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## Understanding Gender in Tagore's Chitrangada and Chandalika

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### Abstract

Few poets and authors have addressed issues like the construction of nationalism, gender, and identity through forces of experimentation of forms and techniques and the radical nature of ideological orientation. Among the most revered and remembered works are dance dramas written by Rabindranath Tagore including *Chitrangada* and *Chandalika*, where he uses dance dramas as an instrument of social and religious changes. These dance dramas were produced with permutations and combinations of style and date back to folk idioms of Bengal and Gujarat in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This paper emphasizes the form and text of both while foregrounding the theme of female desire and uses nuances of dance forms to showcase intersections of caste, class, and gender as an evolution of selfhood.

This paper emphasizes the form and text of the performances in commemoration of the 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore in 2011 and attempts to draw similarities and differences between the forms of representation in the two performances. *Chitrangada* is performed by the Geetanjali Lal of Kathak Kendra, Delhi and *Chandalika* choreographed by Sattriya Kendra of Guwahati. The two dance forms which struggled with massive disrepute in the past due to the anti-nautch movement act as a paradox for the institutional space and there's a constant struggle to regain their original status as the much-revered dance forms.

Keywords: Caste, Class, Gender, Tagore, Dance-dramas

### Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore's dance dramas, created in the later years after the mid-1920s, were studied with various dance forms. His panache for storytelling continued till the very end of his life in the 1930s. There was a tremendous amount of effort made in sense of incorporating folk forms and idioms from Bengal and Gujarat- that ushered in his musical odes to India's season for children group's choreography<sup>i</sup>. Interesting to note is the fact that Tagore was writing these dramas at the high point of nationalist fervor where attempts were made to subjugate the status of women performing in the public domain.

Once considered a highly respected and revered art form performed at the courts of kings and temple courtyards, Indian dance had fallen into massive disrepute under British colonialism under the anti-nautch movement<sup>ii</sup>. The educated elites, in particular, were very much against dance of any kind which they considered gross and unrefined. It was seen as an immoral and debauched practice fit only for prostitutes or rustic village folk. Hence, the educated middle-class Indians did not dare to allow their

daughters to learn dance anymore.<sup>iii</sup> Tagore's Notir Puja (the Dancer's Prayer) marked the return of girls from respectable-middle class Indian families to the stage as dancers. Through his efforts, Tagore dispelled the social taboo once attached to dancing and regained full social acceptance by putting it back on stage.

### **Dance-dramas as intervention: Palace Paradigm and Epic Discourse in Chitrangada**

Rabindranath Tagore realized that Indian society is "permeated by religion and living myth, endowed with a psychic landscape having its concept of time and space" (Choudhuri, 1988). He tried to portray this unique reality through modes and methods indigenous to Indian culture. According to Indra Nath Choudhari, Tagore's central idea was

"...to free the present-the now, and make it part of the eternal time, and in his dance dramas, this is fully realized. Tagore's increasing interest in dance in the last phase of his life reflects his deepening sensitivity to the ecstatic, spiritual aspect of dance, exemplified by the transcendent rhythm of dance which constitutes the flux and the timeless, eternal order of the universe" (Choudhuri, 1988).

Tagore in his two dance dramas emphasized the Indian epics and legends and brought in the element of the Palace Paradigm in his plays. The concept of the Palace Paradigm first introduced by folklorist Jawahar Handoo became the inherent epicenter for understanding the Indian feudal system and came to shape the collective consciousness of people (Handoo, 2006, p. 156). He recognized and developed the aesthetics of both ballads and epics as strong genres developed for politically marginal people. The Indian literary epics, just like the fairy tale, were assimilated into the discourse of the Palace Paradigm and used as a civilizing instrument for the royals and the elites besides glorifying the kings and kinships. It is also studded with elements from myth, history, and religion. With all these attributes an epic becomes a fine source of amusement irrespective of time and space. Handoo says,

"More than any other literary genre, epics present the story of the kings without any symbolic disguise. The question is not that these epics offer the historical discourse of the feudal society and... past of humankind; the real issue is that these epic metaphors have penetrated the subconscious structures of the Indian society...in such a forceful manner that these have, it would seem, the same medieval effect in modern times" (Handoo, 2006, p. 156).

The first play Chitrangada is based on the legend of the warrior princess of Manipur is the only female warrior in the Mahabharata. The tale which is one of the illustrious episodes of Mahabharata moves away from the usual narrative of epics which are stories of bloodshed, palace feuds, wars and conquests, abduction of women, concubines, treasure hunts, and sibling rivalries which seems to have set standards and ideals of a feudal society resulting in setting role models for men and women that are thriving even now for the Indian society.

Most of the literary epics as Handoo points out are raised on the male bias. Epic poets like Valmiki's Mahabharata are men singing the glory of other men, armed men to be precise.

"(O)ut of the thirty-eight basic themes upon which most epic narratives of the world are based, only nine are associated with women, nor do the women enjoy the heroic values. There is little they can do there other than getting abducted or rescued, pawned, or molested, or humiliated in some way or the other." (Handoo, 2006, p. 158).

### **Female desire as a mark of excess in Chitrangada and Chandalika**

Before Tagore, Bankimchandra addressed the issue of female desire and sexuality in his novels and writes about the decline of the feudal aristocracy and how an attempt to ape the west tramples on Indian women. Both Tagore and Bankimchandra challenge the feudal worldview and the women's question becomes a central issue in it and highlights the loopholes in the social reformist movement in the early and mid-nineteenth century Bengal. Ghulam Murshid states the problem in the most straightforward form (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 233).

The body of a Hindu woman remained the locus of unconquered purity for the self-flagellating Hindu nationalist (Sarkar, 2001). The idea of Motherland or Deshmata was sacralised and feminized and hence with the feminization of the country and its inhabitants, there was a point of departure in political consciousness (Anderson, 1983).<sup>iv</sup> Like Deshmata or Bharat Mata, the body of the woman was accustomed and disciplined by the shastras alone and proved its capacity for pain and suffering, and herein lay the redemptive hope of the whole community. The Hindu woman's body was molded to serve her family and later for her husband and is obliged to be monogamous- was taken as the sign of the world's only divine system-the shastric- which had created the most perfect form of womanly chastity and love.

The figure of the woman in most of the narratives of the epics becomes this peripheral figure moving around the boundaries of the narrative, and fails to acquire a significant role. The male is seen as the mover of the narrative while the female's association with space or matter deprives her of subjectivity. Feminist scholar Teresa de Lauretis goes on to explain, "...each reader- male or female- is constrained and defined within the positions of a sexual difference thus conceived: male-hero-human, on the side of the subject; and female obstacle-boundary-space, on the other" (Mulvey, 1981).

Thus, problems related to the recognition and realization of female desire exist throughout the narrative, especially in melodramas (and dance dramas in the case of Tagore) which have been seen to negotiate the dislocating traumas of class and gender struggle, and to answer the doubts and aporias consequent to the breakdown of what Peter Brooks calls a 'traditional sacred' (Brooks, 1984, p. 5)

But Tagore's texts and dance dramas break the usual narrative and create a genre where the emergence of female protagonists takes place. Chitrangada moves away from the usual narrative strain and illustrates the tale of Arjuna who is twelve years penance in the jungle where he briefly encounters Chitrangada the warrior princess of Manipur who leaves Chitrangada longing for Arjuna and his apparent rejection because she lacks sensual beauty. At her entreaty, Madan, the god of love, grants her physical beauty for a year, and Arjuna is delighted with her. Her identity is not known to him. However, before the year ends the kingdom of Manipur is attacked, and reports of the feats of an unknown warrior princess reaching Arjuna have grown tired of Surupa (the beautiful form that Chitrangada takes to woo Arjuna). Chitrangada then reveals herself in her true form, and Arjuna's respect for her grows all the more.

In Chandalika, Tagore uses an ancient Buddhist legend from the Jataka tales for the play, but treats it in a highly imaginative way, giving it a modernist interpretation. In Tagore's dance drama, the central protagonist is Prakriti, the untouchable girl, not Lord Buddha or his disciple Ananda as in the original story. In Tagore's hands, Prakriti becomes the woman living on the fringes of human society- a marginalized figure of Hindu society discriminated against for her background in a caste-segregated worldview. By addressing the theme of untouchability through his dance dramas Tagore was making an extremely bold socio-political statement against discrimination against untouchables that in a way supported Mahatma Gandhi's pro-Harijan campaign in the late 1930s India.

In Tagore's Chandalika, Prakriti becomes obsessed with Ananda as he is the first and only person outside her caste who treats her as a human being of equal standing instead of shunning her as an untouchable. For Prakriti, Ananda embodies liberation, a person who has shown her a way out of the stultifying darkness of self-negation, who has created a revolution in the way she perceives the world and the way the world perceives her. Prakriti now desperately wants to possess the man who has given her the taste of freedom from the chains of social degradation that bound her soul.

In both Chitrangada and Chandalika, the dialectics of female protagonist selfhood and desire gets problematized by the intersection of caste, class, and gender. This adds not only to the complexities of her selfhood but also problematizes the attainment of selfhood through the expression of desire for Arjuna and Ananda. The desire for companionship with a monk or an ascetic is seen as the mark of excess and there's a constant effort to subjugate that desire.

It is through Arjuna and Ananda that Chitrangada and Chandalika first see themselves as human being of their right, and they learn the meaning of dignity- and learn what is it to be a woman, to serve others as equal. With her awareness of herself as a woman comes the first awakening of desire, which turns into obsessive passion for the man who has shown her respect as a human being for the first time in her life.

The act of quenching one's thirst by giving water acts as a metaphor for Prakriti who in turn satisfies her thirst for self-respect. It is a kind of self-ablution as it were, cleansing her from the self-negating stigma of being an outcast. Ananda has given her the power to serve others, the power to give life (water), and nourishment to thirsty travelers<sup>v</sup>. It is in his eyes that Prakriti has seen herself as an equal to all the other human beings. She now gains an understanding of her selfhood; an awareness of her identity as a woman, and an acknowledgment of her worth. Her desire for the monk is the elemental desire of the woman, Prakriti, for the man, Purush, and it comes only with her awareness of her still nascent womanhood. With her desire as a female comes courage, a daring even to bring Ananda back to her at any cost, by any means. Prakriti now takes the help of Maya, her mother, an exponent of black magic. The most potent realization of her selfhood comes when Prakriti calls the post-Ananda episode her 'new birth'. She is in euphoria about what she thinks of as a kind of baptism into humanity and her female desirous self.

*'e notun janmo, notun janmo, notun janmo amar...  
shiure uthlo deho amar/ chomke uthlo pran'  
(it's a new birth for me, a new birth, my new birth...  
my body awoke with a jolt/ my soul got conscious all of a sudden)* (translation mine)  
(Tagore, 1999).

### **Institutionalizing Tagore: Changing Patronage from Patrilinear lineages to state**

Modernity, once a prerogative of the West, is now ubiquitous and diverse among people all over the world. The changing notions of modernity are historically linked to the development of the public sphere. Tagore through his dance dramas was in search of the new reformed women emerging from the time of the Bengal renaissance. In his dance dramas, Tagore uses the dance forms like Kathak and Sattriya in a subtly nuanced manner- where dance itself becomes a liberating force-it is both liberating and an expression of identity and self-assertion of women. Along with the indigenous Indian dance forms, both the classical and the folk forms, he uses the 'other' Dance languages which have had roots not merely in a national but a trans-national culture.

The classical dance forms like Kathak and Sattriya more particularly in postures, movements, the design of stage and costumes, and the music and musical instruments associated with it, if viewed holistically, present a strong male view inherent in the palace paradigm. By tracing the origin of Kathak back to the Brahmin Kathak caste, with a brief link to the high culture of the Mughal courts, Kathak became primarily a male-dominated Brahminical practice (Chakravorty, 2006). In the process, the multiple cultural influences on Kathak and the contribution of the courtesan (tawaif) to its artistic richness were glossed over (Shah, 1998)<sup>vi</sup>. The richness of Kathak and Sattriya emphasize not only the attributes such as female beauty, dress, erotic gestures, and color, but many gestures inherent in these dances seem to be there more to suit the male ego rather than cater to the necessity of dance or the dancer. In that context Movements like fast rotation in circles, various gestures like throwing of arms repeatedly in the nothingness of space and moving hands in various directions, and so on. With this understanding, Jawaharlal Handoo investigates the semantic foundations of gestures of such performances. He points out that in Hindi and other languages of India, for example, nachana ('to make one dance'), ungliyun par nachana ('to make one dance on fingertips'), etc. seem to be reflexive to male ego and power.

The two dance dramas whose text was discussed in the first part of the paper, their choreographic performances happened as part of the Rabindra Nritya Natya festival held in Kamani auditorium as part of the 150th-anniversary celebration of the bard. The Nritya Natya festival was part of the larger initiative and various projects undertaken by the Ministry of Culture for the year (7<sup>th</sup> May 2011-7<sup>th</sup> May 2012). Out of the five dance dramas performed in the Nritya Natya festival the Kathak rendition of Chitrangada by Kathak Kendra, Delhi and Chandaliika performed by Sattriya Kendra, and Guwahati was the most memorable and paradoxical to the question of center and periphery and cultural capital. Other productions, were eclipsed by superficial variations of steps and additions that claim to be a natural artistic interpretation of Tagore but failed to bring forth the ideals and underlying meaning of Bard's work.

Sangeet Natak Akademi's presentation of Chitrangada by Kathak Kendra repertoire and choreographed by Geetanjali Lal fell short in substantiating the genre of dance-dramas but the quality of Kathak cannot

be faulted. *Chitrangada* in Kathak becomes emblematic of virtuosity embedded within the dance form itself. Kurupa's role was executed perfectly by Shaileja Nalwade, while Vidha Lal as Surupa in an attempt to entice Arjuna and play the part failed to execute the aristocratic role. Mulla Afsar Khan made a commendable effort as a fickle-minded Arjuna whose vow of celibacy is feted to be upheld or broken in the spur of the moment. The overall ensemble was well choreographed and the Hindustani classical and Rabindra Sangeet twosome was worked out perfectly.

Chandalika performed by Sattriya Kendra, Guwahati should be lauded for its attempt to break free from the repetitive vocabulary of the technique, where the same set movements are repeated in tandem. Though theatre-cum-dance experience of choreographer Jatin Das was a blessing in disguise, as the stage setting and lighting enhanced the mood. The music and the dance sequences fell into place due to sensitive as well as evocative Khol/Mridanga by Kusha Mahanta along with the chorus of melodious male and female vocalists. Padmalochana Konwar as Prakriti was very expressive, and the mother-daughter encounters were very well executed on stage.

Like the practitioners of Kathak and Sattriya, Kurupa/Surupa in *Chitrangada* and Prakriti in *Chandalika* were denied legitimacy due to their caste and class and banished from the life of a normal human being. Their arrival at the understanding of who they are occurs through various forms of rebellion against sexual and social codes. Both *Chitrangada* and *Chandalika* are icons of marginality-women coming from the peripheral spaces of society. Like the women in the play, the dancers were trying to establish their significance in society with their performing bodies becoming the site for resistance to disrupting the conservative notions about female gender, sexuality, and social positions.

While *Chitrangada* performed in Kathak provided fluidity to Shaileja Nalwade and Vidha Lal to break free from the group ensemble and establish their identity as in general, *Chitrangada* is represented as one woman rent apart by her two conflicting selves, (Kurupa and Surupa). Here, *Chitrangada* is not two but three! This is the high point of the production. The first signifies the self, the unchanging identity of *Chitrangada* (Shaileja Nalwade) narrating the journey of her life, the saga of her hunt for love, her dejection, and decisive 'reclamation' on her terms. The other two are her exterior selves enacted in two separate styles, Kurupa and Surupa, sharing and overlapping the stage –space with the first one.

The idea of sacred and profane and high and low art is played out in the two performances with kathak's origin from the courtrooms of the Kings while Sattriya's contested origin in the courtyard of the temple and it is considered as a devotional folk performance and hence willful exclusion from the canon of classical dance till recently. Sattriya, a folk dance from Assam was seen as a dance of the rustic folk and simpletons in the temple space of Assam. Unlike Kathak which becomes the mouthpiece of the revival of the classical dance movement, Sattriya because it's a dance form from Assam faces a peculiar conundrum where it is required to outline its identity, in the larger context of the nation<sup>vii</sup>.

### **State Patronage and location of the capital**

The central government became the official patron of the arts post-independence with the task of protecting, promoting, and preserving India's cultural heritage. Following the Nehruvian vision of "unity in diversity," the central government took a leading role to showcase India's plural cultural heritage. Centrally funded institutions like the Sangeet Natak Academy promoted dance by organizing seminars, and festivals, and by providing dancers with scholarships, programs, and funding. Exponents of various classical forms were invited to serve on committees for annual awards and to teach in schools sponsored by the Sangeet Natak Academy. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), was a separate administrative body created and financed by the Ministry of External Affairs. Its primary objective was to establish and continue cultural relations between India and other countries. ICCR officials selected artists and performers to be sent abroad on official delegations. The "Festival of India" was introduced in the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Japan, Sweden, Germany, China, and the former Soviet Union to remove perceptions of Indian culture as fossilized and to highlight tradition and change.

Although designated autonomous, the Sangeet Natak Akademy and the ICCR were majorly dependent on government grants and administered by government agents during the year-long celebration of the birth centenary of Rabindranath Tagore. As a result, performing artists had to politically align themselves with the central government. Delhi-based artists largely benefited from this arrangement and a hierarchical

system emerged that reflected regional disparities. The lack of professional art managers and coherent cultural policies fragmented the institutions from their inception.

While the Kathak Kendra, Delhi became one of the most important units of Sangeet Natak Akademy, and became the constituent body of the Akademy in 1964 to develop a consensus narrative on classicism, standards of Kathak appreciation were institutionalized. This centralization in Delhi further marginalized dance forms like Sattriya emerging from the North-eastern part of India. While Tagore idea's of humanism and Nehruvian idea of Unity in Diversity has allowed institutional spaces to open its door to dance forms like Sattriya, it remains a paradox of high vs. low art that troubles the notion of allocation of cultural capital and performance of controversial art forms in Institutional spaces, which emphasize investing and providing infrastructure for the more visible art forms like kathak while marginalizing any folk performance.

## **Conclusion**

The two main sections of the paper- Dance-dramas as intervention: Textual analysis of Chandalika and Chitrangada and Performing Tagore: Politics and Aesthetics of Nritya Natya give a brief history of Tagore's effort for the upliftment of women through the revival of the once condemned dance dramas. Through the aid of dance dramas, more politicized dance forms are incorporated and reach the masses. The aim of the paper was not only the historic periodization of various landmarks in the reform movement and cultural history of India, there was a gradual shift or change in patronage from the royal courts and temples to minting money through corporate sponsorship. The evolution of dance texts and dance forms like Kathak and Sattriya from traditional practice in colonial periods to the development of national art form is linked to changing discourse of modernity working within the ambit of the postcolonial nation-state. Anderson's idea of the nation-state and imagined communities, Pierre Bourdieu's idea of forms of capital, and Appadurai's notion of 'public modernity' is especially useful in analyzing dance forms like Kathak and Sattriya in global public culture in India. Globalization of culture in recent years has reformulated the ideology of nationalism and modern nation-building in multiple discursive ways, as a result, the intersection of "cultural zones" (i.e. global, national, and regional or local spheres) with different forms of capital (i.e. global, national, and regional or local spheres) with different forms of capital (i.e. public and private) has created critical new sites for shaping the identity.

The question of nation and identity is addressed in the two choreographic examples in the second part of the paper to show how innovation in aesthetics of dance and capital formation might be articulated through both national and local/vernacular aesthetics, expressing identities that are national or local.

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<sup>i</sup> Tagore wrote extensively for children and designed his texts in such a way that they could be easily adapted in plays.

<sup>ii</sup> The Anti-Nautch movement was a colonial agitation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century to abolish the traditional practice of dedicating minor girls in service of Hindu temples. The agitation was led by colonial government, Indian social reformist, and Christian missionaries. Although the anti-nautch movement targeted the devadasi system in the south and was most effective in Madras and Bombay, its consequences for dancers were widespread. In Calcutta, the Bengali patrons of bai-nautch, influenced by the ideals of Bramho Samaj (a reformist Hindu sect), withdrew their support of indigenous cultural practices including nautch during this time.

<sup>iii</sup> Lord Macaulay was synonymous with cultural estrangement of Hindus from Hindu civilization, starting with linguistic assimilation into the global Anglophone community. He gave a notorious statement, “If one section of the British library is brought in India, the whole population can be educated and we will have natives who will be able to serve us.” Unlike Gandhi who believed in vocational training and learning by hands the Britishers wanted the natives to learn their language and be literate enough to serve them well and hence they were less invested in preservation of various cultural forms including dance.

<sup>iv</sup> Benedict Anderson has described the quality of the political love within nationalism in terms of the language with which nationalism deploys the vocabulary of kinship (here a matrilinear connection) or the vocabulary of the home, where again the mother is dominant. Both idioms point in the same direction, towards an object to which one does not choose on grounds of self.

<sup>v</sup> Water is significant for its life preserving qualities but also for its significance as the means to baptize a human being and giving a new life to them, that happens in case of Prakriti in Chandalika.

<sup>vi</sup> Purnima Shah (1994) notes the importance of the court genre and the contribution of the secular attitude of Hindu and Muslim rulers to the present richness of Kathak repertoire, yet in a later work (1998), following the nationalist narrative of Kathak, she reiterates that it is a predominantly Hindu practice.

<sup>vii</sup> Assam still sought its rightful place in the Indian polity and found itself reduced to the position of almost a non-player because of its distance from the centre. Moreover, its small population was a disadvantage; for the other major linguistic communities played more prominent political roles and bagged bigger slices of the economic cake. In its formative years, the Indian federation failed to note the asymmetry of the linguistically separated economic regions, so that the special needs of the smaller nationalities failed to receive special attention. Heterogeneity was glossed over by the economic vision of the country as it was read only as diversity. The center did not sufficiently address the micro-level inequalities and needs of a people living in a geo-political unit away from the center.