“The Wings of the Root and the Root of the Wings”: Tagore’s Use of Indigenous Elements in his Plays

Bidhan Mondal
Assistant Professor in English
Kandra R. K. Mahavidyalaya

Abstract: In this article, my focus will be to present an insight into Tagore’s plays fraught with traditional or indigenous elements. Minute observation of his plays reminds us that the modern concepts of an open theatre, little theatre, indigenous theatre, or the root theatre in Bengali stage are indebted to the crucial contribution of Tagore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. His dramatic activities sallied forth a long journey from Valmiki Pratibha to Shyama in quest of a new language of theatre or a parallel theatre to make it free from the clutches of colonial mimicry. Tagore assimilates Indian folk and traditional theatre forms, dance, and music into contemporary practices. The study will try to reflect on the bent of Tagore’s engagements with modernity and indigenous tradition in theatre. My objective in this article is to re-evaluate Tagore as a playwright to explore his attempt to enact alternative modernity by subverting the capitalist paradigms of Western modernity through the indigenous or traditional elements incorporated and appropriated within his plays.

Keywords: Indigenous, Alternative, Theatre, Music, Dance, Performance

Tagore is the pioneer of the group theatres in Bengal, who has endeavoured to appropriate folk forms and explore alternative spaces to practice open-air theatre. Much before the IPTA movement, Rabindranath Tagore pioneered his non-proscenium applications with which he tried to rejuvenate Indian classical or traditional forms of theatre. The politics of colonialism and its simultaneous production of Orientalist knowledge had intervened in the urban literati’s negotiation with its tradition. This negotiation was a disguised negation of the same tradition to which it owed its very existence (Chatterjee, 2009, pp. 120), but Tagore, since the beginning of the twentieth century, had settled a cultural space in Birbhum to deny or challenge this negotiation of Calcutta public theatres. Tagore as a playwright, found in Santiniketan’s Bhubandanga (a village at that time in Birbhum) a space to experiment and enact alternative modernity in the field of theatre. His self-chosen isolation from his ancestral theatre practice of Jorasanko and the mainstream theatre of Calcutta gave him the freedom to subvert the capitalist paradigms of Western modernity. He has rejuvenated indigenous or traditional elements and folk performing arts of Bengal through his second-generation plays.

Modern theatre’s beginnings in Bengal can be identified with the closing years of the eighteenth century when European stagecraft and English plays evoked considerable interest among a section of the Bengali residents of the city. It steadily developed with the spread of English education from the late nineteenth century. At this time, Bengal theatre emerged as a product of the Bengal Renaissance, a colonial importation and an urban phenomenon constructed primarily for the entertainment of local British residents. This western model of theatre provided the models for the theatres [the theatres of Prasannakumar Tagore (1801-1886) or Nabinchandra Basu (with his home production of Vidyasundar in 1835) of “the English educated native Babus that formed a large section of the Bengali intelligentsia” (Mukherjee, 2013, pp. 193). These city theatres being urban and patronized by the wealthy elite classes, evolved principally in the city. This city theatre increasingly pushed to the margins the earlier forms of popular performances of Bengal, which included not only jatra but also Kathakatha, Kabigaan, Kirtan, Panchali, and other dramatic or non-dramatic forms. According to Prof. 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). In the February 1840 issue of The Oriental Observer, the editorial was written that “a Calcutta audience—an Indian audience we should say—is compared with those of Europe, highly respectable audience” (Raha, 1978, pp. 14). Thus, theatres in 1814 and 1815 used to perform a medley of comedies, farces, and serious plays besides Shakespeare, which proved popular in England. At the same time, Calcutta theatres like the Jorasanko Theatre private theatre of the Tagore’s, encouraged the writing of original plays in Bengali. Utpal Dutt considers jatra as the “theatre at its primitive best” (Dutt, 2009, pp. 465) due to the enduring appeal of this traditional performing art, which “has refused to die with the
In his discerning study of Tagore’s drama, Sankha Ghosh suggests that Tagore’s conception of the adhunik (modern) rests on a critical inclination to consider samprotk (contemporary) life conditions from an evaluative distance (Ghosh, 1969, pp. 55). He often tends to engage with the disruptions brought on by the imperialist Modernity in the various life-worlds he traversed. In his plays, Tagore’s metaphorical portrayals of time and space interpret a naive and idealistic call to return to the village and its pristine indigenous values. His play Sarodotiasv (1908) marks a major shift, “not merely dramaturgical or theatrical but even ideological” (Sen, 2010, pp. 42) that has shown us how Tagore had acclimatized a new trend in the form and content of his plays through the employment of various indigenous values. This trend in theatre, argues Solomon, intended to scheme ‘both modernity and Indianness in its style and subject matter’ to constitute an imagined nation that brings into existence the grand nationalist agenda of Indian intelligentsia and a pan-Indian nation-state (Bhatia, 2009, pp. 22). In a letter written by Tagore, he writes his grievance against his countrymen:

Sometimes I feel so unbearably angry with the people of our country! Not because they aren’t getting rid of the Englishman here, but because they don’t do a thing about anything at all—they can’t demonstrate their superiority in any field. They don’t even have that aim in mind…. nobody thinks, nobody feels, nobody works; nobody has any experience of a great undertaking or a life worth living; you will not be able to find an instance of mature humanity anywhere.¹

In that contemporary time, Bengali playwrights like Girish Chandra had to reluctantly use elements of these traditional theatres to cope with the audience’s taste. But, Tagore did something else with his perception, which was anti-modern. In fact, to the contemporary playwrights, modernity used to signify plays modelled after European drama Vasudha Dalmia adds that the chief characteristics of the modern were “the repeated change of scenes...recurrent shift of the painted backdrop” (Dalmia, 2005, pp. 36). Tagore’s conception of a new theatre is formulated in the essay “Rangamancha” (1903), in which he criticized the imitation of Western stagecraft, particularly the use of painted scenery in the background. Throughout his entire dramatic career, which encompasses over sixty plays of various types and moods written in nearly as many years, Rabindranath was preoccupied with searching for a “parallel theatre” (Sen, 2010, pp. 41) that suggests his urge to return to our indigenous cultural traditions. Tagore was seeking to ensure that the audience’s imagination was not limited. Therefore, he had utilized this trend of incorporating traditional elements from jatra and Sanskrit theatres to Indianize the Bengali theatres, an opportunity to make them free from westernization. Alluding Bharata’s Natyasasthra, Tagore claimed that the use of painted backdrops often ceases the audience’s creativity and thinking, turning them into a passive receptor, “ascribing to them an utter poverty of imagination” (Bhatia, 2009, pp. 432). Even in the introduction of his play Tapati, Tagore disapproves of the European realist mode that considers drama solely dependent on other supports like acting, scenery, music, and other accessories. He raises his disapproval of the European realist mode that considered drama to be solely dependent on other supports like acting, scenery, music, and other accessories and appraisals for the “Jatra plays” in this regard:

That is why I like the Jatra Plays of our country. There is not so much of a gulf separating the stage from audience...and the spirit of the play which is the real thing, is showered from player to spectator and from spectator to player in a very carnival of delight (Bhatia, 2009, pp. 433)

In the last half of the nineteenth century, when Tagore started writing plays with Balmiki Pratibha (1881), Kal Mrigaya (1882), and comparatively unfamiliar plays like Rudrachanda and Nalini (1884), he was much influenced by the Western theatres as in case of his poetry that continued up to his play Mayar Khela (1888), Raja O Rani (1889) and Bisarjan (1890). Despite that, we should also remember that these plays took up events from the Indian classical epics and mythological stories. Tagore’s adaptations from Indian classics prove his rootedness; he had borrowed from the Ramayana in his first two plays. He drew heavily upon the Mahabharata in his plays like Gandharir Avedan (1891), Karna O Kunti Sambad, and Viday Abhishap (1894). Most interestingly, in the centre of his play Prakritir Pratishodh (1884), Tagore employed a motif from folklore, i.e., changing faces. Here, the ascetic at the end changes, being influenced by Basanti, the village girl (who represents the spring season) who helps him come out of his cave life to embrace society. Moreover, Prakritir Pratishodh (1884) is also free from the restriction or categorization of any particular community like the dacoit-folk in Balmiki Prativa or hunter-folk in Kal Mrigaya rather, the entire village folk and their simple lifestyle plays a vital role in the play with the passing events of their daily life. Mayar Khela is distinguished as Tagore believed that Balmiki Prativa or Kalmrigaya is like European operas—sure natika or ‘short play in music’ where acting is enacted based on different facial expressions through music like the traditional kathakatha style. But in Mayar Khela, acting is not the chief forte, rather, music is in the centre revealed through actions and expressions (Lahiri, 2014, pp. 66). In fact, at this time, Tagore was also preoccupied with his concept of using indigenous elements in his natika or short plays, his adaptation of a Marathi legend in Sati and Bengali folktales in Lakhkir Pariksha are a few instances. Again in his comedies like Swargiya Prahasen,...
his details about many folk-gods and goddesses in the contemporary Bengali society can be considered Jungian archetypes or primordial images. Thus these plays of Tagore’s first phase (as a playwright) are not overshadowed by “the wealth of the capitalist” and are free from “the costly rubbish held responsible for clogging the stage” (Bhatia, 2009, pp. 434).

The seed for these experimentations was sown during Tagore’s discovery of the beauty of rural Bengal in the 1880s when he was staying at his estate of Silaidaha and Patrasar; here, he got acquainted with the pure, prosperous, and pulsating indigenous tradition of Bengal. Tagore wrote in one of his letters dated 1st February 1891: “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 don’t realize that I am one of their kind.” When he moved to Santiniketan and formed brahmacharyashrama in 1901 (later named as Visva-Bharati University in 1921), the open-air ambience of the ashrama school supported Rabindranath to experiment on his concept of “a new/parallel theatre—particularly in producing seasonal plays like Sarodotsav (1908) and Phalguni (1916)” (Sen, 2010, pp. 42-43). His self-chosen isolation from the mainstream theatre gave him freedom of experimentation with forms and themes without compromising the popular tastes or the demands of the capitalistic conventions controlling the Bengal theatres at that time. Ananda Lal observed:

After his return from the England-America trip in 1913, Tagore continued producing new plays at Santiniketan. However, the distance from Calcutta delimited the possibilities of gaining a wider audience. Except for a few cognoscenti among his friends who travelled travelled between Calcutta and Santiniketan, people outside the small school community remained blissfully ignorant of Tagore’s theatrical advances. (Lal, 2009, pp. 33)

In his essay Swadeshi Swamaj (1904), Tagore expressed his disgust for the rich landlords of the cities. They had been attracted to the foreign-influenced amusements instead of organizing village festivals like rituals and fairs and functions like jatras, kirtans, lantern shows, etc., in connection with the national awakening. He showed his respect for the native culture, which was embellished with the indigenous festivals like fairs and jatras in the villages. At this juncture, Tagore felt the need to restore the country’s roots and unite the heart of the country by acquainting them with the people of the country, its music, pulsation of Nature, and festivity, through his plays.

This new theatrical trend that started with Sarodotsav (1908) was almost a process of self-discovery, and this self-discovery was Tagore’s discovery of the self in Nature. “This trend in theatre”, argues Solomon, “intended to scheme both modernity and Indianness in its style and subject matter to constitute an imagined nation that brings into existence the grand nationalist agenda of Indian intelligentsia and a pan-Indian nation-state” (Bhatia, 2009, pp. 22). Eminent folklorist Richard M. Dorson has outlined four broad folklore and folklife study sectors. One of them is the field of Social customs. Folklorists who work on social or folk customs believe that methods (traditionally used) to collect a tale or the text of a song can very well work for collecting information on social folk customs (Handoo, 2000, pp. 17). The purpose of these folk customs or rituals is the best way to bring harmony among men, and in Bengal, these customs are celebrated according to the seasons. Rabindranath largely secularized these religious festivals so that they become occasions for celebrations of the seasons (without much reference to the religious aspect). Eminent playwright B. V. Karanth argues:

Theatre lies in the region and there is nothing called as National Theatre.

If we call ourselves Indian, we must know India from the depth of its core.

… Languages, dialects…background of the people who belong to different religions and sects, make what India is. Only folk and traditional forms have the energy and spirit to bind people in one single string and uplift them to new heights. (Raut, 2016, pp. 45)

Tagore claimed Sarodotsav to be centred on these seasonal rituals; it’s about celebrations, about holidays, voluntary freedom of the king from his kingdom, freedom of the boys from their studies. Tagore claimed Sarodotsav to be centred on these seasonal rituals; it’s about celebrations, holidays, voluntary freedom of the king from his kingdom, and freedom of the boys from their studies. With time his philosophy of Nature, latent from the beginning stage and continued up to the final stage, as Chitrangada is a celebration of spring as it represents “the enchantment of spring and the power of its spell on the senses” (Kripalini, 1962, pp. 139), was maturing his relationship with Nature. Sankha Ghosh says, “Tagore built up a pervasive relationship with nature, mingled intimately with humanity. Engagement with nature made him feel a very deep and far-reaching acquaintance with it” (Ghosh, 2004, pp. 13). Moreover, in Tagore’s plays, music serves a ritualistic purpose. Tagore believed that before studying or observing the Western realist theatre, our Natya, known as jatra, is endowed with songs, and Tagore used songs in his plays not to entertain the audience but as an inseparable part of life. He did not take it simply as an art form but as an expression of life at its completeness. The predominating tune of panchali can also be found in the songs of these plays. Panchali is a medieval devotional poem that primarily depicts specific deities’ glory. Tagore incorporates the songs of panchali in most of his plays in this phase to connect his plays with the sentiment of people. Tagore being an artist could perceive the inner relation of the objects of Nature. Nature is endowed with inexpressible music and abundant meaning that
This ‘prakriti-bodh’ of Tagore can be traced in ample measure in his play Phalguni (1916). Phalguni is an ideal example among the plays of Tagore that breaks the prosenium and attempts to connect actors with the audience. While staying at the estate of Silaidah and Patisar, in this “neglected bit at the edge of the world”, a “sort of a large, silent, deserted desert,” Tagore could not resist the temptation of endowing the blossom of Nature with the soothing echoes of spring wind. It stages life’s constant renewal from winter to spring through a fantasy that reveals in a medley of song, dance, and gaiety to express Tagore’s mood. He got acquainted with the folk songs and performing arts like Baul, Kirtan, Shyama Sangeet, Shari, Bhatiyali, and Jhumar, even though he also was introduced to the songs of Lalan Fakir (1774-1890) and his disciple Gagan Harkara. The lyrical beauty of Baul songs deeply moved Tagore, vividly expressive of the deep-rooted indigenous tradition in a simplistic and rhythmic language. The spiritual philosophy and ambiguous songs of Baul with deep insight influenced Tagore so profoundly that he played the role of a ‘blind Baul’ in his play Phalguni. This influence led Tagore to return to his roots, and he composed numerous songs following different styles of folk music during India’s Freedom Movement. Consequently, as Ladly Mukhopadhyay claimed, these songs immediately touched the hearts of common people and became a source of inspiration. As in the words of Santidev Ghosh, a well-known music maestro, “...they bring forth a vast panorama of human life and experience encapsulating joy and sorrow” (Mukhopadhyay, 2010, pp. 10). Again the flow of songs by the young boys and the blind Baul make up for the absence of plot or action in the play. Tagore was in quest of a ritualistic presentation of a combined performance of music and dance to go against the conventional theatre. In fact, in the prelude that he later added to this play, Tagore makes Kabisekhar (the poet) speaks these lines: “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, pp. 56). Moreover, Tagore also thought of experimenting with the staging of the play as he wrote a letter to Gagan (Gagendranath Tagore) just before the first performance of this play. He wrote about his idea of creating an indigenous setting that would be free from the restriction of the conventional stage. So, the merit of the play lies chiefly in music; the poet says, “our only background is the mind. On that, we shall summon a picture with the magic wand of music. There the images will be painted by brush-stokes of the melodious tune” (Kripalini, 1962, pp. 245).

Around this time after Phalguni, Rabindranath also wrote what was arguably believed in the academia to be his most mature plays, like – Raja (1910), Dakghar (1917), Mukhodhara (1922), and Raktakarabi (1924). In one of his lectures, Tagore said: “Through this perfect touch with nature we took the opportunity of instituting festivals of the seasons. I wrote songs to cel (tagore, 1925, pp. 100-101). Ladly Mukhopadhyay informed us that Tagore wrote almost 140 exquisite songs commemorating the ‘seasons’, he also wrote songs for different occasions centred on ploughing, harvesting, and tree planting, which bestow Tagore’s plays with an indigenous charm, and these plays include some of them. Tagore delineates nature and the main characters of the play Raktakarabi realistically; the main characters are, according to him, life-like and complete, and the completeness of the cycle of the seasons of Bengal runs beneath the surface text of Raktakarabi through the songs. The totality of the season’s cycles identifies itself with the completeness of the life-like portrayal of the play’s main characters, so Nature and Man are interwoven in Raktakarabi. Like the western authority, the king here has the most deadly touch that tortures tradition to destruction and sucks out the life-sap of natives to leave them in the state like life in death and death in life. He taught us to perceive nature in multiple perspectives simultaneously through his intricately woven words and melodies. But the king’s power is proved to trifle against the magical charm of Ranjan and Nandini, as while the king can fetter everything, he cannot fetter happiness which is entangled with music and dance that can put a beating heart within the dead ribs. Ranjan’s sarengi (a musical instrument) and the seasonal songs like paws toder daak diyeche (my translation: the season of Paus has given you all a call to appear in the field) are indeed the actual currents of indigenous spirit within the common native people. Tagore wrote in one of his letters: “But the people here have something that is not to be looked down on. Until this clear simplicity is established at the centre of civilization it will never be complete or beautiful. It is the absence of these qualities that seems to be making European civilization morbid”.

After the first decade of the twentieth century, Rabindranath had paid several visits to the Far East countries like Japan (in 1916 and 1924), Java, and Bali (in 1927). He appreciated the ritualistic play performances in essays like “Japajatri” or “Javajatir Path”, especially their crucial focus on dance as a medium of theatrical expression. Consequently, Rabindranath took another bold step by this time as he introduced to dance as a medium of theatrical expression in his play Natir Puja (1926). He introduced female characters on stage and gave dignity to the female-based classical Indian performance “nautch” (Sen, 2010, pp. 44) by transforming it into a dance drama. His exposure to the dance posture of the Far East countries helped him develop his theory of “theatre as dance”, which resulted in the cluster of the dance-dramas in the final phase of his plays. This final phase of dance-dramas commenced with Shapmochan (1931) followed by Tasher Desh (1933) and the trio Chitrangada (1936), Chandalika (1939), and Shyama (1939). Tagore adopted the folk form of kathakata in these plays to bestow the strength of rap natya or the kabuki performances of the Far-East countries. The Statesman remarked on the performance of Chandalika. “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 converted into songs as background music, and is symbolically interpreted by the characters through the dances” (Sen, 2010, pp. 45). In his play Tasher Desh (1933), the songs of the pack of cards quite clearly sketch the lifelessness of the people of British India. As an internationalist, Tagore inspired the citizens of the world to break the shackles of these social inequalities that lead to the deep-seated moral weakness in society. His ultimatum against these man-made rules is pronounced in Tasher Desh, as the prince states that none can progress unless the law of the fence is broken. The recurrence of the same message echoes till the end of the play with the song—“bhangon bangh bhang bhang...bangoner joyghaan giao” [My translation: Let the dam be shattered...let us sing the clarion call of destruction]. Although Tagore has indeed derived mostly from the Western tradition, when we listen to his songs, it becomes difficult to determine which part of it is Western and which part is purely Indian classical, or which is from the indigenous tradition. Ultimately, the mixture he
presents is purely his creation, ‘Rabindrasangeet’. In this way, Tagore appended songs in the dialogues and dance forms in the performance of his plays, and Sankha Ghosh has expressed them as the third language of Tagore (Ghosh, 2004, pp. 49).

In his book Kaler Matra O Rabindra Natok, Sankha Ghosh has borrowed a line from the Nobel laureate poet Jimenez where the Spanish poet shares his fantasy — let there be wings of the root and the root of the wings. Throughout his journey in pursuit of a new theatre, Tagore observed the significance of this fantasy that helped him to follow a folk or indigenous type in his plays. Tagore, in a way, pioneered a 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, working towards an evolution of the variegated “traditions of lok-parampara in India” (Mukherjee, 2013, pp. 198). Like some of the stalwarts of Indian theatre, Tagore also believed that the ethos of Indian modernity comprising various regional/vernacular alterations cannot be separated from the folk resources that constitute “the memories of their childhood, family, community, and tradition” (Bharucha, 2009, pp. 93).

Notes


2. Letter from Shahjadpur dated 1 February 1891, Choudhuri, pp. 72.

3. Letter written from Shialidaha dated 29 November 1889, Choudhuri, pp. 51.


References


Mukherjee, Anuparna. (2013). Acrobating between Tradition and Modern’: The Roots


**Declaration:** I hereby declare that this is an original work. This is not published anywhere.