

INDIGENOUS ELEMENTS IN THE PLAYS OF TAGORE: A BRIEF STUDY ON THEATRE ARTS

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ABSTRACT

A careful examination of his plays reveals how Tagore significantly influenced the development of open theatre, tiny theatre, indigenous theatre, and the root theatre on the Bengali stage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From Valmiki Prativa to Shyama, he set out on a dramatic quest for a new language of theatre or a parallel theatre that would liberate Indian performance from colonial mimicry. Tagore incorporates elements of classical and folk Indian music, dance, and drama into his work. This article will attempt to provide some introspection on Tagore's theatrical engagements with both modernity and indigenous heritage. The purpose of this article is to re-evaluate Tagore as a playwright in order to investigate his endeavour to enact alternative modernity by undermining the capitalist paradigms of Western modernity through the indigenous or traditional aspects he incorporated and appropriated within his plays.

Keywords: *Root theatre arts; Tagore; Bengali stage; modernity; Indian*

INTRODUCTION

Tagore is the forerunner of Bengal's group theatre, which have sought to adapt folk forms and investigate novel performance settings. Rabindranath Tagore was an early pioneer in the non-proscenium applications of Indian classical or ancient forms of theatre, long before the IPTA movement. Colonialism's politics and the resulting manufacture of Orientalist knowledge had impeded the urban literati's attempts to negotiate with the tradition's keepers. While Tagore had been establishing a cultural space in Birbhum to deny or dispute this negotiation of Calcutta public theatres since the turn of the twentieth century (Chatterjee, 2009, pp. 120), this negotiation was a concealed negation of the same tradition to which it owed its own existence. Tagore, a writer, discovered in Bhubandanga (a village at that time in Birbhum) in Santiniketan a space to explore and enact alternative modernity in the realm of theatre. He was able to resist the capitalist paradigms of Western modernity because he deliberately separated himself apart from his ancestral theatre practise of Jorasanko and the mainstream theatre of Calcutta. His second-generation plays have helped revive Bengal's folk performing arts and indigenous or traditional aspects.

Bengal's modern theatre may be traced back to the final decades of the eighteenth century, when a segment of the city's Bengali population developed a keen interest in European stagecraft and English plays. From the latter half of the nineteenth century on, when English-language education began to spread, it grew steadily. This period saw the emergence of Bengali theatre, a colonial import and urban phenomenon created primarily for the enjoyment of local British inhabitants as part of the Bengal Renaissance. The English educated native Babus that formed a large section of the Bengali intelligentsia (Mukherjee, 2013, pp. 193) used this western model of theatre as

inspiration for their own productions, such as those of Prasannakumar Tagore (1801-1886) and Nabinchandra Basu (with his home production of Vidyasundar in 1835). Since these theatres catered mostly to the rich elite, they developed primarily in urban settings. Not just Jatra, but also Kathakatha, Kabigaan, Kirtan, Panchali, and other dramatic and non-dramatic forms of popular performance in Bengal were pushed to the sidelines as this city theatre gained popularity. According to Professor Abhijit Sen, "these forms were looked down upon as being fit only for the riffraff — as vulgarisation of the Hindu pantheon merely to entertain the lower sections of the society" (Sen, 2010, pp. 39). Editorials in the February 1840 issue of *The Oriental Observer* stated, "a Calcutta audience—an Indian audience we should say—is compared with those of Europe, highly respectable audience" (Raha, 1978, pp. 14). Thus, in 1814 and 1815, English theatres will perform a variety of comedies, farces, and serious plays in addition to Shakespeare. Calcutta theatres, such as the Tagores' private Jorasanko Theatre, also supported new Bengali playwriting. Because this traditional performing art "has refused to die with the incursions of Capitalism into the countryside," Jatra is what Utpal Dutt calls "theatre at its primitive best" (Dutt, 2009, pp. 464). The revolutionary trend of traditional performing arts in Tagore's plays has been described by scholars as an awakening of a new realisation, a gaze that looked inward at its own history to enable the present and reinterpret myths and traditions to patch and mend the rich tapestry of its indigenous culture (Mukherjee, 2013, p. 190).

Tagore's view of the modern, according to Sankha Ghosh's perceptive analysis of his theatre (Ghosh, 1969, pp. 55), is predicated on his critical predisposition to analyse samprotik (current) life conditions from an evaluative distance. He frequently discusses how imperialist modernism has upended the many lifestyles he has experienced. Tagore's plays interpret a naive and idealistic urge to return to the village and its pristine indigenous values through the metaphorical portrayal of time and place. Tagore acclimatised a new trend in the style and substance of his plays by employing numerous indigenous values, and the play *Sarodotsav* (1908) marks a significant transition, "not merely dramaturgical or theatrical but even ideological" (Sen, 2010, pp. 42). According to Solomon, the goal of this theatrical movement was to create an imaginary nation that would give birth to the grand nationalist agenda of the Indian intellectuals and a pan-Indian nation-state (Bhatia, 2009, pp. 22). Tagore vents his frustration with his countrymen in a letter he wrote:

At times, my anger towards my fellow citizens seems to have no end. It is not that they're not trying to get rid of the Englishman; It is that they don't try to get rid of the Englishman or improve anything else, either. They don't even try to achieve that; no one there thinks, feels, or works; no one has ever accomplished anything noteworthy or lived a life worth remembering; you won't find an example of fully developed humanity everywhere.

In that contemporary era, Bengali playwrights such as Girish Chandra were forced to reluctantly incorporate elements of these traditional theatres to satisfy the tastes of the audience. Tagore, however, utilised his perception in a manner that was antimodern. In fact, contemporary playwrights used to define modernity as plays modelled after European drama. Sen (2010) explains that the primary characteristics of the modern were "the repeated change of scenes...recurrent shift of the painted backdrop" (p. 36). In the essay "Rangamancha" (1903), Tagore criticised the imitation of Western stagecraft, notably the use of painted scenery in the background, and outlined his vision for a new theatre. Rabindranath was preoccupied with seeking

for a "parallel theatre" (Sen, 2010, p. 41) that reflected his desire to return to our indigenous cultural traditions throughout his entire dramatic career, which encompasses over sixty plays of various types and moods written in nearly as many years. Tagore desired that the audience's imagination not be constrained. Therefore, he took advantage of this trend of incorporating traditional elements from Jatra and Sanskrit theatres in order to Indianize Bengali theatres and liberate them from westernisation. Tagore, alluding to Bharata's *Natyasashtra*, asserted that the use of painted backdrops frequently stifles the audience's creativity and critical thinking, transforming them into passive observers and "imputing to them a complete lack of imagination" (Bhatia, 2009, p. 432). Tagore disapproves of the European realist mode, which considers drama to be exclusively dependent on other supports such as acting, scenery, music, and other accessories, in the introduction to his play *Tapati*. He expresses his disapproval of the European realist mode, which deemed drama to be solely dependent on other supports such as acting, scenery, music, and other accessories, and evaluates the "Jatra plays" accordingly.

For this reason, I enjoy the Jatra Plays of our nation. There is not much of a chasm between the stage and audience...and the spirit of the play, which is the genuine thing, is showered from player to spectator and from spectator to player in a very carnivalesque display of delight. (Bhatia, 2009, pp. 433)

Balmiki Pratibha (1881), *Kal Mrigaya* (1882), and relatively unfamiliar plays like *Rudrachanda and Nalini* (1884) marked Tagore's foray into dramatic writing, and his exposure to Western theatres' influence on his poetry continued through his plays *Mayar Khela* (1888), *Raja O Rani* (1889), and *Bisarjan* (1890). Nevertheless, we must not forget that the plots of these plays were based on the traditional Indian epics and myths. Tagore's borrowing from the Ramayana in his first two plays is just one example of how deeply ingrained he is in Indian culture. His dramas, such as *Gandharir Avedan* (1891), *Karna O Kunti Sambad* (1893), and *Viday Abhishap* (1894), were greatly influenced by the Mahabharata. Tagore cleverly used a folkloric motif—that of character transformation—at the play's core in his 1884 work *Prakritir Pratishodh*. The final ascetic undergoes a transformation under Basanti's influence; she is a rural girl who embodies the spring season and encourages him to emerge from his cave and re-join civilization. The thief Ratnakar becomes the benefactor Balmiki at the end of the story, and the hapless orphan girl becomes the goddess Saraswati, therefore the motif is present even in *Balmiki Prativa*. In addition, unlike the dacoit-folk of *Balmiki Prativa* or the hunter-folk of *Kal Mrigaya*, who are singled out in the play, every member of the village and his or her everyday life plays an important role in *Prakritir Pratishodh* (1884). Since Tagore considered *Balmiki Prativa* or *Kalmrigaya* to be like European operas—a sure natika or short play in music' where acting is enacted based on diverse face emotions through music like the old kathakatha style—*Mayar Khela* is notable. In contrast, music is at the heart of *Mayar Khela*, and it is presented through the characters' movements and expressions. Tagore's adaptation of a Marathi legend in *Sati* and the use of Bengali folktales in *Lakshir Parikkha* are only two examples of his current preoccupation with the concept of incorporating indigenous aspects into his natika, or short plays. Many of the gods and goddesses of modern Bengali folklore are shown in his comedies, such as *Swargiya Prahasan*, in ways that are reminiscent of Jungian archetypes or primal pictures. Tagore's early plays (during his career

as a playwright) are not weighed down by "the wealth of the capitalist" or "the costly rubbish held responsible for clogging the stage" (Bhatia, 2009, pp. 434).

Tagore's 1880s visits to his estates of Silaidaha and Patisar, where he became familiar with Bengal's pure, rich, and pulsating indigenous tradition, planted the seeds for his experiments. One of Tagore's letters is dated February 1, 1891, and reads, "When the peasants present their case so respectfully and sorrowfully, and the clerks stand humbly with folded hands, looking at them I wonder how am I greater than any of them, such that at my slightest hint their lives may be saved or at my slightest aversion, destroyed... these simple-hearted peasants, with their children-cows-ploughs-households!" They have no idea I am one of them. Rabindranath was able to test out his idea for "a new/parallel theatre—particularly in producing seasonal plays like *Sarodotsav* (1908) and *Phalguni* (1916)" (Sen, 2010, pp. 42-43) when he moved to Santiniketan and established brahmacharyashrama in 1901 (later renamed Visva-Bharati University in 1921). His deliberate separation from the rest of Bengal's theatre community allowed him to explore new forms and topics without fear of offending audiences or compromising the capitalist conventions then governing the stage in Bengal. Ananda Lal observes:

Tagore's new play production at Santiniketan proceeded after his return from his 1913 journey to the United Kingdom and the United States. However, the inability to reach a larger audience was hindered by Calcutta's location. People outside of the little school community were blissfully unaware of Tagore's theatrical accomplishments, with the exception of a few cognoscente among his acquaintances who journeyed between Calcutta and Santiniketan. (Lal, 2009, pp. 33)

Tagore wrote about his disdain for wealthy city landowners in his article "Swadeshi Swamaj"(1904). They had been drawn to the foreign-influenced entertainments rather than participating in the national awakening's rituals, fairs, jattras, kirtans, lantern displays, etc. He acknowledged the value of indigenous celebrations like fairs and jattras in enhancing local traditions. Tagore, at this moment, saw the necessity to familiarise his audiences with the people of the country, its music, the pulsation of Nature, and celebration via his plays in order to restore the country's origins and unite the heart of the country.

It might be said that Tagore's realisation of the self in Nature sparked the new theatrical style that began with *Sarodotsav* (1908). To paraphrase Solomon, "this trend in theatre intended to scheme both modernity and Indianness in its style and subject matter to form an imagined nation that brings into reality the grand nationalist agenda of Indian intelligentsia and a pan-Indian nation-state" (Bhatia, 2009, pp. 22). Richard M. Dorson, a renowned expert in the field of folklore, has identified four main subfields within the study of folklife. The study of social conventions is one example. Folklorists who study social or folk traditions hold the view that the same techniques used to gather material for a story or song's lyrics can be successfully applied to the study of social or folk customs as a whole (Handoo, 2000, p. 17). These seasonal celebrations of folk customs or rites in Bengal aim to promote brotherhood and unity among males. These religious holidays were secularised by Rabindranath so that they may be celebrated for what they were: signs of the changing seasons. Prominent writer B. V. Karanth claims:

"Theatre lies in the region, and there is nothing called as National Theatre. To truly deserve the "Indian" moniker, we need to be well-versed in every aspect of the subcontinent.

... India is what it is thanks to the wide variety of languages, dialects, cultural histories, and religious traditions that make up its population. Only folk and traditional forms have the power and spirit to unite and elevate people as one. (Raut 2016, p. 45)

Sarodotsav, according to Tagore, focuses on various seasonal rites, including festivities, vacations, the king's seeming release from his duties as monarch, and the child's ostensible release from their schoolwork. *Chitrangada* is a celebration of spring because it represents "the enchantment of spring and the power of its spell on the senses" (Kripalini, 1962, p. 139), and over time his philosophy of Nature developed this way. "Tagore built up a pervasive relationship with nature, mingled intimately with humanity," writes Sankha Ghosh. "His interactions with nature gave him the impression that he knew the world around him intimately" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 13). Music also has a ritualistic function in Tagore's plays. Tagore employed songs in his plays not to amuse the audience but as an integral part of life, and he believed that our Natya, known as jatra, is gifted with songs before studying or seeing the Western realist theatre. He saw it not just as art, but as a metaphor for the fullness of life. The songs of these plays frequently use the panchali tune. The mediaeval poem *Panchali* is a form of devotional writing that focuses on the glorification of individual deities. Tagore uses panchali songs to connect his plays with the feelings of the people during this historical period. Tagore, an artist, saw the hidden connections between Nature's things. The beauty and depth of nature can never be fully captured by human language. We learn from his voluminous writings on the subject of man's reciprocal relationship with Nature that visva-bodh, or world experience, is not separate from prakriti-bodh, or Nature experience.

In his drama *Phalguni* (1916), Tagore displays this 'prakriti-bodh' to great effect. Tagore's plays that aim to bridge the gap between stage and spectators, like *Phalguni*, are exemplary of this trend. In the "neglected bit at the edge of the world" that is "sort of a large, silent, deserted school", on the estate of Silaidah and Patisar, Tagore could not resist the impulse to bestow the blossom of Nature with the calming echoes of spring wind. It uses a fantasy that is revealed through a mixture of song, dance, and merriment to convey Tagore's mood, which is one of perpetual regeneration from winter to spring. Even though he was also exposed to the music of Lalan Fakir (1774-1890) and his student Gagan Harkara, he became more familiar with the folk music and performing arts of his homeland through exposure to Baul, Kirtan, Shyama Sangeet, Shari, Bhatiyali, and Jhumur. Tagore was profoundly affected by the melodic beauty of Baul songs, which clearly expressed the indigenous culture's enduring roots in a spare, hypnotic idiom. Tagore was so moved by the Baul's spiritual philosophy and cryptic songs of profound insight that he portrayed a 'blind Baul' in his drama *Phalguni*. Tagore was so moved by this that he wrote a number of songs in the manner of traditional Indian folk music during India's independence movement. As a result, as Lady Mukhopadhyay asserted, these songs quickly became an inspiration to the common people. Mukhopadhyay (2010) states, "They bring forth a vast panorama of human life and experience encapsulating joy and sorrow" (p. 10). This is a quote from the renowned music master Santidev Ghosh. Again, the constant stream of songs sung by the young boys and the blind Baul compensate for the play's lack of plot and action. Tagore sought to subvert the conventions of theatre by staging

a performance that fused music and dance in a ritualistic fashion. Later, Tagore added a prelude to the play in which the poet Kabisekhar says,

"There is no need for the painted scene—I require only the scene of the mind... with the keys of music the scenes will be opened up one by one" (Lahiri 2014, p. 56).

In addition, Tagore contemplated trying out some new staging techniques when he penned a letter to Gagan (Gagendranath Tagore) before the play's premiere. He described in writing his plan to liberate the traditional theatre stage by placing it in an indigenous environment. The poet explains, "our only background is the mind," suggesting that the musical score is the play's greatest strength. We'll wave the musical wand and conjure up an image based on that. There, "the brushstrokes of the sweet music will paint the scenes" (Kripalini, 1962, p. 245).

After *Phalguni*, Rabindranath composed a string of plays that are often considered his best. These include *Raja* (1910), *Dakghar* (1917), *Muktadhara* (1922), and *Raktakarabi* (1924). "Through this perfect touch with nature we took the opportunity of instituting festivals of the seasons," Tagore declared in one of his lectures. After several dry months, I penned songs to commemorate the arrival of spring and the lovely season of the rains. Tagore (1925, pages 100-101), writes, "We had our dramatic plays with decorations appropriate to the seasons. Tagore created around 140 wonderful songs marking the 'seasons,' as we learned from Lady Mukhopadhyay; he also wrote songs for various events focusing on ploughing, harvesting, and tree planting, and these plays feature some of them. Tagore paints a realistic portrait of nature and the play's protagonists in *Raktakarabi*; the play's protagonists, in his view, are fully realised people, and the play's lyrical undercurrents reflect the full cycle of seasons in Bengal. Nature and Man are inextricably intertwined in *Raktakarabi*; the play's major characters are as fully realised as the play's depiction of the seasons. Similar to western authority, the king here has a "deadly touch" that destroys native culture and ways of life while draining the people of their vitality. Through his intricately intertwined words and melodies, he taught us to view nature from a variety of angles at once. The king may be able to restrain everything, but he cannot restrain happiness, for it is bound up in song and dance, which has the capacity to reanimate even the most lifeless corpse. The true currents of indigenous spirit inside the common native people can be heard in Ranjan's sarengi (a musical instrument) and in seasonal songs like "paus toder daak diyeche (the season of Paus has given you all a call to appear in the field). However, Tagore remarked that the locals had something that should not be sneered at in one of his letters. No civilization can ever be whole or attractive so long as this lucid simplicity is not at its core. It is the lack of these that seems to be killing off European culture.4 .

Rabindranath travelled extensively throughout the Far East after the turn of the century, visiting Japan twice (1916 and 1924) as well as Java and Bali in 1927. Essays like "Japanjatri" and "Javajatrir Path" were among his favourites because of the importance they placed on dance as a form of theatrical expression in conjunction with ritualistic play performances. In his play *Natir Puja*, written in 1926, Rabindranath took even another risk by including dance as a form of dramatic expression. He elevated the traditionally female-dominated classical Indian performance known as "nautch" (Sen, 2010, p. 44) by turning it into a dance drama and introducing female characters to the stage. The dance positions he observed in the Far East inspired him to create his

thesis of "theatre as dance," which explains the prevalence of dance-dramas in the later stages of his plays.

Shapmochan (1931), *Tasher Desh* (1933), and the dance-drama triumvirate *Chitrangada* (1936), *Chandalika* (1939), and *Shyama* (1939) ushered in this final era. To give his plays the power of *rup natya* or the kabuki performances of the Far East, Tagore used the folk form of *kathakata*. When *Chandalika* was performed, the Statesman made the following observation:

"The technique of the dance-drama in '*Chandalika*' is in many ways a revival of the ancient Indian form (*kathakata*), in which the dialogue is turned into songs as background music, and is metaphorically interpreted by the characters through the dances" (Sen, 2010, pp. 45).

The songs on the pack of cards in his 1933 drama *Tasher Desh* depict the dreariness of life in British India. Tagore, as a committed global citizen, motivated people everywhere to free themselves from the prejudice and discrimination that fuels moral decay. In *Tasher Desh*, the prince issues an ultimatum against these arbitrary regulations by declaring that no one can advance until the law of the barrier is broken.

Let the dam be shattered...let us sing the clarion call of destruction" (*bhaango, bandh bhenge daao...bhangoner joygaan gaao*) is sung repeatedly throughout the play. Although Tagore has drawn heavily from Western sources, it is often hard to tell when listening to his music whether a particular piece is influenced more by Western classical music or by India's indigenous classical music. The final blend he displays, which he calls "*Rabindrasangeet*," is all his invention. Tagore's third language is the music and dance that he included in the productions of his plays (Ghosh, 2004, p. 49).

CONCLUSION

Let there be wings of the root and the root of the wings, a lyric stolen by Sankha Ghosh from Nobel Prize poet Jimenez and included in his book *Kaler Matra O Rabindra Natok*. Tagore, on the trail of a new form of theatre, realised the value of this vision that inspired him to write in a folk or indigenous style. Tagore helped to pave the way for a new kind of theatre that "enacted an alternative modernity that did not repudiate but attempted to redefine modernity from certain non-Western vantage points and simultaneously through new interventions," thereby contributing to the development of the diverse "traditions of *lok-parampara* in India" (Bharucha 2009, p. 98). Tagore shared the view of other giants of Indian theatre that "the memories of their childhood, family, community, and tradition" (Bharucha, 2009, pp. 93) are inextricably intertwined with the ethos of Indian modernity, which comprises various regional/vernacular alterations.

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