



থেশ্পিয়ান
THESPIAN
An International Refereed Journal
ISSN 2321-4805

THESPIAN

MAGAZINE

An International Refereed Journal of Inter-disciplinary
Studies

Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

DAULA Theatre Group©2013-15

Editor

Bivash Bishnu Chowdhury

Title: From Indigenisation to Politicisation: Role of *Jatra* in Tagore's Theatre
Author(s): Arnab Chatterjee

Yr. 3, Issue 2-5, 2015

Bengali New Year Edition
April-May



From Indigenisation to Politicisation: Role of *Jatra* in Tagore's Theatre

----- Arnab Chatterjee

Assistant Professor in English,
Harishchandrapur College, Pipla, Malda.

This paper will focus on the role of *jatra* in Tagore's theatre, its various ramifications and try to bring out how this indigenous folk form of performance shaped his play text and performance text. Tagore's theatre has often been stamped as 'elitist' kind and beyond the reach of common mass. Many scholars deny the influence of *Jatra* in Tagore's theatre due to the 'low brow' status of this particular form of performance. Tagore had keen interest in folk culture and folk forms of performance and this had a profound influence on writing and staging plays. He engaged in relentless experimentation in terms of writing play and its production and tried to establish a new theatrical tradition moving away from the nineteenth century Bengal theatre which primarily emulated the western realistic theatre. Tagore kept in mind not only *jatra* but also other folk arts like *baul* and *kirtan* which were pushed to the periphery with the proliferation of theatre in nineteenth century Bengal. His fascination for *jatra* and other folk arts was deeply linked with the project of narrating the cultural history of the nation.

Rabindranath as a playwright felt the need to look for a new type of theatre markedly different from the paradigm of realistic theatre. He consciously rejected the coordinates of realist theatre which dominated nineteenth century Bengal. We need to keep in mind that the notion of theatre itself smacks of Eurocentrism. In our culture the concept of theatre did not exist. Tagore looked back to *jatra*. According to Asit Kumar Mukhopadhyay *jatra* found space in Tagore's theatre as the chief feature of *jatra* is change according to needs of production and performance. He said-

jatraganer pradhan baisisto holo proyojonanusare pariborton. Jatragan ai



paribortoner path dhore Rabindra natya sahitye sthan kore nieche. (Asit Kumar Mukhopadhyay, 358).

Trans. “The chief feature of *jatra* performance is the scope of changing according to the demand of the situation. *Jatra* has carved a space for itself in Tagore’s plays through this change”.

Perhaps one cannot but agree with Asit kumar Bandopadhyay. My endeavour lies not only in discussing how *jatra* has a distinct niche for itself in Tagore’s theatre but also in unravelling its implications with a view to unlocking the politics of nation-building and the project of reconfiguring rural culture. I think it is important to outline Tagore’s own views on *jatra*. This will facilitate our understanding of facets of *jatra* that impressed Tagore and why this folk form of performance demarcated a distinct space in Tagore’s theatre. In *Chelebel* he explicitly talked about *jatra*. He did not theorise much on his theatrical practices. In “Rangamancha” (1903), perhaps his single treatise on theatre, he unequivocally expresses his liking for *jatra*. He said -

amader dasher jatra amar oijanne valo lage. Jattrar r avinay e darshak o avinetar modhe akta gurutoro babodhan nei. Porosporer biswas o anukuller prati nirvar koraa kajta bes sahridayatar sahit susampanna hoiwa othe.
(Rabindranath Tagore)

Trans. For this reason, I like the *jatra* of our country. In the performance of *jatra* there is no huge gap between the actor and the audience. The entire act reaches a successful culmination on the basis of belief and cordial cooperation with each other.

In the Introduction to his play *Tapati* (1929) he also explained his liking for *jatra*. There he clearly said -

natyakavya darshaker kalponar upore dabi rakhe, chitra sei dabi k khato kore, tate khati hoi darshakeri. Avinay baparta begban, pranban, gotishil;
drishyapat tar biporit; anodhikar prabesh kore sachalatar modhe thake se



muk, murho, sthanu; darshaker chittadrishti k nischal bera die se akanta sankirno kore rakhe. Mon je jaigai apon asan nebe sekhane akta pot k bosie mon k biday deowar niom jantrik juge prachalito hyeche, purbe chilo na. Amader dессhe choroprachalito jattrar palagane loker vire sthan sankirno hoi bote kintu poter oudhotte mon sankirno hoi na. Ai karanei je natyavinay e amar kono hat tahke sekhane khone khone drishyapot othano namanor chelemanusi ami proshray di ne. Kran bastabsatya k a bidrup kore, vabsatya k badha dai. (Rabindranath Tagore, 467)

Trans. Natyakavya demands the imaginative faculty of the audience and painted scenery lessens this demand and causes harm to the audience. Acting is energetic, lively and dynamic. Painted scenery is just opposite to it. It remains dumb, blunt and stagnant when it trespasses a dynamic world. It makes the vision of the mind narrow by encircling the audience with static barrier. The act of bidding farewell to mind by setting painted scene where it can take its own seat has become a rule in the age of machine and it was not before. In the traditional *jatra* performances of our country narrow due to huge crowd the space becomes narrow but the audacity of painted scenes cannot make the mind narrow. For this very reason I do not encourage the childish practice of frequently introducing painted scene in the dramatic performances where I can intervene. This laughs at real truth and impedes the inner truth.

Thus Tagore vehemently detested the use of painted scenery on stage which impedes the awakening of imaginative faculty of the audience. In *Phalguni* (1915) Kabisekhar plays the role of painting images in the mind of the audience through music. For Tagore, the stage was not the space to showcase images. The mind of the audience was the fertile ground to plant images. Tagore did not want the kind of plays that deaden sensibilities and the endless flight of imagination and which foster unthinking passive response. The audience were expected to decode the bits of information and create the 'text' in his/her own way by actively participating in the process of meaning production.



Scholars have pointed out that Tagore's new ideas of theatre began with *Saradatsav* (1908) and locate the detectable features of *jatra* in this particular play and the plays written 1908 onwards. But I think the seed of new kind of plays and the impact of *Jatra* can be traced back to the first group of plays including *Valmiki Pratibha* (1881), *Kalmrigaya* (1882), *Mayar Khela* (1888). Critics have interpreted these plays as operatic. Whether these plays are operatic or not is debatable. I think they have a close resemblance to *krishna jatra*. It is pertinent to note the different categories of *jatra*- there are primarily three types of *jatra*- *krishna jatra*, *natun jatra* and *gitabhinay* which later on developed into aitihasic *jatra* or samajik *jatra*. *krishna jatra* was based on songs and contained tales regarding Lord Krishna or sometimes other mythical stories. During 1820s from *krishna jatra*, *natun jatra* came into being with an aim at secular entertainment. During 1860s *gitabhinay* appeared combining merriment from *natun jatra*, bhakti from *krishna jatra* and pathos from European oriented Bengal theatre. Gradually *gitabhinay* reduced its emphasis on lyric and dance, and in its place prose dialogues were included. When Tagore wrote *Valmiki Pratibha*, he perhaps, looked back at the *krishna jatra* or *natun jatra* where usually the narrative unfolded through songs. In *Jibansmriti* Tagore noted that *Valmiki Pratibha* was not opera; it was a play cast in songs. One cannot deny the influence of western music in *Valmiki Prathibha*. Tagore was disappointed with the Indian rag-ragini which, according to him, lacked feelings due to the rigidity of the grammars and artificialities of the composers. He followed the structure of *krishna jatra* and blended it with newly learnt western music. This perhaps added newness to his concept of theatre. Though the influence of *jatra* is discernible in *Valmiki Pratibha*, the performance text largely operated within the realistic tradition. However, it is pertinent to note that plays like *Sarodatsav*, *Phalguni* (1915), *Raktakarabi*, *Muktadhara* ushered in new changes in the history of Bengal. We see direct reference to *jatra* in the play texts of, *Muktodhara* and *Raktakarabi*. In *Muktodhara*, an unnamed traveller speaks of singing in a *jatra* party. In *Raktakarabi*, Nandini says how Shrikanta disguises as a monster in *jatra* stage and children are afraid of him. Thus, we see not only the pattern of *jatra* but also how the characters within play talk about the performance of *jatra*. Tagore's idea of stage underwent conspicuous changes with *Sarodatsav*. When he came to Santiniketan at the very beginning of the twentieth century, he staged plays in open air instead of using permanent stage. The



open air productions seemed suitable in the open ambience of Santiniketan. In the absence of any permanent stage, the new plays were performed in extended ground and gained a new dimension. Tagore thought of the performance of *jatra* where painted scenery did not play a vital role in performance and an intimate relationship existed between the actor and the audience. The absence of stage in production of plays like *Sarodatsav*, *Achalayatan*, *Phalguni*, *Muktadhara* made the audience part and parcel of the ludic space. The play is set on the mind of the audience.

The influence of *jatra* can also be seen in the way Tagore used songs in his plays. In the absence of stage decor, Tagore thought, the use of songs was essential. He deftly grasped almost all the possibilities afforded by song and made it a vital part in his dramatic scheme. In *jatra* we often find the use of song either the end of a dialogue or illustrating the dialogue. In the play *Raja* Thakurda says his mind awaits for the impending danger and then sings *amar sakol nie bose achi*. The figure of 'bibek' in *jatra* sings and sometimes comments on the action of the play and sometimes articulates the feelings of the audience. Though in Tagore's theatre 'bibek' never appeared on stage, I think the 'bibek' figure was at the back of his mind when he created characters like Bishu in *Raktakarabi*, Sardar in *Phalguni*, Thakurda in *Raja*, Dada-Thakur in *Achalayatan*. There is abundance of songs in Tagore's symbolical plays. He used songs in these plays as an extension of dialogue or as chorus. In the seasonal plays the songs enhance the spirit of festival and celebration in *Sarodatsov - megher kole rod heseche* opens the spirit of celebration. In *Phalguni* songs become more important than dialogues. Edward Thompson thinks that "Phalguni in a sense is the poet's own manifesto. We might take the motto of his own method the watchman's query: is it your custom to answer questions by songs?" (113). A sense of joy intoxicated atmosphere is created in *Phalguni* in the song *amader khapie berai*. The song *ami rupe tomal volabona/ vlobssai volabo* in *Raja* underlines the key theme of the play suggesting the needlessness of tangible presence and projecting love as the key to conquer everything.

Tagore's experimentations in the field of theatre culminated in the dance drama which appeared in the late 20s. The dance in *jatra* fascinated him. He said in *Chelebela* how he



would feel about the dance taking place in a *jatrapala* that he was not allowed to see. He said-

ghumer ghore majhe majhe shone jache nacher tal same ase thektei
jhamajhom korotal. (25)

Trans. In the drowsy state sometimes listening to the rhythm of the dance with successive clappings.

He encouraged folk dances of Bengal and experimented with traditional dances of Manipuri. Tagore, the traveller who travelled across Europe, America and Asia always sought to broaden the self and learn from other cultures. He was fond of the dances of Java and Bali. When he travelled to Japan, the Japanese dance mesmerised him so much that he said Japanese dance is 'complete' and European dance is 'half-acrobatics, half dance'. He had perhaps witnessed the use of dance in *jatra* and also minutely observed the dances of the Japan, Java and Bali and thought of making dance as a new medium of communicating with the audience. Tagore, the playwright was considerably influenced by Tagore, the traveller. The verbal language perhaps appeared as opaque and inadequate for the new kind of plays where dance was projected in the foreground. This time he refused to enter into the intricate web of words and looked beyond logocentrism. In *Chitrangada* (1936), *Chandalika* (1939), and *Shyama* (1939) dance acted as both kinesic signs and gestural signs and the songs generate oral/aural signs to create the performance text. This constituted a new semiology for theatre. What was just a part of *jatra* had been elevated to an aestheticised form in a unique way in Tagore's theatre. In the act of envisaging a new kind of mode of performance where dance and music will go hand in hand, one must take into considerations the role played by Tagore, the traveller who was impressed by the dance of Japan, Java and Bali.

Tagore drew upon *jatra* at the different stages of his career as a playwright as it was part of national treasure. Through the incorporation of the folk form of performance in his theatre, Tagore perhaps wanted to acquire traditional indigenous culture imbued with the historical sense of the nation. He realized the need to foreground his national culture. He knew it's easier to plant the seeds of national consciousness through theatre which as a mode



of cultural communication is different from other cultural artificats. It has an appeal beyond the printed version. Nationalism became a key issue in his non-fictional writings and novels. He consciously created rural ambience within theatre as he firmly believed that the village is the centre of Indian culture which needs to be retrieved. His idea of rural reconstruction and the establishment of Sriniketan was a resistant strategy to retain the cultural ethos of the nation. The English rulers wanted to systematically change the colonised land both economically and culturally, thereby setting in motion the self-declared project of bringing enlightenment. The colonial masters wanted to destroy the village-centric Indian culture to create a sense of loss within the community. They wanted to interpret orient for, to use Edward Said's words, "dominating, restructuring and having authority over orient" (3). Tagore realised that the systematic erasure of the markers of national culture would be fatal for the nation. Asis Nandy in his book *The Intimate Enemy* (1983) discusses about two facets of colonialism-the first deals with the conquest of geographical territories and the second includes the conquest of the mind and culture. To quote Nandy:

This colonialism colonises minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within colonised societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all. In the process, it helps to generalise the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The west is now everywhere, within the West and outside, in structures and in minds (xi).

Though Tagore moved away from the mainstream of nationalist politics around 1907 in favour of 'constructive' swadeshi represented by Nikhilesh in his novel *Ghare- Baire*, theatre became a potent site for him to resist the politics of the British Raj. He did not like the kind of freedom struggle that unleashed violence. He revolted against the politics of English rule and looked back to the folk forms like *jatra* to resist the triumphant march of British colonialism. The creation of rural ambience through songs and the introduction of rustic characters on stage countered the cultural hegemony of colonial masters and their attempt to create India as an extension of England. Songs like *aj dhaner khete roudrachaya* in *Sarodatsov* and *posuh toder dak dieche* in *Raktakarabi* (1924) build up the rural atmosphere



in theatre. Rustic characters appear in plays like *Muktadhara* (1922), *Raja*, *Rather-Rashi* and so on. The way the rustic characters appear collectively in the course of performance. The sense of belonging to a community which is a defining feature of Indian rural culture is shown rather than a sense of self inscribed within itself. He could circulate his ideological purpose of dealing with rural life and folk culture through the translation of his play text into performance text. Though Tagore was engaged in the task of reviving the cultural heritage of his nation, he never discarded everything of the west. He was just eager to be familiar with the other cultures and appropriate good sides of each culture. In spite of being aware about the Manichean relationship between the coloniser and the colonised he believed in the existence of ‘boro ingrej’ (great English) and ‘choto ingrej’ (small English) in his essay “Choto o Boro” (1917). For him the English who were not involved in dominating India through colonialism and who upheld justice, truth and liberty are ‘great English’. The ‘small English’ were those who exercised power over orient and ruled it. Tagore’s idealisation of the ‘great English’ sustained till the eve of the Second World War. However, by talking about *jatra* tradition he surely stirred and stimulated the national consciousness of the people. But he was always against the jingoistic western notion of nation which seemed to him as ‘geographical monster’. As he flouted the notion of rigid national boundaries and welcome the positive aspects of western culture, he appropriated some western dramaturgical trends. In spite of the influence of *jatra* one cannot deny the influence of symbolism and expressionism in his plays. *Raktakarabi* bears close resemblance with two German Expressionist plays- Georg Kaiser’s *Gas* (1918) and Ernest Toller’s *The Machine Wreckers* (1922). His theatre at last became a confluence of western and eastern culture. In his essay “In Search of a New Language for Theatre” Abhijit Sen says:

He retained his fondness for the indigenous resources but never believed in a blind replication of the *jatra* or *yatra*-model. At the same time, though largely critical of the Western stage importations, he did not reject them outright if they served the purposes of theatrical exigencies. As a producer, he often conceded to the actual staging conditions at hand to uphold the model of an eclectic theatre where components realistic and non-realistic, urban and rural, borrowed and indigenous, Western and Eastern, could all co-exist (45).



To conclude, one cannot deny the pervasive influence of *jatra* in Tagore's theatre at a time when 'colonial mimicry' was in its full motion. On one hand, elements from this folk form of performance indigenised theatre culture. On the other it becomes a means of conceptualising the construction of identity under imperialism and as a way configuring the relationship between representation on both page and stage and the construction of national consciousness. He wanted to fall back upon *jatra* which acted as a reservoir of the history of the nation and which was attributed 'low brow' status with the rise of theatre culture. He never always blindly championed the indigenous over western importations and disliked the 'destructive swadeshi' epitomized by Sandip in *Ghare-Baire*. In Tagore's theatre the presence of elements of *jatra* and the endorsement of some of the tenets of western tradition not merely foreground a cosmopolitan worldview but also underlined the spirit of postmodern aesthetics where the boundary between high art and low art gets dissolved and grand narratives are seamlessly dismantled. While 'aestheticisation of politics' was evident in colonial education and the theatre culture proliferated in Calcutta catering to the taste of colonial masters and colonised 'mimic men', the way Tagore incorporated the elements of *jatra* became an instance of 'politicisation of aesthetics'.



Works Cited

Bandopadhyay, Asit Kumar. *Bangla Sahityer Itibritto*. Vol.4. Kolkata: Modern Book Agency Pvt. Ltd. 2012. Print.

Benjamin, Walter. "The work of Art in The Age of Technological Reproducibility: Second Version." *The work of Art in The Age of Its Technological Reproducibility And Other Writings Oon Media*. Eds. Michael W.Jennings, Brigit Doherty and Thomson Y. Levin. England : HUP, 2008. 19-55. Print.

Chakraborty, Rudraprosad. *Sadharan Rangaloi o Rabindranath*. Kolkata: Visva Bharati Granthan Bivag, 1999.

Ghosh, Shankha. *Kaler Matra o Rabindranatak*. KOLKATA: DEJ, 1995.

Nandy, Asis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. Delhi: OUP, 1983. Print.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. 3rd ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991. Print.

Sen, Abhijit. "In Search of a New Language for Theatre." *India Perspectives*. Ed. Navdeep Sen. 24.6 (2010): 38-45. Print.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *Japan Yatri*. Rabindra Rachanabali. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Granthanbibhag, 1990.

---. *Rabindra Rachanabali (complete Works)*. Vol.1. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, Magh 1406. Print.

---. *Rabindra Rachanabali (complete Works)*. Vol.2. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, Magh 1406. Print.

---. "Choto o Boro". *Rabindra Rachanabali (complete Works)*. Vol.12. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1990. 149-50. Print.



থেশ্পিয়ান THESPIAN

An International Refereed journal
ISSN 2321-4805

20

- . "Rangamancha" *Bichitra Probandha*. Visva-Bharati Granthan Vibhag : Kolkata, Bhadra
1401. 75. Print
- . Rabindra Natyasamagra. Thompson, Edward. *Rabindranath Tagore- Poetand Dramatist*.
Delhi: OUP, 1992. Print.