INTERCULTURAL SYSTHESIS, RADICAL HUMANISM AND RABINDRANRITYA: RE-EVALUATION OF TAGORE'S DANCE LEGACY

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore imbued Indian dance and music with a new modern sensibility. He created novel and eclectic dance-and-music genres, Rabindranritya and Rabindrasangeet, when the national trend was toward classical revivalism. He inspired Indian women to dance on the national stage at a time when dance was associated with immorality and cultural degeneration. This article explores Tagore's song and dance creations, connecting them to his radical political and philosophical thought on universal humanism. Focusing on his views on creativity and freedom, nationalism and consmopolitanism, and women and essentialism, it is argued that this eclectic intercultural synthesis of ideas served to promote individual consciousness, empowerment and cosmopolitanism without rejecting their Indic cultural roots.

Keywords: *Bauls, Bengal, cosmopolitanism, dance, humanism, India, inter-culturality, Java, nationalism, Rabindranritya, Sbantinkketan, Tagore, universlism, women*

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (1959[1917]:77) clearly connected performance and life when he wrote in his book titled Personality, a compilation of lectures he delivered in America on what he considered life's essential knowledge:

[T]he curtain rises, life appears on the stage, and the drama begins whose meaning we come to understand through gestures and language resembling our own.....We know what life is, not by analysis of its parts, but by a more immediate perception through sympathy.

The 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore (7 May 1861-7 August 1941) in 2011 was an occasion for many kinds of reflections on Tagore's legacy (see Banerjee, 2011). The present article focuses on a lesser investigated arena of this legacy, related to dance, Rabindranritya. In researching Tagore's magna opera of artistic and literary works,[1] we find that his song-dance compositions and dance dramas have remained peripheral to scholarly enquiry.[2] Yet, in Tagore's song-dance compositions and dance dramas we find the full blossoming of life's meanings, as he understood and expressed it through verbal and non-verbal modes of communication: gestures, language and, more importantly, sympathy. He envisioned an integration of language with human emotion/empathy and somatic consciousness. To summarise, his radical departure from various artistic and literary conventions of the time, Chaudhuri (2010:551) writes: 'Unlike previous Bengali dramas, Tagore's dance dramas emphasize a fusion of lyrical flow and emotional rhythm tightly focused on a core idea'.

As a dance-maker and scholar, my first impulse is to investigate this notable lack of attention to the very first creation of modern Indian dance, nothing less than a revolution during its time. The thinness of scholarly attention is even more significant because the organic relationship between knowledge and humanity (something that Tagore spent his life bridging) can be dynamically grasped through his song-dance creations. These were his expressive dances set to poetry (nritya-abbinaya) and dance drama (nrityanatya). His idea of universal humanism is luminescent in these creations. Yet, the dance from that Tagore created, Rabindranritya, has been dismissed by many, such as Ashutosh Bhattacharya, the eminent historian of Bengali drama, as the weakest link to Tagore (Bose, 2008: 1087).

Here, I do not primarily analyse the lack of critical comprehension of Tagore's dance, for which there are many reasons.[3] Instead, in re-evaluating Tagore's legacy, I ask why he, who already had revolutionised the Bengali language through his literary creations, composed thousands of songs, and written dozens if not hundreds of plays and essays, felt inspired in his later years to search for a new dance if not hundreds of plays and essays, felt inspired in his later years to search for a new dance language. My focus here is on Rabindranritya and not Rabindrasangeet, a distinctive song genre beloved by Bengalis, as the latter is too large to deal with in a single paper.[4] What did Tagore seek to achieve by getting involved with dance and how did it connect to his quest for consciousness, knowledge, and self-realisation? I search for answers not by focusing solely on the dance idioms he created in his educational institution Shantiniketan, established in 1901, but by examining how he connected his experiments of a new dance movement to his philosophical and political thoughts for his exploration of universal humanism.

The overarching question is examined in three parts. First, what do we learn about Rabindranritya and Rabindra-nrityanatya in relation to his ideas about creativity and freedom? In this regard I also explore the connections between his songs that are sung poetry and his dance. Second, the article focuses on the debates surrounding nationals and cosmopolitanism and Tagore's struggles with their applications in his own life. Third, Tagore's views on women's empowerment and his thoughts on essentialism and liberation are explored. Seeking to understand his motivations for discussing and presenting such issues, the article aims to determine to what extent individual empowerment, the raising of consciousness, an eclectic cosmopolitanism, within an Indian framework of reference, can be detected. This radical humanism appears neither apolitical nor ungendered, but is fraught with contradictions and new initiatives. Perhaps Tagore's involvement with Indian dance can be viewed as the creative impulse of a polemist who rebelled against conventional notions of knowledge, tradition and identity.

Creativity, Freedom and Movement

Dance entered Shantiniketan through enactments of dramas, poetry and musical renditions. From its inception, this involvement was not bound by rules and regulations. Much like his painting (which Tagore began in the 1920s), his dance was not methodical or technical. Tagore himself performed frequently. As early as 1915, Tagore performed the blind, free-spirited, dancing Baul in his play Phalguni, an event that was put on canvas by the painters Ababindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose. Ghose (1999:6), the veteran Rabindrik (Tagorean) dancer and singer who spent his entire career in Shantiniketan, described it as a dance of pure joy and freedom. The revolutionary approach to dance that Tagore introduced did not, however, follow the revivalist movement which began with the cultural renaissance in India in the early part of the twentieth century. In relation to dance this movement had claimed a revival of India's ancient tradition in its 'purest' form for establishing a modern national identity and history (Chakravrty, 1998,2009; Meduri, 1996). But Tagore did not want to confine his involvement with dance to a narrow and singular vision of tradition. He did not reject tradition, but believed that deeper engagement with it allowed the incorporation of other cultures into one's own. In his own words, in 'Letters to a Friend' (quoted in Tagore, 2008: 1078):

[w}hatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly become ours, wherever they might have their origin. I am proud of my humanity, when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own.

Tagore was deeply influenced by the classical Indian philosophy of the Upanishads, Buddhist thought, Hindu-Muslim syncretism and the free-spirited folk traditions of the Bauls of Bengal. He was also, as we know, greatly influenced by western liberal humanism and the individual expression of creativity. He thought that dance, like poetry, should embrace non-realistic representations and he was moved by the abstract expressivity of American modern dance.

Tagore saw the potential of dance to express deep emotional experience without the restrictions of text or formulaic vocabulary. It was an art that could uncover the innermost unifying rhythm of a fragmented universe. His thoughts are echoed in his verse: '*Mama chitte niti nrtitey keje nache tata thei thei'* (My translation: Inside my heart / who is it that dances daily / tata thei thei).

Bose (2008: 1086) points out that this sense of unity and freedom that Tagore experienced in movement was his primary impulse to set his primary impulse to set his songs and poetry to dance. Expressive dance (nritya-abhinaya) set to his songs and poetry became the perfect articulation for his emotional aesthetic or bhav. Tagore himself explained: 'Poetry may not have one bounded meaning, it has a flexible seat that can accommodate people according to various shapes'.[5] His vision of dance certainly did not exclude music or poetry. The Sanskrit term nritya includes both music and dance in classical Indian dance repertoire and Tagore called his dance style Rabindranritya. In 1880, after returning from England, he wrote a song exclusively for encouraging women to dance on stage. The words in the song reflect how he thought about singing and dancing as inter-related activities (Ghose, 1983:8): *'Aye tobe saha chari, hatey hatey dhai dhari, nachibi ghiri ghiri, gahibi gaan'* (My translation: Come my friends, let's hold hands and dance in a circle and sing). To explore a variety of emotions through his musical compositions, Tagore mixed Kirtan, Tappa, Dhamar and Baul elements with western music (Chakraborty, 2010). This experimental and interdisciplinary approach to music and dance was exemplified by Srimati Thakur when she performed modern dance in Shantiniketan on the occasion of Holi, set to his poetry *'Ami paraner sathe khelibo ajike morno khela'* (My translation: A game of death I shall play with my soul today). The same poetry was later performed by Santideb Ghose using classical Indian and Kandyan (Sri Lankan) dance (Ghose, 1983).

Tagore crystallised his vision of dance through his *Nrityanatya* or dance dramas such a *Valmiki Pratibha, Kalmrigaya, Mayar Khela, Chitrangada, Shyama* and *Chandalika*. He composed the songs for these plays so that they could be performed through movement and rhythm. *Valmiki Pratibha* was first staged in March 1881 in his ancestral house in Jorasanko in North Calcutta. He was only 20 years old when he composed it and performed the lead role himself when it was staged later. The style of dancing we know as *Rabindranritya* today emerged from these early experimental renditions based on literary forms and musical compositions. His experiments with dance movements in Shantiniketan included songs, dialogue, dance, music, stage sets and costumes. The primary style in which students were trained was Manipuri dance. Ghose (1983:26-31) writes about the signal contribution of Nabakumar Singh, the primary Manipuri teacher in Shantiniketan. Kathakali, the main classical dance style from Kerala, was also incorporated in the dance repertoire, as the primary expression of male dance. Ghose (1983) writes about his travels to learn various dance forms from all over Asia, including visits to Kerala to learn Kathakali. Details about his travels were published in the yearly journal of Shantiniketan: 'Santimoy Ghose visited several parts of South India to study indigenous forms of dancing during the year, and was thus greatly helpful in teaching dancing to students' (quoted in Ghose, 1983:50).

Although *Rabindranritya* was/is a synthesis of Manipuri and Kathakali, it often incorporated other classical styles such as Bharatnatyam and Kathak. These styles were used to portray specific characters for his dramas which were no longer music dramas, but came to be known as dramas or *Rabindra Nrityanatya*. For instance, in the staging of Shyama in 1938, Asha Ojha, trained in Kathak, performed the character of Uttiya, and Mrinalini Sarabhai played the character of Vajrasena using Bharatnatyam (Bose, 2008: 1089). However, Tagore was not as enthusiastic about Kathak and Bharatnatyam as he was about the Manipuri, Balinese and Javanese styles. He was particularly impressed with Javanese dance and the Balinese gamelan and wrote during his visit to Java (ICCR, 2011):

The life of man with its joys and sorrow, its trials and triumphs, courses along waves of form and colour and sound. If we reduce the whole of it to sound, it becomes rich music: similarly, if

we leave out everything else except its motion, it becomes pure dance-it became clear that their dane, also, is not intended to display the beauty of motion, but it is their language, the language of their history and their annals. Their gamelan also is but a tonal dance, now soft now loud, now swift; it is also not intended to express musical beauty, but only a song for their dance.

Thus for Tagore dance and music were much more than beautiful motion and sound, they encapsulated the annals of human activity and culture. But his eclectic experimentations and analyses of various dance forms were not always satisfactory for its practitioners. Tagore's daughter-in-law Pratima Devi wrote, originally in the 1930s, about the struggle to give voice to a modern Indian dance idiom: 'It was like groping in the dark with a mixture of mime, musical expression and body movements. The mixture did allow scope for emoting but it was not completely fulfilling' (Devi, 1965 [1949]:20-1, quoted in Chakraborty, 2010:196).

> Not surprisingly, Tagore's notions of modern dance as an amalgam of various styles had many critics, as expressed in the following lines by an unknown commentator, quoted in Ghose (1983:84):
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> For me, however, they seem to be artificially pushed in, disturbing the atmosphere of Tagore's play. Imagine the dance of the guards jumping and dancing all over stage...to me Tagore's dramas and characters–the whole atmosphere of his plays–cannot form a platform for exhibition of the various techniques.

Tagore, in his dance dramas, was drawing inspiration from western theater, the folk theatre tradition in Bengal, Sanskrit theatre and classical dance forms in India and South East Asia. His aim was to use various theatrical, musical and dance traditions to articulate freedom of expression for character development. Through them he wanted to explore different life experiences and plot situations which would reveal complex human emotions, whether it was in *Chandalika, Shyama* or *Natir Puja*. He called his dance a chemical synthesis of music and movements. Through his artistic explorations in dance, music and theatre he was interested in crossing boundaries of not only aesthetic forms but also cultures and nations. His experimentations were catalysts for ushering in new ideas of pan-Asianism and inter-Asian cultural exchange during a time when patriotic nationalism was the dominant motif (see Bharucha, 2006). According to Visva-Bharati reports, he visited Java and Bali for two reasons. The first was to study the remains of Indian civilisation in what is modern Indonesia, and the second was to bring close cultural co-operation between these regions and India through appreciation of arts and culture (ICCR, 2011).

Tagore ultimately did not see his dance as something that would or could be codified to render the same movement vocabulary everywhere it was performed. That is why we learn from Ghose's (1983) detailed description of Tagore's dance dramas how the same song was danced on different occasions using different vocabularies. The idea of continuous re-creation and spontaneity was instilled deeply in Tagore's philosophy of creativity and freedom. For him, creativity was an ongoing search for perfection that would create empathy and free the human soul. This reflects his search for universal humanism which began from developing empathy and sensitivity to other human beings and cultures. His teachings at Shantiniketan were based on these ideals cultivated through the arts. Tagore (1929:73) wrote: 'I invited thinkers and scholars from foreign lands to let our boys know how easy it is to realise our common fellowship'. Interestingly, Tagore's search for creative freedom and personal self-re-invention lasted well beyond his search for a new idiom for Indian dance. He turned to painting in his sixties and painted till his last years.

His ideal of creativity and freedom, two sides of the same coin to him, was not confined only to artistic matters. Although Tagore believed that true freedom is found in our creative juices or emotion and is not bounded by detached reasoning, he thought that man, with his intelligence, is the originator of rules, rhythm and creative unity in the world. This creative consciousness in man

according to him is *atmashakti,* the highest consciousness and a true discovery of selfhood (Roy, 2005:4). For him, creative expression originates from finding one's place in the wider world. He found it first in his intimate relationship with nature and later in human relationship. Tagore wrote that man is connected to the rest of the world through sympathy/empathy or emotion. By enjoying the world's emotive juices numerous relationships are developed by man. The world of appearance that is the external world is gradually transformed into the intimate world of sentiments. He further explained that when we appreciate aesthetic emotion (*rasa*), it is not only a feeling about the object of our appreciation but also a feeling about ourselves. Through these 'feeling states' our consciousness becomes more pronounced and we are able to express ourselves (Roy, 2005:18).

Tagore believed that creative freedom percolates through social and political freedom. He was not just a poet and artist, but an ardent social critic and a public intellectual who believed in free debate on every subject. Amartya Sen (2005:89-120) dedicates a whole chapter to Tagore,[6] and points out that for him fearless reasoning, where knowledge is free and not bounded by dead habit, meant freedom. *Rabindranritya,* I argue here, can be understood in relation to Tagore's deep quest for creative, social and individual freedom that is associated with his concept of *atmashakti*. This abstract concept of an empowered self that is interconnected with other human beings is expressed in our psychic unity. Tagore found this unity (universal humanism) in human expressions of art and culture.

Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism

This section focuses on debates surrounding nationalism and cosmopolitanism to analyse further how *Rabindranritya* was integral to Tagore's political thoughts and ideals of universalism. His unpopular stance against nationalism came during a time when anti-colonial nationalism and the Swadeshi movement were sweeping across India. It can be difficult to understand Tagore's version of humanism and cosmopolitanism against such a political backdrop. While he greatly admired Gandhi (Sen, 2005:92), he rejected the Swadeshi movement and never joined the non-cooperation movement. He also had strong words against nationalism (Tagore, 2008:1080):

> The logic of nation will never heed the voice of truth and goodness. It will go on its ring-dance of moral corruption, linking steel into steel, and machine unto machine; trampling under its tread all the sweet flowers of simple faith and living ideals of man.

To grasp this position of anti-nationalism through the lens of *Rabindranritya* can be confounding, but is necessary here. Tagore believed that art and culture could create a rich civic life which then could keep the power relations of political and economic structures distant from human social relations. He wanted to create an egalitarian society of overlapping cultural particularism through a notion of empathetic universalism (Hogan & Pandit, 2003). In this regard he departed strongly from the intellectual trends of politics during the times which Sumanta Banergee (2011), in a historical analysis of the Bengali bhadralok and their complex relationship to Tagore and his political thought, describes as a vacillation between Marx and Manu. Influenced by western liberal thought and wanting to break from the rigid cultural orthodoxy of the Hindus, Tagore ushered in a new consciousness for cultural identity. He created a dance in India which had earlier, for centuries, been bounded by an unbending grammar of school (gharana), a hierarchical ideology of tradition (parampara) and rigid identities, although this view of 'tradition' itself is contested today by scholars of Indian culture.

Dance and Indian nationalism have an inter-linked history. The modernization of India went hand in hand with cultural renaissance in which the arts were central. The revival of India's ancient art forms including dance became important for establishing a civilizational lineage of a classical golden past. IN the early part of the twentieth century Rukmini Devi re-fashioned Bharatnatyam from Sadir, post Vallathol re-discovered Kathakali, and Madame Menaka re-

invented Kathak as a classical dance form with an ancient past. The textual source of the classical dance form with an ancient past The textual source of the classical styles was traced back to the fifth Veda, written sometime between the second century BC and the second century AD. The postcolonial construction of classicism and the historiography of Indian dance have been an important subject for contemporary scholars of dance (see Allen, 1997; Chakravorty, 1998; Ram, 2010). However Tagore, and later Uday Shankar (Erdman, 1987), went against this national trend of dance revivalism from an ancient heritage to search for a modern consciousness for dance in India.

Thus despite Tagore's leading role in shaping the narrative of India's cultural self-assertion from colonial rule, he distanced himself from Swadeshi nationalism because of its narrow view of Indian nationalism. Accordingly he also did not see the hegemonic national narrative of dance as reflective of India's past. He wanted to go beyond the strict codification of classicism, bounded aesthetics and fixed identities, which were largely Brahminical and patriarchal, to usher in freedom of creative expression. Both the song style (Rabindrasangeet) and the dance style (Rabindranritya) that he invented were solely concerned about expressing emotion (bhav). He imagined his dance as the aesthetic conduit for expressing the nine aesthetic emotions (navarasa) at the core of human emotions.

Tagore thought that nationalism, like classicism, was preoccupied with establishing cultural authenticity, when he himself embraced cultural borrowing and exchange as an inevitable part of humanity. The tensions between universal humanism and cultural specificity linked to tradition surfaced again and again in his creations. His statements about unthinking tradition are uncompromising. For example, Tagore (1930: 76) wrote:

> We Indians have had the sad experience in our own part of the world how timid orthodoxy, its irrational repressions and its accumulation of dead centuries, dwarfs man through its idolatry of the past... This mechanical spirit of tradition is essentially materialistic; it is blindly pious but not spiritual, obsessed by phantoms of unreason that haunt feeble minds in the ghastly disguise of religion.

Yet, Tagore's educational ideals at Shantiniketan were also directed against western urban colonialism, ideals of progress and utilitarian values. He wrote that earlier civilisations had pursued their own paths of social formation, which he calls samaj, and were governed by dharma, the principle for moral sustenance. This formation was not a rule of law, nor was it political, but social, not predatory, mechanically efficeient and utilitarian, but based upon deeper relations of humanity and spiritual bonds. He further claimed that the political, mechanical and commercial characteristics of modern civilisation were about to devour Asia's spirituality (Bharucha, 2006:76). At the same time, his affinity for the west and western thought were strong. In a letter to Nirmal Kumar Mahalanabis, quoted in ICCR (2011), he wrote: 'The people here enlighten me deeply and completely and I can respect myself. My birth place is divided between the East and West.'

Western influence notwithstanding, Tagore imagined Shantiniketan based on grassroots rural development and drew his inspiration from Eastern spirituality rather than progress and technology, not unlike Gandhi, who profoundly inspired Nandalal Bose, the resident artist at Shantiniketan (Mitter, 2007[1979]:79). But Tagore was unhappy with Gandhi's rejection of enlightenment thought and found the non-cooperation movement in the 1920s restricted to narrow nationalist interests. Rebelling against traditional orthodoxy in both politics and aesthetics, the hallmark of Tagore's dance and music became a cross-fertilisation of emotional experience with unfettered creativity. He continuously experimented with different dance styles to give shape to his ideas, as discussed in the previous section.

Not being a trained dancer himself, Tagore depended on his disciples to learn new styles. Ghose(1983), who writes in detail about his own travels to Kerala, Burma(Myanmar), Ceylon(Sri Lanka) and Java to learn and bring back new dance idioms to Shatiniketan, outlines how

Rabindraritya became an eclectic synthesis of words, images, tunes, movement and emotion. Tagores's daughter-in-law, Pratima Devi(1965-1949]), mentioned earlier, and also the wife of his nephew, Shrimati Tagore, created new choreographies under Tagore's guidance to render his visions of motion and emotion(Bose, 2008: 1091). Tagore's dance dramas such as Tasher Desh ('Nation of Cards', a social satire) portray the free-spirited individualism of the young, who break from country, lineage and social norms to embrace newness. This rediscovery of self in Tasher Desh captures the creative self of man. This is Tagore's creative inner-being (jiban debata) that is also part of the larger universal being. This idea of self/being that can be re-created finds profound expression in his play Gora (Bharucha, 2006:64).

Tagore's version of cosmopolitanism can be understood, then, not as sheer rejection of tradition but through immersion in one's own tradtion to be able to comprehent and assimilate other. IN this perspective one's own tradition becomes an anchor to reach out and interpret other traditions. The conduit for such inter-cultural understanding and connections, according to him, is the phenomenon of aesthetic delight or enjoyment, which the Upanishadic tradition on calls rasa. Saranindranath Tagore (2008:1079) writes that the hermeneutic conception of reason that attempts to harmonies rather than flatten difference is to service a conception of unity that Tagore ultimately derives from his distinctive reading of the Upanishads. Tagore's ideal humanity, metaphysical in orientation, is thus not an abstract concept arrived at by reason (as in Kantian philosophy), nor a narrative of postmodern fragmentation of human rationality, but as Saranindranath Tagore (2008:1080) eloquently puts it: 'Rather humanity (in Tagore), the mark of the cosmopolitan vision, is the locus of intersecting traditions and histories captured in the lives'. Tagore himself wrote: '[L]et us be rid of all false pride and rejoice at any lamp being lit in any corner of the world, knowing that it is part of the common illumination of our house' (quoted in Tagore, 2008:1080).

Despite Tagore's brilliant interjection into the history of dance in India, his ideas about dance never reached a broader audience outside Shantiniketan. Perhaps due to the eclectic amalgamation of movements and a lack of systematic codification or documentation, *Rabindranritya* became merely a form of recreation for self-indulgent Bengalis, as the dance-maker and anthropologist Manjusri Chaki-Sircar lamented. However, the seed of Tagore's thoughts and creations found resonance among the new educated Bengali middle class that came to inhabit the new public sphere of modern India. He propelled middle class women (*bhadramahila)* to dance on stage as early as the 1930s, when Indian dance was associated with backwardness and degenerate culture. Hence the discussion in the next section now turns to Tagore and his thoughts on women, essentialism and empowerment in the context of *Rabindranritya*.

Women and Essentialism

Tagore was criticised, already during his time, for going against the fervour of nationalism. But his views on women's condition in India and their upliftment echoed nationalist calls for reform during the 1890s. Along with social reforms on *sati,* widow remarriage and women's education, the debates on women's sexuality, *devadasi* and dance were subjects of raging debates during the turn of the century (Chakravorty, 2008). In this politically volatile terrain Tagore played a critical role in encouraging Indian middle class women to claim their identities as autonomous subjects. To see middle class women on stage moving their bodies was revolutionary, since dance till then was confined to professional women like temple dancers/courtesans (*devadasis),*[7] and more profane couresans (*tawaifs).*[8] In fact, disregarding the entire social stigma attached to dance during the time, Tagore made Indian dance an integral part of education in Shantiniketan. Tagore enabled middle class educated Indian women to establish themselves on the modern urban stage as dancers and artists. He inspired them to carve out their own individual identities without subjugating themselves to the traditional patriarchal restrictions of *parampara*.

The legendary dancer and choreographer Mrinalini Sarabhai (2004:56) wrote about her time in Shantiniketan:

> For me, the enchantment came alive each time Gurudev said: 'Here is the music. This is the story. Dance it as you wish'. I felt so elated, so free to express myself. Finding new forms from traditional techniques was my need and it was Gurudev who first understood and encouraged this creative urge.

Sarabhai (2004:61) goes on to write that 'Shantiniketan was the heart and soul of India's tradition and progress...For me, at that time; it was the place where I found my own real self and true friends'.

But Manjusri Chaki-Sircar, the radically innovative choreographer who was profoundly influenced by Tagore, had some reservations about Tagore's dance style. She thought that Victorian morality and Brahmo puritanism restricted Tagore from developing a powerful body language for women. Therefore in *Rabindranritya,* Manipuri, the most gentle and 'non-threatening' of the classical styles was assigned to his women dancers (Chakraborty, 2010:191). Perhaps Chaki-Sircar's critique is a window into how tagore viewed women, especially Indian woemn, and the essentialist characters he thought they possessed. However, this perspective on women changed during his later years. Tagore (1959[1917]:172) wrote: 'This one-sided civilisation (created by men) is crashing along a series of catastrophes at a tremendous speed ecause of its one-sidedness. And at last the time has arrived when woman must step in and impart her life rhythm to this reckless movement of power.'

Tagore attributed certain qualities to woemn in this book which he himself described as passive, such as modesty, chastity, devotion and self-sacrifice. He claimed women have these qualities more than men. He argued that these qualities were necessary for healing, nurturing and restoration of life. Women, for him, were at harmony with the world since they created life. They had personal knowledge of the true relationship between humans and the world they were born into. Since a woman was the source f both food and love for the new born, she understood the integral relationship between body and soul (Tagore, 1959[1917]). These views on women were not too far apart from nationalist views on Indian women during this time. The literary giant Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, art historian Coomaraswamy and others, not unlike Tagore, attributed certained essential characteristics to woemn that made them symbolic rather than real (see Chatterjee, 1989). So was he an essentialist regarding women?

We find that Tagore later departed from such stereotypes, specifically in his essay on women, 'Nari' in 1936, where he urged women to step out of the confines of their home and pursue education and knowledge for self-realisation. His choice of women characters for his dance dramas also reflected his changing position, as these characters ranged from courtesans and warriors to untouchables (see Purkayastha, 2009 for elaboration). But his attitude towards sexual explicitness (such as found in the literary magazine *Kallol*) and women's emancipation based on individual sexual freedom tended to reflect the conservative norms of his Brahmo upbringing regaring women's sexuality (Banerjee, 2011). Hence, sensual exression rather than sexual freedom was implicit in his dance dramas.

Tagore envisioned modern Indian women as the embodiments of the highest qualities in human beings and he created complex plots in his dance to dramas to reflect his social and political critique. Examining one of his most popular dance dramas, *Chandalika,* we find the women characters not simply enunciated as good and nurturing, but torn between societal regulations, deep emotional conflicts and the assertion of their individual identity. Hence *Chandalika* is not merely a commentary on the caste system where Prakriti, the main protagonist, is a low caster Chandala girl or untouchable, who falls in love with the beautiful Buddhist monk Ananda and overcomes her self-degradation. It is also the awakening of consciousness of a moral self and of her full rights as a woman and human being. Prakriti comes across neither passive nor

modest, but as an agent who demands to love and possess. But her assertion becomes her ego and pride which are purged after her mother's death. She realises that love is not about claiming possession but about giving freedom. In much of *Rabindra-nrityanatya* such as *Chitrangada* or *Shyama,* the women are protagonists with complex motivations to love and to conquer, but ultimately to explore and assert their own independent identity. Through his dance dramas, then, Tagore explored female identity formation that went against the traditional notions of women's role in society. Chaudhuri (2010:551) articulates the feminist consciousness embodied in Prakriti that is both sensuous and political.

> In Chandalika Tagore uses dance as a subtle and nuanced form of self-expression for Prakriti; without the dances the desire for selfhood in Prakriti would remain inarticulate. It is through the free and fluid movements of the body that Prakriti as a woman expressly articulates her desires: emotional, physical and spiritual- at once liberation the female dancing body from the strict rules of classical dance as well as traditional society that viewed dance as immoral and demoralising.

Chaki-Sirear restaged Chandalika as Tomari Matir Kanya ('Daughter of your own Land') with a unique feminist consciousness, where the body is no longer the soft and gentle body of a female Manipuri dancer of Rabindra-nrityanatya. This has become a memorable creation of contemporary Indian dance. Chaki-Sircar recreated Tagore's dance style with a strong spine and dramatic gestural movements that combined various classical and folk styles. Her new dance style, Navanritya, was founded on the aesthetic and ideological principles of Tagore dance. It followed Tagore's method of gathering material from the widest possible range of dance styles to create new movements of poetic reflection (Bose, 2008: 1093).

Tagore's changing ideas about femininity are perhaps best captured in the dance drama Chitrangada, which he rewrote from an earlier version in 1936. In this dance drama, the female protagonist Chitrangada is a warrior queen of what is today Manipur. She has an androgynous identity. She desires Arjuna (the major character in the Mahabharata) and transforms herself into a beautiful woman to attract him. But ultimately she reveals her true self to Arjuna as his equal in the battlefield. In the dance drama, Chitrangada expresses a fluid identity where masculinity and femininity are external to her inner-self. As Sen (2013:6) writes: 'Chitrangada asks her sakhigan (female friends), to 'mould her anew" by 'cloaking her in a new dress" (abharan)'. She goes on to argue that the idea of 'cloaking' is crucial as gender seems to function merely as an external grab that can be put on and cast off. Here Tagore seems to question any ontologically fixed essence of the feminine. In this dance drama, then, Chitrangada asserts her self-realisation (atmashakti) as a human being who is not attached to any intrinsic feminine trait and in fact shows that she is equal to her male counterpart, Arjuna. Moving away from notions of the essential feminine, Tagore here rejects any kind of biological determination of gendered identity. Tagor's radical departure from his previous notions of bounded gender identity is perhaps even more explicitly expressed in his poem 'Chitra' (1941) where he embraces an androgynous identity (ardhanarishwara) for himself.

Tagore's message of women's rights, dignity and self-empowerment that he propagated through Rabindranritya certainly continues to capture young choreographers today. I observed a powerful example of this recently in Kolkata in a production by Sanved, an institution that uses dance therapy to rehabilitate women and girls who have been trafficked and physically and mentally abused. The programme was a tribute to Tagore. In a creative colege of dance, music and text, Sohini Chakraborty, the founder and choreographer of Sanved, staged a powerful and graceful piece on women's empowerment. Chakraborry, a student of Chaki-Sircar, impressively wove an amalgam of movements with Rabindrasangeet and western music. The signature movement style was Navanritya and the choreographic piece was titled 'The Inner Light'. The

work showed that Tagore's song – dance creations have enabled creativity and empowerment to come together for women of many classes in Bengal today.

The dance horizon in Kolkata, Bengal and possibly Bangladesh (more so that in India) is ever broadened by Tagore's legacy of dance and music as many things: social, personal, political, emotional and dramatic. It is boundless in its creative possibilities for connecting people of different social and religious backgrounds. For Tagore, this creative force can ultimately free the human soul. For him, freedom was not just about creative, personal or political freedom, but ultimately fused into the matephysical realm. During an exchange with Einstein (referred to in ICCR, 2011), Tagore wrote:

> The progress of our soul is like the perfect poem. It has an infinite idea which once realized makes all movements full of meaning and joy. But if we detach its movement from the ultimate idea... then existence appears to us as monstrous evil, impetuously rushing towards an unending aimlessness.

Conclusion

The dance style Tagore created, Rabindranrita, has not quite stood the rest of time. Few dancers and choreographers are aware of it outside Bengal. Rabindranritya was never codified and Tagore who believed in spontaneity over strict discipline (going back to his childhood experiences) never created a rigorous regimen for training dancers. Although dance was fully integrated with the educational curriculum at Shantiniketan, it remained experimental and ad hoc. Not a dancer himself, Tagore was unable to create students or a lineage to perpetuate his dance aesthetic after he was gone. But what has remained is his foundational role in imbuing Indian dance with a modern aesthetic and sensibility. His dance was a step in ushering in modernity itself in India. He made dance respectable and a worthy art form at time when it was considered a degenerate pursuit.

I am drawn back to the question asked in the beginning about Tagore's turn to dance at a later stage in his life when he was already a literary giant. I have tried to answer this question in the three interconnected sections relating dance to his thoughts on creativity and freedom, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, and women and essentialism. His quest for an organic and critical relationship between knowledge and the world we inhabit had many dimensions, expressed through poetry, plays, novels, essays, painting, music and dance. He found a particular kind of knowledge or creative / empowered consciousness (atmashakti) through the arts. Tagore (1959 [1917]: 116-17) wrote: 'We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy. But we find that this education of sympathy is not only systematically ignored in schools, but it is severely repressed.'

His song--dance creations allowed him to explore the core sentiments and inner harmony of human beings and the world. It enabled an embodied and experiential knowledge that is most intimately related to human emotions that can release the mind and body into a metaphysical space of aesthetic delight and freedom. These world of his express this deep perception: 'Ki dhoni baje ghana chetona majbe' (My translation: What sound is this in the midst of my deepest consciousness?).

Tagore's method of synthesising various dance styles from many parts of the world to create an integrated whold inflected his own unique understanding of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. In his view, interculturality and cultural boundary-crossing could create a rich life in civil society where political and statist identities would be pushed to the margins. For him political identities were fixed like national boundaries, but cultural identities were open-ended and could absorb others. According to him, if we are connected to the larger human family we can keep our personal identities porous and create ourselves a new. This was his vision of a multicultural self, both culturally specific and universal.

In this day and age of globalisation and perceived clashes of civilisations, the cultural sphere is often subsumed by fragmentation and identity politics and Tagore sounds utopian and naive. Let us ask, however, whether it is plausible that Tagors' humanitarian insights can generate momentum for a re-valorisation of the cultural sphere? With such a surge can the political realm be muted? Then again, can such a super-organic and distilled cultural sphere ever exist? His embrace of dance, women, creative freedom and cosmopolitanism was an attempt at widening and deepening this distinctive civic relationship between the cultural, creative and everyday human relationships. Perhaps through a deep and sustained engagement with the arts our humanism, then, can be intuitive and not merely intellectual, and all the richer and deeper for it, to contribute to human consciousness. That, in the end, was the richer and deeper for it, to contribute to human consciousness. That, in the end, was the ambition of Tagore, as this article demonstrates; seeking to empower individuals, including women, to cultivate the expression of feelings, through performative movement. He believed that the cultivation of feelings, not just reason, enabled humans to reconcile difference. This was his vision of humanism, and it remains deeply relevant.

Notes

1. I thank the Comparative Literature Department of Jadavpur University, Calcutta, for giving me access to their library for the purposes of this research.
2. Tagore's output is so massive that there is no agreement on its totality. It possibly includes 25 volumes of poetry, 15 plays, 90 short stories, 12 novels and novellas, 13 volumes of essays, over 2200 songs (much of which he set to music) and hundreds of paintings. In addition to all this he initiated and edited several journals, wrote Bengali textbooks and thousands of letters.
3. The largest single volume in English marketing the 150th anniversary of Tagore's birth was published recently. The authors divide his creative works into ten genres: poetry, songs, autobiographical works, letters, travel writings, prose, novels, short stories, humorous pieces and plays. It also includes examples of his artwork, but his dance making is conspicuously absent.
4. Rabindrasangeet was fiercely protected by Tagore experts and no innovation was allowed till the copyright on Rabindrasangeet expired.
5. In discussion with Charuchandra Bandopathyay in 1938, quoted in Ghose (1994).
6. Here, too, the element of dance in Tagore's work remains unmentioned (Sen.2005:89).
7. For detials, see Kersenboom (1987).
8. See in detail Du Perron (2007).

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