmi Reddy who believed that this tradition was an insult to womanhood. Mahatma Gandhi too had raised his voice against this institution. Finally, in the year 1947, by The Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act the *Devadasi* tradition was legally banned in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. The ban was however not imposed on the Maharis of Orissa. In Orissa, till then the temple was under the Raja of Puri and as the *maharis* enjoyed royal patronage the tradition was not banned. It was only in 1954 when the temple administration was taken over by the Orissa State government and the Temple Administration Act, 1954 (Orissa Act II of 1955) was passed that the *mahari nijoga* was officially banned from the list of temple rituals.

Sashimani speaking about the ban on the *mahari nijoga* in the temple had stated that the *nijoga* was stopped by the temple administration in the late 1950's due to lack of patronage of the King. The King of Puri lost his estate after India's Independence and the temple administration was taken over by the State, fortifying the King's authority in the temple administration and thus, the *mahari niti* was stopped and they had to give up their residence. Sashimani had stated that there were days when she had gone without food as she was denied a portion of the *mahaprasad*. With pride in her voice she had said that during those tough days she never stooped to begging as she was the consort of Lord Jagannath. It was only in the early 1990's that she was given shelter by one of the temple servitor Somanath Panda at his house that she no longer had to worry about food and shelter. Sashimani had remarked that whatever she goes through in life is a test for her from The Lord. She had said that she had to pass the entire gamut of tests given to her. Sashimani emphasized that her Lord helped and guided her in passing the tests overcoming hurdles as she was devoted only to Him. At the age of eighty years Sashimani has never taken any allopathic treatment for her ailments. After the refusal of *mahaprasad* by the temple she gave up on food also and was surviving on *horlicks* (energy drink) and fruits. Her favourite fruit was *anar* (pomegranate). Touching her vermilion and with a look of total surrender to the Lord she had said, 'I am the only living wife of Lord Jagannath who is still alive to serve Him' (Zaman, 2015).

### **Mahari tradition at the cross roads**

Sashimani's involvement in the temple activities reduced after the temple administration was taken over by the Temple authorities though it did not end completely. There were occasions like *janmastami* (celebration of Lord Krishna's birthday) and *navakalebara* (literally means the new body) when the temple authorities had invited her to take part in the rituals as the consort of Lord Jagannath. The *navakalebara* festival marks the symbolic death and rebirth ritual of Lord Jagannath when the wooden image of the Lord is replaced with a new image and Sashimani as the wife of Lord Jagannath had to perform her duties as the widow in mourning till the new image is placed in the sanctum sanctorum besides other duties. The temple authorities during the last *navakalebara* festival had tried to recruit *maharis* in the temple for such rituals. Sashimani however, had refused to adopt any female as a *mahari*. The politics of the Temple administration is reflected herein. The Temple authorities had stopped the *mahari nijoga* in the temple, made the *maharis* vacate their residences in the *mahari palli* and had refused even a portion of the daily *mahaprasad* to Sashimani and the other *maharis* leaving them to starve and fend for themselves when the temple administration was taken over from the King of Puri. This was the time immediately after the independence struggle in India when many aspects of the Indian tradition was being looked down and denounced- a time that saw the rise of the middle class in India. However, the late eighties and nineties were marked by revival, wherein India people were seen falling back on traditions. The need for revival was also seen in the Temple of Lord Jagannath when the Temple authorities in the name of continuing rituals and traditions approached Sashimani to adopt a *mahari*. The need for a *mahari* to continue traditions associated with *navakalebara* was also advertised in the newspapers. The advertisement was met with strong opposition from women welfare groups. Sanjukta Panigrahi one of the pioneers of Odissi dance had offered to dedicate herself as a *mahari*. The temple authorities could not continue with the recruitment, as per the Temple rules only a female adopted by a *mahari* can continue in the tradition and moreover, Panigrahi was married. Wide negative media coverage against the temple tradition and Sashimani's strong refusal to adopt a *mahari* as the status and financial security was no longer provided by the Temple authority, the advertisement had to be withdrawn and the Temple authorities had to shelve the plan of recruiting *maharis* to the temple.

### **Eclipsed tradition**

During the days of the structuring and designing of the Odissi dance the Jayantika organization was formed with the aim of giving a definite structure to the Odissi dance. Guru's of that period like Late Deba Prasad Das, Late Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra etc were members of the group. Much of Late Guru Pankaj Charan Das's style was assimilated in the Jayantika form of style as he belonged to the family of *maharis* and his style was directly

or indirectly followed by the other gurus. Yet he was known to have contributed very little to the association by direct participation in its activities. Likewise, Sashimani was also excluded from the Jayantika organization. However, an alternate explanation is given by Sarat Das son of Late Guru Pankaj Charan Das who stated that, Guruji (Pankaj Charan Das) was deliberately not invited to join the Jayantika organization due to differences in opinion among the members regarding the style and technique and also because he was directly from a *mahari* family. This sentiment is also reflected in Ratna Roys's writing when she states, "Guru Pankaj Charan Das, the adopted son of a mahari dancer, was in general left out of the equation, (Jayantikas) along with the *maharis* themselves, because of the attack on the *mahari* institution and postcolonial sensibilities" (Roy, 2005). The same view was also reflected in the works of Marglin when she states, "The intelligentsia that revived Orissi ignored the *maharis* and also one of the male preceptors, Guru Pankaj Charan Das, because of his social status as the son of a mahari" (Marglin, 1985: 28, 30-34).

The above views bring into focus the impact of western education and the rise of the middle class post colonial administration. The Oriya society was trying for the recognition of the dance form in the national map as an art form of Orissa yet was not ready to accept the contribution of the *maharis* because of the social stigma attached to their names and the institution they represented. As Marglin (1985: 6) states, "the Indians felt they could reclaim the beauty only at the cost of separating it from what they themselves came to see as sinful and deserving of moral condemnation."

It was only around the late 90's that Sashimani came to be known for her dance as a *mahari* to the world with the works of Illeana Citaristi. Citaristi had involved Sashimani in her workshops on dance. Revered by some while ignored by others Sashimani lived a secluded life though she always welcomed people who wanted to meet her. Surviving on a mere pension from the temple Sashimani had very little to complain about life. Her greatest pride was that she was the last surviving *mahari* of Lord Jagannath and was living for the upcoming *navakalebara*, sadly enough destiny had other course. Sashimani during the last *navakalebara* held in 1996 had refused to adopt a girl and train her in the *mahari* tradition. It was highly debated and contested and the temple authorities had to finally bow down to her wish.

This article has been a humble attempt to present the life history of Sashimani as I was fortunate enough to document her life during her lifetime. In this documentation I have fulfilled one of her wishes as she had many times during the interviews, had held my hand and said, "You are the chosen one" and it was my *bhagya* (fate) that Lord Jagannath had send me to seek her. According to her it was Jagannath's wish I record her life history. She would say, "I will give you all, I will not hold anything back because tomorrow I may go but through your writing the world would know how I served my

Lord.” (see also Zaman: 2015) With Sashimani’s death an era has come to an end. The last wife of the God-King has taken away with her the eight hundred year old tradition of temple dancing.

#### NOTES

1. Some of the recent publications after Sashimani’s death had recorded her age as 92 years. Herein I record the age as specified by Sashimani during the course of my fieldwork in 2005.
2. In the list of private records maintained by the National Archives of India regarding the Jagannath Temple there were certain records related to petition by *maharis* for their daughter’s *saree bandhan*. One of the *hukumnamas* (order) dating back to 1885-86 AD records the order issued by the Dewan of the Raja of Puri, instructing Deulkaran, Amin and Tadhau to allow Nakshi *mahari*, daughter of Mani *mahari* for *mahari seba*, (National Archives of India, 1988).
3. During my fieldwork I had received this translation from one of my informant and had recorded it as unpublished manuscript in one of my earlier publications of 2013. Recently, I have seen a published work of Citarist dated 1987 much before my publication of 2013. Herein, I am rectifying and acknowledging Citarist’s work.

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